

A Scripted Debate on Classes, Voting, and Catechism

By

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Moderator: The purpose of this program is to present points to think about on different sides of a few issues in Masonry that are usually considered controversial. We will all learn some new facts about these issues, as well as pro's and con's based on fact rather than emotion. This will help us understand these issues better. As Masons we should be tolerant of all points of view and we should be willing to reconsider and possibly change our own views on these subjects.

The questions we will be discussing today are:

1. Should EA's and FC's continue to be required to memorize the catechisms we use today and recite them in open Lodge?
2. Should we have classes to confer the first three degrees, similar to those used by the Scottish Rite for their degrees, and to the classes used in other States?
3. Should we change the way we vote in Lodges on petitioners?

Remember that those who are participating in this program have been assigned their roles, and are not stating their personal views. In fact, I will now flip a coin to determine which side each of the brethren will be on during this program. [does coin flip]

After the scripted discussion, we will welcome comments and opinions from all the brethren here about any of these subjects.

The first question we will discuss is: Should EA's and FC's continue to be required to memorize the catechisms we use today and recite them in open Lodge?

Brother A: Each EA and FC has to learn a long, difficult, and archaic catechism, that does not

really teach them anything. Many men, young and old, are turned off to Freemasonry when they discover that we make them repeat, parrot-like, a catechism that is meaningless to many men. It does not prove that a man is a good Mason because he learns to repeat some words, without his lodge caring if he understands their meaning. We make things worse by requiring EA's and FC's to stand up in open lodge and repeat what they have memorized. Many men are just not good at public speaking, and there is no connection between being a good public speaker and being a moral man. If there were, all politicians would be moral.

This memorization requirement did not always exist. It came into Masonry in the early 1800's when Thomas Smith Webb succeeded in convincing U.S. Grand Lodges to impose this requirement. Masons in other countries are not required to memorize much more than the passwords and grips, and they sometimes ridicule U.S. Masonry for our long and unproductive memorization requirements.

It would be better if we eliminate the memorization requirement for EA's and FC's and instead require them to learn and explain in their own words what Freemasonry really means, what its philosophy is, what the tenets of Masonry are, and how our Craft operates. Many men who have been Masons for years cannot do that, so we would all benefit from hearing it in our lodges. George Washington and Masons for hundreds of years were never required to 'earn anything like the catechism we use today, and in other countries and other states Grand Lodges do not impose the requirement to simply memorize and repeat back the words of the catechism. Let's get away from requirements that do not mean or teach anything, and instead

make sure our new members learn what Freemasonry is all about.

Brother B: Tradition is one of the most important things in Freemasonry, and we should continue the tradition of requiring EA's and FC's to learn the catechism just as each of us was required to learn it. If it was good enough for us it should be good enough for them. Even though the memorization requirement only dates to the 1800's, and even though it is unique in US. Grand Lodges, we should retain it.

Hopefully the catechism instructors will answer questions from EA's and FC's, but even if they do not the candidates learn all they need from memorizing the catechism, where they relive their degrees and thus learn the lessons of Masonry. The catechism instruction is also useful because new Masons get to know their instructors and form a close brotherly bond with them during the process of memorizing the catechism. In addition, memorization is itself a lesson and a test of fidelity. If a man truly wants to become a good Mason he should have the self-discipline to learn the catechism, even if the words are difficult. He should thus prove that he is willing to work to become a Mason and that he cares enough about Masonry to work on difficult tasks. Those who developed the catechism requirements knew what they were doing, and we should follow their traditions.

Brother A: At the very least, we should change the memorization requirements in Virginia because so many other states have different and more useful requirements, such as allowing candidates to prove they know the catechisms in private meetings with lodge officers rather than in the full lodge. In some states EA's and FC's are required to memorize the obligations, due guards, signs, grips, and words, and then to take a short course, and pass a test, on the history and philosophy of Freemasonry in general and in their state. In some states they are required to attend study groups or lodges of instruction where they meet not just one catechism

instructor, but a group of their brethren who help them feel they are truly welcome into the Craft and who help them learn the philosophy and history of Masonry. They learn why we are called "Ancient Free and Accepted Masons how the Grand Lodge governs lodges, the protocol in lodge meetings, and all the other important things that new Masons really want and need to know.

