

Where Parallel Lines Intersect

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"But in modern times they are dedicated to St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, who were eminent patrons of Masonry; and since their time there is represented in every regular and well governed Lodge a certain Point within a circle; the Point representing an individual Brother; the Circle representing the boundary which he is never to suffer his passions, prejudices or interests, to betray him on any occasion.

This Circle is embroidered by two perpendicular parallel lines, representing St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist, who are perfect parallels in Christianity as well as Masonry. Upon the vertex rests the book of Holy Scriptures, which points out the whole duty of man. In going round this Circle, we necessarily touch upon these two lines, as well as upon the Holy Scriptures; and while a Mason keeps himself thus circumscribed it is impossible that he should materially err." (Michigan Monitor)

As a new entered apprentice, I stood and looked at that circle with the two parallel lines, and at my proficiency examination, recited it with perfection. But what does this really mean to me, a Man and a Mason? And why the Sts. John?

Indeed, why? They were unique characters of Christianity who were strange in their own right.

Peculiar Parallels

At first glance in the Scriptures, they seem like strange people to hold up as examples. John the Baptist's diet consisted of wild honey and locusts. Honey certainly is appealing, but the locust! A study of Middle Eastern customs indicate that they could be eaten fried, boiled, dried or raw. Certainly not a person you'd want to invite to your lodge's next potluck.

He dressed in camel hair clothing and his hair and beard had a wild look about it. And he didn't have a lot of tact, he told you the truth straight to your face. He called the Pharisees a "brood of vipers" and was fond of telling everyone to repent. In our "politically correct" era, he would certainly not be riding high in the polls.

St. John the Evangelist was also a different sort. He was a rich kid (Scripture tells us that his father owned at least one fishing boat on the Galilee and they had servants) and at the beginning of the Gospel of John he was looking to find himself. He first attached himself to John the Baptist until called by Christ.

He was hot tempered, so much so that Jesus called John and his brother James "boanerges" meaning "sons of thunder." He lived up to that name when the villagers in a small town in Samaria refused to welcome Jesus and the disciples, so he asked Jesus if he (John) could rain fire and brimstone down upon them (Luke 9:51-55). Fortunately for the village, Jesus rebuked him.

John was also self-seeking, asking with his brother James for thrones on the right and left of Christ when Jesus set up his early kingdom, thus placing himself above the other disciples.

But when one goes beyond their faults, the Sts. John have some strong qualities that every Mason should exhibit.

When looking at John the Baptist, one must look at him through an Eastern light. John was a Nazarite from birth, literally set aside for service to God. He let his hair and beard grow wild, because like Sampson, he could not cut his hair, which was forbidden by Mosaic law. His appearance brought to mind, to the people who heard him, the stories of Elijah the prophet who had dressed in similar manner. His clothing was of camel hair, because that was what poor people wore. It was plentiful when the camels shed their coats. It was cheap, warm, and although scratchy, quite waterproof.

John taught "change of character." He pointed fearlessly to the truth, even at the cost of his life. It was better to die for truth than to live a lie, because he knew that the Great Light upon the Altar, the holy scriptures, pointed to a better way, a life with God.

St. John the Evangelist teaches us to subdue our passions, one of the first things every Mason is taught in lodge.

When we follow the Gospels and the Book of Acts in the New Testament, we see a major transformation of young John. He goes from being the hot-tempered young man to one who exhibits peace in his old age. He goes from being intolerant of others, to working with others in sharing his theology of a better way of life.

John is loyal. He was the only disciple to attend the trial of Jesus as well as to be at the foot of the cross for the crucifixion. And when he heard about the empty tomb on Sunday morning, he was the first of the disciples to arrive. He also took care of the widows taking Mary, the mother of Jesus, into his home until she died.

A study of John's writings shows that he teaches truth with love. He didn't waiver from his convictions, but he knew the power of truth and love in a person's life.

Applying The Sts. John To Our Lives

If they form the two parallels, then a Mason traveling the circle must touch both of the Sts. John and learn from each of them.

