

To Dress or Not to Dress

The Masonic Dress Code

Before one can honestly address the topic of dress standards in Freemasonry, one must first determine why a man became a Freemason in the first place.

Was he looking to improve himself through the great and important undertaking offered by a genuine Masonic journey? Was he looking to become a member to make new acquaintances, have fun, and give to charity as it has become defined in today's culture? Was he looking for secrets as popularized by Dan Brown novels? Was he looking to wear symbols of the Craft so others would see him as part of the mysterious centuries' old fraternity about which too many today know too little?

The topic surrounding the question of how to dress in and for lodge is one that can lead to disagreement among Masons. It is a matter each lodge should address for itself. After all, for better or worse, the fraternity today is not the fraternity of yesterday in more ways than how we dress for and in lodge.¹ Whatever a lodge accepts as "suitable" attire also defines their lodge culture, and in many cases, their practices.

Our evolving attitudes and culture has indeed affected our sense of reverence and style in North America, including how we dress and look and are perceived by others. First impressions about the way we look to others has taken a back seat to our

personal need for "comfort" in our appearance. The emphasis is on the inalienable right in our society to choose how we dress, eat, live, and generally behave in some cases. We expect less and as a rule, when expectations are lowered so is the end result.

Films, books, television noticeably influence our personal and general views on what is appropriate when and where. Marketing and media helped create an acceptance of tattered clothing, t-shirts promoting tasteless slogans, ragged baseball caps, eccentric footwear, and a variety of cargo shorts substitute for what was once considered suitable attire for a range of formal functions. As a result, many people think that what used to be "dressing down" is now "dressing up."

Many further the debate about how the disintegration of our standards on attire and the way we look in lodge has watered down the sense of formality and dignity once associated with the fraternity.

Our rituals are far from proficient. Many of our lodges appear less than well-kept. That external, as well the internal condition and appearance of many of our lodges, reflect the opposite of what many Masons may believe they project to others, particularly

¹ Andrew Hammer, *Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labour and Observance*, Mindhive Books, 2010.



prospective petitioners who are looking for a genuine Masonic experience.

Traditional practices have been set aside in favor of expediency, or worse, lost because they were not practiced for so long that generations didn't know they ever existed. A left over and flawed perception grounded in the idea that the decline in membership since the late 1950s meant we must tirelessly strive to keep membership rolls high, remains. That thinking resulted in accelerated degree processes better suited to assuring more members – not suitably prepared Masons.

As a result of these few things alone, we can easily trace how Freemasonry evolved closer toward a social club, relaxed in not only our appearance, but our practices, decorum, management, and style. As Masonic author Stephen DeFoe called it, *Rotary with aprons*.

Excuses or Justifications?

In defense of our outward appearance in lodge, many Masons are quick to quote a line from the Letter G Lecture found in the Fellow Craft degree, and shout out, "It is the internal, not the external qualifications of a man that Masonry regards!" Another Mason, perhaps one better read, might also add the fact that while that line is certainly part of our charge, it's been in the charge for some time. Important to consider is that it was there at a time when men subscribed to the idea that the external appearance of men in lodge practicing Freemasonry should clearly demonstrate their reverence to the Craft and certainly its long standing and bona-fide formalities.

Using that phrase as the justification of attitude about appropriate attire in lodge is clearly out of context for this discussion. A man's good heart is clearly what Masonry regards - not his plight in life. The lesson emphasized by that line is that we are all equal in Freemasonry. It has nothing to do with our dress standards.

A common position also heard is based on yet another lesson and principle of the Craft. Some contend since Masons meet *on the level* that it should make no difference what a man wears to lodge. This too is out of context.



Masons are indeed instructed about meeting on the level, but without regard to special, political, or religious status. We meet upon “the level” because Masonic rights, duties, and privileges are the same for all Master Masons without distinction. The field is level for all who are Masons – no Mason is supposed to have an advantage over the other – we treat all men with respect and dignity, thus no matter of social status, wealth, or office. When we twist “on the level” to support a position about attire in lodge, we are moving outside the margins of logic to defend such a position with a principle unrelated to how we dress in lodge.

Life experience and common sense should tell us that the outward part of a man is not the best judge of what is inside of a man. That same life experience and common sense, however, should also remind us that the outward part of man can certainly and often reflect his inner nature.

Using the line from the Letter G Lecture or asserting that meeting on the level justifies wearing flip flops, a sleeveless t-shirt, and a pair of cut off blue jeans to lodge is like thinking the penalties of our obligations are literal. That thinking is simply out of context – a worn out pretext and rationalization. Some Masons believe it is also an indicator of the lack the depth and breadth of Masonic history and education offered in the past.

