

FREEMASONRY AND THE CHURCH

BY

**W. J. COLLETT, C.D.
M.A. B.ED. B.D. D.D.**

**GRAND MASTER
GRAND LODGE OF ALBERTA, A.F. & A.M.**

AND

**PRESIDENT
MOUNT ROYAL COLLEGE**

CALGARY, ALBERTA

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From time to time Freemasonry has come under criticism from the Christian Church both the Roman Catholic and Protestant branches. The Roman Catholic opposition dates back to the Eighteenth Century when Papal Bulls were issued by Clement XII in 1738 and Benedict XIV in 1751 denouncing Freemasonry and instructing the Roman Catholics to withdraw from the Craft. Originally Freemasonry had both Roman Catholic clergy and laymen in its membership in almost every country where it had been established. The first Freemasons' Hall in London was erected in 1776 when Lord Petre, who was looked upon as the leading layman in the Roman Catholic Community in England, was the Grand Master of Masons. Earlier than that in 1730, Thomas Howard, the Eighth Duke of Norfolk, a Roman Catholic, was Grand Master and during his term presented to the Grand Lodge its Sword of State, which is still in use. After the Papal Bulls had been issued Roman Catholics gradually withdrew from membership in Freemasonry. This process was accelerated when a number of edicts were issued starting in the year 1821 and the result was almost a complete separation of the Roman Catholic Church from the Freemasons' Lodge.

The opposition of the Roman Catholic Church does not differ greatly from the criticism that arises from time to time in the Protestant Church. In 1935 the Catholic Truth Society issued a pamphlet which sets forth quite clearly the basis of the differences. The pamphlet admits that Freemasonry is "heretical to the country or, at any rate, quite harmless" but that the great objection is that Freemasons are placed under a solemn oath of secrecy. Even more serious than this is that Freemasonry tends to undermine belief in Catholic Christianity by substituting for it what is practically a rival religion based on deistic or naturalistic principles".

Through the years there have been criticisms of Freemasonry by Protestant groups. At a Methodist Conference in Great Britain in 1927, Rev. C. Penney Hunt criticized the Craft in much the same manner as did the Catholic Truth Society. While the Methodist Church refused to pass a motion unfavourable to Freemasonry yet there were many indications of support for Mr. Hunt. In January, 1951, the magazine "Theology", a publication of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, carried an article by a Church of England clergyman, Rev. Walton Hannah, entitled: "Should a Christian be a Freemason?" The question, of course, is answered in the negative mainly because Mr. Hannah claims that the oaths of secrecy and the penalties associated with the oaths are pagan. He claims, in addition, that the Masonic Order is a Gnostic Heresy. The article demands an inquiry into Freemasonry by the Church of England especially since both the Methodist and the Roman Catholic Churches questioned the validity of the Order.

At a Church Assembly in June 1951, Rev. R. Creed Meridith moved that a Commission be established to study the Hannah article and a long debate ensued. Freemasonry found supporters in many of the high dignitaries of the Church including Dr. Garbett, the Archbishop of York. Rev. C. E. Douglas made the following very penetrating statement: "You cannot understand Freemasonry except in a Lodge. Its real secret is fellowship." The motion was ultimately defeated.

In Scotland in 1754 the Associated Synod of Stirling considered the propriety of the

Masonic oath and in 1755 the Kirk Sessions were requested to make enquiries into Masonic practices. In some places in Scotland any person who admitted to being a member of a Freemason's Lodge was required to do public penance and subjected to a rebuke from the Kirk Session. The reasons for the opposition were the objections to the Oath of Secrecy and the penalties associated with the obligations.

From the above account it may be concluded that the historic objections to Freemasonry are:

- (1) Theological
- (2) Ethical

The theological objections are based on the charges that Freemasonry is:

(1) Deistic-The Deist relies on reason to prove the existence of God. They come to this position by conclusions drawn from the observation of nature. The revelation of God through a person, such as Jesus, is not necessary.

(2) Naturalistic -Naturalistic theology believes that the world can get along all right by itself by obedience to the natural law. God may have created the world but once it was set in motion there is no further need for Divine intervention. Hence there is no need to acknowledge that God once intervened in the natural order by sending his Son as the Saviour of the World.

(3) Gnostic -The Gnostic heresy claims that truth is revealed by God to specially selected individuals by means of special secret rites and ceremonies. The mystic ceremony of initiation confers on the initiate a special type of knowledge. Again the appearance of Jesus in human form is not necessary in the Gnostic view.

The Christian Church finds error in these three theologies because they exclude the need of Jesus Christ as Saviour of the world. This accusation against the Masonic Lodges is not correct. A man before he is admitted to the Masonic Order must profess a belief in God and in Life Eternal. It follows, then, that the Christian who applies for admission to the Masonic Lodge must confess a belief in God cfs revealed in Jesus Christ. Hence Freemasonry cannot be Deistic, Naturalistic or Gnostic. It is true that the Freemason's lodge endeavours to enrich a member's belief in God by instructing him in the moral law and the hidden secrets of nature and science. For the Christian this is a further understanding of the nature of the God as revealed in Jesus Christ in whom he has already admitted a belief.

The matter of secrecy has been greatly overrated as far as the Freemason's Lodge is concerned. There are no mystic initiatory rites which purport to give secret knowledge. There was a time in the early Christian Church that the Christians were accused of cannibalism because in their sacred meal they were reported to have eaten human flesh. This was, of course, a complete misunderstanding of the Lord's Supper and arose because the Christians were forced to meet for worship in secret. The meeting of the Freemason's Lodge is limited to members and their proceedings are in secret. It does not necessarily

follow that secrecy produces theological error or special knowledge. What it does indicate is that a very close and warm fellowship is developed amongst the members.

