

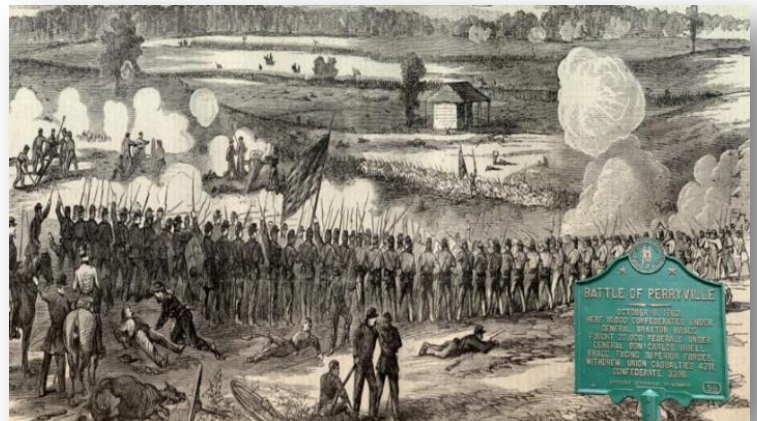
WHO'S LEFT STANDING? FREEMASONRY AFTER COVID-19

COMMENTARY

Dan M. Kemble, PM, William O. Ware Lodge of Research – July 2020

Civil War historians generally agree that the Battle of Perryville, Kentucky, although being a relatively small affair in terms of the total number of men engaged on both sides, was fought as fiercely as any of the larger and better-known battles of that war. Soldiers in both armies recognized the strategic importance of Kentucky and, indeed, Union President Abraham Lincoln remarked, “I think to lose Kentucky is nearly the same as to lose the whole game.”¹

Metaphorically, an equally fierce battle is being waged for the heart and soul of American Freemasonry. While relatively few men are engaged on either side, the struggle is a bitter one and the outcome will determine the direction of Freemasonry in this country for the next several decades.



The heart of the conflict is this: What is Freemasonry?

On one side, Freemasonry is viewed as having a single definition, which, as stated in the Entered Apprentice Degree, is that of being an organization whose aim and purpose is to teach men to subjugate their passions and desires, and, in so doing, improve themselves and achieve their potential for a more fulfilling life and draw nearer to their Creator, the Grand Architect of the Universe. Adherents to this view of Freemasonry readily acknowledge that there are many secondary attributes of the Craft that flow from this basic understanding. But without the presence of the foundational belief that, through its ritual, Freemasonry defines itself, it is impossible to successfully practice Freemasonry or deliver its promise to others.

The opposing point of view is that there are many versions of Freemasonry, each conforming to the particular point of view held by the individual Mason, or corporately by Lodges or Grand

¹ Abraham Lincoln, letter to Sen. Edward A. Barnwell, September 22, 1862.

Lodges. Emphasis has been placed on the enactment of various public service programs, the substitution of ritual for education and a generally casual approach to the practice of Freemasonry. This has been the de facto rule in American Freemasonry for at least a century, and the result has been wildly inconsistent (and occasionally incompatible) interpretations of Freemasonry at all levels.

Because of the way in which a majority of our Lodges and Grand Lodges are governed, long-term planning has been neglected and the organization merely drifts from year to year, from Master to Master and from Grand Master to Grand Master. The lack of uniformity in ritual and education has resulted in a Craft that is largely incapable, in most cases, of performing Degrees at anything other than the most perfunctory level, and that is almost entirely ignorant of the philosophical and spiritual underpinnings on which Freemasonry was established.

The gulf between the two sides is of Biblical proportion and is not likely to be bridged anytime soon. In fact, the argument is much like the debate found in Protestant Christianity between Calvinists who insist on a stern regimen of theological absolutes and more relaxed believers who follow the doctrine of “soul competency” which posits that each individual is accountable only to God and is capable of interpreting his faith in the manner most meaningful to himself. Much like the contemporary Protestant Church, contemporary Freemasonry is a crazy quilt of varying patterns and shapes. In both instances, the outsider looking in sees mostly chaos and very little that appears inviting or appealing.

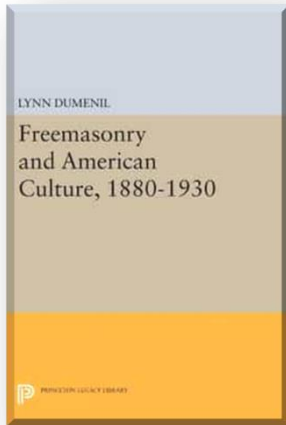
The comparison of American Freemasonry to Protestant Christianity is not a random one. Demographically, Protestant America tends to be majority white, conservative and older.² The demographics of the rank and file of American Freemasonry reflect a mirror image. It is not uncommon, or to be unexpected, that the religious attitudes of American Freemasons will be consistent with their approach to Freemasonry. Interestingly, memberships in both the American Protestant Church and American Freemasonry are in steep decline.

