

Masonic Education: Geometry and Three Lesser Lights

Ray Soltis

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Presented by Worshipful Eric J. Fierst

Freemasonry and its various lessons throughout the degrees take us on a journey through education. One could compare the first 3 degrees in Masonry to our education system. The Entered Apprentice degree where we first obtain light would be our elementary education. The Fellow Craft degree our Middle School and Junior High School years. Advancing to Senior High School as were all raised to the Sublime degree of Master Mason. For some the education in Masonry stops there just as it does for those who obtain their High School Diploma. After High School some further their education by attending schools to learn trades or skills at a Technical College or Apprenticeship program while others may choose to attend universities where they earn degrees. This level of education correlates to the lessons of the Appendant Bodies like the York and Scottish Rites. As Masons we are afforded many opportunities to further our Masonic education and journey through various degrees and programs presented within our lodge rooms.

All Masons understand or at least were instructed that one of the founding principles of Freemasonry is Geometry. We're also instructed of the correlation and usage of the seven liberal arts & sciences which are Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, & Astronomy. Geometry is so ingrained in Freemasonry that it almost requires no explanation. Geometry allows us to incorporate right angled triangles which symbolize and remind us to square our actions towards God and Man. This leads us to the placement of the three lesser lights or burning tapers which are placed in a geometric form "Triangle"

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about the altar. From the beginning of our journey, we are taught that the three burning tapers (lesser lights) symbolically represent the Sun, Moon, and Worshipful Master. Those burning tapers are placed in a triangular form about the altar with the following lesson: As the sun rules the day and the moon governs the night, so should the Worshipful Master endeavor with equal order and regularity to rule and govern his lodge.

The symbolic use of the lesser lights is very old; it being found in the earliest lectures of the eighteenth century. The lights are placed in the East, South, and West. Although the lights placed in the East and West are placed on the North side of the altar, they are placed to the front and rear of the altar keeping with our teachings that the North is Masonically a place of darkness. Although not directly representing all 3 stationed officers (in Virginia), the lesser lights do correspond to the location of the lodges three stationed officers. The placement also corresponds with our ritual and the rotation of the earth. The sun rises in the East, is at its meridian in the South, and sets in the West; thus, the symbolism of the lodge and the scientific rotation of earth around the sun is represented (Science and Geometry).

The placement of the lesser lights is not consistent across all jurisdictions, in fact some lodges don't use the lesser lights. Texas for examples places 3 lights in a triangular form that directionally represents East, South, and West but they are placed together, usually on a single fixture and placed on the South side of the Altar. During my research I came across 11 different diagrams covering the placement of the lesser lights in North America. It's my understanding that the burning tapers initially started with or were illuminating the 3 stationed officers in the lodge and may have been the primary light source. Imagine going back to the first days or creation of our fraternity and imagine rooms without the convenience of the electricity that we have today. Lodge rooms would have been illuminated by torches, candles, lanterns, and these burning tapers. One of each being placed in front of or near the stationed officers of the lodge.

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Today, the physical light put off by these burning tapers allows the candidate to see the three great lights: the Holy Bible, Square, and Compasses after traveling through darkness. It is our responsibility as Mason, educators, and leaders to continue to shine the light on Geometry and its correlation to our liberal arts & sciences.