The ethical accusations against Freemasonry in relation to the oaths of secrecy and the penalty of the obligations are more difficult to explain to those who are not members of the Order. The penalties when considered with a historical imagination and with an understanding of their origins are not as pagan as they may at first appear. Recently, however, some Grand Lodges have undertaken to revise the penalties. In Canada, the Grand Lodge of Quebec, has led the way in this matter. It should be sufficient to note that the Masonic Order is conscious of the need to study a revision of the penalties. This, in itself, should indicate to the critics of this aspect of Freemasonry that the penalties are not basic to the purpose of the Order.

Secrecy will have to remain because this is a fundamental concept but it should be noted that secrecy implies a fellowship and not immorality, irreligion or sedition. Far more important than the issues discussed above is what may be described as the practical situations which cause individual clergymen to oppose Freemasonry. This practical conflict appears when the Freemason's Lodge appears to compete with the Church for the time, energy and talent of the men in any community. The validity of such criticism is borne out when the Mason prefers to attend his Lodge rather than go to a Church meeting. It is further aggravated when a Freemason's Lodge plans events which conflict with Church activities. Very regrettably some Lodges arrange practices on Sundays when the members should be in church. Such inconsiderate action rightly brings the Lodge into disrepute.

Another very valid point of criticism is 'when the Freemason's Lodge presumes to usurp some of the historical prerogatives of the Church, for example the so-called Masonic Funeral. The Church, as is its right, commits the body to the ground and concludes the burial service with the benediction. Then the Masonic Lodge takes over and conducts the committal service again, often inexpertly and in a painfully long and theologically unsound manner. It should be noted that the Freemason's Lodges are themselves examining the validity of this practice and many are substituting a Memorial Service for the Funeral Service. The following is a quotation from the proceedings of the United Grand Lodge of England dated September 12th, 1962:

- (1) That Masonic Rites, Prayers and Ceremonies be confined to the Lodge Room and that dispensation to wear Regalia (which term includes White gloves) be granted only in exceptional cases;
- (2) That there be no active participation by Masons, as such, in any part of the burial service or cremation of a Brother and that there be no Masonic prayers, readings or exhortations either then or at the grave side subsequent to the interment, since the final obsequies of any human being, Mason or not, are complete in themselves and do not call, in the case of a Freemason, for any additional ministrations. That if it is wished to recall and allude to his Masonic life and actions this can appropriately be done at the next Lodge meeting in the presence of his Brethren, or at a specially arranged Memorial Service;

(3) But that while no obstacle should be put in the way of Masons wishing to take part in an act of corporate worship, only in rare and exceptional cases should they be granted dispensation to do so wearing regalia; moreover, that the order of service should in all cases be such as the officiating minister, or his superior, consider to be appropriate to the occasion."

The most serious criticism that clergymen have against Freemasonry is that some Freemasons claim that their Lodge gives them all the religion they need and that they feel no need of the Church. Any Freemason that makes such a claim has completely misunderstood the teachings of the craft and is doing a serious disservice both to the Church and the Lodge. Freemasonry is a science of morality founded on the purest principles of piety and virtue" and can never claim to be a substitute for the Church. Although its teachings are based on deeply spiritual concepts based on a belief in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man and although it looks forward to the ultimate unity of mankind in the spirit of love, it can never aspire to supplant the Church as the militant body of Christ manifest in the world. Nor can a Freemason's Lodge hope to satisfy the spiritual life of man which is expressed in the worship, ordinances and outreach of the Christian Church. The Freemason's Lodge has no message of redemption for the sinner and no hope of salvation to offer to those who have lost their foothold on life. No message of forgiveness and atonement is offered to those who are battered and broken by sin and wrongdoing. There is no ministry of healing for those who, in life's struggle, have lost courage and hope. Forgiveness, atonement, redemption and hope are all the prerogatives of the Christian Gospel as expressed in the Church and it is presumptuous for a Freemason to assert that they can be found elsewhere. A well instructed Freemason will never treat lightly the divine ministries of the Church nor will he absent himself from attendance at the house of God. Indeed, if he lives as a Freemason should, he will be eager to be a valued aid to the church life of his community.

Religion, morality and noble living find themselves seriously challenged in this age of materialism and all the forces of high and noble living must be rallied to meet the crisis. Both the Church and the Freemason's Lodge are dedicated to such a cause and it would be to their eternal shame if they dissipated their energies in a non-productive criticism of each other. For the Mason it is essential that he demonstrate to the Church his goodwill and support. This task will be made easier if the Masonic Lodge takes steps to remove those areas in which there has been misunderstanding especially by a critical re-examination of its public ceremonies and re-interpretation of the image of being a secret society bound by obligations to which are attached pagan penalties. The Craft has in its membership many clergymen of differing faiths who should accept the responsibility of representing the Freemason's Lodge amongst their brother clergymen. Then it may be possible for more of them to subscribe to the following statement made by Dr. Daniel A. Poling, an outstanding Baptist minister:

I arrived at the decision that Masonry is a vital and dynamic force in America, and in the world, for everything high and worthy to which my life has long been committed. And there is something more, Masonry occupies, in my opinion, a unique position of opportunity and obligation in the human order today."

Calgary, Alberta, Canada, May, 1965.