

# The Patron Saints and the Point within the Circle

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Volume 66 • Nº 4

Fall 2013



# A Classical Vision of Masonic Restoration

## THREE KEY PRINCIPLES OF TRADITIONAL OBSERVANCE

SHAWN EYER'S ADDRESS FROM THE 2013 MASONIC RESTORATION FOUNDATION SYMPOSIUM EXPLAINS HOW SOLID RATIONALE CAN INFORM AND SUPPORT LODGES THAT ARE COMMITTED TO OBSERVANT MASONRY

The continual growth in recent years of the number of lodges that are exploring a closer connection to Masonic tradition and a deeper commitment to ongoing education has brought renewed inspiration to many. While this approach is neither ideal for all lodges nor the answer to all of the fraternity's modern problems, it has proven both resilient and effective. Referred to under various names—most commonly “Traditional Observance” or “Observant Masonry”—and reflecting varying styles, the attempt to raise the standards of lodge meetings while integrating compelling educational content has led to positive outcomes in many areas.

Although it is not generally acknowledged, this more deliberate approach to lodge culture was first articulated in modern times by the English Masonic philosopher Walter Leslie Wilmshurst. In his 1924 book, *The Masonic Initiation*, Wilmshurst describes an “Ideal Lodge,” in which the primary

focus would be on exploring the mysteries of the Craft. The tiled lodge would be a solemn and contemplative space, where the silence would be broken only by ritual working or words of “luminous instruction.” The lodge would be such a profound experience that “no member would willingly be absent.” Candidates would not be run through degrees quickly or *en masse*, but carefully selected and slowly progressed. Such a lodge would not exist to enlarge the egos of its officers and members, but the lodge room would be considered a sacred space, “consecrated to Masonic work.” Masonic travel would be for the purpose of sharing Light, not just a meal. Officers would be selected by ability alone, without progressive lines of promotion. Wilmshurst did not propose this as a universal vision, but hoped that “here and there . . . a small new lodge might be formed” to embody these values.<sup>1</sup>

Seven long decades after Wilmshurst made his suggestions, lodges resembling his “Ideal Lodge” began to form in the United States. At first, these were isolated developments. Later, the Masonic Restoration Foundation was created to provide education and guidance to those seeking to implement a traditional approach.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, *Observing the Craft* by W.: Bro.: Andrew Hammer, M P S,

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presented a vigorous argument in favor of careful Masonic observance, quickly becoming one of the most widely discussed books in the fraternity.<sup>3</sup>

Now, as a result of these and other factors, dozens of lodges—both new and established—are aspiring to follow a model of Masonic observance that is traditional and restorative. Freemasons who are attracted to the idea of Traditional Observance frequently ask how to replicate the benefits in existing or newly-forming lodges. Detailed checklists of “best practices” have been produced and distributed—the finest of which is the MRF’s version simply titled “The Traditions.”<sup>4</sup>

While such lists can be highly instructive [see page 156 for an example], in practice there are potential downsides. First, when read carelessly, they can create an impression that Masonic observance is comparable to the adoption of a lodge “program,” whereas it properly reflects more fundamental cultural and attitudinal changes. Second, by being presented in a checklist format, common expressions of Masonic restoration can be viewed as arbitrary, diminishing their perceived legitimacy, or leading to an *à la carte* approach that may fail to provide desired impact and stability. And finally, whenever a set of criteria is perceived as essentially arbitrary, it may seem that *any* desired practice could be appended to the list and be considered legitimately traditional. This can lead to innovation rather than restoration, and a general loss of integrity and credibility.

These potential pitfalls are not inherent in the various best practices lists, but more the result of how they are read or misread. The purpose of this article is to offer suggestions that can strengthen the implementation of Traditional Observance and similar models by means of a dynamic underlying rationale, based on a decade of experience building and participating in such lodges.

## THE PRESTONIAN ROOTS OF A TRADITIONAL RATIONALE

Serving for many years as the Master of a Traditional Observance lodge—California’s first of several—led me to realize the value of developing such a rationale. As an historian, I was particularly interested in how the practices we were enjoying had roots in our Masonic past. As a lodge Master, I was occasionally faced with a question of whether we ought to do or not do a certain thing.

Such questions occur to many who serve in the East, and where there is an overall commitment to Masonic tradition in place, those decisions ought to be consistent and coherent. What approaches are the right fit for a traditional lodge, and why? What practices are best to adopt, if we want to observe the Craft in a manner consistent with the intentions of the framers of our ritual work? And what if a practice is popular, but doesn’t really belong?

