

Freemasonry Under Attack

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Previous to becoming a Freemason I thought the only opposition to our Fraternity came from the Catholic Church. I had never heard of the "Morgan Affair" or the Anti-Masonic Party. Growing up, Masons in my neighborhood were always held in the highest esteem. Since becoming a Mason I have been surprised at the opposition that has arisen against us. Let me add that since becoming a member I have had no cause to alter my childhood opinion of this great institution.

Alas, there are those who still would try to divide and destroy us. The latest in our country is on Rev. John Ankerberg who, along with a renegade Past Master from a Maryland Lodge, attempted to smear our image on a public TV channel.

This paper does not concern just one minister or even Masonry in our own country, but it is about the Methodist Conference in Great Britain, which has recently taken us to task. In July 1986, while visiting the Wesley Memorial Chapel on City Road in London, my attention was attracted to the following headline in the weekly publication, *The Methodist Recorder*: "Masons: Report Not Blanket Rejection." After reading the article my appetite was whetted to look deeper into this matter.

Although our philanthropy is well known in both our country and Great Britain for our generous contributions to various charities, for our English brethren are no less generous

than we, yet we alone of all fraternal organizations are viewed with suspicion and distrust. This seems to be more pronounced in England in the general public, as well as the Methodist Church. Some of the ill will directed at Freemasonry can no doubt be traced to the book The Brotherhood written by Stephen Knight and published in 1983. This purported expose of our order has certainly had its impact on British society.

The issue of Masonic influence on the Methodist Church was raised at the 1984 Conference by a small synod from Cornwall. Some of the so-called evidence was that the church had a duty to protect its members from heresy, no matter where it came from. Mr. Michael Prowting, a Methodist minister stated: "Our people are confused and need some guidance." The charge was also made that in Masonic liturgy were prayers to Lucifer and Jesus Christ was among a list of prophets and that Methodists were disturbed when well-known Masons were proposed for circuit and local church appointments. This seemed to be the crux on which the inquiry was to be established.

The report was remanded to the Faith and Order Committee for a thorough investigation of the charges, and a recommendation to be presented at the 1985 Conference. Dr. David Stacey, the convener of the committee noted that secrecy did not exist. There is much printed matter concerning Masonry if one wishes to avail themselves of it. He seemed less than enthusiastic to carry out the work needed for the report. Since his committee was broke, he asked the question about where was the money coming from to finance the effort?

Obviously the money was made available and Dr. Stacey and his committee did present a very lengthy report, "Guidance to Methodists on Freemasonry," at the 1985 Conference. It is evident from the report the committee availed itself of several books about, and some probably by, Freemasons. To its credit it did communicate with the Grand Secretary

in England, Commander Higham, for his input into its deliberations and to correct any errors of fact that might occur.

The report that was presented to the 1985 Conference consisted of 24 separate articles, and I will list each one here. Several of them were in no way critical of our fraternity. They pointed out our three great principles of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth, that our members must believe in a Supreme Being and be of good report. They speak of our respect for the laws of the land in which we live and work and of our generosity in giving to Masonic and non-Masonic charities. They also acknowledge our condemnation of trying to promote our own interests or that of our brothers by reason of our Masonic affiliation, and yet that is one of the charges leveled against us by much of British society.

Article 9 condemns us as being discriminatory in our membership because it is restricted to men only and is not opened to those who are handicapped, while in the same breath they acknowledge that they have been given evidence of lodges which include handicapped members and men of different races and religions.

Article 10 alleges that church business, including the stationing of ministers, is discussed and decided in lodge meetings. The Grand Secretary refuted this, because in English Lodges, as well as our own, the discussion of religion and politics is not allowed.

Article 11 says that suspicions about the fraternity abound because of the excessive secrecy practiced by the society. One of their peeves is that there are no public lists of members or lodges. This nefarious charge is negated by the availability of any number of books on Freemasonry, by the cooperation of Commander Higham, and since 1799 no secret societies have been permitted by law to meet in Great Britain, and until twenty years ago a listing of the membership had to be presented annually to the police.

