

21st Century Conversations About Freemasonry: A Candle in the Dark

Co-Authors: John W. Bizzack and Dan Kemble

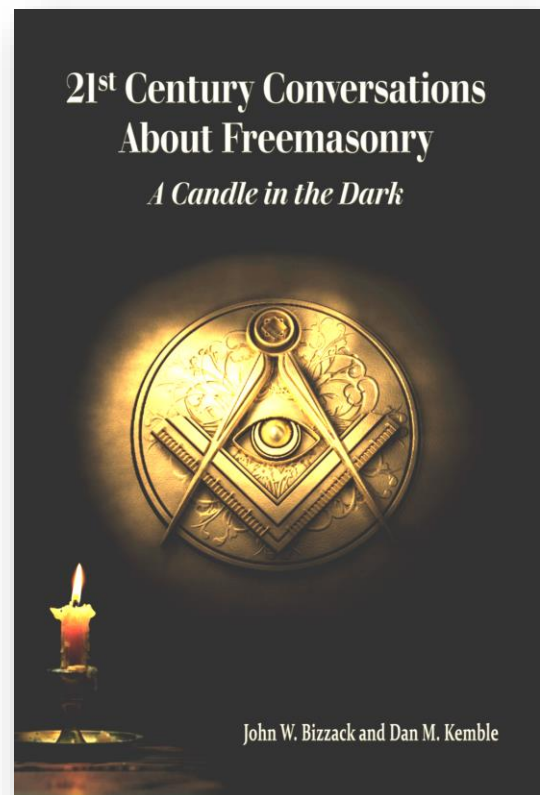
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21st Century Conversations About Freemasonry: A Candle in the Dark is presented as a discussion of active Masons, friends from across the nation, who miss attending their lodge meetings due to the pandemic. The characters in the book, Entered Apprentice to Past Grand Masters, are fictional. By no means, however, is this a book of fiction. The discussions are real. Well researched, authors John W. Bizzack and Dan Kemble, team together to make one very worthwhile book. The numerous “call-outs” are a nice addition. The division between the “conversations” makes it easy to lay the book down and pick it up at a later time and quickly fall back into the theme of the discussion.

This is a powerful Masonic book. It reflects what Masons are saying to themselves, or to a few close friends. “What happened to the great years of Freemasonry and what will Freemasonry become in future?” It demonstrates that it has been many years since we implemented “rational thinking and dialogue” (Enlightenment ideals), in our important decisions for the direction of our lodges and their activities.

When one thinks of the Enlightenment, he must not consider it as a single movement. It appears at different times and in different countries, with varying ideas and different approaches. There is the English Enlightenment, the French, the German, Scottish, Swiss and our own, American Enlightenment. Although the great thinkers of the Enlightenment period, David Hume, John Locke, Frederick the Great, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Thomas Jefferson would present different concerns, each believed that “rational thinking and dialogue” could resolve any and all questions before them. The literal interpretation of the Bible itself was questioned, and yet God, morality and education of man was held in high esteem.



It was a time when Freemasonry and other groups flourished, with men coming together in coffee houses and taverns across Europe and the thirteen American Colonies, to present and discuss meaningful ideas of immediate interest and importance, as well as practicing their private ceremonies. The first Grand Lodge of Freemasonry was born in London in 1717, and, within a few years, Freemasonry came to the American colonies.

Perhaps John Locke was the most influential philosopher of the Enlightenment. Locke's "Two Treatises of Government" (1690) and three natural rights 'life, liberty and property,' would find its way into Thomas Jefferson's thinking in his preparation for the Declaration of Independence.

It is through this premise, "rational thinking and dialogue" that co-authors John W. Bizzack and Dan Kemble have nineteen fellow Masons come to together to discuss Freemasonry. The brothers choose a "virtual" environment as the nineteen fictitious friends from across the country share their thoughts, and experiences in Freemasonry.

The *conversations* flow easily from one brother to another, each adding something of their own observations. Although the characters are fictitious, anyone who travels in Masonic circles will recognize the characters' questioning thoughts, opinions, and concerns, in brothers they know. In fact, through introspection, one may find a piece of himself in at least some of the characters.

