

# THE OBSERVANT MASON

## ALAS, POOR HIRAM: THE USE OF THE SKULL AND CROSSBONES IN MASONIC SYMBOLISM

BY ANDREW HAMMER, FMS



In most Masonic jurisdictions in the world, the use of the skull and crossbones as an emblem of the Master Mason degree is simply obvious, for obvious reasons. At times, one finds only the skull used, without crossbones, but by mere observation, its employment in the ritual and art of the Symbolic Lodge cannot be disputed.

In the United States, however, the notion of that emblem being used openly seems to strike fear in the hearts of many good brothers, who have a concern that it is either inaccurate, sends the wrong message, or somehow belongs to some other organization that came after the Craft. Perhaps this misconception arises from Mackey, who states rather emphatically that *'the skull as a symbol is not used in Masonry except in Masonic Templarism'*. Yet all around him in England, Scotland, and Ireland, before his time and to this day, in those lodges throughout the world who work under those constitutions, the Master Mason is explicitly informed that the skull and crossbones do indeed have a relevance to that degree. They are arguably the most prominent symbol on the most commonly used tracing boards of that degree.

However, let's not be unfair to Brother Mackey; he *does* state that the skull and crossbones together are used in the French Rites, and even alludes to their use before initiation. But this only serves to prove wrong his previous statement about the skull as an outlier when everyone else in the Masonic world is using this emblem as a matter of fact.

How then, should we understand the skull?

To every Mason is conveyed the idea that we must come to terms with the inevitability of our own death. We must learn to cope with it, as the other end of life's journey. If we look at that self-evident point alone, we can see how a supposedly scary emblem like the skull has a perennial and unavoidable meaning to all mortals, no matter how much one might want to look the other way.

Despite that rather simple justification, some Masons might respond that the skull gives an ominous, perhaps even negative image of

the fraternity to the general public. Respectfully, such Masons are greatly removed from the reality of what is going on in the world around them. Eight year-old girls are wearing skull and crossbones socks that anyone can buy from Target. No initiation is required.

But what if the concern is that such an image invokes a sense of the occult or some alien belief system? In that case, it has to be said that the simple emblematic use of the skull in Masonry is nowhere near as horrifying as, let us say, a tribal ritual where a fragment of a child's skull is taken in the night, and hidden away as an offering to a mythical creature, in a primitive and superstitious attempt to gain some kind of favour from the gods. God forbid that Masons should ever introduce their children to the cultish horror of the Tooth Fairy.

While Masons worry like busybody aunts, society is busily putting a skull on almost any item that can be sold, which begs the question: if an eight year-old girl is not afraid of a skull, how can Masons possibly look at each other with straight faces and worry that the use of a skull might be sending the wrong message?

What is that message we send anyway? That Masons should, out of fear, deprive themselves of a symbol of ultimate meaning, to ward off the possible misunderstanding of a profane world which is printing that same symbol on everything from t-shirts to toys?

The Skull is not merely an emblem of death. It is also an emblem of *life*, and the evidence thereof. As it frames the human head and face, it is also a part of the image of God in which we are made. When a man sees the Skull, he sees a reminder of himself, and as he reflects, his mind will inevitably go to the concept that he also has a skull, and that this is a part of him.

But it doesn't end there. Every human being reading this has a skull, right now, and if we were to see each other's skulls, we would understand a deeper, living representation of the Level amongst us. We would not





readily be able to tell the difference between each other on this basis alone.

So in this sense, what we have symbolically in the Skull is far more consistent than the Trowel, in that as the Fellow Craft degree gives us the practical application of the Level in our temporal life, the skull—as it applies to the Master Mason degree throughout the world—is a reminder of a more profound awareness of the Level given to us by our Creator. As the Master Mason degree takes the lessons of the Fellow Craft from the physical to the spiritual, the skull provides us with a spiritual understanding of that internal Level before both God and man, which is with us throughout our lives and beyond.

