

Whither Are We Traveling?

Chapter Six – Subdivided We Stand

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Subdivided We Stand

Question 5: What can we expect when we have permitted Freemasonry to become subdivided into a score of organizations?

Back in my newspaper days I used to get a great deal of unwholesome amusement out of the power struggle between four church congregations in a town of less than four hundred inhabitants. All four churches were of the same denominational family and bore the same name. Each claimed to be the Real Thing. The membership of each was convinced that all others were heretics, and, as such, were condemned to eternal damnation.

What must a newly raised Master Mason who takes his Freemasonry seriously think of our subdivisions? Are they just as baffling to him as the four churches of the same name in a town of 400 were to me? Sometimes I wonder.

What must he think when he discovers that no less than 70 organizations have attached themselves to our ancient brotherhood – and that the end is not in sight? What is the reaction of the man who came into Freemasonry of his own free will and accord when he finds that a subdivision can solicit him almost as soon as he leaves the altar in the Entered Apprentice degree? And how does he feel when his beloved Lodge is referred to as the “Blue Lodge” with a rather patronizing air, and when the so-called “Blue Lodge Mason” is looked upon as something inferior, as if his neck and ears were not quite clean?

If we are interested in exploring possible causes for a decline in membership and for a slackening of interest and attendance, we had better look to our subdivisions. Of course, he who introduces the subject invites bitter criticism, but I stand firm on my conviction that in the United States we are spreading ourselves so thin that the basic unit – the Ancient Craft Lodge – is the loser. We may not end up by killing the goose that laid the golden egg, but certainly we are bleeding her white.

Yes, I am a member of many of the subdivisions. All of them have contributed much to my understanding and appreciation of Freemasonry, and I do not believe any of them can question my loyalty. *“It is not that I love Caesar less, but that I love Rome more.”*

And I am not the only one who is concerned, -- not by a great deal. Authorities by the dozen might be quoted. As long ago as 1924 the eminent English Masonic student, Sir Alfred Robins, was writing that “this sponge-like growth is spreading in American Masonry, and is threatening certain of the best interests of the Craft.” One of the most forthright and statesmanlike pronouncements comes from Brother Noah J. Frey, 33°, Scottish Rite Deputy for Wisconsin, in an address before the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin in 1961. “Sometimes,” he said, “I wish that Masonry were not as divisive as it is, because we are all Blue Lodge members, and I fear that we lose sight of that fact and divide ourselves into smaller groups and thereby increase our inefficiency.”

And certainly Dr. Thomas S. Roy, Past Grand Master of Massachusetts, can not be accused of hostility to any Masonic body, yet in an eloquent address before the

Conference of Grand Secretaries in North America in February, 1962, he was forced to declare:

“If we permit the proliferation of Masonry into rites, and the 57 varieties of bodies whose membership is dependant upon ours, let us face the fact that the attendance that goes to them belongs to us. There is a sense in which it can be said that their success is our failure. I am not passing judgment on any of them. I am a good member in some of them, and have done my share of work in them. But they all must face the fact that they must pour some of their strength back into the Symbolic Lodge. For any weakness we develop must sooner or later communicate itself to them.”

It is not basic loyalty that is at stake; it is not unity of purpose that we lack. Nor can we gloss over our shortcomings with talk about money, and benevolences, and good works. *These are not the issues.* We have never faced the real issues, which are:

One: The weakening of the basic unit of Freemasonry by too great an emphasis on our subdivisions, and,

Two: The unsound premise that the child is more important than the parent.

Let's stand before the mirror and take an honest look at ourselves.

1. **Masonic bodies and appendant organizations are actually competing for the time, the attendance, the interest, the substance, the devotion of Master Masons.** I am sick and tired of all the talk about TV, and the automobile, and bowling leagues as competing influences. It is time we look in our own house to see where the competition comes from.

Like the four churches of the same name, each Masonic organization poses as the Real Thing. Each claims to have That Which Was Lost. Each is the true wrinkle if we want to appear before the world as a Big Mason – one with a collection of degrees, exclusive and affluent.