Brother B: New Masons should learn all these things, but they should learn them after they have first memorized the same catechisms as in the past. The catechisms give them a better basis upon which to understand what Freemasonry is all about. What we memorized about the working tools tells us some of the basic Masonic precepts. When we memorized the uses of the FC working tools we learned that the level teaches us that every person is equal and has the same blood derived from the same Almighty Parent, regardless of the man's race, color, or religion. If a Mason wants to learn more about the history and philosophy of Masonry, or about how the Lodge operates, that should be optional after he first demonstrates his proficiency in the catechism. In fact, it will be another test to see if Masons attempt to better themselves by reading books about Masonry and engaging in discussions about the deeper meaning of the Craft. Those who do this will be welcomed as the best in our lodges.

Moderator: The next question for discussion is: Should we have "classes" for the first three degrees, similar to those used by the Scottish Rite and in other States?

Brother C: The number of Masons in this country has dropped at an alarming rate during the last 30 years, and if this trend continues there might be so few Masons in a few years that we will not be able to open Lodges or maintain Masonic buildings. Some say there have always been ups and downs in Masonry, but never has the number been as low as it is now in relation to the population. Even if those

who are left in the Craft in the future are the best Masons ever, without decent numbers it will be impossible for anyone to continue Masonry as we know it. In some States they now hold “Grand Master’s Classes” where those who are to receive their EA, FC, and MM degrees receive them the same way the Scottish Rite confers its degrees. Members of the class sit in an auditorium and watch the degrees conferred on one of the class members, and then each member of the class is individually instructed in some basic points such as the grips and words he needs to know. In this manner we can build up the Craft. Most candidates do not learn much during their degrees now, so whether we use the current system or the class approach, the real learning about Freemasonry comes after a candidate is a Master Mason.

Brother D: Those who receive degrees in a class rather than individually would not get the same feeling that candidates receive when they go through the degrees the same way each of us did. New Masons who go through large classes would become bored and even sleepy since they were not participating, and even if we got large numbers of new members they would not be good members and would not become active in our Lodges. Some people refer to this as “McMasonry” because it is a little like going to a fast food restaurant to become a Mason. What we want are new members who will feel that we showed them excellent degree work, where they learned important lessons about Freemasonry. Even though it is difficult for us to find enough Masons who know or are willing to learn the parts in the degrees, and even though many are not willing to come to rehearsals to make sure all work well together in the degree work, and even though some of the degree work is not the best, we are still better off doing the degrees the way we do than in classes such as those used by the Scottish Rite. Even if our numbers decrease, it is better to maintain the old traditions than to make changes to get more members.

In the 1820’s and 1830’s the number of Masons decreased even more than it has in the last 30 years, due to the activities of the Anti-Masonic Party in the U.S. Those who attacked Masonry for harming religion and the U.S. Constitution succeeded in convincing very large numbers of Masons to renounce their membership, often at revival-type meetings, and in many States in the Northeast Freemasonry almost ceased to exist. Still, the small numbers that survived kept the Craft alive, and in the 1850’s built up Freemasonry again.

Brother C: We do not usually show candidates excellent degree work or help them learn what they are supposed to learn from the degree work. Often those who have parts in the degrees struggle to say their words correctly, and sometimes they are not even able to be heard. Some lodge members talk during the degree work, and do not show much interest in the candidate. Then, when the degree work is over many shake the hand of the candidate and then ignore him. Even with the present system where we give degrees to each man individually, the majority of them do not attend Lodge meetings and do not learn the lessons we say we want to impart to them through the degree work. We might say we should improve the way we give degrees, but let’s face it — with the drastic drop in our numbers and the pressures of other things, we cannot realistically do it. And those who try to get the rest of the brethren to do degree work right will become frustrated themselves.

For many years the Scottish Rite, in both the Southern and Northern Jurisdictions, has recognized that candidates may get as much from watching degrees as from participating in them. If it is good enough for the Scottish Rite, why isn’t it good enough for the first three degrees?

Brother D: We should still make the effort to put each man through each degree individually, and even if our numbers continue to drop, and

even if we only have a few Masons who are willing and able to present degree work as it should be done, we should stick with the rules we have lived by for many years. At least some will continue to be Masons as they should, going through the full degrees, learning the moral lessons from the floor work and the lectures, and afterwards actively participating in the work of Masonry. Even if we have to sell many Masonic buildings, and close many Lodges, it is better to retain Masonry as it has existed than to dilute it. Hopefully we will be able to survive in much smaller numbers, but even if we do not, at least we will have kept our traditions alive as long as we are.