The skull is also an emblem of God's Creation; this intricate container of all of our senses is the case to protect the Almighty's gift of consciousness.

Therefore, as we ponder the role of the skull in the Symbolic Lodge, it becomes clear that it is never something to be utilized by Masons because it might be seen as being 'cool', or as a device to instill any kind of sophomoric sense of fear in a man. It is a solemn and dignified

indication of the seriousness of all that Freemasonry has to teach. This is precisely why we find it used as a symbol in Masonry Universal. For many brothers, especially those who have served in the military, this awareness is already close in their minds. The presence of the skull as a symbol in our Craft demonstrates to them, as it has for those who served in ages past, that this fraternity is not a trivial engagement, but rather takes the questions of life and death with the utmost seriousness and reverence. It is, without a doubt, a most sublime and appropriate symbol for the most sublime degree.

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# THE OBSERVANT MASON

## GETTING A GRIP: ADDRESSING RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE IN MASONIC RITUAL

BY ANDREW HAMMER, FMS



The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *prejudice* as “preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.” The use of the word in common parlance has come to be understood as an accusation of intolerance, when what one really wants to address is only a matter of ignorance. If we take the positive implication from that definition, then such flawed preconceptions can be easily remedied with both reason and experience.

In a handful of jurisdictions in the United States, the language used in one section of the Master Mason lecture used to explain the several grips in Masonry, is a brazen comparison of religious belief, one that flies in the face of the universality of our institution. In that explanation, a gradation of faith is presented to the brother, quite explicitly, as if to propose a preferred religious belief to him.

Before we delve into it, it should be stated that this bothersome construction of thoughts is not something that has gone unnoticed all these many years, until your humble correspondent decided to bring attention to it. One of the things about Masonic history that is as amusing as it is frustrating, is that errors on the part of ambitious authors are noticed almost instantly by diligent brothers at the time they are published, but are then blithely ignored by those who seem determined to accept whatever erroneous perspective on the Craft is being offered. It is no different in this case. Brethren have been complaining about this particular bit of verbiage since it entered into our Masonic world somewhere about the 1820s, yet that fact is put aside with the cloudy—and false—explanation that “it has been there since ‘time immemorial’, and we cannot change it.”

The 1820s may look like a venerable moment in antiquity when we look back upon it from today, but it is important to remember that it is also over 100 years away from the creation of the Premier Grand Lodge. The early nineteenth century was a time when innovation in ritual was rife in the United States. Entire concepts that previously did not exist in Masonic narrative were introduced during this time (e.g. the beautiful virgin weeping over the broken column), by men who can—and must—be called *innovators*. Here is where our story of the grips begins.

Let’s be a bit clearer about what we’re talking about, by using an excerpt from *The Freemason’s Universal Monitor*, published in Ohio and submitted to the Library of Congress in 1890.<sup>1</sup> This version of the lecture uses the language in question, in which the grips of Masonry are bizarrely explained as corresponding to a specific religious faith (or the perceived lack thereof) assigned to each of the degrees.

The Apprentice is considered to be little more than a rank heathen with no chance of salvation. The Fellow Craft apparently represents “the Jewish dispensation”, which, the brother is told, teaches the immortality

of the soul, but lacks any knowledge of the resurrection of the body. But the Master Mason is assured that this problem will be remedied by his introduction to the “faith in the Lion of the Tribe of Judah”, which seems to allude to a Christian interpretation of biblical symbolism, if not an overt solicitation to Christianity.

This is also an odd way to speak about the previous ranks of those we have agreed to call brothers. It is yet another example of the persistent behavior of humans to insert something they are personally fond of into everything they encounter, even when they know it is not really appropriate to do so.

Albert Mackey explains this language as follows in his *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, under the listing “Dispensations of Religion”:

*This symbolism, which was the invention of a peripatetic lecturer in the South about fifty years ago, is so forced and fanciful in its character, that it did not long survive the local and temporary teachings of its inventor...*

Without elaboration as to the identity of the author, Mackey goes on to say that it “...is only preserved here as an instance of how symbols, like metaphors, may sometimes run mad.”