Another defense of dressing in any manner one chooses to attend lodge comes in the form of “I want to be comfortable,” which extends on to “I don’t have to wear a coat and tie to practice Masonry.” Somewhere, buried in those positions, we find yet another position; the belief that if Masons are required to “dress up” for lodge, then younger men will not want to petition. This is nothing more than fragile and unreliable anecdotal evidence. There is no documented proof to the claim that potential members

avoid knocking on the West Gate because of a coat and tie dress code.

We also find the contention that since some men come to lodge directly from their work, they cannot change clothes, therefore, they should come as they are regardless of what work wear their jobs require. It seems “planning ahead” might be in order if that’s the case. There’s many men who change to clothes more suitable for lodge when they arrive at lodge. It’s not impossible to do. Some also say they have never owned or worn a tie in their life; this defense is offered as if it were some legitimate reason to be given a pass on their appearance.

Another contention is that some men cannot afford to purchase a coat or a tie. It seems that if this was the case, other Masons, acting with the relief and charity in their hearts, might consider helping a brother get a coat and tie. The idea that any shirt with a square and compasses on it is suitable is often heard, as well. And of course, “I am a freethinker as a Mason, therefore, I can dress as I wish” cannot be discounted as a reason for appearance in many lodges today.

Extending the Debate

To extend the debate, it has been pointed out that some lodges dress in attire that is perfectly acceptable in their respective local cultures, thus acceptable in lodge. For example, a lodge in Montana or other western state might consider a dress code of bolo ties, western style vests, jeans, and cowboy boots as very appropriate.



Farmer's Lodge No. 168 in Kinross, Iowa is the only lodge in Iowa adopting a dress code of bib overalls. The 150-year-old lodge represents members of a very small community and yes, most all are involved in farming.

There exist many lodges where men prefer to wear coat and tie or the more formal tuxedo at all stated communications. Because they choose that approach, does it mean they are "elitists?" Not at all. It does mean that they have a different perspective on what the Craft represents. Their choice is to observe it through this style of reverence represented in the manner of their attire.

This is where the rubber meets the road on the topic of Masonic dress codes. We can give lip service to one of the important lessons in Freemasonry or we can genuinely subscribe to and practice one of its most important lessons: the lesson of *tolerance*.

Tolerance in Freemasonry refers to opinion, not a man's dress or his manner of practice of the Craft, at least if that practice is within the confines of our respective Constitutions.

We more often than not think tolerance has to do only with being accepting of another

² Thomas W. Jackson, *What Are We Trying to Save?* - Transactions Texas Lodge of Research 32 (1997-1998). *Taking Stock in American Freemasonry: Commentaries for Non-Casual Masons*, Rubicon Masonic Dinner Club, Lexington, Kentucky, 2014.

man's religious or political beliefs, when in fact it has to do with being accepting of other men, regardless of their opinion on any matter – at least those matters that are within the Constitutions that govern us as Masons and the obligations we take.

The Reverence of Attire

Well known Masonic scholar and possibly the most traveled Mason in North America, Thomas W. Jackson, tells us "The problem with Freemasonry is that it does not practice Freemasonry anymore. And how can we, when the vast majority of our Members do not even know what to practice." ²

Jackson was not specifically speaking to the issue of attire, yet his insightful comment strikes the heart of the entire matter.

Our dress codes in North American Freemasonry evolved with our culture and attitudes, whereas in Europe and other parts of the world, Freemasonry influenced culture and attitudes. As traditions in North American Masonry slowly disappeared, lodges proliferated with more lasting influence from respective lodge sub-cultures than from standard practices and traditions. Jackson is correct: Freemasonry is not universally practiced as the system it was designed and intended to be. Nothing in Ancient Craft Masonry is random. ³

The system is designed to influence and affect the moral and spiritual transformation of its members. When done consciously and properly, the system should change men who join and set them on a lifelong journey of spiritual, moral, and mental growth the

³ Kirk C. White, *Operative Freemasonry: A Manual for Restoring Light and Vitality to the Fraternity*, Five Gates Publishing, Vermont, 2012.

average person cannot get anywhere else. ⁴ If we believe and accept the exceptionalism of Freemasonry as we often say we do, then members should be both exceptional people and treat Freemasonry as special. ⁵

What does this have to do with dress codes? Actually, quite a bit. As soon as one well-intentioned Mason somewhere suggested casual dress or no dress code at all and that notion began to bloom to the point of general acceptance, a part of the *system* of Freemasonry, elegance of dress, started to fade. It is doubtful if that well-intended suggestion was ever envisioned to allow vulgar t-shirts, hoodies, and rotting tennis shoes to be accepted in lodge, but once the genie was out of the bottle, there was a new problem: clearly defining what “casual dress” was supposed to be.