Questions like these require a working rationale, a reasoned set of principles to empower us to evaluate new ideas as they appear. Since the ritual and lectures of most American lodges are versions of the Preston-Webb work, a traditionalist is naturally led to study the ideas of W.: Bro.: William Preston (1742–1818). He was, after all, the great editor of the Masonic rituals that we use today, crafting the expression of Freemasonry that our rites represent.<sup>5</sup> Preston’s Masonry was rooted in a love of tradition. Young Preston sought to collect all of the obscure teachings of Masonry and unify them into a comprehensive system of instruction.<sup>6</sup>

Wherever instruction could be acquired, thither he directed his course, and with the advantage of a retentive memory, and an extensive Masonic connection, added to a diligent literary research, he so far succeeded in his purpose as to become a competent Master of the subject. [...I]n the

course of a literary correspondence with the Fraternity at home and abroad, [he] made such progress in the mysteries of the Art, as to become very useful in the connexions he had formed. He has frequently been heard to say, that in the ardour of his enquiries he has explored the abodes of poverty and wretchedness, and, where it might have been least expected, acquired very valuable scraps of information.<sup>7</sup>

The Prestonian system, which was formalized in the late 1770s, preserves many Masonic oral traditions of earlier times. Although “new” in its comprehensive form, it consisted mostly of the venerable traditions of the past. Preston loved Masonic tradition, and through his concerted preservationist efforts, he was trying to ensure that none of it was lost by accident during a period when many concepts in Masonry were transmitted by iconographic and oral tradition alone.

The writings of Preston and his contemporaries provide an invaluable window into the classical period of Masonic development from the 1760s to early 1800s. In those days, the Craft did a great deal to instill its rationale and culture. We can hear the voices of our Masonic forebears through their books, orations and songs, as well as the three degrees, the installation ceremony of the Master and the ceremony for lodge consecration.

While some aspects of Traditional Observance were partly derived from European sources,<sup>7</sup> careful research revealed that most of the supposedly European practices in fact had roots or parallel expressions in the English-language Freemasonry from which we were truly descended. Accordingly, we revised certain aspects to make our experience more consistent with our real Masonic heritage. By aligning our approach more closely with the classical Freemasonry expressed by Preston and

his contemporaries, we found that things came into greater focus. We were not borrowing from distant contemporaries, but getting back to our own roots—roots that turned out to be very much alive and profoundly relevant to the present. Most importantly, by squaring our work with the ideas expressed by the framers of the Preston-Webb ritual that we were actually practicing—rather than Continental sources whose rituals, though regular, were usually of another rite—we were able to form a refined, logical, and robust rationale.

Closely following all regulations and requirements of the Grand Lodge under which it is chartered, a Traditional Observance lodge that is committed to this rationale adopts time-tested cultural practices which support the initiatic experience of the candidates and educational opportunities for all members, preferring activities that are rooted in Masonic tradition and rejecting those that lack a significant basis in (or have an incompatibility with) the traditions emanating from regular speculative Freemasonry as it emerged in the eighteenth century, with a specific emphasis on the classical period of William Preston and his contemporaries, during which our rituals became fully developed.

### THREE KEY PRINCIPLES

The guiding principles of a restorational lodge approach provide some practical criteria to reinforce a lodge culture that embraces the best traditions of the Craft. Each idea for lodge activity, identity or culture may be tested continually against these three essential principles: speculative purpose, initiatic emphasis and traditional basis.

#### 1. SPECULATIVE PURPOSE

The principle of *speculative purpose* is considered first because Freemasonry defines itself as a speculative art. Our fraternity is denominated *Specula-*

*tive Freemasonry*. Although the word “speculative” is often used in a cynical sense today, in the eighteenth century it usually had lofty connotations. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the primary meaning is “Of the nature of, based upon, characterized by, speculation or theory in contrast to practical or positive knowledge,” and the word is used “of knowledge,” “of special sciences, or parts of these.” When used of persons, “Given to speculation; inclined to theorize or indulge in conjectural reasoning,” and “similarly of the soul, mind, etc.,” “given to pry or search into something,” “of life, etc.: spent in, devoted to, speculation.”<sup>8</sup>

The Craft calls us to a particular speculation that involves a unique and complex body of ritual, symbol and tradition. Centuries ago, William Preston famously defined Freemasonry as “a regular system of morality conceived in a strain of interesting allegory, which readily unfolds its beauties to the candid and industrious enquirer.”<sup>9</sup> So our Craft is a symbolic and speculative art that requires effort to understand. Now, consider the definition of a *lodge* in Preston’s original working:

Q: What is a lodge of Masons?