Except that this “madness” did survive and still exists in some jurisdictions, and is taught to the Master Mason as part of his understanding what we are all about. Beyond the obvious problem with that kind of preferential—and unMasonic—religious ranking passing as instruction, the greater problem is that it is factually wrong, which means that Masons in those jurisdictions are teaching bad theology to their brethren.

Let’s start with the explanation of the “Jewish dispensation”. Gentiles may not be aware that in the daily prayer service of all Orthodox Jewish synagogues, and even in the newest edition of the Reform Jewish prayer book, Jews are instructed to pray the following verse:

***Blessed are you, Lord, who resurrects the dead.***

Clearly then, it cannot be said that in Judaism, “the resurrection of the body was not clearly taught,” and therefore this lecture has, for generations, made a false assertion about a particular religion that should not be allowed to stand in the light of accurate knowledge.

But the problem goes a bit further. The description of the Entered Apprentice’s grip makes reference to the “dim light of nature and the religion of reason”. Certainly one can understand the inadequacy of



nature alone to reveal the majesty of Creation. But Masonry itself is founded in the pursuit of reason guided by Divine Providence. It arose in a time when men combined the right to reason with their faith to combat the oppression of kings and clergy, and seek freedom for all men. Of course, reason is not or should not be a religion, but it is by reason that we are able to discover the philosophical principles that allow for the deeper exploration of our faith. Reason cannot possibly be the enemy of the Mason, especially when the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts has been telling brothers to “Follow Reason” for nearly 300 years.

And let’s get back to this phrase about the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. This allusion first appears not in the New Testament, but rather in the Torah, in Genesis 49:9, when Jacob refers to his son Judah as *gur aryeh Yehuda*, or “the young lion of [the tribe of] Judah”. This in actuality means that *Judah himself* is the Lion of that tribe. I know of no religion that believes in Judah as salvational. So the description of the significance of that entity found in this particular language is inaccurate, even in its attempt to convey the message it sought to deliver in the first place.

How then, do we get away from this conundrum of sectarian religious doctrine entering into and remaining in the ritual, in these places that still hold on to this “fanciful” explanation of grips? One option would be to avoid piques or quarrels about religion altogether, and focus on the big picture, that is, on what is actually intended to be taught to the Mason about life and faith itself as he moves through the three degrees.

Consider the following explanation, of how the development of religious faith in man is an uplifting and educating rite of passage necessary for the self-development of any man:

What our Craft is seeking to teach is that the Apprentice, with his mere observation of natural law in the world around him, has not yet attained the skill or wisdom to understand his purpose in life.

It then offers that the Fellow Craft, even though he has now learned to work and produce perfect stones, with which magnificent structures can be erected, cannot through these great works alone understand his ultimate destination. His abilities may give him a sense of purpose, but yet not a sense of destiny or meaning. This is the province of the Master Mason.

Through the information given at his raising, the Master Mason has arrived at the point where he can understand that only through reliance on Deity can he be a complete and immortal being, able to seek the meaning of life through worship of the Eternal.

What if the jurisdictions which use this explanation of grips were to instead use language like this author proposes below, which inculcates the necessity of faith in a Supreme Being in completing the man and Mason, and carrying him through to eternal life?

*By the EA \_ , or . . . . , we are reminded that by the dim light of nature, we have no hope in immortality; we know not but that our bodies go down to the earth, like beasts of the field, there to remain.*

*By the FC \_ , or . . . . , we learn that although the works of man may be wondrous and magnificent, they alone cannot gain us admittance into the realm of the spirit.*

*By the S \_ of a MM or LB, we know that through faith in the power and the mercy of the Great Architect of the Universe, our souls will become immortal, and our bodies transcend the physical death, to attain life everlasting.*

Here, in a simple change of language, from specific and unreasonable religious classifications to a general description of the power of faith, we manage to teach better the actual lesson meant to be taught to the Mason as he completes his journey. We explain to him, without proselytizing for any one faith, how a man goes from knowing nothing, to knowing himself, to knowing God, however he conceives of that Great Architect.

