

# The Challenges of Masonry in the 21st Century

*Thomas W. Jackson*

---



**M**ost Worshipful Grand Masters, distinguished colleagues and my Brothers, it is a great honor and distinct privilege to be with you today and to address the subject that is the theme of this Conference, “The Challenges of Masonry in the 21st Century”

Indeed, since the beginning of this Century, the challenges of Masonry have been a major topic of discussion by Masonic leaders of the World as well as by the individual brothers who comprise our Lodges. It is also a subject on which



I have placed a great deal of emphasis in my position as Executive Secretary of the World Conference of Regular Masonic Grand Lodges. Keep in mind that the observations I present to you today will not be applicable to every jurisdiction or even to every part of the World. I write from the cumulative experiences which I have had and the knowledge I have gained from the privilege of being able to travel over a great portion of the World for the purpose of Freemasonry.

My Brothers, this is a remarkable age for Freemasonry. Our Fraternity is expanding and establishing roots in relatively untouched

environments. It is achieving success in its influence in parts of the World where it has not existed in the past or where it has been rejuvenated following the demise of repressive regimes. There have been 26 consecrations of NEW Grand Lodges since the beginning of this millennium. This represents perhaps the most rapid rate of expansion, over that span of time, we have seen in our history. There has been a rebirth of interest in the potential of our Craft to contribute to a new societal evolution in much of the World. I have been greatly impressed and stimulated by the development of the interest seen in the leaders of countries striving to enhance the evolution of their societies and looking at the potential for Freemasonry to participate in that enhancement.

In many stable societies, however, the potential influence of Freemasonry has become less than what it was. This is simply a matter of fact, because these societies have evolved to a level of stability where future evolutionary change will be limited, or at least slowed, in its development. This does not mean that the need for the Philosophical purpose of Freemasonry has in any way decreased, but that its ongoing influence will be more subtle than in the past. It means that the need for dramatic societal changes is no longer paramount in these environments. But where Freemasonry is now rising, there exist fertile fields to be cultivated by those dedicated to a Society in need of the gentle guidance of our Craft. And yet, along with this glowing future for

our Craft in some parts of the World, we continue to acknowledge the ongoing challenges we are facing in other parts. The search for the ultimate solutions to the challenges of Freemasonry might almost be likened to the search for the “Holy Grail”

Facing challenges and searching for solutions is nothing new to Freemasonry. Challenges to our integrity have been part of Masonic history even before we were formally structured in 1717. We have searched for solutions for centuries, and yet, challenges remain. However, our survival over those centuries is indicative of our success as an institution.

Every challenge, large or small, became temporary because our philosophical purpose never wavered and the leadership of the Craft never lost its vision. The very fact that it continues to thrive throughout the World is undeniable evidence that its purpose is universal & undying.

In the present age, however, there seems to be a prevailing attitude by many of our leaders that the Freemasonry of those past centuries is not a good fit for modern society & that we must change our operational precepts to adapt to this Society. In spite of all the changes that have been made in recent years, however, there has been little success with our attempts to reshape Freemasonry to fit the “Modern” World. Indeed many attempts have resulted in increased failure.

One of the causes for our failure to find a universal answer is that the challenges are not Universal and that leaders of the Craft differ considerably on the solutions to these challenges. In our attempt to regain our prominence and visibility, we have become far too willing to surrender the integrity & character that made us prominent & visible to begin with, simply to satisfy demands from the uninitiated.

Certainly, the environment in which we must operate today is different from the environment of the past, but the environment has constantly changed. Is the societal change required to advance into today’s age of technology any more dramatic that the societal change required to advance into the age of the Industrial Revolution?

## **Changing our Fundamentals**

Is it necessary for us to become fundamentally different from what we have been for the last 300 years?

Are the environmental changes of the modern world so much different from those of the past that the philosophy of Freemasonry, with its emphasis on Morals & Ethics is no longer applicable? Perhaps changes are not so much needed in Freemasonry as they are in the society in which it exists! Because society lowers its values does not mean we must lower ours on order to fit in. We must always pull others up to meet with us, not climb down to meet with them. I would suggest that the problem is NOT with us and our philosophy, but rather with society and its values. Our concern, today, must not so much be with the changing environment in which we operate, but rather our reaction to it.