A: Any number of Masons assembled for the express purpose of explaining Masonry.<sup>10</sup>

A lodge that is committed to Masonic Tradition accepts our founders’ insistence that Freemasonry is essentially and inalienably speculative in nature, and—understanding that its mysteries may only be unfolded through sustained inquiry—the lodge embraces the classical idea that its “express purpose” is to explore and explain the meaning of Speculative Masonry. More than just noting this as a point of historical trivia, an observant Lodge seeks to embody the classical vision of what a Masonic communication ideally should be.

While many believe that the early Lodges were realms of carefree refreshment, many early brethren of those Lodges took pains to explain how highly the quest for Wisdom—not general knowledge, but hidden Wisdom that takes time to grasp—was to be emphasized.

You are to cultivate your minds and store them with useful true knowledge: How beautiful are the ways of wisdom, and what pleasure attends the pursuit! You ought to search into nature, the advantage you will reap will soon recompense the pain; knowledge must be attained by degrees, nor is it every where to be found: Wisdom seeks the secret shade, the lonely [*not forlorn but set apart from the rest of the world—Ed.*] cell designed for contemplation, there enthroned she sits, and there delivers her oracles; seek her, pursue the real bliss, tho’ the passage be difficult, the further we trace it, the easier it will become.<sup>11</sup>

Those words were spoken in 1741 in Scotland by W.: Bro.: Charles Leslie, and because they were transmitted by William Preston, they are still found in some official Craft workings. For his part, Preston offered this brilliant description of the profound intellectual and sacred nature of our labors, which he connects to an overall purpose that he terms “the grand design”:

Masonry includes within its circle almost every branch of polite literature. Under the sanction of its mysteries, is comprehended a regular system of science [*in the older sense of a discipline comprising systematic knowledge—Ed.*]. Many of its illustrations—to the confined genius—may appear dull, trifling, and unimportant; but to the man of more enlarged faculties, they will appear in the highest degree useful and interesting. To please

the accomplished scholar and the ingenious artist, Masonry is wisely planned; and in the investigation of its latent doctrines, the sage philosopher will experience delight and satisfaction.

To exhaust the various subjects of which Masonry treats, would transcend the powers of the brightest genius; still, however, nearer approaches to perfection may be made, and the man of wisdom will never check the progress of his abilities, though the task he attempts may seem arduous and insurmountable. Perseverance and application will remove each difficulty as it occurs; every step he advances, new pleasures will open to his view, and instruction of the noblest kind will attend his curious researches. In the diligent pursuit of knowledge great discoveries are made, and the intellectual faculties are employed in the grand design of promoting the glory of God, and the good of man.<sup>12</sup>

An observant Lodge knows that the symbols of the Craft are not “dull, trifling, and unimportant,” but that the “sage philosopher” will continually investigate them in pursuit of latent teachings, so extensive that even the “brightest genius” could never exhaust his discovery of them. Preston held the notion that the essential core of Masonry is “wisely planned,” that is, a deliberate and cohesive system which is more than the sum of its parts.

One does not need to agree with Preston, but it is no small matter to dismiss outright the considered opinion of the architect of our rituals, the very die in which our labors are cast.

Brethren of lodges that observe this tradition generally seek to foster a sheltered environment of peaceful contemplation, this “secret shade,” to celebrate speculative Freemasonry, to plumb its mysteries, to experience fine ritual and to continually grow together as men and as Masons. Yes, a lodge of this kind may do far more than contemplate the mysteries of Masonry, but it can never neglect meaningful speculation without running counter to its intended purposes.

Moreover, these ancient purposes are profoundly consistent with the stated desires of many of today’s incoming Masons. Applying the criterion of speculative purpose means allowing this vital commitment to guide the actual activities of the lodge. Activities that support and enhance the speculative endeavors of the brethren are given higher priority, while activities and programs that detract too much from the philosophical aspect of the lodge are carefully reconsidered. It is all about finding the right balance, but a lodge that observes Masonic tradition will never make the mistake of putting education and speculation last, nor the even more disappointing choice of excluding them altogether.

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“These, I know, are lofty ideals, largely impracticable at the moment, and I have no wish to alienate any brother’s interest in the Craft by imposing a standard beyond his present capacity and desire. Yet brethren to whom the ideal appeals, and to whom it is both desirable and practicable, might unite in meeting with the intention of conforming to it, and here and there even a small new lodge might be formed for that special purpose, leaving other lodges to work on their accustomed lines.”

—Walter Leslie Wilmshurst  
*The Masonic Initiation*, 1924

## 2. INITIATIC EMPHASIS

The first principle concerned the nature of the Craft itself and the purpose of the lodge. The next principle is *initiatic emphasis*, and here the focus is on the lodge’s duty to each initiate. Initiatic emphasis means that the lodge is “about” the candidates, and that the Masonic development of the candidates and other members is the lodge’s primary and never-ending concern. Initiation is seen as a lifelong activity, just as we typically think of the Perfect Ashlar as a state toward which a Freemason strives all of his life.