Grand Lodge ritual commissions and custodians of the work should take note, that while we have an obligation to defend the traditional language of our historical ritual, we have an equally important duty to not uphold poorly framed, inaccurate, and prejudicial statements from earlier times which not only betray our claims to possess and revere knowledge, but actually make us look unlearned and ignorant as Masons.

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#### (Endnotes)

- 1 *The Freemason's Universal Monitor*, published by John D. Caldwell, Past Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, 1890, 111-12.

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## PERFECTING OUR POINTS OF ENTRANCE

BY ANDREW HAMMER, FMS



In the monitorial part of the lecture of the Entered Apprentice degree—as commonly worked in the “Preston-Webb” ritual—the new Apprentice is presented with four perfect points of entrance, which he is then told are related to the four Cardinal Virtues: Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice. These are illustrated down the body from head to foot, and explained as guttural, pectoral, manual, and pedal. They are accompanied by modes of recognition, but oddly, those modes are reversed from their usual order. As is common with many things Masonic, brothers have accepted this method of instruction without delving into why it has been communicated in that way. Naturally then, they are also not likely to have asked themselves whether or not that way is the best or most sensible way to convey the information.

The contention of this article is not that the points themselves are imperfect, but that the *arrangement* of these elements might need a better order, for both obvious as well as more esoteric reasons. The proposal put forth here is that we might consider the instructive benefit which might be gained by reversing that current order. While such an idea may sound heretical to some, the reader is reminded that respectful and mindful alterations in the ritual are a well-established aspect of our shared Masonic history. The names of two of these ‘tailors’ are well known to us.

William Preston’s work, which forms the basis of most ritual used in English-speaking Lodges today, certainly comes after the establishment of the mother Grand Lodge in 1717—he being born in 1742. The work of Thomas Smith Webb, which most American Grand Lodges have today accepted as canon, but also did not exist at the birth of the Craft, was criticized in his own time as innovation. That being the case, there

and sign respectively.] This is obviously the opposite of the degree he has just experienced. Why this might have been so arranged is not clear to this writer, but what is clear is that in addition to a reversed order providing more consistency in basic instruction, there is a definite esoteric benefit to starting from the pedal point of entrance and working upward. Mackey maintains, without further explanation, that the existing order is meant to convey the literal points of entrance, into the penal responsibility, the Lodge itself, the covenant of the obligation, and the instructions given in the northeast corner. But if this order was essential to the integrity of the degree, then the penalty sign would be the first mode of recognition communicated in the degree itself; instead it is the last. Mackey’s prosaic assessment also fails to connect with higher lessons which might be found in each of these points.

For the esoterically-minded Mason, the four perfect points of entrance may correspond to the four realms of existence as found in the Kabbalah. These realms take us from the temporal to the spiritual plane, and correspond to overlapping areas of the Sefirot or Tree of Life. In analyzing the journey in this way, we begin at the fourth point of entrance and go up to the top.

In the same way that we associate justice with feet being firmly planted on the ground, and thereby make the pedal mode of recognition, so too does this idea correspond with the realm of *Assiya*, which represents the temporal plane of existence. The notion of justice being part of our initial judgment of our circumstances and surroundings provides us with the initial stage of consciousness, or what we might call the first

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is certainly no harm done by suggesting that we might thoughtfully reverse the order of an already existing section of ritual.

Consider first that the manner in which the new Apprentice is instructed in these points gives him the sign of the degree before the due guard. [In some jurisdictions these may be referred to as the penal sign

step. One of the first lessons we learn in life is what seems fair to us, even before we fully understand the concept of right and wrong.

