

Innovation and Masonry

From Southern California Research Lodge F&AM, April, 1999

The fraternal society known as Freemasonry is among the oldest of existing entities. Its present organization began in the year 1717, 282 years ago. It is older than every present-day government, except England's, and is 59 years older than our own Declaration of Independence.

That Masonry has survived these many years while governments, and even nations, have come and gone is a marvel. Undoubtedly, the teachings of the fraternity made a substantial contribution to that longevity. Nevertheless, two events have had a greater and more direct impact on the evolution and survival of the craft. Both are concerned with the formative years of the United Grand Lodge of England, and have roots in the writings of James Anderson, author of the Book of Constitutions, and William Preston, father of Masonic ritual.

The first event concerns the requirements for admission into the fraternity. Shortly after the formation of the Grand Lodge of England, 1723 to be precise, the Rev. James Anderson, under authority of the Grand Lodge, wrote the Book of Constitutions for the government of the fraternity. His work was generally faithful to the Old Charges, on which he drew heavily; however, he made one drastic alteration, namely, he changed the requirements for admission into the fraternity. In 1717 the requirements were that the candidate be a man, of lawful age, freeborn, under the tongue of good report, AND BE A CHRISTIAN. The requirements for admission as written by Rev. Anderson were that the candidate be a man, of lawful age, freeborn, under the tongue of good report and PROFESS A BELIEF IN THE SUPREME BEING.

This was an innovation, and apparently done entirely on his own, for we have no record whatsoever to even suggest authority for the change. That this raised some eyebrows is an understatement. Nevertheless, the rule stuck and it is today the hallmark of our institution.

The second event has its basis in the 39th General Regulation of the Grand Lodge. As quoted from Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia, Macoy, 1961:

The 39th General Regulation adopted by the Grand Lodge in January, 1722/1723 stated: "Every Annual Grand Lodge has an inherent Power and authority to make new regulations, or to alter these, for the real benefit of the ancient Fraternity; Provided always that the old Landmarks be carefully preserved."

This was followed by the resolution of June 24, 1723: "That it is not in the Power of any person or body of men, to make any Alteration, or Innovation in the Body of Masonry without the Consent first obtained of the Annual Grand Lodge."

William Preston, considered by most as the father of Masonic ritual, when writing his lectures, varied the language so that it read: “No man or body of men can make any innovation in the Body of Masonry, . . .”

Through the years, the Preston version of the 39th General Regulation has become the foundation stone of the “no innovation” principal in current Masonic Law. One need only to look at the Constitutions of the several American Grand Lodges to see that a majority have adopted the principle. The fact is that the Preston version of the 39th General Regulation is of itself an innovation and contrary to the Book of Constitutions. Thus, we have two principals (both innovations) handed down to us during the formative years of the first Grand Lodge. The first has been an immense factor in making our existence “The brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God.” The second, in recognizing the hypocrisy caused by Preston’s innovation.

Today, both principles are relevant. The first, in furthering the universality of Masonry for the benefit of the fraternity. The second, in recognizing the hypocrisy caused by Preston’s innovation.

Today, “change” is one of the most popular topics in Masonic literature. Almost every publication in recent times deals with some aspect of “change.” The question, both practical and philosophical, is whether we can change without innovation. Whether we are to continue our society in its present form or adapt to the society we anticipate in the new millennium.

Scholars acknowledging the dilemma seem to be telling us that change is a process of molding our institution to an intense, mobile society, while innovation is the altering of a basic principle.

It is the spirit of Freemasonry that we need to retain. That brotherhood of a fraternal society where true friendship exists-among those who might otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance. To alter the form is not an innovation, so long as we do not destroy “that spark of true divinity.”