Such a lodge accepts several serious responsibilities. First, it is committed to initiating appropriate candidates, strictly obeying the charge given to every Entered Apprentice. Next, the officers and brethren of the lodge are devoted to providing the highest quality and most fulfilling initiation ceremonies possible, emphasizing the experience of the ritual with solemnity and respect both to the candidate and to the Craft’s established usages.

It is very clear that the early Freemasons, even before the first Grand Lodge was founded, took the initiation ceremonies seriously. Although some have a temptation to imagine that the early initiations were boisterous or even comical, like a twentieth-century frat hazing, the evidence does not support this. English antiquarian Sir William Dugdale (1605–1686) related that the “manner of their Adoption is very formall, and with an Oath

of Secrecy.”<sup>13</sup> The 1670 *Lawes and Statutes* of the lodge at Aberdeen strictly forbade talking and even whispering during their labors, assuring a formal atmosphere in meetings.<sup>14</sup>

This attitude toward lodge communications is not only found in the earliest records, but is emphasized in the *Constitutions* of the premier Grand Lodge, founded in 1717, which stated that interruption, “separate Conversation,” and disrespectful behavior was prohibited “while the *Lodge* is engaged in what is serious and solemn.”<sup>15</sup>

Since this regulation was born in the early days of the Craft and was carried over into the official regulations of the grand lodge era, lodges that observe Masonic tradition consider it the best policy to follow today. The purpose is not to eliminate fellowship, for there is extensive opportunity for conversation and camaraderie at the feast held after the meeting. The stated intention was to protect the solemnity of the tiled lodge and by extension the work that takes place in that lodge: the experience of the initiates and the contemplative endeavors of the brethren foremost, and the business of running the lodge, as well. Setting the right atmosphere is crucial because when lodge behavior is coarse, casual and disrespectful, some Masons begin to believe that the Craft was actually intended to be so. Instead, an observant lodge uses the solemnity of the lodge to remind all who are present that every lodge represents the Temple

of Solomon, creating an initiatic atmosphere that lends focus to the ritual work and supports more engaged contemplation of the rites, symbols, and lectures of Craft Freemasonry.

Considered in tandem with the cordial and fraternal atmosphere of the festive board—another restoration commonly emphasized by traditional lodges—it becomes clear that observance of Masonic tradition is not joyless and austere, but *balanced and purposeful*. We are serious in the tiled lodge, jovial at the festive board. These two halves combine to create lodge nights that are profound *and* celebratory, philosophical *and* social.

Another desirable expression of the principle of initiatic emphasis is when all members of the lodge assist one another in making what our tradition refers to as a “daily advancement in Masonic knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> The duty of every Mason to make daily progress is explicit in some workings, implicit in others. This is not simply progress toward being a better person—although that is certainly part of it—but progress in understanding the symbolism. In a beautiful rendition of this teaching by William Preston, the Apprentice is asked what he discovered in the lodge’s inner chamber. The answer? “The Master and his brethren all zealously

employed in investigating the rise, progress, and effect of hieroglyphic learning.” The Apprentice then observes that “it was a duty incumbent on every Mason to make daily progress in the art; as no end could be more noble than the pursuit of virtue and benevolence: no motive more alluring than the practice of honour and justice, or any instruction more beneficial than the accurate delineation of symbols which tend to improve and embellish the mind.”<sup>17</sup>

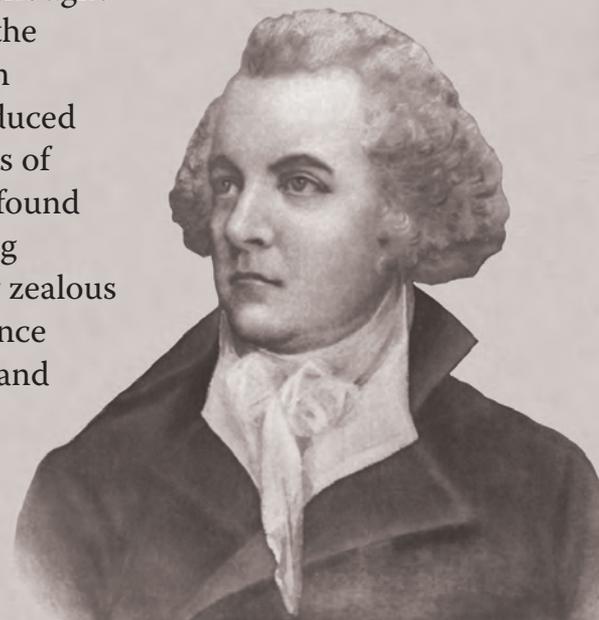
As many intuit, the initiatic process does not end when the ceremonies are over. We come to understand the Craft more clearly with time. This is an experience nearly every Freemason knows: suddenly a lesson makes better sense. In an instant, a symbol’s meaning applies more directly to our lives. Preston hints at this experience when he says that “new pleasures will open to his view.” This teaching is made more explicit in the 1772 first edition of *Illustrations*:

[...H]e who is possess of this true science, and acts agreeably to the character he bears, has within himself the spring and support of every social virtue; a subject of contemplation that enlarges the mind, and expands every mental power; a

“When I first had the honor to be elected master of a Lodge, I thought it my duty to inform myself more fully of the general rules of the society; in order that I might be able to explain to the brethren under my direction, their utility and importance.... [This] induced me to enquire, with a more minute attention, into the contents of our various lectures. The rude and imperfect state in which I found them... rather discouraged me in the first attempt; persevering however in my design, I continued my pursuit; and with a few zealous friends to the cause, who had carefully preserved what ignorance and the degeneracy of a corrupt age rejected as unintelligible and absurd, I diligently sought for the ancient and venerable landmarks of the society.”

—William Preston

*Illustrations of Masonry*, 1772



subject that is inexhaustible, ever new, and always interesting.<sup>18</sup>

The esoteric teachings of the Craft that are latent in its symbols are extensive and require a lifetime of study. As noted earlier by Preston, exhausting the content of Freemasonry “would transcend the powers of the brightest genius.” Therefore, initiatic emphasis is expressed in a traditional lodge not through an “education program” as such, but by means of a continual focus on Masonic formation as an essential aspect of the lodge’s life and identity. *This commitment guides the policy of an observant lodge.* Any aspect of lodge practice that could have a negative impact on the initiatic process of the members is reconsidered.

### 3. TRADITIONAL BASIS

The last core principle is traditional basis. This is essential for Masonic restoration. Simply put, this principle holds that each aspect of a traditional lodge’s culture ought to have some real basis in Masonic tradition.

Critics sometimes voice the straw man objection that restoration-minded lodges are claiming to embody “the one true Masonic tradition.” Apart from being a preposterous misrepresentation of what traditionally-minded lodges actually seek to restore, such arguments reveal a hostility toward the very *idea* of Masonic tradition. But Masonic tradition does exist, as we learn repeatedly from our degrees. In fact, our rituals are part of that

tradition, and emerged from it.

This is the most misunderstood (and therefore fragile) aspect of Masonic restoration work. It is challenging because, as modern people, we have a distrustful relationship with tradition. The timeless is suspect. Expressing respect for tradition is widely viewed as simplistic, and expressing disdain for tradition is seen as sophisticated and rational. Yet, as Freemasons, we are obligated to preserve our traditions, and in a Traditional Observance lodge that duty is especially emphasized.

Our word *tradition* is direct from the Latin *traditio*, which literally refers to something passing from *one hand to another*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines tradition in distinctly cultural terms, as “a statement, belief, or practice transmitted (esp. orally) from generation to generation,” and as a “long established and generally accepted custom or method of procedure, having almost the force of a law; an immemorial usage . . .”<sup>19</sup> And the adjective *traditional* means: “Belonging to, consisting in, or of the nature of tradition; handed down by or derived from tradition.”<sup>20</sup>

Note that “traditional” does not refer to “what used to be done,” nor “what has been done for a long time.” It refers to ideas and activities that were *intentionally* handed down, preserved from one generation to the next. This means we can distinguish tradition from chronology and pedigree on the one hand, and from customs that are not intended to reach the formal level of tradition on the other. Tradition is something that

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is deliberately passed down as a part of the body of Masonry. Precedent is more superficial and is merely the set of all things that have happened in the past. Confusing the two muddles the question and makes restoration efforts needlessly difficult.

A tradition may become forgotten, but tradition interrupted is not the same as tradition destroyed. Traditions may be legitimately reclaimed and restored by carefully researching them and then returning them to practice. That process of reclamation is precisely what an authentic Traditional Observance lodge is trying to support. Of course, the quality of such research is of paramount importance in obtaining reliable results.

The cultural traditions of Freemasonry take many forms, all of which are worthy of study. In light of limited space, we will discuss two major aspects that are crucial to the initiatic work of a lodge: the mythopoetic tradition and the practical tradition.

