

Chapter 9

Little Man, What Now?

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Let Freemasonry "take a position" on public issues of the day. Stand up and be counted (as-suming, of course, that the position our Craft takes is in line with our own pet prejudices).

ONE OF THE BEST friends I have ever had was a blue-blooded Calvinist twice my age. In our present-day society he probably would be known as an egghead. Strait-laced though he was, he had a rare sense of humor. I am still chuckling over some of his salty remarks.

Of all the amusing incidents he related to me, I believe I have derived the most unholy glee from his story of the divisions within a church congregation. It goes something like this:

After many years' absence a clergyman returned to pay a visit to his former parish. When he discovered that one venerable Watchman on the Walls of Zion was no longer affiliated with the local congregation, he sought out his friend and, in the course of the visit, asked why he had separated himself from the fold.

"Well, parson, it's like this," said the weather-beaten old pillar. "Some of the brethren in the church embraced false doctrines. Those of us who could not accept the new heresies withdrew and established another branch of the church."

"Has that arrangement proved satisfactory?" the minister asked.

"Not exactly, parson. Everything went well in the new church for a time until other false doctrines were propagated and some of our brethren accepted them. Those of us who stood foursquare withdrew and formed a small congregation of our own."

"And that, I trust, has been spiritually satisfying to you?"

"No, parson, I am sorry to say it has not. Satan was busy even in that small congregation. Some of the brethren began to follow heresies my wife and I could not accept, and we were forced to withdraw and worship alone in our own home."

"Then at last you have found inner peace?" the minister asked.

"I can't exactly say we have," was the reply. "You see, even my wife began to embrace ideas that were theologically unsound, so that now she worships in the northeast corner of the living room and I worship in the southwest."

WHENEVER ONE OF MY zealous Masonic friends tells me the time has come that

Freemasonry must "take a position" on some issue of the day, how our Craft must "stand up and be counted," mount a white horse and raise the banner of some-thing-or-other, I chuckle to myself and think of the church congregation which "took a position" to the extent that only the old deacon and his wife were left—and even they could not agree.

It is amazing how many American Masons of today are obsessed with the thought that Freemasonry should become some kind of glorified pressure group. "Oh, but this is different," my idealistic Brother will tell me with patriotic fervor. "Just remember how our colonial Brethren dressed in Indian costumes and threw the tea overboard into Boston Harbor!"

"Yes, I'm remembering," is my stock reply, "and I am trying also to remember a certain paragraph that might not have been a part of the charge to the Entered Apprentice in 1773! I am remembering that many of the 'Indians' (though not necessarily all of them) were members of both the Lodge of Saint Andrew and of a revolutionary organization known as the Sons of Liberty which met in the same tavern. I am remembering, too, that the membership of the Lodge of Saint Andrew was perhaps 25 or less."

And what does the size of the Lodge have to do with it? Simply this: It was easy enough for those colonial Masons to be revolutionary-minded, for they were men small in number, united by common background, common interest, common purpose. Just how would you persuade a present-day Lodge of 800 to 2,000 members of diversified background, interest and purpose to unite on anything?

I HAVE SEVERAL Masonic friends who think Freemasonry should "take a position." From the tone of their conversation I gather they would want our Fraternity to become the handmaiden of the Republican party—and of the conservative faction of the Republican party at that!

Should they realize their hearts' desire, then all Democrats would have to be expelled for un-Ma-sonic conduct; then all progressive Republicans would get the axe; then all modern middle-of-the-road Republicans would have to go, and finally our Craft would be reduced to the ludicrous position of the church deacon and his wife kneeling in opposite corners of the living room.

Why all the hue and cry to "take a position" on some ideology? It is entirely contrary to the Ancient Charges, to the Declaration of Principles, to the ritualistic ceremonies of the three degrees, to all there is in Masonic philosophy, usages, customs, traditions. And besides, to espouse the ideology of the day and lift the banners in its behalf would be to sign the death warrant for our Craft.