Jackson’s comment also encompasses the fact that many Masons may know the “secrets” of Freemasonry, the passwords, and grips, but too few know the mysteries. When they are confused or thought of as the same thing, we see hollow recitation of our rituals, candidates wondering where the Light is they were promised because of a lack of degree education, and business meetings becoming the norm instead of on-going Masonic education. This again leads back to the treatment of Freemasonry as some sort of pick and choose system instead of practicing

it as an entire system – including the concept of being “properly clothed.”

For example, Masons around the world know the first as well as last great care of Masonry when lodge is assembled is to see that the lodge is duly Tyled. We know too that no lodge may be opened or closed without benefit of lodge prayer. How do we know these things and practice them uniformly?

We know them because they have been handed down and taught through our respectively approved rituals in all jurisdictions. In short; they are part of the fundamentals of the *system* of Freemasonry.

If we don’t see that the lodge is duly Tyled and if we don’t open and close lodge with a prayer, we are not practicing Freemasonry as a *system*. Not only would we be in violation of our constitutions, but we would clearly be picking and choosing what parts of Freemasonry we wish to

practice. Leaving out parts of any system makes whatever the system is supposed to be less than what it can and should be.

The New Ahiman Rezon of 1791 – that is to say the particular edition of the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* as adopted and then modified by the Antients – makes

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⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

reference to how a man should dress for Lodge.⁶ We find the passage:

Every brother ought to belong to some regular Lodge and should always appear therein properly clothed. And in clean and decent apparel, truly subjecting himself to all its by-laws and general regulations.

Andrew Hammer, in *Observing the Craft* point out that this passage can easily be interpreted by either side of the debate on proper attire for stated communications.

What cannot be easily interpreted to suit arguments for no dress code or very casual attire is the fact that the matter is addressed in the first place, and words like “decent” and “proper” are not commonly used in a constitutional document unless there is an intent of setting a standard for something.

Hammer goes on to make the sensible point that given the conventions of dress in the 18th century, this would have meant that brethren were expected to attend their Lodge in something other than their everyday clothing, and certainly that the matter of dress was a consideration deserving of their attention.

Hammer, along with other Masonic authors, has often pointed out that the preponderance of paintings from the 18th century and photographs from the 19th century show most lodges had high standards of dress. Furthermore, it is evident for those who read and study the genuine history of the fraternity that lodge has been considered a special and even sacred occasion, and the attire of brethren in the past extended this reverent attitude by

respectfully dressing in attire equivalent at least to apparel worn to other formal occasions, like church, funerals, weddings and even official public events.

There’s no question that Masons throughout history, at least until the last 60 years or so, found no problem at all declaring outwardly that he was serious about his pursuit of the Craft through his effort to be reverently attired.⁷

A March 1898 edition of *The Canadian Craftsman* tells us more about past attitudes regarding dress:

We may say what we will about the clothes not making the man. One who is careful of his dress on all occasions and will always present the very best appearance he can possess, a certain element of refinement that is certainly commendable, and that brother who is careful to appear at lodge meeting in appropriate dress shows an appreciation of the place and the people with whom he is to mingle that is praiseworthy. The man who went to the wedding feast not properly clad for the occasion was made to feel out of place. The brother who goes into the lodge room in rough, untidy clothing cannot but feel a kind of humiliation if all about him have made a careful toilet [a reference to the effort to be clean and best in one’s appearance].

⁶ Andrew Hammer, *Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labour and Observance*, Mindhive Books, 2010.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Changing Your Clothes Can Change Your Mind

Changing your clothes works on your mood from the outside in. Ever notice how you feel when you spill something on your shirt or put on something wrinkled? It can be bothersome and irritating. Although it's not always likely to ruin your day, it can make you feel like something is amiss. You don't feel quite right. Your outside apparel has influenced your feelings inside.

We know from studies about a phenomenon they call *encllothed cognition*: the effects of clothing on cognitive processes.⁸ *The Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* explores the field of embodied cognition. The Journal reports that we think not just with our brains but with our bodies, and our thought processes are based on physical experiences that set off associated abstract concepts. Now it appears that those experiences include the clothes we wear. It has long been known, of course, that clothing does affect how others perceive us as well as how we think about ourselves and what we are doing.