The *mythopoetic tradition* can be thought of as the soul of Freemasonry. The classical lodge existed within the context of a traditional and “immemorial” body of symbols and legends. When our ritual states, “Masonic tradition informs us,” it is invoking this mythic dimension of tradition, which scholars say preceded and gave birth to our rituals and lectures. It is told largely in the form of a history, and indeed scholars typically call it the Traditional History. But it is *not* a modern-style historiographical narrative; it is a story that conveys a set of ideas and values, many of them complex and difficult to grasp.

The Traditional History was cast and recast many times in the Old Charges and later writings. In its classical form, it begins with the creation of the universe and the first man, and then tells the story of the descent of Masonic knowledge through the generations. It reaches several cre-

scendos, including the erection of the pillars of Seth, the Noachide covenant, the Tower of Babel, the building of the Tabernacle, and of course the construction of the Temple of Solomon. It was at this point especially that the mythopoetic tradition and initiatic practice powerfully intersected, with the “re-founding” of the Craft based on substituted secrets and a new quest of the lost word.

Despite this intersection, recent Masonic experience is severed from the Traditional History, as though it were totally irrelevant. The mythic tradition has been labeled erroneous, therefore false, and consequently discarded. Interestingly, the early Freemasons recognized that their traditions were imperfect, but they treasured them all the more for it. The premier Grand Lodge’s anonymous 1730 response to an early exposure noted that the Masonic tradition “may have some redundancies or defects.” Tellingly, it notes that Masonry had “long run in muddy Streams, and as it were, under Ground.” It asserts that the “essential Pillars of the Building” may be found, even if amid rubbish and overgrown.<sup>21</sup> This is a very sophisticated viewpoint to take, and it shows that the Masons of that time were not necessarily as credulous as some imagine them, but were in some degree capable of critically engaging their mythic traditions to discover meaning and purpose.

This is not how most of us treat the “time immemorial” traditions today. A minimalist way of thinking has miscategorized the legends as though they were “bad research” and eschewed them—despite the fact that the same logic, if fully applied, would discard our very rituals as well. In practice, the Traditional History has disappeared from the minds of today’s initiates.<sup>22</sup> Such a disavowal of tradition is counterproductive for a lodge that seeks to restore the initiatic wisdom and intellectual dimension of the classical period



## Traditional Observance *in* Practice

*The main article presents three principles which traditionally-minded lodges might use to evaluate proposals. What do Traditional Observance lodges commonly do? Each is different, but this is a list of some of the most common approaches and practices. Taken together, they create a pleasant atmosphere and an edifying lodge experience.*

A general preference for traditional forms and practices, inspired by a genuine desire to understand what Masonry meant to the early brethren who crafted our work, and to enjoy a classic mode of fraternalism.

A smaller lodge size, in imitation of early lodges, supporting a close camaraderie and true friendship in which no brother is a stranger.

An increased focus on symbolic instruction and a firm devotion to meaningful Masonic education as a main aspect of the lodge, with regular orations on Freemasonry and kindred subjects given during tiled communications. Discussions generally deferred to the festive board to discourage becoming too casual within the tiled lodge itself.

Active respect for classic Masonic traditions, ancient usages, established customs, and the ancient landmarks; a deep attachment to regularity and what our rituals call “the original plan of Masonry.”

An emphasis on the initiatic experience, with great care being taken to perform excellent ritual and to provide extensive Masonic education to candidates and all other members of the lodge.

A general inclination toward quality over quantity in the material decisions of the lodge, such as regalia; a dress code—often formal—is common, in imitation of the finest old lodges.

The selection of officers based upon merit alone, in accordance with the original 1723 tradition that “All Preferment among Masons is grounded upon real Worth and personal Merit only . . . no Master or Warden is chosen by Seniority, but for his Merit.” Masters are selected based on their ability to provide Masonic instruction, and typically serve for several years.

The careful cultivation of a mature, solemn and contemplative atmosphere within the lodge (using real or artificial candles in lieu of bright overhead lighting, traditional music instead of whimsical melodies, respect for the Master vs. speaking out of turn, etc.)

The promotion of a fraternal atmosphere of warm conviviality through the restoration of the festive board or harmony; quality food and drink are shared over toasts, traditional songs and brotherly conversation on Masonic topics; observance of the traditional feast days of St. John the Baptist (June 24) and of St. John the Evangelist (Dec. 27).

in Masonry. It is, of course, not that members of Traditional Observance lodges naively “believe” the immemorial legends are true, but that they are *willing to entertain what they might really mean*, and to give consideration to the degree work in the *informed context of the old traditions*. After all, our rituals and lectures are really dramatic and narrative expressions of this treasury of tradition.