Articles 13-15 takes the Fraternity to task concerning the oaths we are required to take. While acknowledging that the oaths are of such a nature that they would never be inflicted, they are disturbed that solemn words and phrases are used just to add color to penalties and obligations that cannot be enforced. They acknowledge that in 1964 an alternative form of the oath was approved by Grand Lodge in response to Masonic concerns; in it the candidate vows only to bear in mind the traditional penalties. This form has not been widely adopted. By innuendo they assert that our Masonic membership takes precedence over all other commitments, including our Christian commitments. Our English brethren deny this charge as vociferously as each of here would do.

Articles 17-21 are concerned with theological questions raised by our ritualistic work. They are fearful that although we claim not to be a religion or a religious movement, yet they see a great danger that Freemasonry may compete strongly with Christianity and that a Freemason may find himself compromising his Christian beliefs. The strongest objection they make is in Article 20 over the use in the Royal Arch Degree of the name of the Supreme Being, "Jahbulon." Their contention is that this word is a clear example of syncretism, and attempt to unite different religions in one, which Christians cannot accept. They aver that the word is a composite of Gods of different religions the explanation of which, modern scholars say is wrong.

Brother Ronald Harris, in his letter to the President of the Methodist Conference, gives a much deeper meaning to the word, which the Faith and Order Committee failed to explain to the Conference. He explained the word was built on the name of God in four languages: Chaldean, Hebrew, Syriac, and Egyptian. "Jah" is the Chaldean name for God. "Bul" is a Syriac word meaning Lord, All Powerful, and is compounded to mean Lord of Heaven and on High. "On" is an Egyptian word signifying Father of All, and it is also Hebrew for might and power. It expresses the omnipotence of the Father of All. All these significations are collected thus: "I Am and Shall Be; Lord in Heaven and on High; Father of All."

Article 22 flatly asserts that Methodists should not become Freemasons.

Article 23 recognizes that there are many loyal and sincere Methodists who are Freemasons, whose commitment to Christ is unquestioned and who see no incompatibility in their membership of the church and the fraternity. They recommend that Methodists who choose to remain Freemasons should, on appropriate occasions, declare their membership in order to remove suspicion and distrust.

Article 24 states that Freemasons lodges or meetings for Masonic purposes cannot be held on Methodist premises. If a Freemasons' lodge requests a service to be held on Methodist premises, the trustees may either withhold permission or grant permission on the following conditions: 1. The service will be one of public Christian worship, held in accordance with Methodist practice; 2. The contents of the service shall be first seen and approved by the Superintendent; and 3. It shall be conducted by a person appointed by the Superintendent.

This then is a condensed version of the charges voiced against the Craft. From the tone of some of the speakers favoring the adoption of the report, their prejudice was apparent. They believed the worst about us and I think nothing would alter their opinion.

There were a number of memorials that were received for consideration at the 1986 Conference from various Circuits opposing the report, but the Committee on Memorials rejected each one out-of-hand as not containing an accurate representation of the report. The only thing that I can find that was accepted by the Memorials Committee was one resolution contained in a memorial from the Doncaster Circuit. That reads: "While declaring that the report does express reservations about Methodists becoming and remaining Freemasons, it should not be interpreted as stating that Freemasonry is not

compatible with membership of The Methodist Church." The committee accepted this part of the memorial as being an accurate interpretation of the intent of the report as a whole.

Needless to say, the debate on this report attracted a lot of attention from the news media as well as observers from other denominations in Great Britain. The Methodist Conference in Ireland had a similar report to consider. It refused to adopt the report, but it did agree to the following amendment: "Whilst recognizing the privilege of members of the Methodist Church in Ireland to exercise the right of individual conscience in joining any organization or society outside the church, the Conference would ask all Methodists to ensure that membership of any such organization or society does not compromise their commitment to Christ and His Church."