One side of the debate holds that sloppy dress leads to sloppy work. And a few years back, a poll found that tardiness and absenteeism increased at companies that adopted dress-down policies.⁹

⁸ Mind Games: Sometimes a White Coat Isn't Just a White Coat, New York Times, Science Section, p.d-3, April 13, 2012. From an article in *The Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

⁹ CBS Money Watch, September 10, 2008, Does Casual Dress Affect Productivity?

Research psychologist, Jeffery Magee states "continually relaxed dress leads to relaxed manners, relaxed standards and relaxed productivity".¹⁰

But the deeper question, researchers continue to work on, is whether the clothing we wear changes our psychological processes. Does our outfit alter how we approach and interact with the outside world? Common sense and experience tells us that is more than likely to be true, but the research continues.

In 2012, Kirk C. White, in *Operative Freemasonry: A Manual for Restoring Light and Vitality to the Fraternity*, wrote about many worthy topics and spoke plainly about the effect of attire on the individual Mason.



He points out how putting on special clothes puts us in a different frame of mind and changes our consciousness. It delineates from the ordinary; the sacred from the profane.¹¹

He offers the example of how a basketball player puts on his uniform – a boxer wraps his hands – a soldier prepares his uniform – a religious leader dons his vestments, and how, when it happens, he is changing his mental state. He is gearing up for what is ahead. His mind focuses, his concentration intensifies, and he becomes more serious about the work ahead.¹² When we select our clothing, we are performing a personal ritual – a personal ritual that influences our outlook on the task ahead.

¹⁰ Clare Barton, *Casual Dress, Casual Attitude*, Barton Mills Recruitment. World Press, 2014.

¹¹ Kirk C. White, *Operative Freemasonry: A Manual for Restoring Light and Vitality to the Fraternity*, Five Gates Publishing, Vermont, 2012.

¹² *Ibid.*

Should preparing for lodge be any different? After all, we are supposed to be preparing for spiritual labor, a special activity – one that is sacred where we ask for the blessings and guidance in the name of the Grand Architect of the Universe. As White points out, lodge doesn't have always be solemn, but it should always be serious. Thus, our preparations for lodge should be serious.¹³

If we wear our everyday clothes we likely fail in our preparations since we are not taking the preparation all that seriously. White and other contemporary Masonic writers emphasize that special dress for lodge is an act of respect to God, other brothers, and to ourselves. We wear special clothes when we invoke the name of God in our places of worship, weddings, and funerals, but for some reason we don't always think it's equally important in lodge.

Unintended Consequences

It's been suggested that when dress codes were first relaxed in Masonry, there was probably little thought given as to who would end up arbitrating or determining what *is* and what *is not* "relaxed." Clearly, those who relaxed the dress standards believed it could be an easily understood policy.

As history often shows, however, the fraternity, like most organizations made up of volunteers, has a track record of temporarily attempting to "fix" many issues, but failing to see long term unintended consequences.

Could it be in the liberal permissiveness of our dress codes, we have actually created undesirable competition that flies in the face of that "meeting on the level" claim? After



all, shouldn't we be more impressed with a pair of \$300 designer jeans with intentionally ripped out knees more than a man who wears a pair of \$25.00 Wranglers with tattered knees? Or, does the option of wearing the most expensive clothing a man can afford set up a competition between certain men

to do so and who can afford it?

The arbitrators of the dress code, whoever they may end up being, must address, if pressed and questioned, whether an inexpensive pullover cotton shirt is "proper" compared to a moderately expensive Polo shirt, or one from a fraternal supply shop with a Masonic symbol embroidered on it. Should or could "casual" mean a button down or collarless shirt? Should a bright red plaid blazer be deemed too colorful to be appropriate or deemed casual? Can an ascot be considered casual if a man chooses to wear one? Would turtleneck sweaters or only mock turtlenecks be too casual? What about footwear? Combat or mountain boots, sandals, loafers with no socks, red and green Nikes only?

¹³ *Ibid*

The choices are dizzying. Who is it again that is going to say what is “too casual” and what is not before we find ourselves going down the road of defining taste, perhaps even thread count or outlawing Dacron altogether.

We can say sport coats are permissible, but what about Nehru jackets, although they are out of style. But speaking of style, does the arbitrator have a say in how the clothes, casual or not, should fit? Are baggy pants too casual or slim fit jeans and European cut shirts not casual enough? What about the improper length of the hem on the pants? And, those ties, for those who bother to wear them – should they be tied in a Double Windsor knot... or not?

Of course, all of this is being facetious and all lodges with defined dress codes don't deal with this, but the point should be clear: once we relax a dress code and allow open season on style and fashion, we have set ourselves up for arched eyebrows and, in some cases, cold shoulders from men who are supposed to be Masonic in their tolerance. So much for harmony if we get into the business of policing taste in casual and perhaps even the more formal clothing styles.