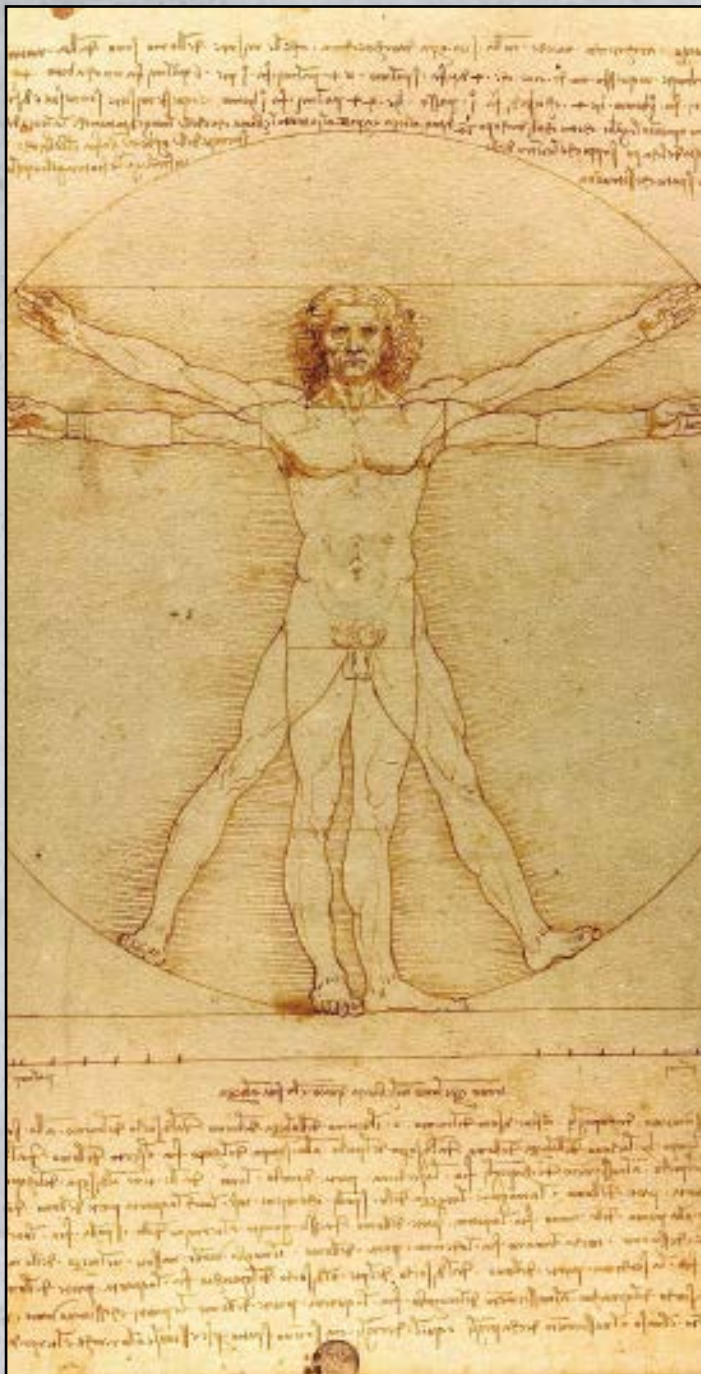
Prudence brings us up to the manual point of entrance, with hands being associated with actions, specifically the actions resulting from that initial judgment. As we go up the body, from the foot to head now, we

encounter the third realm of *Yetzira*, which deals with the emotions, or more precisely the choices one makes as a result of their judgment, based upon our feelings. Prudence is an essential quality in relation to this realm, so that we are able to subdue the passions we might feel in relation to any matter, and act prudentially in determining a proper course of action. The close placement of the hands in this mode of recognition suggests great care, as if holding something of great importance. Literally we hold one thing, but symbolically we hold our own destiny at this point. One must also remember that physically, we instinctively use our hands when seeking balance.