The problem with the application of the doctrine of “soul competency” to Freemasonry is that Freemasonry clearly defines itself. It is neither necessary nor appropriate for the individual Freemason to develop his own interpretation of the aim and purpose of Freemasonry. He is explicitly told exactly what that aim and purpose is during the course of the ceremonies and lectures of the Degrees. Much as Calvinists would argue that the theological doctrine of soul competency provides a built-in escape hatch for those who are unwilling to be held accountable for their behavior, those who favor a traditional approach to Freemasonry caution that allowing the individual Freemason to interpret the tenets of the Order for himself gives such a member license to avoid holding himself to the strict standards that are truly essential to a fulfilling Masonic journey.

² Pew Research Center. U. S. Religious Landscape Survey, February 1, 2008.

As it is with religious controversies, so it is with the battle for Freemasonry. Both sides, more often than not, view each other with suspicion, distrust, and more than a little contempt.

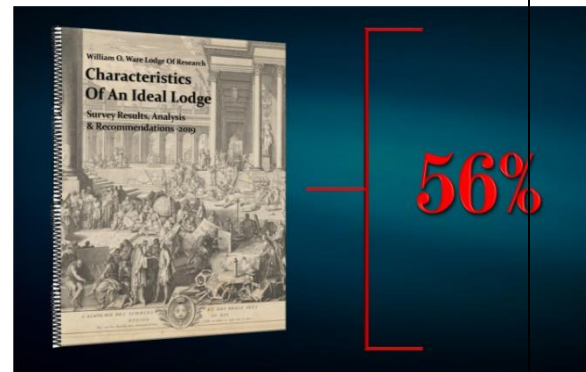
Those who view Freemasonry as having a single definition and follow a path of self-improvement through its teachings are a decided minority. While some individual Masons from this group have held leadership positions at the local Lodge level, very few have gone on to hold similar positions at the Grand Lodge level.



In *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*, Professor Lynn Dumenil of Occidental College described how American Freemasonry gradually surrendered its philosophical and spiritual nature and adopted a service-club orientation during the last quarter of the 19th Century and the first quarter of the 20th Century.³ The service-club orientation continues to exist among the majority of contemporary American Freemasons and its leaders are drawn from those ranks.

Affecting the ebb and flow of the battle between the two sides has been the continuous out-flux of members. In the period beginning in 1960 through the end of 2019, American Freemasonry experienced a roughly 75% loss in its membership.⁴ Further impacting matters is the phenomenon quantified by a study

conducted by William O. Ware Lodge of Research in 2019 that found that 56% of all current Kentucky Freemasons have had no involvement with their Lodge since the conferral of the most recent Degree that they received.⁵ It is likely that Kentucky Freemasonry is merely reflective of American Freemasonry in this respect. As the number of men on each side changes, each band grows more entrenched in their beliefs and, because of diminishing numbers, are more likely to have occasion to confront the other side. Hand to hand combat is the most bitter fighting of all.



In the year 2020, American Freemasonry, like all of the rest of American society, has been beset by the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In many cases, Lodge activity at all levels has been suspended for at least two months, with the possibility of a longer suspension on the horizon. In COVID-19, the adherents of contemporary, casual Freemasonry and those who desire a more formal and traditional approach to Freemasonry have encountered a foe greater than their combined force.

In his 2019 trilogy, *The Reckoning*, W. B. John W. Bizzack wrote of how shrinking membership rolls and correspondingly shrinking revenues would eventually force American Freemasonry to

³ Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture 1880-1930*, Princeton University Press. 1982.

⁴ Membership numbers supplied by the Masonic Service Association of North America.

⁵ "Characteristics of An Ideal Lodge." Survey by William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky, October 2019.

confront its fragile state and would necessitate a serious discussion of how to direct the Fraternity's future.⁶ What W. B. Bro. Bizzack did not foresee (and could not have foreseen) is the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has compressed the timetable for such a reckoning.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is serious, it is not the Bubonic Plague. The great weight of history tells us that this episode will pass, and that life will eventually resume in a manner close to that in which we knew it. But what will be the lasting effects of the pandemic? How will those factors shape American Freemasonry? Will attendance at Lodge be limited to a certain number of members? If so, who will choose which members will be allowed to attend Lodge? Will we be willing to welcome visitors into our Lodges? Will you be comfortable visiting a different Lodge?

Will we still be willing to shake hands with each other? Although it is difficult to visualize Freemasonry without handshaking, that is likely the environment that will exist, at least in the early stages of returning to Lodge. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a refusal to shake hands with a fellow Mason was a direct affront and an intentional insult. Now it may merely be the exercise of prudent care. How, then, do we respond to the Brother who insists on shaking hands?