What has happened that so many segments of American Freemasonry want to make our Fraternity a sounding board for all kinds of inflammatory political tirades? Is it an outgrowth of the so-called democratic system wherein each man, operating under the guarantee of free speech, feels compelled to mount a soap box and bellow to all who will listen?

NOW THAT I HAVE expressed my opinion in advance, let us look at some specific

examples of what I am talking about; then let us argue a bit. First, the examples:

—Two sessions of the Conference of Grand Masters in North America: one at which the Grand Masters went into "executive session" to talk about a national political campaign; the other at which there was bosom-beating and flag-waving on a divisive issue that was not only ill-advised but also beneath the dignity of Freemasonry.

—The Grand Master who issued a formal protest to the two United States Senators and Members of the Congress over what he termed the "most outrageous decision of the Supreme Court in *ruling out prayers* in the public schools in New York State." (Italics are mine).

—The Grand Master who got all his political, economic and sociological pet peeves off his chest with a peroration denouncing the United Nations and foreign aid, followed by a broadside blast at "professional politicians, labor racketeers, professional do-gooders, free spenders and One Worlders."

—The Grand Orator of one Jurisdiction who took advantage of Masonic immunity to rave and rant on political subjects, the following of which is a sample: "Left wingers, politicians in Washington and the Supreme Court say that we must destroy traditions and customs of one-fourth of the American people because the Communists will say bad things about us—that if we do not integrate the races in (name of State) and the South, the people in other parts of the world will not like us . . . Our destiny is to continue our resistance to this lousy Supreme Court and the irresponsible leftists until the American people are awakened and sanity returns to the American governmental scene . . . Let us accept the challenge!" (The Grand Lodge then adopted resolutions to print the address in pamphlet form and to send a copy to each Lodge, to both United States Senators, to the Representatives in the Congress and to the Supreme Court.)

—Letters in my files, regrettable and un-Masonic that they are, in which efforts are made to identify Freemasonry in Indiana with partisan disputes, with so-called "States' rights" ideologies, with sociological issues, with almost every conceivable activity where Freemasonry does not belong.

The few illustrations reviewed above are serious enough in themselves. But the appalling aspect of so many of them is that they were not the work

of newly-raised Master Masons ignorant of what Freemasonry is and what it is not—they were the work of *Grand Masters and Past Grand Masters*. It is discouraging to see how far we have to go to educate our leaders—those who should be setting the Craft to work and giving them good and wholesome instruction. "If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch!"

I SUBMIT THAT *we had better think it through*. Freemasonry is one of the few institutions of Twentieth Century society which seems to have any interest in maintaining an attitude of good will. Consider these few basic questions:

1. When Freemasons "stand up to be counted" on political, civic and legislative

subjects, do they espouse the side of Tweedle-dee or of Tweedle-dum? My old Calvinistic friend liked to quote the famous wisecrack of the Bishop of Gloucester: "Orthodoxy is my doxy; heterodoxy is another man's doxy!"

Look back over the last century and a half at the horde of religious sects which have come into existence to propagate a single (and trivial) point of doctrine, or custom, or individual peculiarity. On the north side of the street the People of God devote their energies to a lot of wild-eyed absurdities in connection with an "iniquitous" institution known as Freemasonry. On the south side of the street the People of God single out some personal practice or habit and seek to label it as a mortal sin. Down in the next block the People of God make a Federal case out of one small word in one particular translation of the Scriptures.

And you can safely wager that all three of them have exclusive custody of the keys to the kingdom!

Let Freemasonry "take a position" in line with one man's pet prejudice and it descends to the same level of pettiness and intolerance as the prolific sects, and makes itself just as ridiculous.

2. Just who would determine which "position" Freemasonry should take? A few years ago, when *The Indiana Freemason* began to publish paid advertisements for a cooperative industry, some of our good Brethren wrote letters to protest. "You are identifying Freemasonry with socialism," they said. They went on to tell us that the competing industry in which they owned stock represents the American Way of Life, and it employs a great many Masons who will not like this sort of thing.

