

A DISCUSSION ON MASONIC SYMBOLISM

Part Five, The Covenant

PLEASE NOTE: In all of these essays, I am referring only to the Symbolism in the Ritual as used within the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of New York.

There is a particular time in each of the Three Degrees of a Symbolic Lodge when the Initiate is caused to swear that he will abide by certain rules that govern his behaviour as a Mason. He is giving an oath of obedience; stating and agreeing to his obligation to perform in a certain manner. What he is not doing, however, is entering into a contract with the Lodge. A contract is, usually, a well-defined set of actions on the part of two or more people that will result in a well-defined conclusion. Here, we have a slight difference in that the Initiate was informed, prior to his oath taking, that it would be necessary for him to agree to this oath taking process before he could proceed further with only the spoken assurance that it would not interfere with his personal sense of morality or values. The only promise made to him beyond that which was spoken to him was, should he agree and then make the oath, he would be qualified to proceed further (and receive more light) in the ceremonies of the Initiation ceremony.

In its ancient usage, dating from the 14th century, a covenant, in its most general sense, is a solemn promise to engage in or refrain from a specified action. More specifically, a covenant, in contrast to a contract, is a one-way agreement whereby the covenanter is the only party bound by the promise. A covenant may have conditions and prerequisites that qualify the undertaking, including the actions of second or third parties, but there is no inherent agreement by such other parties to fulfill those requirements. Consequentially, the only party that can break a covenant is the covenanter. Under the common law of that time, a covenant was distinguished from an ordinary contract by the presence of the placing of a seal. Because the presence of a seal indicated an unusual solemnity in the promises made in a covenant, the common law would enforce a covenant even in the absence of other considerations.

What the Initiate has entered upon is a covenant rather than a contract, sealed with his kiss on the Holy Bible, in the ancient form present in every regular and well-governed Lodge of Masons since time immemorial. His kiss on the Bible as a seal of his consent and agreement is a symbolic tie to that time when most men seeking that which he is seeking and agreeing before witnesses to that which he is agreeing...when most men could neither read nor write. It is symbolic of his pledge before his God and man to abide by the provisions of his oath as well as his agreement to certain symbolic consequences should he fail to live up to his bargain. There is no return promise on behalf of the Lodge.

Why do I feel this to be (symbolically) important? It is yet another instance in Freemasonry where most of us do not pause to understand both the deep importance of this symbolic act – the taking of a covenant – nor to the ageless ties to the founders and the founding of our fraternal craft. Perhaps when next you observe an Initiate in this situation, you will now pause and consider how, centuries ago, a similar Initiate knelt in

the dust before our operative brethren to give a similar vow of obedience. Perhaps you will begin to understand how beautifully and how perfectly all this symbolism fits together to tie us across the centuries, one to another, as the blocks in an ancient cathedral, perfectly fitting together to form and maintain this philosophical fraternity of learning. Perhaps you will look within the Oath you have taken and examine to what it is you have given your assent. Perhaps you will examine and begin to understand the relevance of the words you have spoken. Perhaps you will begin to wonder, as have I, at the depth – the breadth – the height to which the symbolism of Freemasonry reaches...and to begin to wonder what more there is to be discovered.

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