*“In our attempt to regain our prominence and visibility, we have become far too willing to surrender the integrity & character that made us prominent & visible to begin with, simply to satisfy demands from the uninitiated.”*

*“I have sometimes found myself in disagreement with many of today’s leaders of Freemasonry, especially in my own Home Country (United States) where our desperate attempt to secure numbers has resulted in a catastrophic loss of our image and the marginalization of our influence in society. Now we spend far too much time making excuses to justify our failings instead of working to maintain our successes.”*

Organized Freemasonry has survived and indeed flourished in a constantly changing environment for close to three centuries and has been a dominant player in the evolution of civil society during that period of time. It has changed over three centuries, but never in the form of magnitude that we are seeing in the present age on some areas of the World. Freemasonry has never been a stagnant institution, although we should be greatly concerned about refusing to consider change, if this change could benefit our Craft. Any change we choose to make, however, must not be as a result of pressures from the outside world. Alterations we previously made in our operational procedures were effected because we wanted them made for the benefit of the Craft...not because those from the uninitiated world wanted them made. Now, however, many changes we are making or considering are attempts to satisfy external demands. We now seem to be willing to make these changes to satisfy the “political correctness” attitude of present-day society, and I find myself to be out of step with this attempt.

I have sometimes found myself in disagreement with many of today’s leaders of Freemasonry, especially in my own Home Country (United States) where our desperate attempt to secure numbers has resulted in a catastrophic loss of our image and the marginalization of our influence in society. Now we spend far too much time making

excuses to justify our failings instead of working to maintain our successes.

I am not in accord with the rationalization that the protocols of regularity, recognition, right to visit, and territorial sovereignty are unable to shape today’s world, and I readily admit that I do not accept that these fundamental precepts, which defined Freemasonry and served as a stabilizing force for centuries, are merely outmoded vessels of our past. For some reason or reasons we seem to have adopted the attitude that dramatic changes are not only desirable but necessary for our survival in a society that desperately needs an injection of the Ethical and Moral values of Freemasonry.

These protocols, under which we have operated for three centuries and that we are now implying do not fit into today’s world, have provided a protective umbrella, shielding the Craft, from those who would attempt to dilute its essential values. Why we have become so willing, in recent years, to submit to the liberal thinking elements of society that, the Freemasonry we have known for 300 years; the Freemasonry that has been a major contributor to shaping the World as we know it today. The Freemasonry that has participated in so many struggles for liberty, freedom and equality for so many peoples, indeed the Freemasonry whose philosophy could serve as a template for World Peace is no longer applicable?

Freemasonry did not survive by bowing to the wishes or the demands of a Society so lacking in many ethical & moral values that are foundation stones of our Craft. Freemasonry did not thrive by subjugating the Craft to dictatorial regimes or to oppressive religious powers. Freemasonry did not become the greatest organization conceived by the mind of man by lowering our standards and sacrificing our principles in order to receive greater numbers or acceptance from the profane world that makes no attempt to understand us. No, my Brothers, Freemasonry became what it has become due to our commitment to retain those qualities which made it great and made it a benefit to civil society.

A very good friend of mine, who is a Christian minister, once asked me why we define ourselves as an organization with a goal to accept only good men and make them better, choosing to

ignore those who need our help most. My response to him was that fine porcelain cannot be made from bad clay. It was the responsibility of religious institutions to reform men, not ours. *We are not* a reformation society.



We seek to better men of excellent character, knowing that many of those improved by our Craft have made great contributions to the structure of our

civil society. I fear that Freemasons in many areas of the world today are forgetting that purpose. As a result, the visible image that we are projecting to society is one with much less prestige than we were able to sustain in the past. As that prestige diminishes, our influence on the ongoing evolution of civil society also diminishes. That is a tragic loss to the World. Freemasons exemplified those Moral and Ethical characteristics that tended to elevate societies, simply by emulating what was good and what was just and right in man. In so doing, Freemasonry served as a template that resulted in a new vision of the rights of humankind. In a broad sense, it has served as a foundation for the concept of democracy.