Will it be necessary to have Lodges professionally sanitized before we return to meetings? Is it responsible not to do so? Should we wear masks in Lodge? Given that the average age of our members places the vast majority of them firmly in the "at risk" group, is it irresponsible not to exercise a higher level of prudence than we have perhaps shown prior to the pandemic? How much risk are we willing to assume in order to resume our normal Masonic life? Should any Brother who is unwilling to immediately return to Lodge once the "all-clear" is given be sanctioned or otherwise looked upon with a sense of diminished regard?

In a certain sense, the COVID-19 crisis has been a lost opportunity for Grand Lodges to demonstrate strong leadership by getting in front of the current situation, which is obviously going to be institution changing in some ways. One of those areas is hygiene. While we seldom acknowledge it, we all admit that we have Brothers who do not practice good personal hygiene. Freemasons have been notoriously resistant to dress codes, but is it unreasonable now to insist that our Brothers bathe and wear clean clothes when attending Lodge? Is it responsible to allow men to return to Lodge if their personal hygiene is neglected? To put it more pointedly, who is it, exactly, with whom you are willing to sit beside in Lodge?

In a time of dwindling numbers and strained resources, would it not be reasonable to allow Entered Apprentices and Fellowcrafts the ability to fully participate in the life of the Lodge? How does Freemasonry benefit from their being forced to the sidelines? How do they individually benefit from such banishment? Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures and it is to the everlasting shame of American Freemasonry that in a substantial number of jurisdictions (including Kentucky) these men are excluded from being fully welcomed as Brothers.

⁶ John W. Bizzack, *The Reckoning: Transformations that Weakened American Freemasonry Leading to an Inevitable Reckoning*. November 2019.

We have seen that we can live without District Meetings. Just how necessary is the annual communication of a Grand Lodge? Is it prudent and reasonable to gather so many of us, including spouses, together in one place, even if we are allowed to do so by state and local authorities? Can an annual communication be effected in a manner different than that to which we are accustomed? Will a rush to return to “normalcy” generate an even larger decline in our participation levels?

In the dark days of the Morgan Affair and its aftermath (roughly encompassing the period from 1826 to 1845), the perpetuity of American Freemasonry was threatened because large numbers of individual Masons who were unwilling to risk public censure for their membership simply dropped out of the Fraternity. With them went much of the institutional memory, experienced leadership and competent ritualists of the time. Those who remained practiced Freemasonry as they understood it, but not necessarily as it was meant to be understood. Their imperfect understanding of the Craft is what they transmitted to succeeding generations of American Freemasons.

Will the same phenomenon occur in the wake of COVID-19? While we do not know how long this pandemic will last, we can be assured that there will be long lasting consequences. Will there be Masons in the 21st Century who, because they are unwilling to risk illness, simply cease to attend Lodge? When the time comes for Lodges to resume their Labors, who will be there to fill the chairs, to deliver the ritual and confer the Degrees? How will they recall the manner in which such things are done?

Following the Morgan Affair, and again in the current era of steep membership decline since 1960, institutional Freemasonry focused its energies and its efforts on bringing the membership numbers back up. Had institutional Freemasonry been capable of concentrating its resources on making Freemasons, rather than merely making new members, it would likely be in a different position than that in which it now finds itself.

Battles produce casualties. The carnage of a battlefield is immediately apparent in the aftermath of armed conflict. The dead are lost to their cause forever. The wounded may or may not recover. *In Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle*, Auburn University Professor Ken Noe relates that almost immediately following the Battle of Perryville, the Confederate and Union armies shifted their movements into Middle Tennessee. The tiny hamlet of Perryville would see no more of battle, but it was forever changed. Left behind the two armies were hundreds of dead, dying and wounded soldiers. The identification and burial of the dead, along with the care of the wounded and invalid, affected life in Perryville long after the armies had left. Professor Noe recounts that within the town of Perryville, following the fight on October 8, 1862, there was at least one death every day for the remainder of the year attributable to wounds received in the battle.⁷ Very tellingly, Professor Noe also points out that not all wounds are of the body. The mental and emotional strain of participating in such an event, what we now know as PTSD, also took its toll on the soldiers who fought for control of the Bluegrass in 1862.⁸

⁷ Kenneth W. Noe, *Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle*. University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

⁸ Ibid.

COVID-19 will also produce casualties. Undoubtedly, some Brothers will be lost to us, either through death or because their health simply will not permit them to return. Others, out of caution, will be hesitant to come back to Lodge. Some will simply fade away as a result of our normal attrition rates.

Will the casualties from the COVID-19 pandemic fall equally upon the two sides of the philosophical divide in American Freemasonry? Will both sides be equally diminished? Or will the casualty rate fall more heavily on one side than the other?

The answer to that last question will, largely, determine the course for leadership among the Craft throughout American Freemasonry for the foreseeable future. Obviously, the last man (or men) standing will have the organizational control to decide such matters. It is left to be seen just what it is that will remain of the Craft at that time.

