

# MASONS WITHOUT CHESTS

## A REBUTTAL TO THE ASSERTION THAT “ALL FREEMASONRY IS LOCAL”

Dan M. Kemble, Past Master, Papers Night,  
William O. Ware Lodge of Research, June 30, 2021

---

Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill (D-MA) was fond of using the phrase, “All politics is local.” Speaker O’Neill meant that any elected official first needed to determine how a position on any given issue would be received by his constituency before announcing his stance on the matter. While Speaker O’Neill’s maxim may have been perfectly applicable in the political arena, it has no corresponding application in the realm of Freemasonry.

Among Freemasons in recent years, it has become increasingly popular to modify the phrase to, “All Freemasonry is local.” Roger S. VanGorden, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Indiana (2002-2003), is frequently attributed with coining the phrase, and it has been enthusiastically repeated by Masons nationwide, most notably by author and blogger, Worshipful Brother Christopher L. Hodapp. Attributing the best of intentions to M. W. Bro. VanGorden and his cheerleaders, the phrase is meant to convey the thought that Lodges should adopt practices that work best for them. To a certain point, that is sound advice. There is a point however, and it is reached relatively quickly, that what a Lodge determines is a “best practice” for them really is not Freemasonry at all.

The society in which we live, and from which our pool of members is drawn, long ago rejected the concept of absolute standards. In our contemporary culture, morality is a moving target, absolute right and wrong do not exist and ethics are situational. Those attitudes have been brought into Freemasonry, illustrating, again, the extent to which contemporary culture has influenced Freemasonry, rather than Freemasonry having any influence over the society in which it (uneasily) exists.

In current conversations about Freemasonry, it is common to hear the phrases, “my Freemasonry,” and “in my definition of Freemasonry.” Let us be clear: there is no “my Freemasonry,” nor is there “my definition of Freemasonry.” There is only Freemasonry, and it is absolute and immutable.

The individual Freemason does not have license to define Freemasonry for the simple reason that Freemasonry defines itself. It does so throughout the course of its three degrees and their lectures, but never so clearly as it does in the Entered Apprentice Degree. In the opening ceremony of the Entered Apprentice Degree, the question is posed, “What came you here to do?” Phrased in more modern English, the question is, “Why are you (we) here?” The answer is clear: to learn, to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry. In the initiatory portion of the Entered Apprentice Degree, we tell our candidate that the purpose of Freemasonry is to make its members “wiser, better, and, consequently, happier.” Those two statements, whether taken individually or together, clearly define the aim and purpose of Freemasonry, and if what a Lodge determines to be its “best practice” falls outside that definition, then it is simply not Freemasonry.

And that, my Brothers, is exactly where American Freemasonry stands in the year 2021. Long before M. W. Bro. VanGorden and W. B. Hodapp began to articulate the theory that “all Freemasonry is local,” individual Masons and Lodges began to pursue their own definitions of Freemasonry, and to implement their own practices, whether or not such practices really fall within the actual definition of Freemasonry. The result has been a hodgepodge of practices and activities, many (most?) of which have little connection to the practice of Freemasonry. It has led to the condition that exists today, in which most of our members define Freemasonry as a public charity and believe that our purpose is to “do good” in our communities. While charity and good works are laudable, and while they may be attributes of Freemasonry, they are not, by themselves, Freemasonry.

Author and William O. Ware Research Fellow John W. Bizzack has described American Freemasonry as “kaleidoscopic” in its appearance. I respectfully disagree with Bro. Bizzack on this point. Kaleidoscopic patterns are, at least, symmetrical and contain some discernable pattern or order. Contemporary Freemasonry does not possess these characteristics. A more fitting description of contemporary Freemasonry is that of a crazy quilt, asymmetrical, and with no regularity or equilibrium of purpose or practice. Kaleidoscopic patterns can be quite beautiful. In contemporary American Freemasonry, there is very little in the way of beauty.

Ironically, it was another Past Grand Master of Indiana, Dwight L. Smith (1945-46), who gave the best advice for restoring Lodges, and, indeed, all of Freemasonry, to the original aim and purpose of the Fraternity. M. W. Bro. Smith’s advice was simple: Practice Freemasonry. In other words, make sure that the activities of the individual Brother and the Lodge are designed to cause men to learn, to subdue their passions and to improve themselves in Masonry. Such a course would, in Dwight L. Smith’s view, make men “wiser, better, and, consequently, happier.”