When we move up again, to the pectoral point of entrance, we find ourselves entering the first true realm of the soul, with the placement in the breast. Here we develop the fortitude, or power of mind necessary to accept the consequences of our judgment and our actions, and endure whatever externalities might arise from our decisions. Fortitude corresponds with *Beriya*, the second realm, which denotes the beginning of man's maturity as a spiritual being.

At the top of these points is the gutteral, which serves as a gateway to ultimate consciousness, the divine spark in humanity and the beginning of our oneness with the Almighty. Here we cross over into the realm of *Atzilut*, or divinity, where as a complete being, we assume the responsibility of not only having wisdom but also the ability to speak to and guide our lower realms with wisdom and higher cognizance. That the penal sign is placed here is of no small significance; it indicates a demarcation between the *God in us* and the rest of our previous spiritual efforts, almost as if to say that if we arrive at that realm and yet fail to maintain the lessons of the three that came before it, then we risk losing everything we have worked to attain thus far. This is totally consistent with temperance, that ultimate quality which enables us to understand, and determine how to integrate, all thoughts, passions and actions into our whole being.

Now, after saying all of this, and arguing for this bottom-up order to be used in explaining the points, it is necessary to say that for some, it is equally important to see these attributes or realms as descending into the individual. In other words, the idea is that by starting at the top,



with the emphasis on the realm of the divine, what the Apprentice is being asked to do is bring the divine down into him in this world. The beauty of esoteric systems, especially the Kabbalah, is that one can see equal merit in such an approach. Put another way, we are on Jacob's Ladder, and the traffic goes both ways at various times in our lives. However, the idea offered here is that to instruct the apprentice from the pedal to the gutteral, from justice to temperance, is to not only remain consistent with the order he has been previously given in the degree, but to show him a transformative ascent from rectitude to spiritual knowledge.

Today, as we enter a stage in the development of Freemasonry which finds us met with brothers seeking fuller meaning instead of free meals, it behooves us to liberate our rituals from the perception that they are perfunctory operations of either a 'less philosophical' English Masonry or of 'lower degrees', with the true philosophical elements only to be obtained in the alleged 'higher degrees' of some appendant body. Neither assertion is true, and here in the very first degree of the Craft, we have deeper spiritual teachings available to us that are almost never conveyed to the initiate.

While one might argue that these things are not properly taught even in those later innovations to which they were removed, and where they might appear more outwardly visible to the candidate, that discussion is for another time. What is clear is

that these deeper meanings in our work are and have been there for us, as well as the initiate, before he finishes his first evening as an Apprentice. All we have to do is to teach them, in whatever order seems best.

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## THE QUESTION OF MASONIC RESTORATION

BY ANDREW HAMMER, FMS



The most exciting thing happening in Freemasonry today is the energy coming from men who became Masons within the last twenty years. These brothers are looking for ways to make the experience of being a Mason something more than just belonging to a club with some mythic elements of history. They are looking for much more than a public charity, which they can find easily and in abundance, anywhere in daily life. They are looking for ways and methods to make Masonry what it seems to have been to our near ancestors; a serious endeavor aimed at an actual improvement in the way men live.

That desire, to make the Craft a relevant player in the life of the individual man, so much so that he wants to devote significant blocks of his time to it, has led to a general effort to improve the way Masonic lodges live. That effort has gone by a number of names in those twenty years, some better received than others, but the result in mind is mostly the same. The result being sought is a restoration of Freemasonry to its historical place as a philosophical institution, both viable and earnest, for men to seek meaning.

During that time, we have seen groups of brothers come together to try to articulate, to give definition to the various notions of lodge improvement that had been put forth. Originating in the then new world of the Internet, forums and websites began to spring up from a well of both intent and discontent, offering Masons an opportunity to learn from each other in ways they were not learning from their respective lodges.