Importantly, and on a more serious note, we do have to consider that when a dress code is straightforward, i.e., coat and tie, it at least may be viewed as more of a leveler than open season on anything that happens to strike the fancy. The only distinction that can be made between Masons all dressed in coat in tie is their individual preference in more formal clothing and their position or ranking in lodge once they adorn their aprons.



Some suggest that adopting a “Masonic blazer,” something akin to the sports coats worn by fraternal organizations at universities, would be another leveler. This idea, however, opens

the door to the impression of a Masonic uniform, which in the view of others, takes Masonry to places not intended, and might suggest Masonry is or becoming a paramilitary organization; adding to the pointless ire of those who are ignorant and seem to search for ways to justify their suspicions of the fraternity.

Masonic lodges are not Elk's Club meetings or a group of Rotarians, or Kiwanis together for lunch or an event - or like any other civic club get together. Our ritual teaches strong and profound moral lessons designed to improve a man's heart and mind if he so chooses to practice what he has taken an obligation to do. Lodge is supposed to be a *special occasion* – a full *systemic* Masonic event. Dressing as if it isn't special at all, ultimately makes it not special at all.

With Masonic education on the rise and a clear paradigm shift in attitudes and practice of traditional Freemasonry occurring in American lodges, there are many more Masons today who uphold the practice of dressing up for lodge regardless of the official policy that may or may not exist. A common theme has arisen from this shift; a theme that suggests that a brother who chooses to wear clothing that distracts from the dignity and harmony of lodge, its practices and other brothers present, is far from being the freethinker Masons are

supposed to be. Instead of free thinking, that Mason has fallen into the mode of acquiescing, thus conceding to the ordinary.

Our Different Points of View

Lodge sub-cultures that choose to be “comfortable” in their attire have that prerogative. Lodge cultures that choose to be formal in their dress codes and attire have the same. And, lodges also have the prerogative to be exceptional or ordinary in the way they practice Freemasonry - at least within the parameters of the respective constitutions.

Masons have the prerogative at lodge of eating baloney sandwiches or opting for more of a feast. The choice is theirs as to whether to provide extraordinary ritual and education or not. The choice is theirs as to whether go the extra mile on investigations of petitioners or let a petitioner slide through the West Gate. Importantly, Masons have the right to involve themselves with a lodge where they are satisfied with the manner and practice of the Masonry that is offered. No Mason is forced to remain in a lodge with which he is not experiencing what he wishes to find in our Craft, and there is nothing that prevents a Mason from having his own opinion and interpretations about Freemasonry and the various important matters surrounding it.

There is, however, the matter of tolerance with which most deal with on a regular basis.

Should any Mason fault another or another lodge or claim they are being elitists because they choose to dress formally? Should a Mason reproach another or another lodge of being a lesser form of Masonry because they do not adhere to a dress code at all? What if they don't adhere to the proficient delivery of ritual or practice required protocol?

Dress codes are far from what they once were in the fraternity. Whenever a relaxing of any standards in any organization occurs, it becomes doubtful if it can ever be re-unified.

The main problem surrounding the differences of the points of view on Masonic dress codes is more likely found to be in the education of Masons since the 1950s. Some believe a formal dress code should be an annual and perpetual edict. Some believe dress codes should be casual and some subscribe to the notion there should be no dress code at all.

The variance of our perspectives is certainly influenced by lodge sub-cultures and changing attitudes in our national beliefs, principles, and fashion, yet one still has to wonder that if all Masons were uniformly educated on our history and the manner in which the system of Freemasonry is supposed to work – as a system, if we would remain that far apart on our views about dress codes.

Dressing up has always given a sense of occasion offering and demonstrating an outward gesture of respect, whether the occasion is a wedding, religious service, funeral, or formal evening at any function. Is our practice of Freemasonry not an occasion in which a genuine gesture of respect when it comes to attire important as well?

What does it require for Masons to pause and seriously reflect beyond the worn-out rationalizations and excuses for dressing in attire that is outwardly contrary to the dignity of the Craft?

We have claimed the high ground for 300 years on teaching important lessons through which a man can improve himself, yet we lower the bar on the dignity and seriousness of the labor by showing up dressed in ways ranging from comical to irreverent.

While our national culture may subscribe to the peculiar idea that no one, including ourselves, should care how we look, should Masons humbly and blindly adopt the practice? If so, then Freemasonry has stopped its history of being influential in society and has allowed this practice in society to influence Freemasonry.

What's next?

John W Bizzack, Presentation at the Masonic History & Study Group, Lexington Lodge No. 1, September 2014.