He must learn to subdue his passions. A story is told in my lodge about a man who took his entered apprentice degree and then 20 years later came back to take his proficiency. When asked why he waited so long, he replied, "It took me this long to learn to subdue my passions!"

Learning to subdue our passions is a lifelong process. Zeal not tempered by love becomes extremism and leads to misuse of power. The problems in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and the Middle East can be directly related to failure to subdue one's passions.

While subduing one's passions is good, a Mason must always stand for truth. Truth, even when it is unpopular, is still better than the alternative. Truth will always reign. Even when some dictator tries to re-write it, the real truth will always emerge.

Like St. John the Evangelist, a Mason must help the widow and orphan. In our lodges today, are we doing enough? Recently, I received a call from a new widow who's husband had unexpectedly died, and she was about to lose her house due to the loss of income with his death. "If anything ever happens to me, call the Masons" he would always tell her. But she wondered what they could do. And I wondered, what would her husband's lodge do? It's up to every Mason to look after the widows and orphans.

Every Mason must practice brotherly love, which is the unique characteristic of our fraternity. St. John writes about the true meaning of brotherly love when he says: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" I John 3:16-17.

A Mason is called to practice charity. We must hear the cries of a needy brother, but we must also be aware of each other to see when we are in need. Masons must care, which we learn from traveling the circle.

Where Parallel Lines Meet

If one travels the circle, he quickly finds that the two parallel lines meet at the point where the circle touches upon the Volume of Sacred Law.

In Masonry, the Bible is called the Great Light and is placed in an open position in the center of the lodge. A brother is admonished to open it and learn from its wisdom in all the three degrees of Masonry.

Indeed, the Sts. John were well versed in Scripture, and held it in high esteem. They looked with reverence to its knowledge, because they knew the answers of life were contained within its pages. They were not afraid to quote it, to trust it, to read it, and to apply it to their lives.

Masons must likewise emulate the Sts. John in their application of this Holy Light in their lives. Only by its constant attention and application can a Mason improve his own life.

If Masonry is to grow today, it will not be through some flashy change or altering of ritual, it will be when each brother begins to travel the circle on a regular basis, touching upon each of the patrons of Masonry as well as the Scriptures. Each time we touch the Scriptures or the Sts. John, something should rub off on each of us, just as brushing against chalk will leave its mark, no matter how light the touch.

Values like truth, subduing passions, brotherly love, care of widows and orphans and practicing charity never go out of style. They are timeless values, and no matter how often attacked, always rise victorious in the end.

The Sts. John are timeless examples for each of us. Their foibles simply show their humanness. It is in their humanness that we can relate to them, and see that if we apply Scripture and our Masonic teachings, we too can become better men!

What Is The "Lodge of the Holy Sts. John at Jerusalem"?

Originally, lodges were dedicated to King Solomon. Later – at least as early as 1598 – Masonry connected her name with that of St. John the Evangelist. Dedications to the Sts. John were made by other organizations as early as the third century, when the Church adopted the two pagan celebrations of summer and winter solstices and made them our St. John's Day in Summer and St. John's Day in Winter. It was wholly natural for operative Masons, having dedicated their Craft to the Holy Sts. John, to begin to believe that both Johns were themselves Craftsmen. Craftsmen must have a lodge – where should that lodge be, but in Jerusalem? Hence "The Lodge of the Holy Sts. John of Jerusalem" came into imaginary existence.

No such lodge ever existed in fact, and yet it is not a fiction – it is an ideal, and without such ideals our life would be dim and drab. The thought back of the question and answer, then, is that we come from an ideal lodge into this actual workaday world, where our ideals are to be tested. Today, we use the phrase as the starting point for a Masonic career, Masons mean only that their Craft is dedicated to these holy men, whose precepts and practices, ideas and virtues, teachings and examples, all Freemasons should try to follow.

From MSA Digest 101 Questions

STB - June 1996