Along the way, two terms stood out, or at least caught the attention of brothers interested in improving their Masonic experience. The first term is “Traditional Observance,” or “TO,” which has caused the most consternation in some areas of the fraternity. The term is and always

I find myself pointing out to brethren that I have never used that term either in relation to my own ideas or my own lodge. Whether it leads one into a debate as to whether or not Freemasonry is intended to be an extension of perennialism (space does not permit that far more extensive discussion here), or into a discussion of whether such a rigidly held rubric is itself a form of alternate practice that does not accurately reflect the actual traditional practices of Masonry, the term “Traditional Observance” has not, and does not communicate effectively the ideas of best practices in Masonry. One can certainly talk of traditions, and even more of being observant in our practice of Masonic ritual, history and law. But when the two words are capitalized and joined as some sort of label, the clarity of their meaning is somehow decreased.

The other “label” that has caught on during the last twenty years is “European Concept” lodges. Sure, it sounds appealing to some, even chic. But as anyone who understands American society knows, the idea that Americans need to improve their own situations by importing ideas from Europe or anywhere else sells about as well as air conditioners in Nome. Here again, the term, more than the ideas behind it, is what gets in the way. It should also be pointed out that the term “European Concept” for a particular kind of restored lodge comes from Australia, which means that the idea has now passed through *two* continents before arriving on North American shores. At the end of such a global journey, however, are we entirely sure that the ideas that are supposedly found abroad cannot be found within our own historical lineage? [One small example of this is that a skull and crossbones, wrongly considered by some to be a “foreign” emblem in Craft Masonry, may be found in the center of the square and compasses in a Maryland Past Master jewel from the late eighteenth century.]

In fact, as I travel throughout North America talking with Masons about these ideas, the use of the term “Traditional Observance” is the most common complaint I encounter, even from brothers who are sympathetic to the general idea, *or who may be practicing a form of it.*

has been problematic. In fact, as I travel throughout North America talking with Masons about these ideas, the use of the term “Traditional Observance” is the most common complaint I encounter, even from brothers who are sympathetic to the general idea, *or who may be practicing a form of it.*

Let me say that some of my dearest friends in the Craft have labored under these terms in their lodges, with nothing but the very best of intentions—and outcomes—in every aspect of their work. Let’s also be clear that the brothers who originally devised these terms were engaged in nothing more than seeking the very best in their Masonic experience. But after more than a decade of effort in a multitude of locations and



scenarios, it is time—in fact overdue in the opinion of your humble correspondent—to drop the hard attachment to these terms, and express very simply and clearly what the objective is behind all of these attempts to put that goal into a convenient phrase: to restore Masonry to its sense of greatness.

The fact of the matter, a fact that cannot be ignored by Grand Lodges any more than it can be put aside by the brothers who are inspired by it, is that the study of our history reveals a deeper and more mentally stimulating journey in the lodge than most of our lodges today are offering. Because Freemasonry was indeed seen in previous ages as a means of improving oneself intellectually, Masons today are seeking to restore lodges to that degree of engagement with the brethren, in order to restore Masonry itself to a position where it captures and holds the interest of serious men. *Restoration is not innovation.* It cannot be. Rather, it is a genuine effort to find out what we do not know, or might have forgotten about our own lodges and their histories, and bring that magic which made Masonry such a thing of value to our forefathers back into the lodges of today. Restoration is an ideal word to apply to this endeavor, not only because it speaks to rediscovering our own history, but because it also carries the meaning of restoring new life to the future of our Craft.

To that end, I invite our readers to find out more about the idea of Masonic restoration in general. For five years now, the Masonic Restoration Foundation (MRF) has offered annual educational symposiums throughout the continent where brethren from regular Grand Lodges can meet to discuss Masonry. This year the MRF will hold the Sixth Annual Symposium in Philadelphia, at the magnificent Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, from August 21-23. Any brother who attends the Symposium will not be disappointed, at the very least because it offers an opportunity to meet others who are interested in more light. Information about the Symposium and the MRF can be found at [www.masonicrestorationfoundation.org](http://www.masonicrestorationfoundation.org).

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