

The Petitioner Knocks

Unknown

Dr. and Brother George H. T. French, author of this Short Talk Bulletin, is Editor of The Occasional Bulletin of the Texas Lodge of Research. We are indebted to him and to the Texas Lodge of Research, A.F. & A.M., for the use of this paper, which was presented in June of 1971.

We search for hidden lessons woven into the Masonic ritual. The scrutinizing eye and enquiring mind do uncover those lessons – deep, illuminating, edifying lessons.

Too often it is assumed that all of Masonry's lessons are presented after the candidate has entered the lodge room. This is not so, and here an attempt will be made to dissect the petitioner's initial steps in the hope of uncovering the principles upon which all petitions rest.

If we take the word principle in its meaning of a settled rule of action, a governing law of conduct, there are at least seven well defined principles which apply to the petitioner himself. Besides which, the recommender, who is the petitioner's guide to the door of the Lodge, is also governed by certain rules.

UNSOLICITED PETITION

Freemasonry demands that the petitioner, unbiased by the improper solicitation of friends against his own inclination, offer himself as a candidate of his own free will and accord.

There is a well-known picture called The Light of the World. It portrays Jesus holding a lantern in his left hand. The light falls on the closed door which lacks a handle. The explanation is that this is the door of the human heart, to be opened only from within.

Centuries ago men saw in Freemasonry a deposit of the high and simple wisdom of old, preserved in tradition and taught by symbols. They, freely and voluntarily, petitioned for membership. This supposed in them a preparation "at heart" which our Craft still cherishes and continues to demand, a preparation that signified a change of mind and purpose leading to a sincere desire for a deeper quality of life. This in turn suggested that the petitioner was a good man and true, and as such could be accepted. Masonry has repeatedly stated that it does not strive to make bad men good, but rather seeks good men to make them better.

One enormous value of the principle of the unsolicited petition is that it relieves all Masons from the onus of being the judges of what is proper and improper in the matter of solicitation. The current rule of no invitation and no solicitation is easily and readily understood by any Mason, and can lead to no misinterpretations or confusions. So valuable is it that it is not even advisable to consider the possibility of any form of discreet or veiled solicitation, for that would not take long to develop into dissonant publicity and outright membership campaigns.

Another value of the prohibition to proselyte is that it imposes upon each and every member of the Craft the duty to display, at all times and in all places, a conduct so exemplary and a loyalty to the Fraternity so evident that all reluctant good men would be enticed to join the Order. Thus every Mason, by the example of his private life, can become a silent but efficient Masonic ambassador to the world at large.

Every Mason can also be a vocal ambassador if he be well grounded in Masonology, which is the knowledge of the doctrines, principles, symbolism and history of Freemasonry, and so be willing to tell people what the Craft stands for, whence it came, how it developed.

There is also a matter of policy to be considered. A rapid extension of the Order due to excessive proselyting, plus injudicious acceptance of members, can easily damage the long term interests and welfare of the Craft, which is so dependent on slow but steady growth.

And, finally, if the candidate had been invited to petition or prevailed upon to join, then many changes would have to be introduced into the ritual.

THE PERFECT YOUTH

Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 stated that "no Master should take an Apprentice ... unless he be a perfect Youth, having no Maim or Defect in his body, that may render him incapable of learning the Art...."

This rule, when applied to our Craft today, means three things:

1. that the petitioner must be able physically to perform the ceremonies of the three degrees, and earn his own living;
2. that he be mentally able to learn the ritual and pass the proficiency tests, and
3. that he be intellectually qualified to study Masonology and understand the purpose and doctrine of Freemasonry.

It is worthy of notice that Anderson specified two points:

1. a Youth, that is to say a man with a youthful and flexible mind, a mind not set in its ways but pliable enough to learn that which Masonry can teach; and
2. not merely a youth, but a Perfect youth, a person functionally able and willing to perform adequately within Freemasonry.

MATURITY

When Masonry demands a youth, it is saying that it will reject a man approaching his dotage. And when it demands a perfect youth it is saying that it does not want an immature youth.

The maturity demanded is interpreted, by some Jurisdictions, to be the lawful age of twenty-one years. What is really desired is the steadfastness of purpose of an adult, the attitude to life that is conducive to a continuous increase in moral stature, and the prudence that assures discretion.

Although some American Jurisdictions have given serious consideration to the lowering of the age of admission to less than twenty-one years, there repeatedly arises the question of whether it should be increased instead of decreased. Full social responsibility and maturity of judgment come with full financial independence, and this is arriving later and later in life in a complicated society that is demanding increasingly prolonged education for the performance of so many wage earning occupations. At college, under the intellectual direction of teachers, and under dependence due to financial help received from parents or spouse, the situation is not ideal for independent thinking or decision making.