As Freemasonry is a product of the Enlightenment, two topics were agreed upon by the nineteen friends to set the stage for discussion. First, the philosophies of the Enlightenment "learning, science and reason," formed the way that Freemasonry was intended to be practiced. Second, the principles of the Enlightenment nourished "the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity," which were instrumental in both American Freemasonry and bringing the American colonies together.

Following the agreement, the first question is addressed. "Does contemporary American culture still value the ideals that characterized the Age of Enlightenment?" Discussion leads to other questions, and later to the thought that there are two types of active lodge members, "Mainstream Masonic Community" and the "Heritage Seekers."

The Mainstream Masonic Community, by far the larger of the two, practices their Freemasonry by doing good deeds for the community, including fund raisers for various charities, or honoring police, firemen or the military, thereby putting themselves favorably before the public eye. Although this can be done by any service group, or other fraternity, it does bring Masons together, building fellowship by working for a common goal. Anyone who flips a pancake, stirs the spaghetti sauce, or throws battered fish into the fryer, can be proud of doing something for a good cause, for "charity for all mankind" is a Masonic ideal. The Mainstream Masonic Community loves their Freemasonry. But is that what Freemasonry is all about?

The Heritage Seekers believe that today, Americans seemingly have drifted far from Enlightenment practice. As evidenced by our political system, we can no longer hold civil discussions. Learning, political science, and reason just do not exist. American Masonry also has drifted. It tends to come up with a "quick fix" approach to problems, just "kick the

can down the road” or does not discuss the situation at all. The Heritage Seekers question how Freemasonry, a product of the Enlightenment, has drifted so far from Enlightenment philosophy. Their hope is to re-connect Freemasonry with the philosophy of the Enlightenment era. The Heritage Seekers also love Masonic fellowship and what they feel Freemasonry could and should be.

Both groups agree that Freemasonry has relaxed its standards in dress code, ritual expectations, and requirements for membership. Is it a good thing or is it bad? Complacency is rampant in a large number of lodges. Protocol and Masonic etiquette barely exist. The lack of Masonic education is definitely a major problem. So why aren't lodges talking about this?

A new member receives his Entered Apprentice Degree and receives handshakes and congratulations. He presents his catechism and receives pats on the back. He is passed to a Fellowcraft, and later presents his catechism, again congratulations. And finally, he is a Master Mason, more pats on the back and then nothing.

All through the degrees he is told he will learn about Freemasonry; however, he finds that, except for the ritual, he must learn on his own. “What came ye here to do?” – 1) to learn, 2) to subdue my passions (a moral compass), and 3) improve myself. So why aren't lodges talking about this?

The American Masonic Order, along with our nation, has over a period of many years slowly walked away from the Enlightenment era, but a candle in the dark is still held by the Heritage Seekers. Through education, Freemasonry will make good men, better men as promised. It is up to the lodge. Today's Masons must decide what their lodge is willing to do, and hopefully those decisions will be well thought out and practiced. Good intentions without thought will not work. Change is not sufficient; it must be wise change. This will only be accomplished through “rational thinking and dialogue.” Why isn't your lodge talking about this?

21st Century Conversations About Freemasonry: A Candle in the Dark is an outstanding book. Space does not allow this brief review to do it justice. There is so much more to the book than shown on these pages. It is a book that needed to be written and should be reviewed by every lodge. Anyone who reads “21st Century Conversations” will be enlightened. The Brothers willing, any lodge could quickly be improved. My hope is the collaboration between these two authors continues.

John W. Bizzack, Ph.D., a William O. Ware Research Fellow, is a noted Masonic researcher and popular lecturer across the nation. He has authored several significant books including ***Island Masonry – The Final Bastion of the Observant Lodge***, which was considered by the Southern California Research Lodge, to be one of the most important Masonic books in the last twenty years. A Past Master of Lexington Lodge No. 1 and the current Vice-Chairman of The Rubicon Masonic Society, John is heavily involved in Masonic Research groups, and feels Masonic education of the lodge and its members is of prime necessity.

Dan Kemble is an avid researcher who has presented numerous Masonic papers on multiple subjects. He is a Past Master of William O. Ware Lodge of Research and currently serves as Recorder for The Rubicon Masonic Society. He also holds membership in Hays Lodge No. 517, Indiana's Dwight Smith Lodge of Research and has served as Chairman of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky's Committee on Masonic Education.