

Ancient Symbolic Penalties

By K.W. Aldridge

We want To thank Most Worshipful Brother Aldridge. PGM/Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Quebec for this provocative Short Talk Bulletin. The ancient penalties in our obligations have been the source of much of the criticism leveled at Freemasonry. Most Worshipful Brother Aldridge deals with this criticism in a stimulating way.

The United Grand Lodge of England being in many respects the well-spring of modern day Masonry is a valuable source of inspiration, education and philosophy concerning what has come to be regarded as REGULAR FREEMASONRY. The recent decision by the United Grand Lodge of England, followed by a number of American Grand Lodges, to eliminate the Ancient Penalties from the obligation of each degree has caused much discussion within the Masonic Fraternity.

The purpose of this article is to discuss an alternative approach to the actual elimination of these Ancient Penalties.

Before proceeding further in this dissertation concerning the ANCIENT PENALTIES it needs to be pointed out that these penalties were not the brainchild of some distant Masonic ritualist. These or very similar variations of them were in use in England among the oaths taken by mariners during the 15th century and were also used in oaths assumed by those being admitted to the bar in London, England during the 16th century.

If Freemasonry has erred in the choice of these penalties it was in the reference to them as "ANCIENT PENALTIES" rather than what they really were – "ANCIENT SYMBOLIC PENALTIES". As Shakespeare's Hamlet said, "...ah there's the rub". These penalties were never included for the purpose of having an enforceable violent penalty. They were included simply as a symbolic representation of how seriously a postulant should view his oath.

Some would say if these are simply symbolic then remove them since they no longer mean anything. That is somewhat misleading because so much of what we have around us and which we hold so dear in this troublesome world is recorded in symbols of all kinds. Symbolism is part of life and cannot be cast aside. Mathematicians, geologists, in fact anyone whose discipline relies on the use of numbers or numeric expressions, relies on symbols as an

everyday experience. The simple act, though not always simple, of driving a car depends on the use of symbols to arrive safely at the intended destination. The numbers on the speedometer are symbols, various designs on highway signs are symbols, the little knobs on the dashboard all have different symbols. They are there to ensure understanding regardless of the language of the operator. So it may be concluded that symbols are an effective means of communication to ensure accurate understanding regardless of language, education or intellect. In fact your ability to read this paper is based on your understanding of the symbols or letters used to express my thoughts.

"Oh yes", some may say "...but these are all symbols lacking any violent origin". That may not be entirely accurate either. Many symbols in use today depict a violent beginning and their design is intended to remind us of that hazard. So it may be concluded violent symbols are effective communication links to save us from harm. The simplest being the skull and crossbones as a symbol of life threatening danger and of course the modern nuclear era has spawned untold violent symbols especially designed to protect us from violent hazards.

Even the flags of many nations which certainly are revered and honored by their nationals, and displayed in their places of worship, use red as a symbol of the spilled blood which caused their nations to be born. The red poppy worn so reverently in memory of our soldiers who died in battles to defend our country is a symbol of the blood spilled in battle on Flanders Fields during World War One. The buttons on the sleeve of a man's jacket and the little slit under the buttons are symbols of the time a man's jacket unbuttoned all the way to the shoulder so that he might have easy use of his sword. The vent at the back of a man's jacket is a symbol of the time soldiers rode horseback. The vent allowed their jackets to fall on either side of the riders' legs and so keep his powder dry to more effectively kill his adversary. Quite a nice little symbol to carry around with us when dressed in our Sunday best.

Now to get back to our ANCIENT SYMBOLIC PENALTIES. Why on earth should we even consider relocating or removing them in the first place? "Oh because they are offensive to some religious leaders". That begs the question as to which religious leaders? Some of the greatest clergymen I have ever met, both the pragmatic and the scholarly, have been members of the Masonic Order. Not a single one of those extremely worldly wise reverend brothers ever dreamed of any part of the ceremony being offensive in any manner whatever, INCLUDING the penalties. Obviously no clergy outside of the craft should cause us any concern because they really don't understand the context of the ceremony or the part the penalties play in it. Now what does that leave us to contemplate? I believe it points out in the clearest possible terms that the Masonic Order is a true microcosm of the real world in which we live.

We have our own fair share of iconoclasts whose aim is to tear down rather than to build constructively.

However, their arguments are not too compelling if analyzed. They suggest that violence is an offense to God. Yet both Moses and Jesus had recourse to violence in defending what they believed was an affront to God. Notwithstanding that argument or counter-argument there is no violence in Masonry provided the penalties are described as ANCIENT SYMBOLIC PENALTIES. Anything less than that description is an offense to God and Masonry. It is not good enough to describe them as ANCIENT PENALTIES since that implies that they are exigible and therein we could be faulted from within and without this noble craft.

At a time when the Scandinavian Churches are seeing in Masonry no conflict with their profession of faith, where leading clerics of the Church of Rome are finding no incompatibility between Regular Freemasonry and their belief of Christianity and those who malign us the most are being found to be guilty of criminal and moral law breaking, we must be sure we stand by what we teach. We must continue to conduct the affairs of Masonry in a manner well beyond reproach.

We must not allow indiscriminate changes to be made. Once the start is made where do we stop? Would we consider dropping the investigations of potential candidates, would we discontinue the trial procedures, would we allow avowed atheists to become part of our fraternity, would we allow and tolerate plots or conspiracies of any kind? Certainly we would not do any of those things.

We are assembled to unify, in a God fearing brotherhood, wherein we can unite in spirit to treat all of God's children as family. We cannot do that effectively by allowing schisms to develop. We must be unified for the benefit, not solely for our Order, but to better serve mankind in whatever manner God leads us as individuals who have learned to recognize our duty to him and our Brother. There will always be room for change in administrative practices but we should not change that which has worked so well heretofore and for which there is no substantive reason to consider change!

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