If the mythopoetic tradition is the soul of our Craft, the *practical tradition* is the body. It involves our labors and how we approach them. This term encompasses all of the traditional practices and ancient usages of Freemasonry—that is to say, not *everything* that ever happened in a Masonic lodge, but those practices that were *intentionally transmitted for the express purpose of sustaining a Masonic culture that would be consistent with the values, teachings, and purposes of the Craft*.

Early Masonic literature is replete with discussions on this subject, emphasizing that Freemasons are to be civil in conversation, gentlemanly in demeanor. The surviving orations and regulations teach that brethren were to be silent and contemplative during the lodge’s serious labors, and convivial and temperate during the hours of refreshment. They were to carefully consider each prospective candidate, disregarding worldly status and basing acceptance only upon his faith, character, and desire for the mysteries. All of this was to protect the lodge as a place in which Masonic tradition would be regularly passed down, and within which the brethren could apply themselves to learning.

Freemasons of the classical period and earlier were encouraged to study the arts and sciences—especially architecture and geometry—as well as ethics and speculative philosophy. These studies have only begun to be taken up again by Freemasons in our own time, but there is great and grow-

ing interest in it among the recently initiated. Of course, in certain lodges, the idea of restoring this educational dimension presents an unfortunate culture clash, and one in which newer brethren are often marginalized. Other lodges, however, seek to reclaim the old Masonic practice of offering orations on such topics, for subsequent discussion among the brethren at the festive board.

In a Traditional Observance lodge, the mythic and ritualistic dimensions fit hand-and-glove, so to speak, with the social and intellectual aspects of Masonry. This is easy to accomplish when the activities of the lodge are guided and informed by the *practical tradition*. The lodge prefers activities that were an intentional part of the design of the Craft, not just for tradition’s sake, but to restore to a certain extent the kind of Masonic environment that was recommended so strongly by the framers of our degrees. This is done out of a love for the Craft and a desire to create a lodge experience which accords with the expectations many of our newest initiates are expressing.

How does one apply the principle of *traditional basis* in terms of lodge practice? Simply by considering each activity and looking at it from the perspective of tradition and the overall desire of the lodge for restoration.

When it comes to the festive board, the application of this principle is relatively straightforward. Our eighteenth-century brethren left us a tremendous amount of information about their festive boards. We can read their toasts, their songs, and even their advice on how to hold wholesome and engaging Masonic conversation. It is not difficult to put together a special dinner just for Masons to participate in these venerable traditions.

There is also a significant amount of documentation pertaining to Masonic instruction, but in this case the approaches were not as standardized.

That is because it was the prerogative of each lodge Master to diffuse instruction. This was done partly by way of orations, some of which were only for certain occasions, while others were given repeatedly. In the 1770s, lectures of this latter type began to be published (in part) and soon would coalesce into relatively standard degree lectures. In other words, the “official” degree lectures of today began simply as (mostly unknown) lodge Masters of the eighteenth century addressing their brethren and sharing what they understood about the traditions of Masonry, the symbolism of the various degrees, and the pursuit of the many virtues taught by the Craft. And, long after many degree lectures became standardized, orations and allocutions of this type continued to be given. While they never died out, they did become rare enough in most American lodges that Masonic instruction can be seen as a superfluous activity.

Still, the Ceremony of Installation teaches that every Master-elect must be well-skilled in the teachings and ancient usages of Masonry, and that it his special duty to diffuse light and instruction to the Craft. That represents a traditional basis for the practical restoration of this vital Masonic activity. In most Traditional Observance lodges, fresh papers on Masonic topics are presented at the monthly meeting. These are prepared by the Master and by other brethren he selects, and presented formally in the lodge itself. Then, at the festive board after the meeting, the brethren join in the discussion over good food and drink. This simple, centuries-old practice of diffusing Masonic Light within the tiled lodge and engaging in brotherly conversation during the feast afterward is probably the most exciting aspect of the growing observance of old Craft traditions. This exchange of ideas, this *Masonic communication*, strengthens fraternal ties and supplies an “in the

moment” counterpart to the “timeless” initiatic tradition embodied by the degrees.

While the initial explanation has been fairly complex, the application of the principle of *traditional basis* is relatively straightforward.

For the mythical elements, it comes down to the lodge’s overall attitude and each participant’s demeanor toward the subject of Masonry. A traditionalist is an idealist, an intellectual optimist. For him, the venerable legends of the distant Masonic past are inherently worthy of respect and consideration. For him, the symbols of Masonry are profound and beautiful. By him, the landmarks and teachings of the Craft are wholeheartedly embraced and pursued. Any lodge composed of such brethren will, in turn, affirm the best qualities of our Masonic heritage and espouse a classical approach to the practice of Freemasonry.

