

## **An Overview of Masonic Degrees**

Masonic degrees are a means to an end. In Freemasonry, a degree is the method by which the principles of Freemasonry are passed on to the candidate in a ritualistic manner. Even though prayer is used at certain points, the ritual is quite categorically not a religious ceremony. It is merely a formalized procedure used to induct new members into Freemasonry, and to explain to them what it is they are joining and what will be expected of them.

Freemasons have traditionally kept the degree ceremonies to themselves for a very simple reason. If someone wishing to become a Freemason knew how the stories unfolded in advance it would ruin their impact, much in the same way as being told how a movie ends would ruin the viewer's experience.

So why the ritual? There are two primary reasons. First, by using formalized degree ceremonies everyone enters freemasonry on an equal basis and shares the same experience, regardless of what their position or status outside the craft may be. Secondly, by continuing to use degree ceremonies, which incorporate drama, allegory and symbolism, the principles of Freemasonry are indelibly impressed upon each candidate's heart and mind.

The origins of our ritual, like the origins of Freemasonry itself, have not yet been discovered. Other than knowing that our ancient Brethren had a "Mason Word" we have no clear definition of what ceremonies were used in ancient operative Lodges. The earliest evidence we have comes from a set of over one hundred versions of a very old document known as the "Old Charges." Some of these ancient documents date back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and are thought to be copies of even much older manuscripts dating back to the tenth century and earlier.

Although the various versions of the Old Charges differ slightly in their detail, they conform to a common pattern. Typically, there is a legendary history of the "Mason Craft" followed by a set of rules or "Charges" by which the initiates were to conduct themselves both at work and in their personal lives. The versions dating from the second half of the 1600's provide an inkling of their ritual. An obligation to preserve the mysteries of the craft was taken on the Holy Bible, and the "Mason Word and Sign" were communicated. The charges were then read, telling the new Mason of his duty to God, his Master, and his fellow man. The legendary history of the Craft was then read. Other related documents of about the same period add several minor details, including the wearing of aprons within the Lodge Room itself, and the presentation of two sets of white gloves to the candidate, one for himself, and one for his wife.

It is not until 1690 that we discover evidence of ritual content within the Edinburgh Register House Manuscript (a set of questions and answers describing a simple ceremony and signs) From 1690 to 1729 a number of manuscripts that include printed questions and answers in varying states of completeness have survived. These show a simple two degree system, (Apprentice and Fellow of the Craft,) the taking of an obligation on the

Holy Bible, the communication of signs and words for each degree, and very simple symbolism based on the simple tools of a Stone Mason. The earliest reference to a third degree, so far as discovered, comes in 1725, but it is not until 1730 that we have any real idea of its content.

These later manuscripts included a system of three separate degrees, i.e. Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason, each with its own sign and word as modes of recognition, but with an obligation only in the First Degree. The ceremonies were divided into two parts: the communication of the sign and the communication of the word. In each case, they were followed by a short set of questions and answers through which the ceremony and the purpose of the degree is explained to the initiate, again using simple symbolism based on Stone Mason's tools.

From the 1770's onwards, lectures based on questions and answers began to be expanded, incorporating explanations of the way in which the candidate was prepared for each degree. They also included additional Stone Mason's tools to illustrate virtues expected to be practiced by all Freemasons, and symbolic explanations of the furniture of the Lodge Room as well as the regalia worn by the Lodge Officers.

The ritual for each of the three Craft Degrees, as we practice it today, falls into two parts. The first is the ritualistic ceremony in which the candidate is introduced, demonstrates his qualifications for the degree, takes an obligation, and has the signs, steps, grips, and words communicated and explained to him. The second part of each degree ceremony includes a formal lecture and charge in which the purpose of the degree and the initiate's duties are explained. The Charge to the initiate is possibly one of the most succinct explanations in the English Language of how to live a good and useful life. Given the positive impact these Charges can have in each of our lives, it is well worth studying them time and time again.