

Letter Perfect By Unknown

"We put too much emphasis on Ritual, and not enough on the higher things in Masonry!"

How often have we heard that said; how often some of us have said it! A statement which has the ring of authority often passes for fact. So accustomed are we to the voice of the boss, the law or the minister that we get out of the habit of questioning, "Is it True?" Yet it will be of use to us here to question closely and ascertain if too much emphasis "IS" put upon ritual.

It is easy enough to state what Ritual is – certain words arranged in a certain way, which have come down to us, so we say, from time "Immemorial" and by means of which we confer degrees, and impart Masonic teachings to novices, and incidentally, to the brethren who attend lodge. But when we ask "Why is Ritual?" the answer is not so easy.

We have before us constantly the example set by school, college, tutor and student; knowledge is knowledge whether given in a set form or otherwise. "Twice two is equal to four" is no more true than is "four is the product of two multiplied by two." We can say two time two, or twice two, two by two; and express exactly the same truth. We learn no words by rote, when we study history. The medical student learns geography of the body, but not the heart. Everywhere it is shown to us that real knowledge does not depend upon a certain form of words, and that it is the fact, not the word, which is the important thing.

Why, then. this insistence upon an exact memorization of the "Words" of the Ritual? Why do we lay so much stress upon the successful employment of a mighty memory? Why do we insist that those who confer degrees should spend painful hours in long and arduous study in order that certain sentences, often of an involved and old-fashioned construction, may be uttered in a certain way only, and only in a certain way for the instruction of candidates?

Yet there are several reason why Ritual is important.

Let us examine and see for ourselves that there really are explanations of the need for memorization.

One of the great appeals of Freemasonry, both to the profane and the initiate, is its antiquity. The Order can trace an unbroken history of more than two hundred years in its present form (the first Grand Lodge was formed in 1717), and has irrefutable documentary evidence of a

much longer existence in simpler forms. There is very complete circumstantial evidence that Freemasonry is the legitimate and only heir to guilds, societies, organizations and systems of teaching which run so far back into the past that they are lost in the mists which shroud antiquity.

Our present Rituals – the plural is used advisedly, as no two jurisdictions are exactly at one with another on what is correct in Ritual – are source books from which we prove just where we came from, and, to some extent, just when. For instance, the penalties are so obviously taken from some of the early English Laws, that no sensible student can believe that they were invented or first used, let us say, in the time of King Solomon.

If we alter our Ritual, either intentionally or by poor memorization, we gradually lose the many references concealed in our words and sentences, which tell the story of where we came and when. It is a beautiful thing to do as all have done who have gone this way before us. To say the same words, take the same obligations, repeat the same ceremonies that Washington underwent, gives us feeling of kinship with the Father of this country which no non-Mason may have, But this we must lose if we change our Ritual, little by little, altering it by poor work; forgetting or leaving words out.

Time is relative to the observer; what is very slow to the man may be very rapid to nature. Nature has all the time there is. To drop out a word here, put in a new one there, eliminate this sentence and add that one to our Ritual – a very few score of years – the old Ritual will be entirely altered and become something new.

We have a confirmation of this. Certain parts of the Ritual are printed. The expressions in these printed paragraphs are, practically and universally the same in most of our jurisdictions. Occasionally there is a variation, showing where some Committee on Work and Lectures has not been afraid to change the work of the Fathers. But, as a whole, the printed portion of our work is substantially what it was when it was first composed and phrased, probably by Preston and Dermott. But the "Secret Work," given between portions of the printed work, is very different in many of our jurisdictions. Some of these differences, of course, are accounted for by different original sources, yet even in two jurisdictions which had the same source of Freemasonry and originally had the same work, we found variations, showing that "Mouth To Ear" no matter how secret it may be, is not a wholly accurate way of transmitting words.