Here is M. W. Bro. Smith’s advice broken down in steps:

1. Does this activity cause the individual Mason, or the Lodge, to learn? If so, in what measurable way (or ways) is that true?
2. Does this activity enable the Mason, individually, or the Lodge, corporately, to subdue one’s passions? If so, how does it accomplish that?
3. Does this activity cause the individual Mason, or the Lodge, to be improved through Masonry? If so, how is such improvement made manifest?

Brothers, the truth of the matter is that we practice everything but Freemasonry. Most Lodges interpret learning as being exposed to ritual. Can anyone cite an instance of a Lodge offering any path toward subduing one’s passions? Can we even define that phrase?

What of “improving myself in Masonry?” Ah, you say, there I have you! When I perform acts of charity or community service, I improve myself and thus Masonry has made me a better man.

In fact, that attitude is a distortion of the philosophy of Freemasonry. Freemasonry aims to make the individual man better, and by making men better, the society in which they live is consequently improved. Freemasonry does not teach that the man is improved through good works, but that good works are the natural result of an improved man. Many of our Lodges (and individual Masons) do good works, but have failed to build the foundation of learning and self-discipline upon which such works are to be built.

My Brothers, there is no such thing as “local Freemasonry.” There is only Freemasonry, as it defines itself, and it is absolute and immutable.

This paper began with an example from outside of Freemasonry, and it will end in the same way.

Author and philosopher C. S. Lewis in 1943 published a book titled *The Abolition of Man*. The book was an accurate, albeit scathing, treatment of the modernist and post-modernist approach to ethics and the prevailing attitudes of moral relativity. The first chapter of the book was titled, “Men Without Chests.”

Lewis wrote:

We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.

There is no evidence that C. S. Lewis was a Freemason, but his words apply perfectly to contemporary Freemasonry. When Lewis used the word “chests,” he was referring to the heart of a man. He was essentially saying that our greater society raises men without heart, or conviction, and then expects them to exhibit morality and leadership.

Is that not what our “local” Freemasonry does? After jettisoning the absolute standards of Freemasonry – learning, self-discipline and self-improvement – should we be surprised that our leaders, at every level, have no understanding of the genuine aim and purpose of Freemasonry? Having banished meaningful Masonic education from our Lodges, is it shocking that our Masonic leaders are hostile to any type of thinking that challenges their vision of the status quo? By surrendering the heart and soul of our Masonic purpose, have we not become geldings, unable to be fruitful and multiply?

In the age in which we live there is a tendency to view morality as a sliding scale. During a recent virtual Masonic education program, a Brother offered the thought that the work of another Brother could only be judged accurately by using that other Brother’s square as a measurement. That statement brought immediate nods of assent and supportive comments. The problem with such a sentiment is that it is completely at odds with the principles of Freemasonry. Are not all squares a perfect 90°? Is the measurement of the square something less than an absolute standard?

Just as Lewis warned, by turning our precepts and principles into moving targets, we have effectively removed the very heart of who we are. Continuous decades of diluting our standards while denying our own elevated purpose and birthright has stripped us of our identity as the organization of morally and intellectually elite men we were intended to be, grounded in the knowledge of absolute truth. Standing for nothing more than platitudes, our chests are as hollow as those of the men of whom Lewis wrote.

We live in a society that, at least tacitly, often overtly, devalues men. And yet, we live in a time when men are greatly needed, and in short supply. Freemasonry is an organization for men. It teaches men how to be men. It does not teach women how to be men, nor does it teach men to be women. Further, it does not teach boys to be men. That Freemasonry is exclusively an organization for men is one of the absolute and immutable characteristics of the Fraternity. Altering that characteristic, while perhaps popular in some locales, is to make Freemasonry something other than Freemasonry.

Freemasonry teaches us how to be a man. That’s one of the reasons we are here – to learn. It teaches us how to live as men. That’s another reason we are here – to equip ourselves with the tools of self-discipline. Dwight L. Smith understood this, and that sentiment was at the heart of his advice: Practice Freemasonry.

Note that M. W. Bro. Smith, who was a journalist and understood the power and meaning of words, did not say, “Practice Freemasonry as you understand it.” Nor did he say, “Practice Freemasonry as you define it.” His directive was simple, and it was clear – Practice Freemasonry.

There is no your Freemasonry, nor is there my Freemasonry. There is no Kentucky Freemasonry, nor is there Indiana or Ohio Freemasonry. There is only Freemasonry. It is absolute and it is immutable. It waits for us to practice it.