

FREEMASONRY AND THE NEW ORDER

by

MW Bro. Dr. JG Brown

GM British Columbia

No idea is more engrossing today than that of a new world order. In speech and in print one confronts at every turn the notion of a new system, a new set-up, changed conditions. Cautious guides have suggested more than once that we ought to win the war before we begin to plan for society after the war. But planning will not wait. We are swept on. Winning the peace is as important as winning the war. The urgency is increased as orators declare that for the period of the first world conflict we won the war, but we lost the peace. Now we must see to it that we win the war and win the peace also. Imagination loves to dwell in a Utopia, and we may even claim that we are not day-dreaming. We are simply facing facts. Did we not endure eleven years of hard depression? A world of machines and no work for men. Poverty in the midst of plenty.

Rather we are stern realists as we turn our faces to the future. A new day is coming, and we have an opportunity; yes, we have responsibility to shape it and to determine its quality and character. Some foresight we must have and some attempt must be made to picture the shape of things to come.

As one begins to forecast the future of Freemasonry in a new world order, one is impelled to look back over the road we have travelled. We confront an undeniable truth, that the future is moulded by the past. The road into tomorrow leads through our yesterdays. In the times of crisis we become aware of the pressure of the past and discover that heritage is in no small measure a determinant of destiny. True, each day is a new one; yet history has something to say. We ought to be able to learn from experience. It has been said that the only thing we learn from history is that we do not learn anything from history. But we neglect the past to our own disadvantage. We fancy history repeats itself; it never does, but we fancy history repeats itself because again and again we wake up to realize that there were lessons of the past which would have saved us both labour and sorrow had we been familiar with them. Our heritage was more precious than we thought. There was light for the path coming from the days gone by.

Let us therefore seek for a few stakes driven down by those who opened up the land and built the first roads. For every Freemason a valuable surveyor's monument stands in the year 1717, the year of

the founding of the first Grand Lodge. That was an eventful day. It was a time of crisis, and it was a prophetic time. Eyes were peering out into the future. Plans were being made to shape and fashion human destiny. Freemasonry was in a real sense an attempt to establish a new social order.

The past had not been propitious. The seventeenth century had just closed and its record was disappointing and dark. The course of events was backward, rather than forward, a reversion rather than progress. Life in Britain was at a low ebb. The Cambridge Modern History says of that age: "The masses were ignorant and brutalized; the governing classes intent only on pleasure and politics; the church chiefly occupied with patronage and controversy." Mark Pattison offers the characterization that the age was "one of decay of religion, licentiousness of morals, public corruption, and profaneness of language, an age destitute of depth and earnestness, an age whose poetry was without romance, whose philosophy was without insight, whose public men were without character."

True, there were some representatives of better things. This was the age of John Milton and John Bunyan. But the very mention of this latter name reminds us of the intolerance and the tyranny which sent a man to prison for holding religious services. Cromwell's Ironsides were men of faith. He rallied men with a strong conviction of right and wrong. He declared that he preferred men who believed in God and who knew what they were fighting for than the courtier or the professional soldier. Puritanism was a courageous effort to stem the forces that were sweeping the nation into degeneracy.

The latter part of the century saw the Restoration, and once more the flood-gates of profligacy and licentiousness were thrown open. Then came Monmouth's Rebellion, the conflict with James, and then the invitation to William of Orange and Mary to assume the sovereignty of England. In that day England found it necessary to depose one monarch and put another on the throne.

It may be set forth as a broad generalization that Britain entered the eighteenth century with a constitutional government fairly well established. It was not so on the continent. Not until a hundred years later did political life in continental countries begin to spell out the principles of responsible government. Britain has in very truth been a full hundred years in the forefront in all that pertains to democratic freedom.

Freedom of worship was barely attained in that period and it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century, in the great Wesleyan Revival. that religion came to its own. The spontaneity and vigour of well-grounded religious conviction then found freedom of expression. Then, two simple, yet very profound, truths shone with such light and warmth upon the consciousness of the common people the accessibility of God to man and the glowing intimacy of fellowship with Him that :the mental outlook and the social conditions of the working classes of Britain were utterly transformed. It has been, I believe, rightly claimed that this revival saved Britain from all the violence and horror of the French Revolution.

But all effort to make a better world was not left in abeyance in the meantime. What other meaning is there to that little gathering at the Apple Tree Tavern in Charles Street, Covent Gardens, which formed the first Grand Lodge of Freemasons? It was a most significant movement fraught with glorious possibilities, which they themselves were scarcely able to envisage. Beyond a question, it was with a genuine awareness of the critical nature of the times genuine, I say, and definite, though not necessarily complete and all-seeing to the point of infallibility. What was the hope of those brethren but to bring something to bear upon social conditions which would build the common good. The dissoluteness of their day and generation must be withstood. Some standards of behaviour: more honourable, more wholesome, must be established, and men united in a common purpose of strengthening the decencies and accepted standards of human conduct. From the beginning Freemasonry was as it is today, a beautiful system of morality. It was the values of life with which those honourable brethren were concerned. That was a critical time. There was something to be rebuilt into the public practice which would render life more wholesome and more receptive of noble ideals. Avoiding religious disputation, they set before them a minimum of creedal affirmation a fundamental belief in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. The spirit of tolerance was to leave men free to develop their own dogmas, but also to unite men on a broad and solid foundation. The Fatherhood of God .and the Brotherhood of man was thus thrown up into relief and became a common ground for the uniting of men of varied dogmas into a genuine fraternity.