The United Reform Church issued a lengthy report of its own in which it detailed the origins of Freemasonry. It was by no means a derogatory report. It acknowledged the integrity of those who are Masons and of their charitable works, noting that in this respect they put many of their fellow Christians to shame. On the other hand, the report noted that the lack of understanding was not entirely the fault of those outside the Craft. Secrecy is bound to create suspicion however found, and it is in the interests of Masons to make clear how far their obligation to keep secrets is supposed to go.

The Grand Secretary welcomed the report from the United Reform Church saying: "The report is open-minded. It shows that, although there is still a need for better understanding between Freemasons and non-Masons in the United Reform Church, there is nothing incompatible between Freemasonry and Christianity."

A motion was introduced asking Unitarians to examine their consciences as to the compatibility of being a Freemason and a Unitarian. This motion was soundly defeated as being against the free tradition of the Assembly.

The General Synod of the Church of England has appointed a working group to inquire into Freemasonry and Christianity. The Grand Master, while deeply disappointed at this development, was nevertheless encouraged at first reports, which confirm that the group is open-minded and intent on testing any evidence which may be offered. He feels that Masonry will get a fair hearing from this church. It might be noted here that this committee has on it two clergymen who are also Masons. *Editor's Note: The report was extremely derogatory and has touched off a nasty debate that will last for years to come.*

When I first communicated with Brother Ronald Harris, the Secretary of "The Methodist Freemason" organization, I asked him three questions: 1. What has been the short-term effects of this resolution? 2. What might be the long-term result? 3. What response might be expected from the Craft? His answer to my first question was that it wouldn't have much influence on members of the pew because the vast majority did not know or care about what goes on at Conference. He injected the opinion here that he believed it was the left-wing elements in the church who sought to be delegates to the Conference and whom today he thought formed a majority. He only knows of one Brother who has left the fraternity as a result of the report, but he knows of several who have left the church.

Questions 2 and 3 he answers thus: "The long-term effect? I think the report will be forgotten until someone chooses to raise it again, unless we are seen to make a stand and there is a movement now which emanates from Grand Lodge to the effect that we should stand up and be seen. Previous policy had always been finger on lip."

Needless to say the emergence of the organization "The Methodist Freemasons" is a direct result of the report adopted by the 1985 Methodist Conference. While the organization serves to unite Methodist Freemasons and afford them a forum in which to express their views and opinions, its primary purpose is to eventually have this report rescinded. It is my opinion, from the articles I have read, written by Brother Harris and his fervor in pursuing this situation, that the Conference has a very able adversary, with the tenacity of a fabled English Bulldog, to contend with.

Freemasonry has not always been anathema to Methodism. Some of the irony noted here is that in 1917 the Epworth Lodge was founded expressly for Methodists. It was formed principally to afford Methodist ministers the opportunity to go through the chairs. There are now eight associated Epworth Lodges. Brother Samuel Wesley was the first Grand Organist from 1812-17. There were several prominent Masons in the Irish branch of the Wesley family, one of whom was Garret Wesley, the First Earl of Mornington. He wanted to make Charles Wesley his heir but was turned down by Charles' father. Had this adoption been allowed, one could speculate that the great hymn writer might well have become a member of the Craft.

Sharing John Wesley's tomb in the graveyard of the Wesleyan Memorial Chapel in London is the man who wrote the hymn that is used as an ode in English Royal Arch Masonry. Last but not least, gracing the south wall of this Citadel of Methodism is a beautiful stained glass window, a gift from the Freemasons of Great Britain to the memory of the men and women of the British Empire who gave their lives in the First World War.

I will close by quoting the last paragraph from an address by Brother Richard Tydeman, P.G.C.:

"Long may the historic and honorable connection between the Church and the Craft continue. May our religion help us to see the importance of the Third Dimension of Life in its true proportion and may Freemasonry, by remaining true to its principles, inspire the world with reverence and love for that Great Architect of the Universe, by whom and for whom alone, we build our churches and our lives, by whose love we are sustained and by whose Hand we are guided. To Him, be all Honor, Glory, Dominion and Praise, henceforth and evermore."