

CIRCUMAMBULATION

Presentation At Elvin E. Helms Lodge No. 926, F. & A. M.

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It is a personal pleasure to be invited to speak to you this evening and I will be addressing a subject that I hold in high regard. Before we get started, I'd like you to consider the central question of the evening. Why do we perform ritual and do we understand the symbolism of the ritual we perform?

When asked, almost all Brothers can tell you that the badge of a Mason is his apron. Many will tell you that what makes him a Mason is his obligation, and most can tell you the purpose of the working tools of each degree. Some can recite for you the uses of chalk, charcoal and clay, or the symbolism of the beehive or pot of incense. A gifted few can deliver the mountainous Stair Lecture in its eloquent explanations of the various forms of architecture and the liberal Arts and Sciences. I am not going to spend our time here this evening peeling apart one of those worthy subjects, however. This evening I am going to ask you to consider one of the most often overlooked components of our ritual. And while this small piece of ritual may seem trivial as we take the first step in considering it, I ask that you keep an open mind to the very nature of esoteric initiation, which is what our ritual truly is.

This evening we are going to consider the very steps taken about the altar during the conduct of all ritual, and what those steps represent.

What is Circumambulation?

Circumambulation – the noun, or Circumambulate – the verb, from the Latin Circum (around) and Ambulate (to walk), Merriam Webster defines as to circle on foot, especially ritualistically. Oxford defines it as the act of moving around a sacred object or idol. Though the Etymology of the word dates to ancient times, its first known usage occurred in 1606. It is believed that the circumambulation dates to ancient times, prior to all, or at least most of the current concepts of religion going back to the time when humankind worshipped the sun and other forces of nature. Both the Greeks and the Romans are known to have circumambulated their sacred objects. Ritualized circumambulation occurs today in many of the world's religions and is an integral part of Hinduism and Buddhism in Eastern religions as well as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Circumambulation occurs in both Sunwise (clockwise) and Widdershins (counter-clockwise) motions. Masonic Circumambulation occurs Sunwise, with the altar always to the right.

While we do not know with certainty how the act of circling the Altar first became part of the rituals of Masonry, many speculate that the practice began during the Operative roots of the Craft and was intended to allow for a proper inspection of new candidates for physical deficiency or inadequacy. While we cannot know with certainty the when or why, we can explore the meaning and the symbolism associated with the Rite of Circumambulation in Freemasonry.

Masonic Scholar Carl Claudy, in his book, Introduction to Freemasonry, states, “Among the first religions were sun and fire worship. Prehistoric man found God in nature ... Worship of the sun in the sky was done symbolically by worship of fire upon piles of stones which were the first altars ... Early man imitated the God he worshipped. Heat and light he could give by fire, so lighting the fire on the altar became an important religious ceremony. And early man could imitate the movements of his God.” Most ritualistic circumambulation occurs in a clockwise motion, from East to West through the South following the movement of the sun across the sky as observed in the Northern hemisphere. As early man worshipped the sun, the procession was not just a physical act, but a mystical one as well. Brother Mackey wrote that circumambulation “had a reference to the motion of the heavenly bodies, which, according to the ancient poets and philosophers produced harmonious sound, inaudible to mortal ears, which was called ‘the music of the spheres’” As humankind evolved from worshipping nature to polytheism, henotheism (*the worship of a single god while not denying the existence or possible existence of other deities*) and

monotheism the rite of circumambulation necessarily took on new meaning. No longer simply an act of initiation, circumambulation became an act of purification made possible through the structured proximity to the holy.

Many Observant Lodges in America, and most European Lodges execute the Officer’s Procession, whereby the officers enter the Lodge in a solemn line and proceed about the Altar before assuming their appropriate stations. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Senior Deacon would frequently travel from his station to the Secretary’s desk to retrieve the Volume of Sacred Law, and then proceeds to the Altar to display the Great Lights appropriate to the degree being worked. The entire time, the Senior Deacon would keep the Altar on his right side. At the end of the meeting, he would follow the same path, East through the South, approaching the Altar from the West, always keeping the Altar to his right. Within the Lodge room, this procession purified the profane and transformed it into the sacred space necessary to perform our initiation rites.

In the stereopticon lecture (the third section) of the Entered Apprentice Degree, we are taught that among the several decorations found within every regular and well-governed Lodge of Entered Apprentices you will find a point within a circle, touching upon two parallel lines. We are taught that the point represents the individual Brother, the circle is the boundary line of duty, beyond which we are never to suffer our prejudices or passions to betray us, and that while traversing this boundary line, we necessarily touch upon the two lines and our Volume of Sacred Law. We are also taught

that for those Masons who keep themselves thus circumscribed within those due bounds, it is impossible for them to materially err. Like most of you, I have heard those words many times within the walls of a Lodge of Entered Apprentices. In my travels, I have looked for the literal symbol just described without fail in every Lodge I've entered and seldom find it displayed as such. After beginning my study of the Rite of Circumambulation though, I found this symbol -- at least its esoteric representation - - in every Lodge I've entered, be that a Lodge of Entered Apprentices, Fellow Crafts or Master Masons.

Symbolically, the point is the Volume of Sacred Law, the parallel lines are the Master in the East and the Senior Warden in the West and finally, the circle is made by the candidate led by the Senior Deacon in procession about the Altar. By proper attention to the act of circumambulating the Altar, in reverent procession, we not only symbolically sanctify the Lodge room and purify the candidate for the initiation, but we also should be reminded of our own obligation to keep our own actions and passions in due bounds.

While I do not dare tell you that the Rite of Circumambulation is the most important step taken within the Lodge room, nor that it is the most meaningful component to our ritual, I do want to impress upon you the weight of the procession about the Altar and draw your attention to its proper care. I am of the firm belief that through knowledge -- that knowledge of what those steps represent, we are better enabled to perform our ritual with the sincerity and gravity that it deserves. If we pay greater attention to the smallest detail -- literally the meaning of

the steps we take around the Altar then we almost certainly will be compelled to give greater attention to the more obvious components of our ritual. And I believe **that** is a path to a more enriching Masonic experience, for our single claim, when we answer the Master's challenge in each Degree, while standing in the East for the first time, to be a traveler in search of Light. Let us shine the light of knowledge upon our ritual, and thereby elevate our appreciation for it and those who have come this way before us. I leave you this evening, my Brothers, with a hearty thanks for the opportunity to fellowship with and address you. I also ask you to reflect upon that central question that I opened with -- why do we perform ritual and do we understand the symbolism of the ritual that we perform?

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