Moderator: The final question on our program for discussion is: Should we change the way we vote in Lodges on petitioners?

Brother E: We should, because the current system does not make sense. We say that balloting on petitioners and on candidates for advancement after catechisms have been presented must be done using white balls and black cubes, with each Mason casting a secret ballot, because we want to avoid disputes in the Lodge. But we vote on motions in Lodges by voice vote or by a show of hands, even though these types of votes can, and often have, caused just as much of a dispute. More importantly, we say that each Mason is a brother of the other members, but we allow a single member to cast a secret ballot that blackballs a potential new member without even telling his brethren why he did so. How does this show respect for our brethren? Shouldn't someone who has a legitimate reason to blackball a candidate have the courtesy to inform his brethren, who he supposedly respects and trusts, of what he knows? We even allow one black cube, cast anonymously, to overrule what might be the strong desire of every other member of the Lodge, including the investigating committee and the Master and officers, to elect the member. Why do we give less consideration to the desires of all the others, than we do to one

who is not even willing to tell his brethren what he knows?

Brother F: The secret ballot has been said to be sacred, in Masonry as well in our voting for candidates for office in civil life. Each Mason has the absolute right to vote against any petitioner for any reason that he wishes, without having to explain or even identify himself to anyone else. This way each Mason can be assured that everyone who joins our Lodge is acceptable to everyone else, or at least those who were present at the time of the vote. This preserves peace in the Lodge. Maybe we should take all votes, including those which are now done by voice vote or by show of hands, using the white balls and black cubes, with one negative vote killing any motion. Unanimity in decision making insures that everyone in the Lodge will be happy with every decision.

Brother E: At the very least, we should adopt the rules already used in some other U.S. Grand Lodges, where 3 black cubes are needed to reject a candidate, or where a Mason who has a reason to vote against a petitioner is required to inform the Master in private, with the Master remembering that he must "keep the secrets" he is told. The Master is required to rule and govern his lodge, and the Virginia Methodical Digest states it is improper and unmasonic to vote against a petitioner because of his race or color. By requiring anyone who cast a black cube to inform the Master why, the Master can determine if the brother is doing so for Masonic or unmasonic reasons. This could speed up our meetings, because a Master could state to the Lodge whether he has heard any reasons for the rejection of a candidate, and if he says he has not heard any, and if the investigating committee reports they have thoroughly done their job and recommend acceptance of the petitioner, then the Master can declare that the Lodge has approved the petitioner. Why go through the very long and boring white ball and black cube procedure, when it almost always results in a positive vote, and when it does not it

could be for unmasonic reasons? Too many times we have heard that petitioners were rejected because one Lodge member wanted to see if he cared enough about Masonry to petition again after being rejected, or because a petitioner worked for a used car company where a Lodge member bought a lemon, or because a Lodge member confused the name of a petitioner with someone else. Let's improve this.

Brother F: Masonry is a human institution, and humans sometimes do things that some of us might say are not right. If a Lodge member wants to blackball a petitioner for any reason, whether it is because that member feels the petitioner is not a moral person, or wants to make it tougher for anyone to get into the Lodge, or because that member does not like the race, color, or religion of the petitioner, or just because he does not like the sound of the petitioner's name; any Lodge member should be able to black ball the petitioner. Many people vote for Presidential candidates based on how they look or for other reasons that are not related to how well they might perform in office. We should each be permitted to vote the same way n Lodge meetings. Even if some people use this as a means to vote against someone based on his race or anything else, the sanctity of the ballot box is more important.

Moderator: Remember that the purpose of this presentation has been to present different points of view, and different ideas, on some of the subjects that Masons talk about. Should catechism requirements remain as they are, or should they be changed? Should the method of conferring the degrees be changed to use of classes or should we continue to do degrees individually for each candidate? Should the method of voting on petitioners remain as it is or should those who have reasons to reject candidates tell the Lodge or the Master what those reasons are? We are not suggesting that the discussion here will result in changes, even if we agreed unanimously on any of these

subjects. Our purpose has been to help us all think about these issues in more detail.

Now, the floor is open to discussion by any brother who would like to present any additional things to think about on any of these subjects. Remember that each person who speaks is not necessarily stating his firm views but is free to simply make a statement or ask a question to help us all consider additional ideas. And I urge everyone to base his statements or questions on facts, not emotions, just as we are taught to do in our Masonic degrees.