

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

BOOK REVIEW

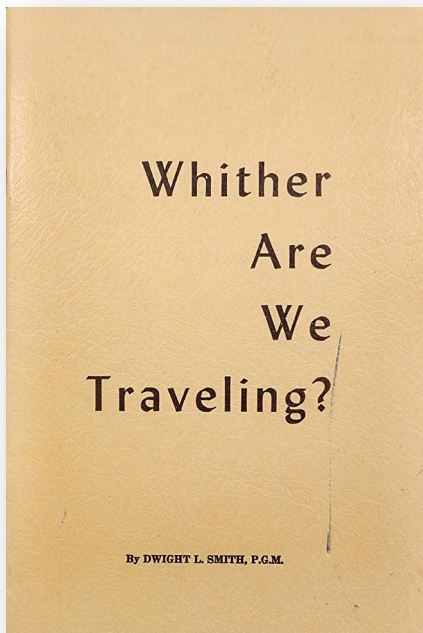
WHITHER ARE WE TRAVELING

Dwight L. Smith, PGM

Reviewed by: Dan M. Kemble

In February 1962, Dwight L. Smith, Past Grand Master of Indiana (1945-1946), was serving the Grand Lodge of Indiana in the dual capacity of Grand Secretary and Editor of *The Indiana Freemason*, the monthly publication of the Grand Lodge. That month, Most Worshipful Brother Smith published the first of a series of eleven articles which were later published collectively under the title, *Whither Are We Traveling?* Although the entire collection of articles is relatively brief – only 46 pages – and despite the fact that it was written some sixty years ago, it is, unquestionably, one of the most powerful, provocative, and, indeed, prescient works ever written about 20th century American Freemasonry.

In *Whither Are We Traveling?*, Most Worshipful Brother Smith posed ten questions, and devotes a chapter of his book to each question. Smith's ten questions are:



1. Can we expect Freemasonry to retain its past glory and prestige unless the level of leadership is raised above its present position?
2. How well are we guarding the West Gate?
3. Has Freemasonry become too easy to obtain?
4. Are we not worshipping at the altar of bigness?
5. What can we expect when we have permitted Freemasonry to become subdivided into a score of organizations?
6. Has the American passion for bigness and efficiency dulled the spirit of Masonic charity?

7. Do we pay enough attention to the Festive Board?
8. What has become of that “course of moral instruction, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols,” that Freemasonry is supposed to be?
9. Hasn’t the so-called Century of the Common Man contributed to making our Fraternity a little too common?
10. Are there not too many well-meaning Brethren who are working overtime to make Freemasonry something other than Freemasonry?

Smith addressed each of those questions in detail in the subsequent chapters of his book, and did so in the plain language of the newspaperman that he was. The immediate conclusion, after reviewing Smith’s ten questions, is that American Freemasonry has been struggling with the same issues for over six decades.

The idea of a Grand Master raising any of Smith’s questions in the climate of contemporary Freemasonry is almost unimaginable. The same questions, if posed by a 21st century rank-and-file Freemason, would be considered revolutionary, if not downright heretical.

Smith writes, “Freemasonry has not been tried in the balance and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” Those words contain an undeniable truth about the mindset of the men who make up the mainstream of 21st century American Freemasonry. They are the culmination of all of Smith’s earlier warnings: That Freemasonry has become too easily obtained, that we are negligent in guarding the West Gate, that we have ignored our ancient traditions etc. Freemasonry, when practiced as intended, is far more than a social club. It asks men to undertake the most difficult labor in which they will ever engage – that of conducting an honest evaluation of themselves, and based on their findings, to construct within their hearts a spiritual temple equal in magnificence to the celebrated Temple of Solomon. Flipping pancakes and donating money to charitable causes are each infinitely easier (and less intellectually uncomfortable) than the difficult and daily work of self-improvement.

One of the most important aspects of Smith’s work is the tone in which it is written. Although it is nothing less than a stinging indictment of 20th century American Freemasonry, its tone is not accusatory or adversarial. *Whither Are We Traveling?* uses a matter-of-fact, common sense approach to deliver its message. Smith’s observations are not argumentative. His approach is that of a newspaperman reporting fact. Smith realized that, in this instance, the facts were so clear that they needed no embellishment, and he wisely refrained from such an attempt. Smith characterized his own writing in this manner, “Hard words, perhaps, but they need to be spoken.”

Dwight Smith clearly recognized that the success or failure of American Freemasonry could not be measured by the number of names on membership rosters. Make no mistake, Smith had no objection to having large numbers of men practicing Freemasonry. His concerns were about the quality of the men, rather than the quantity. Smith said (and, again, remember that this was in 1962), “We are accepting too many petitioners who can pay the fee, and little else; too many men who have no conception of what Freemasonry is or what it seeks to do, and who care not one whit about

increasing their moral stature; too many men who look upon Ancient Craft Freemasonry with contempt – who are interested in using it only as a springboard from which to gain a prestige symbol.” Smith’s remarks would be echoed decades later by Right Worshipful Thomas W. Jackson, Past Grand Secretary of Pennsylvania, who warned that was impossible to “make fine porcelain from bad clay.”

His unerring criticism of mid-20th century Freemasonry notwithstanding, Smith never lost faith in the ultimate power of Freemasonry to elevate the moral quality of a man’s life, and bring about an internal transformation of character.

Most Worshipful Brother Smith advocated the exploration of the substance of Freemasonry. He explicitly rejected the use of gimmicks designed to increase membership in the Fraternity and increased attendance at Lodge meetings. Instead, he posed one additional question: Why does not someone suggest that we try Freemasonry?

In presenting that simple question, Smith reveals the answer to each of the questions that had posed: Try Freemasonry. Smith’s point is that Freemasonry’s adoption of community service projects, lowering of standards and its lust for “bigness” only served to undermine its fundamental aim and purpose.

In closing *Whither Are We Traveling?*, Smith wrote, “I come to the conclusion of this booklet with my faith in the basic worth of our ancient Craft unshaken, convinced that the solutions to Freemasonry’s problems is Freemasonry. Why do we not try it?”

Most Worshipful Dwight L. Smith’s *Whither Are We Traveling?* is a powerful punch. The issues that Smith identified over sixty years ago continue to exist, only they are now more deeply entrenched and institutionalized. American Freemasonry failed to address the issues identified by Most Worshipful Brother Smith in a timely manner. As a result, the Fraternity has paid a steep price for deliberately ignoring the elements that have contributed to its steady decline.

Through *Whither Are We Traveling?*, Most Worshipful Dwight L. Smith continues to speak to American Freemasonry despite the passage of time. One can only hope that Smith’s questions, and his ultimate prescription – **Try Freemasonry** – become the topic of discussion throughout American Freemasonry in the 21st century.

Whither Are We Traveling? was published by The Indiana Freemason in 1962. It is long out of print, but copies can occasionally be found through online booksellers.