

The Blessings Of Liberty

By George W. Baldwin

PGM Grand Lodge of British Columbia

This Short Talk Bulletin has been adapted from a speech given at the Grand Lodge of Alaska in February, 1987, by M.W. Brother George W. Baldwin, Past Grand Master, Grand Lodge of British Columbia. We thank M.W. Brother Baldwin for sharing these "cross the border" thoughts with us.

This year, 1987, marks the 200th anniversary of the drafting and ratification of the United States Constitution by those thirteen former colonies, which eleven years earlier had joined in their Declaration of Independence from Great Britain. Incidentally, there were those other American colonies in existence at that time, which chose to remain loyal, and of course, they laid the foundation from which Canada, the largest, geographically speaking, democratic nation in the world developed. I want to draw your attention to those events of 1787, and in particular, to some of the language used.

The Preamble to the Constitution is a masterpiece of concise writing, and is generally believed to have been the work of Gouverneur Morris, a delegate from Pennsylvania to the Constitutional Convention. Even though you may be well acquainted with it, let me read it to you again: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States."

I would ask you to pay particular attention to the phrase, "to secure the blessing of liberty." I do not want to dwell at length on what those blessings are, or attempt to find a definition for them, for I think that each one of us, if so asked, would produce a different list. Perhaps Thomas Jefferson came as close as any, to a satisfactory definition, when he wrote, in the Declaration of July 4, 1776: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

But how are those rights to be "secured"? The Constitution, as originally drafted, did not spell out any particular rights, nor any rules for securing them. The first ten amendments, known ever

after as "The Bill of Rights," were not proposed until 1789, nor adopted until 1791. I mention this, because it is of importance to us as Freemasons, that likewise there is not mention made of any duties or responsibilities, insofar as the individual citizen is concerned, either in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights, or, for that matter, in the Canadian Constitution and its Charter of Rights and Freedoms. My proposition tonight is that those rights, that our freedoms, that the blessings of liberty can only be secured when the individual citizen recognizes and acts upon his or her own sense of duty and responsibility.

I also venture to suggest that this is in direct accord with the principles of Freemasonry. To illustrate this, let me share with you part of our Canadian Masonic ritual, where we are told that the chief point in Freemasonry is "to endeavor to be happy ourselves, and to communicate that happiness to others." In this sentence, the word "happiness" must be taken in the wider meaning of the 18th century and coincides with the meaning used by Jefferson.

We are also taught in our Canadian ritual, that the ritual is intended to carry into active practice the four cardinal virtues: Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice, combined with the theological virtues--Faith, Hope and Charity--thereby demonstrating to the world at large that in Freemasonry there is found the true import of the three great social treasures: Fraternity, Liberty and Equality.

Let us turn for a moment to consider the men who sat in their hot stuffy meeting room in Philadelphia throughout that summer of 1787. The presiding officer of the Convention was Bro. George Washington. I am sure that when he considered "securing the blessings of liberty," he had no illusions as to his responsibilities. He had amply demonstrated, over the preceding 10 or 11 years, that he was prepared to contribute his all to the cause of liberty as he saw it. Yet, he was a reasonably prosperous land-owner in Virginia, he was well connected with the aristocracy and governing class in that Commonwealth, and he could quite easily and justifiably have remained at home in Mount Vernon that summer, and let some one else do the work for a change. But such was not his nature. As a patriot and as a Freemason, he saw where his duty lay, and he took up the responsibility of seeing that the blessings of liberty were secured to his fellow countrymen, not only in Virginia, but throughout the new nation that was then being created. It is interesting to note that for a time, Washington seriously considered not attending the Convention in Philadelphia that summer long ago, for very valid political reasons, but he was ultimately persuaded to attend by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Edmund Randolph, and by his especial friend, General Henry Knox.

Another Freemason who could easily have been excused from attendance at the Convention, on account of age and health, was Bro. Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania. He was then over 70 years old, within three years of his own death, and had certainly proved his loyalty to the cause of liberty, over and over again. He suffered from gout and stone, and had to come to the State House, where the Convention met, in a sedan chair which he had bought in Paris, as it was the only mode of transportation that did not jostle him painfully. Yet, he came, because he knew it

was his duty to do so. And we should all remember that it was Franklin, early in the Convention, when it seemed that the rival factions from the different colonies would never reach any basis for agreement, moved that every morning the session be opened by prayer to the Most High for His guidance. Franklin's duty lay not only to his fellow citizens, but to his Maker, and he saw that prayer to God was the first step to be taken in securing the blessings of liberty. These are just two examples. I am sure there are many more, but I use these to point up that the absence of any mention of "duty" in the Constitution was not an oversight. It just did not occur to men such as Washington and Franklin, as well as the others there present, that the rest of us needed to have it spelled out for us.

When the Constitution had been drafted, it was sent to the Continental Congress, accompanied by a letter, written in the hand of Morris, but signed by Washington. In it, Morris wrote: "Individuals entering into society, must give up a share of liberty to preserve the rest. The magnitude of the sacrifice must depend as well on situation and circumstance, as on the object to be obtained. It is at all times difficult to draw with precision the line between those rights which must be surrendered, and those which may be reserved."

So, let us now ask where we stand in 1987, and what we, each one of us, is doing to secure the blessings of liberty. Which of our rights are we prepared to surrender in order to preserve our freedom? Or, in other words, what duty will we assume and discharge, in order to secure the blessings of liberty? Let us not forget the duties which we assumed when we entered the bonds of Freemasonry, the duties which we owe to God, to our countries, and to ourselves. We discharge those duties, and so secure the blessings of liberty, when we set about to practice those cardinal and theological virtues which I mentioned earlier. We secure those blessings not only for ourselves, but for our whole nation, yours and mine, by the manner in which we act as citizens, as individuals, as children of a common Father, and as brethren one of another.

I would like to leave you with a little poem that was recently printed in Ann Landers' column in our local newspaper in Prince George. It was attributed to an 88-year old resident of the Masonic Homes at Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, and is entitled "Definition of a Real Man" –

One who has self-confidence but does not show it;
One who can be courteous in the face of discourtesy;
One who keeps his word, his temper, his friends;
One who wins respect by being respectable and respectful;
One who has a steady eye, a steady nerve, a steady tongue, and steady habits;
One who is silent when he has nothing to say;
One who is calm when he judges, and humble when he misjudges.

May I suggest to each of you, that if we take that poem to heart, that if we accept and discharge our duties and responsibilities in this world, that if we live by the principles of our Masonic order, then we may join in spirit with Washington, Franklin, Morris, and those others who

labored throughout that hot Philadelphia summer 200 years ago, to secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and for our posterity.

*George W. Baldwin PGM, resides at 2095 McBride Crescent, Prince George, B. C., V2M 1Z2, Canada
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