If then, in spite of us, alterations creep in by the slow process of time and human fallibility, how much faster will the Ritual change if we are careless, indifferent, or in open rebellion against established Masonic tradition? The further away we get from our original source, the more meticulously careful must trustworthy Masons be to pass on to posterity the work exactly as we received it. The Mason of olden time could go to his source for re-inspiration and re-instruction – we cannot.

Ritual is the thread which binds us to those who immediately preceded us, as their Ritual bound them to their fathers, our grandfathers. The Ritual we hand down to our sons, and their son's sons, will be their bond with us, and through us, with the historic dead. To alter that bond intentionally is to wrong those who come after us, even as we have been wronged where those who preceded us were care-less or inefficient in their memorization and rendition of the Ritual.

It is not for us to say "This Form of Words is Better Because They are Plainer," any more than it is for us to say that we can build a "Better" Temple than Solomon erected, or write a "Better" document than the Constitution of the United States.

"But we amend the Constitution!" some brother may argue. Aye, we amend it, but we do not alter it. We keep the old, just as it was written, and write our amendments separately, And we have been obliged to amend the Masonic procedure of our progenitors in many ways. Modern times require modern methods. But we can add to our procedure without changing our Ritual. Every Masonic Book on symbolism is an addition, but it is not a change. Every lecture delivered by a student of Masonry may open up a new vision, but it is not a change in the old. To amplify, explain, expound is but to give that "Good and Wholesome Instruction" which a Master is sworn to do, but all that may be done without in any way altering the fundamentals of our methods of teaching.

But there is a great and more important reason than any of these. Freemasonry is not a thing, but a system of thought. It is not something that may be bought or sold – it can only be won. We may not wrap up Freemasonry in a package and give to an initiate. All we can do is to lead him to the gate, beyond which lies the field which he may till, the mine in which he may dig, the treasure house from which he may help himself.

Our duty is to lead him so that the way is clear – to give him instructions in such a way that he cannot miss the path. This we do by our ceremonies, our Ritual. In our Ritual is contained the germ of all those philosophical and moral truths which Freemasonry teaches. In our Ritual is at least one explanation of our symbols. In the Ritual are the real secrets of Freemasonry made plain for those who have ears to hear.

If we memorize our Ritual badly, we put the emphasis on the way we say it, not on what we say. If we omit or interpolate, we change the instructions which generations of Masons have found to be effective. If we do not pass on to others what we have received, just as we have received it we handicap those who profess to teach, and thus can have no right to complain if they do not become good Masons, but merely lodge members.

A candidate comes among us, knowing nothing of the Fraternity beyond the fact that it is an association of men in an Order which has had the approbation of leaders of men for hundreds of years. Upon the impression we make upon him when he takes his degrees will depend not only the kind of Mason he becomes, but in some respects, the judgment the world will make of Masonry, since it can only judge of the institution from the individual.

The impression make upon him will depend very largely on the character of the work we do – the care and attention we have given to its preparation – the ease with which the dear old words come from our hearts and lips.

Any one, with time and attention, can memorize Ritual. But it is not enough merely to know it and deliver it so it sounds, as something learned by rote, parrot like, unimpressive. We may not speak as an orator speaks; we may not have his personality and the impressiveness of the actor, but we all can, if we only will, attain the perfection of letter-knowledge; we can learn our Ritual so that it becomes a part of us, and give it forth with ease and clarity, if not with fire and force. The vast majority of Ritualists are but indifferent elocutionists; Freemasonry neither expects nor extracts a very high standard of delivery from us, her servants. But to make up for that which nature has denied us, we owe to Freemasonry that willingness to study, that care in preparation, that interest in perfection which alone will enable us to pass on to these who are to be our Brothers, her teachings, her instructions, the Holy fire concealed in her old, old words.

Be not discouraged then, if Ritual "Comes Hard." Fail not in the task, nor question that it is worth while, for on what we do, and on the way in which we do it depends in a large measure the Freemasonry of the future. As we do well or ill, so will those who come after us do ill or well.

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