2. **Our subdivisions have encouraged the mental attitude that when a Master Mason gains membership in another body, he then and there has outgrown the Ancient Craft Lodge.**

Several months after I became a Mason I was solicited by a worker in one of the recognized bodies. But I had mental reservations. “Why is it,” I asked him, “that Masons who belong to the other bodies place such a stress on those affiliations and seem to care so little about their Lodge?” Just what answer he gave me I do not remember. Really, it doesn't matter too much, for the question never has been answered to my satisfaction. I held out for about three years before I presented my petition.

Years later, when I received the degrees in another Masonic body, I overheard a past presiding officer say, “Now here, in this body, you will find the Cream of Masonry.” From that day to this, I have resented such artificial class distinction.

The newspaper obituary in my files which states that the deceased “was a member of 17 organizations, 10 of them Masonic groups,” and then proceeds to list everything that could be bought with money, is a case in point. To be a Master Mason was not enough; actually, that was of little or no importance.

And what about the Vanishing Emblem? What is wrong with the Square and Compass? Even Grand Masters have discarded it. Is it no longer a badge of honor? Must something else replace it to set the wearer apart and place him in the aristocracy?

A young man of my acquaintance was interested in petitioning for the degrees. He was interested, that is, until a Master Mason gave him the old Superiority Sales Talk, something like this: “Sure, I’m a member of Brotherly Love Lodge, but only because I have to be. The Blue Lodge, it doesn’t mean a thing to me. What I’m after is what give me the prestige and helps me in my business!”

And we wonder why attendance is poor, why interest is lax, why the membership curve goes downward!

3. Then there are these subdivisions that foster the attitude that, within their place of refuge, the standards of Ancient Craft Masonry do not apply.

Therein lies a situation that is more than alarming; it is downright vicious. Scarcely a Jurisdiction in the United States is free of headaches brought on by some group restricting its membership to Masons, but considering itself exempt from Masonic standards. A few Jurisdictions have met the issue head on, to the good of all Freemasonry. Others have looked in the other direction, and thereby have damaged the entire Fraternity.

One of these days Masonic leadership had better come to grips with the issue. The winking attitude which says, in effect, “It’s none of our business as long as you are not wearing an apron,” is unthinkingly dealing a body blow to our beloved Craft. A serious minded young friend of mine expressed interest in Masonry until a Past Master gave him a lurid description of the antics and the carousals he enjoyed in his favorite appendant organization. That ended his interest. Mark it down. *The public makes no distinction between the Master Mason who wears an apron and the Master Mason who wears some other kind of garb.*

4. When the leadership of Ancient Craft Masonry neglects the parent body to smile upon everything which claims a relationship to Freemasonry, however remote, that leadership is not contributing to a solution of our problem; it is

only aggravating it. In a single year, not so long ago, two American Grand Masters actually visited more appendant bodies than Symbolic Lodges in their respective terms of office.

From one end of America to the other, Grand Masters are going up and down their jurisdictions like itinerate peddlers, promoting everything under the sun except plain, unadulterated Symbolic Freemasonry. They go to Washington to attend what used to be the Grand Masters' Conference and find that it has become "Masonic Week" with the side-shows taking over. Truly, the tail has begun to wag the dog. And we wonder what is wrong!

Subdivided we stand, and subdivided, I fear, we shall fall.

One does not have to be more than forty to remember when the superpatriots raged over the hyphenated American, declaring it was time to drop Old World loyalties and become an American without a hyphen.

Well, I am not advocating that hyphenated Masons eliminate anything that contributes to their understanding and appreciation of Freemasonry. But I am preaching a gospel of fundamentals. I am calling on our Symbolic Lodges to do a better job of upgrading themselves. And I am challenging the other Masonic organizations and appendant groups to put a stop to the down-grading of the Symbolic Lodge; to acknowledge by actions, rather than words, that the Lodge is the fountainhead of all Freemasonry; to put first things first; to look unto the rock whence they are hewn.