For the practical aspects, a great deal of it comes down to atmosphere. What is a lodge meeting like? Solemn, or casual? Consistently respectful, or often disunited? Are the ceremonies serious, or have they taken on some aspect of “horsing around?” There is a traditional answer to all of these. The lodge is intended to be solemn and respectful. The ceremonies are intended to be serious and profound, without horseplay or levity. The demeanor of Masons toward one another is to be brotherly and generous, rather than cynical or suspicious. A supermajority of Masonic regulations, writings, and orations spanning the centuries affirms the classical perspective on these matters of lodge atmosphere.

### **MORE LIGHT**

The purpose of all of these principles is to deliver a higher level of enjoyment and edification to the brethren who seek this kind of Masonic experience. Certainly, not every lodge would prefer to

work along traditional lines. But for those who wish to, this three-point rationale is offered as a reliable way to resolve pressing questions. Using these principles, a lodge that wishes to adopt an observant approach becomes empowered to dynamically evaluate suggested ideas and practices. We can move forward in confidence when we can articulate the reasoning behind our values.

The first step is always asking *why* we do what we do. Being able to answer that question meaningfully can minimize problems and prevent missteps, eliminate superfluous distractions, and protect the lodge from short-term thinking. A strong rationale helps confirm and sustain the best ideas. And in the case of aspects that are not a good fit, it allows for a better answer than “It’s not on our list of best practices.” This is about knowing who we are, what we are doing, and why we are doing it. This is a positive approach that is not easily diverted by arbitrary whim nor subordinated by charismatic personality. Classical in perspective, it is firmly grounded in enduring principles.

With a conscious vision that is established on the principles of contemplative purpose, initiatic emphasis and traditional basis, we can succeed in restoring a dignified and contemplative Masonic atmosphere—always remembering our goal of providing the finest possible experience for those we are initiating. These principles directly and reliably foster lodge experiences that will genuinely meet the needs and fulfill the expectations of those worthy men who present themselves at the West Gate. Without compromise on our part and disappointment on theirs, we can conduct the labors of our Ancient Craft in excellence and integrity. In doing so, we will all enjoy the profound results of that work together: that which we most desire, a perpetual increase in Masonic Light, to the glory of the Great Architect of the Universe.

## NOTES

- 1 W.L. Wilmshurst, *The Masonic Initiation* (San Francisco: Plumbstone, 2007), 29–34.
- 2 Pierre G. Normand, Jr., “A Return to the Traditional Lodge Model.” *Heredom* 19(2011): 207–227.
- 3 Andrew Hammer, *Observing the Craft* (Alexandria, VA: Mindhive Books, 2010).
- 4 Normand, “Traditional Lodge Model,” 224–26.
- 5 See Robert G. Davis, *The Mason’s Words* (Guthrie, OK: Building Stone Publishing, 2013).
- 6 William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry*. (London: J. Williams, 1772), xix–xxiii.
- 7 Stephen Jones, “Memoirs of Mr. William Preston.” *The Freemasons’ Magazine* 4(1795), 6
- 8 Normand, “Traditional Lodge Model,” 218.
- 9 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “speculative.”
- 10 Colin Dyer, *William Preston and His Work* (Shepperton, UK: Lewis Masonic, 1987), 172.
- 11 Dyer, *William Preston*, 172.
- 12 *The Free Masons Pocket-Companion* (Edinburgh: Auld & Smellie, 1765), 162; for Preston’s adaptation, see *Illustrations* (1772), 86–87, and subsequent editions.
- 13 William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: J. Wilkie, 1775), 75–76.
- 14 David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Century, 1590–1710* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 222. Stevenson reasonably infers that the source may be Bro.: Elias Ashmole (223).
- 15 Shawn Eyer, “Silence and Solemnity in Craft Freemasonry.” *Ahiman: A Review of Masonic Culture & Tradition* 1(2009), 104f.
- 16 James Anderson, *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (London: W. Hunter, 1723), 53.
- 17 The Masonic teaching of the daily advance dates at least to the 1720s, as it appears in a 1730 exposure, as well as the premier Grand Lodge’s response to that exposure. See S. Pritchard, *Masonry Dissected* (London: J. Wilford, 1730), 9; *A Defence of Masonry* (1730) in Anderson, *Constitutions* (1738), 217.
- 18 Dyer, *William Preston*, 189.
- 19 William Preston, *Illustrations of Masonry* (London: J. Williams, 1772), 186–87.
- 20 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “tradition (n.).”
- 21 *OED*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “traditional (adj.),” emphasis added.
- 22 Anderson, *Constitutions* (1738), 219.
- 23 See S. Eyer, “Masonic Historiography and Cultural Analysis,” *Philalethes* 66(2013), 94–106.