As our overall influence may be decreasing, our potential to impact the World is increasing. But even as that potential is increasing, we are experiencing dissension in our ranks that also may be approaching a zenith. Internal issues within Jurisdictions that give rise to schisms and confrontations between Grand Lodges are on the increase. Too many of our members are developing the attitude that the Freemasonry that has existed for 300 years is not compatible with what they perceive as Masonic Philosophy. Historically, the greatest challenges facing Freemasonry were external. Our greatest enemies have been oppressive leaders of governments & oppressive leaders of Religions. You will note I referred to Leaders of Governments and Religions, not governments and religions. Governments do not oppose us, nor do Religions oppose us. It is only the leaders of these institutions who have been our opponents.

It is also worth noting that both of these entities, even when in opposition to each other, opposed us for the very same reason, a desire to control the bodies and minds of those under their control and with intent to destroy any organization tending to interfere with that desire. They would take away from the adherents everything that Freemasonry stands for, the liberty of man to think and to live, free from repressive political constraint and with the freedom to worship God as individual consciences dictates.

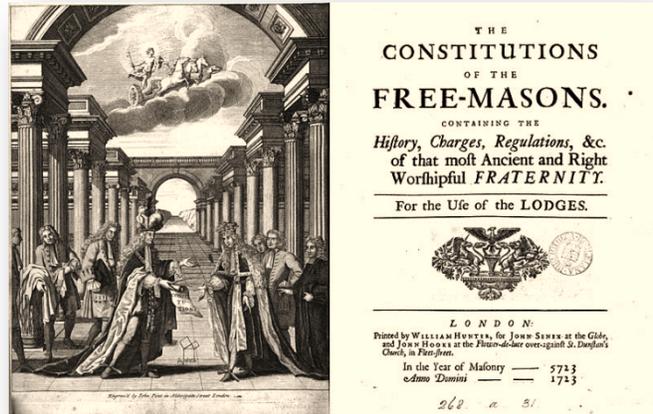
## The Threat from Within

Today, however, they are not the greatest threats that we are facing. The greatest threat we are facing is *internal not external*. There are far more divisive issues for Freemasonry now existing within the liberal minds of the membership of the Craft, than there are challenges from forces outside of it.

No repressive government nor any oppressive religious regime has been able to defeat the philosophy of Freemasonry. In spite of all the attempts from these powers, none have destroyed us. Many have tried and many have failed.

Now, however, in some areas of the World, we are accomplishing what they could never do.

For years, I have been emphasizing several of the greatest threats to our Integrity as an Institution. They are the interference of appendant bodies with Grand Lodge operations, the spread of irregular forms of Freemasonry and our willingness to accept it, and our enthusiasm to encourage exposure of Freemasonry to the public generally through the development of modern technology.



Any organization requiring that Masonic Membership is a prerequisite is subordinate to the Grand Lodge in that Jurisdiction. The Grand Lodge is the supreme authority over Freemasonry in all Jurisdictions, and any interference by an appendant organization must be unacceptable. There have been far too many Grand Lodges, in recent years, struggling to compete with these organizations, whose members sometimes feel that higher degree numbers denote higher status. There is no Degree higher than that of a Master Mason. All other Degrees are superfluous to the third.

Irregular Freemasonry is nothing new in the Masonic World; it has been in existence for almost as long as regular Freemasonry, but it has never been a serious threat to our stability. Now, however, it is spreading into environments where regular Freemasonry has existed for centuries. It is currently developing into a competitive threat to mainstream, regular Freemasonry. It has become a major obstacle in stabilizing Freemasonry in Eastern Europe and in some parts of Africa. We must be concerned today with the willingness of some of our leadership to grant recognition to those bodies that are not governed by the same protocols as are we. In lacking those protocols, they present to the World a different image from what we attempt to project, while the World sees us all simply as Freemasons. Regularity of Origin is a constitutional assurance that those who are seeking recognition are indeed Masonic.

Regularity in practice forms a basis for recognition, and assures us that Grand Lodges remain in compliance with the principal landmarks of the Craft. Regularity is a right based upon origin and practice. Recognition is a privilege granted by each individual Grand Lodge and it must be based on regularity.