We replied to each protest, patiently and in good humor. We had no intention of identifying Freemasonry with socialism, we told them, but first we must get Masons to agree among themselves as to what constitutes socialism. We reminded them that the competing co-operative industry to which they objected also is owned and operated by many hundreds of Master Masons. "Shall we expel them?" we asked. "Are you prepared to prefer charges?"

Our experience with the co-operative advertisements was good for us, for it gave us a clear picture of how unthinkable it would be for Freemasonry to "take a position" and become a pressure group for some ideology. Here was a school of thought which regarded its own business interests as epitomizing the American Way of Life and its competitor as "socialistic." Who, then, becomes the judge of which side of the battle for more business Freemasonry should take? And what would be left of our Fraternity if it were purged of all our business competitors, and of all who might disagree with us on political, social, civic and religious subjects?

3. Should Freemasonry "take a position," how then could we justify the Masonic insistence on the dignity and importance of the individual? I suppose the reason so many of our Brethren are restless in wanting Masons to "stand up and be counted" for or against something is that it has become the fashionable thing to do. Without any effort at

all we can find organizations which will sound the trumpets for Mother, Home and Heaven. The political parties adopt platforms, and how silly they are! Every community is crowded with organizations which say they believe in Good Government, National Defense and Safe Driving on the Highways. Yes, and there are groups far too numerous to mention which will stand firm and resolute for Lower Taxes, Better Working Conditions, Higher Prices for Our Products, Government Subsidies for Us, No Government Subsidies for the Other Fellow, and all kinds of good things.

LET THE RESTLESS Brother who yearns to make Freemasonry just another pressure group go elsewhere. There are hundreds of pro- and anti- societies that will welcome him as a member and permit him to orate from the soap box, to conduct hate campaigns, to circularize, to lobby and to picket. The Masonic Fraternity simply does not operate that way. Our Craft maintains an historic position the wisdom of which has been demonstrated again and again.

Freemasonry, thank God, thinks highly of the individual man. It says so in a multitude of ways—and it does more than merely *say so*. Surely no man can receive the three degrees without being profoundly impressed, by word and symbolism, with the mighty fact that he is acknowledged to be a son of God!

The lessons of our Craft are such that no Masonic dignitary need tell the Master Mason what he must think, nor what he must believe, nor which side he must take, nor how to vote. Freemasonry has enough confidence in those who wear the lambskin apron that it believes the Mason will *know* these things—and it is not so small and narrow that it will sit in pontifical judgment on a Brother simply because of his convictions on a current public question.

TRULY, IN THE WORDS of the French poet¹ we need to ask ourselves, "Where are the snows of yesteryear?"

It is a humbling experience to think back on some of the foolish and immature "causes" with which American organizations have been identified. Remember the Ku Klux Klan and how it tried to fasten itself upon Freemasonry?

I always have liked the gentle manner in which Dr. Joseph Fort Newton admonished his restless Brethren in an editorial written almost four decades ago:²

"In his capacity as an American citizen, each man of our Craft will do what seems to him wise and just and right and to the best interest of his country; but let us hope and pray that no echo of angry debate may be heard in any Lodge of Masons . . . lest we injure what is priceless . . . By the same token, the men who stand out in our history, to whom we pay the highest homage, are the men of personality, principle and ideals, who, combining sympathy and good will with unbending loyalty to great truths, defied the cynical spirit and wrought disinterestedly for the common good. By as much as Masonry creates such men and endows them with moral ideals, by so much does it render its highest service to the country and the Craft."

As a fraternity Freemasonry has no business "taking a position" on the fleeting fads

and disputes of the day. These, too, will pass. If Master Masons have been given good and wholesome instruction we can depend upon them to take the right side when the lines are drawn on a vital issue. And if our Brethren are not of that caliber, then it is up to us to guard the West Gate a little more carefully; to do a better job of hewing and squaring the stones in the quarries where they are raised!

¹ Francois Villon (1430-1484) *The Greater Testament*.

² *The Master Mason*, August 1928.