GOOD BIRTH

From the 4th Article in the Regius Poem (c. 1390) which directs that the Master "be no bondman 'prentice make." Down to our 20th century question as to whether the candidate is a free man, Freemasonry has been concerned with the status of its applicants.

Not only the ecclesiastics who composed the Ancient Charges but also the rearrangers of the Masonic Ritual throughout the 17th into the 19th centuries were well aware of the debasement which any form of bondage brought to its victims. And they were absolutely determined that there was no place in Freemasonry for any man who was not physically free.

Bondage has several aspects: (1) illegitimacy; (2) serfdom; and (3) slavery from birth.

Inasmuch as the Old Charges required a prospective apprentice to be of "honest parentage" or "to come of good kindred," we must assume that young men of illegitimate birth were not generally acceptable to Masonry.

The Old Charges have been written by men of the degradation brought by serfdom, and our Ritual has borrowed freely from those ancient manuscripts.

Anderson's Constitutions insisted that every candidate be not only a free man, but free born. There was intense feeling against any man who had been born a slave and afterwards achieved his freedom. It was considered that a slave needed time to emancipate himself from the habits of deceitfulness and meanness of spirit which a subservient condition had forced upon him.

Today, with slavery abolished in most countries where Freemasonry exists, there has been in some rituals a change from the term "free born" to the words "free man." This charge has been

resented by some as an alteration of a Landmark. But it has the advantage that it precludes a prisoner from being made a Mason.

To grow, Freemasonry has always needed an atmosphere of freedom, and only under such conditions can it survive. Its very existence is bound up with the principle of freedom, the freedom of the individual to act in accordance with his choice and his will.

GOOD REPORT

There is something in man that is greater than man. Freemasonry's purpose is to accept men who are good and have the potential to become better.

The rough ashlar is stone taken from the quarries, but the stone must be of good quality, without defects or cracks, possible to be worked into a perfect, smooth ashlar. That is why Masonry accepts no immoral or scandalous men, but only those who come under the tongue of good report.

In essence, Masonry puts the requirement of membership on good conduct, and not on conversion which is a religious experience.

SOLVENCY

Financial ease is not spelled out in so many words as one of the qualifications of a petitioner. However, it is most decidedly implied as different duties are enumerated. The candidate undertakes to pay dues regularly to his lodge, for which he must be both solvent and willing.

The Constitutions of 1723 demanded that every initiate "deposit something for the relief of indigent and decay'd Brethren." He could not do this unless he were solvent. Furthermore, our obligation enjoins us to help, aid and assist our poor and penniless brothers. We have to be solvent.

Freemasonry was not created to be an institution dedicated to benevolence, relief or life insurance. However, the Old Charges do state that "every Mason receive and cherish strange Fellows when they come over the country ... refresh him with money unto the next Lodge." This brotherly duty was necessary in an age when travel was so difficult.

Solvency is not enough to entitle a man to become a Mason, for no man has an inherent right to become a Freemason. Membership is a privilege to be conferred upon the worthy. Unfortunately, however, many petitioners are accepted today who can pay the fee and little else, and care naught about increasing their moral stature. There have even been cases of ill advised parents and church parishioners who paid the fee for their sons or their ministers, almost insuring thereby an uninterested Mason because not financially involved.

MONOTHEISM

The Ancient Charges commenced with a prayer addressed to The Holy Trinity, but gradually over the centuries the mention of Christianity decreased and even ceased in some places, and the doctrine of a "glorious Architect of Heaven and Earth" asserted itself.

While the transformation was taking place, the Letter "G", which originally stood only for Geometry, began appearing on the ceiling of English Lodges. Today, as it appears in our Lodges, it has come to denote much more than Geometry.

Hence our petitioners must be ready to profess their belief in Deity, willingly invoke God for help and steadfastness, and place a hand on the Volume of the Sacred Law.

THE RECOMMENDER

Finally, Freemasonry has decided that a petitioner's only path to the door of the Lodge is paved by the good offices of a friend whom he has enlisted on his behalf. This friend is called a Recommender.

The Recommender's signature on the petition means several things.

1. It means that he is well acquainted with the petitioner.
2. It means that the recommender sincerely believes that the applicant is the type of man who would want to pursue a course of symbolic moral instruction, is a benevolent man who wants to express that attitude in practical ways, and wants to enjoy the association of like minded men.
3. It means that the Recommender is assuming a definite responsibility for the interest and growth in Masonry of this petitioner, whom he should accompany when receiving his degrees, help him to acquire the necessary proficiency as he advances through the several degrees, and by individual attention, advice and orientation lead him in paths where he will be able to grow daily in Masonic knowledge, information and understanding.

May each of us prepare ourselves to go forth and, acting as Recommenders, select those men who are good and true, and be permanently responsible for their interest and growth in Masonry.

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