A former and well known member of the United Grand Lodge of England commented recently on a blog that

*“It is my belief that there is no such a thing as clandestine or irregular Freemasonry. Such labels belittle the rich tapestry of our traditions both contemporary and historical. Further, such attitudes directly contradict the premise of brotherhood and fraternalism which is the foundation of Freemasonry”*

I could not disagree more with that quotation!

How could the writer possibly understand Freemasonry and write that such attitudes contradict the premise that brotherhood and fraternalism which is the basis of Freemasonry? A founding principle of Freemasonry is belief in a Supreme Being. Many forms of irregular or clandestine Freemasonry have no such precondition. The required belief in a Supreme Being is one of the major factors that distinguish us from other Fraternal, civic and social bodies. Were we to delete the requirement of the belief in a Supreme Being for one to become a Freemason we would dismantle one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Craft and perhaps the most revealing bond that unites us.

Personally since 2004 I have held the office of Grand Representative from the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Washington & Jurisdictions to the Grand Lodge of British Columbia & Yukon, in which I am a member. Recognition between these two Grand Lodge bodies occurred in 2006 and I am honored and privileged to hold that office.

Also, how could these labels possibly belittle contemporary and historical traditions, when regularity has been consistently required and enforced for centuries? In our present age, there has been a willingness among most of our leadership to submit to society's demands to lift the veil of the mystique and secrecy that have made us such a unique organization.

That uniqueness is what helped differentiate us, and made us the most outstanding and significant institution that the human mind has ever conceived. Never has there been any organization that rivals the positive influence that Freemasonry has had on the evolution of society. Now for some reason, many of our present day leaders feel the need to expose to the public that which we have concealed (or attempted to conceal) for several hundred years, diluting our uniqueness and dispelling the aura that surrounded us and that tended to lift us to a higher plane in comparison to other fraternal organizations. This new found tendency has had a major impact upon those who were attracted by the mystique and the unknown of the Craft. The result has been that many who might have petitioned for that reason no longer have the stimulus to affiliate.

*“Our own ignorance of the true significance and purpose of Freemasonry has facilitated the decline of the mystique.”*

Our own ignorance of the true significance and purpose of Freemasonry has facilitated the decline of the mystique. It is appalling to read some of the information that is put on the Internet by well-meaning brothers who have all the answers, but have never heard the questions.



We also live in a World society dominated by the concept of political correctness, wherein everyone should have the right to have the same as everyone else irrespective of their ability, initiative or work ethic. In some parts of the World, Freemasons have bought into that concept, resulting in a devastating effect upon the quality of the Craft, followed by a concomitant decline of our image on Society.

The greatest challenges that Freemasonry faced in our historic past will be quite different from those we will face in the twenty-first century, because most will be caused internally. We will probably continue to face challenges from leaders of governments and religions, but they will not be our greatest concern.

We have faced these external challenges for centuries. We have also faced internal challenges in the past. However, the internal dissensions that are tending to divide Grand Lodges, the increased egotism that tends to weaken Grand Lodges, the advancement of modern technologies that facilitate the diffusion of misinformation, and our willingness to surrender our protocols should be our greatest concerns.

My brothers, the twenty first century could very well be the most critical period of time of our existence. We have, in this century, the potential to accomplish what no other entity has been able to do: facilitate our own extinction.

We have spent way too much time parasitizing the greatness of our past, but we cannot continue to dwell upon its greatness while continuing to ignore the need to create our future. Our concern must now be our future, and our greatest hurdle to overcome will be us. The time has come for us to deposit our egos at the door and dedicate ourselves to the unity of regular Freemasonry.

It is a time for us to repay our brothers of the past who have given an unsurpassed legacy to each of us and to the World. We will not accomplish this by sacrificing the protocols that have created that legacy. We, the present-day leaders of this heritage, must assume the responsibility of perpetuating it and carrying it into the future.

My Brothers, if Freemasonry is not succeeding anywhere in the World, it is not the failure of Freemasonry, it is our failure as Masons

**Presented by Thomas. W Jackson to the Third International Conference of Masonology, held in Izmir, Turkey, April 12, 2013 and shared in the Spring 2013 Edition of the Philaethes Magazine.**