This is strengthened for us as we contemplate the affinity between the lodges uniting in this Grand Lodge and the Operative Guilds of the Middle Ages. These Operative Guilds have given us working tools and much of the content of our ritual reflects the processes and

ceremonies of the Guilds. Freemasonry is the continuation of these Craft Guilds.

It is interesting enough that the text books on political economy do not connect the craft guilds with the modern trade unions. These latter are definitely the product of the new industrial revolution. The introduction of power machinery and the factory system created a new type of organization, one specifically adapted to the new order. But the life and spirit of these trade guilds was not extinguished. They were organizations not only having to do with their trade and business interests, but there was in them a vital and enlarging human element. The bond of fellowship was strange. They were genuine fraternities, heightened even to a family fellowship. Human welfare was a major concern. Moral ideals were inculcated and standards of behaviour were rigid. Religious observance and instruction were definitely enjoyed, and with the Cathedral builders the religious aim and spirit were to the fore.

These guilds were sufficiently progressive to adapt themselves to changing circumstances. The practice of receiving men of rank and professional men into the guilds of masons, as accepted masons, is an evidence of this adjustment and that the moral and spiritual interests were becoming the determining factor.

It is not too much to assume that the founders of Grand Lodge took cognizance of the distress of the day. They saw the need of the very principles taught by the working tools of the operative craft. Human society needed moral foundations. Spiritual principles and worthy standards are concepts of the good of life were to be built into the social structure. They faced the task, I submit, with great provision. They displayed courage of the finest sort. Freemasonry was launched in a dark and difficult day with the express hope that it should be a power for reconstruction, that it should furnish the dynamic for a new social order, and in a chaotic and disintegrating period it should be a symbol of universal and abiding principles not subject to the vicissitudes of time and circumstances, but would prove eternal as the ages.

Three positions were accepted. First, as we have stated, in the interests of toleration and with a desire to include all men of right mind and attitude toward life, a minimum of religious creed was required. Belief in a Supreme Being and in the immortality of the soul. Freedom here was to develop his faith and creedal positions as any member might choose, but this simple faith, common to all men,

furnished a basic piety which would permit both Christian and Jew to unite in a fellowship devoted to the common good, and further the grand design of being happy themselves and of communicating that happiness to others.

A second position was solidly held in the minds of these early founders, viz., that science would open the way to all truth, even to the knowledge of God. It may be regarded as one of the glimmerings of light that shined through the erstwhile gloominess of the seventeenth century that science was beginning to find its foot and assert its independence. It was in 1662 that the Royal Society was formed in London. Sir Isaac Newton belongs to this period. The publication of his "Principia" gave the world a new theory of the universe. Philosophic writers like John Locke were contending for the validity of human experience and the authority of reason, both in the world of knowledge and in the world of government. There was a Rationalism in the higher sense of the word, that is, that man's reason could establish the certainty of the highest truths, even the existence of God. Great store was set by the powers of the human mind. Hence men were urged to contemplate "the intellectual faculties and to trace them in their development through the paths of heavenly science, even unto the throne of God Himself." It was their confidence that the "secrets of nature and the principles of intellectual truth" could be unveiled to the view of men. Once men "learned to form a just estimate of those wondrous faculties with which God has endowed the being created after His own image, then they would feel the duty which he has thereby imposed upon them of cultivating those divine attributes with the most diligent care and attention". And for what purpose was this endeavour to be bestowed? The answer is nothing less than the glory of God and the happiness of mankind. The man who made the liberal arts and sciences his careful study would be the better enabled to discharge his duties, and he would also be able to estimate the wonderful works of the Almighty. All of this reveals a confidence in the powers of the human reason to attain to the highest knowledge, even the knowledge of God, and men were not left in servile dependence on dogmas which were imposed on them from without, either by the authority of church or state.

Now this was a supreme confidence in the powers of the human intellect to attain to knowledge sufficient for all human needs. It was also a bold confidence that this reliance on the powers of man would save him from being either a stupid atheist or an irreligious libertine. With neither of these would Freemasonry have anything to do. But it was also a very emphatic assertion of the spirit of human freedom that

man had a right to search for truth. He would not need to fear where truth would lead him and he could feel free in the exercise of his judgment. He was not obliged to simply accept dogma from an external authority, whether that authority be church or state. The spirit of freedom was dominant in the whole outlook of these early founders of the Craft.

The third procedure was to eschew politics and political dissensions. It is generally recognized that French Freemasonry became involved in political plots and movements, as perhaps also it wrecked its spiritual foundations, but English Freemasonry has moved steadily forward on the acceptance of these principals.

As we face the enormous tasks of reconstruction, we can perhaps well afford to remind ourselves of the great wisdom of avoiding political issues and all the divisions which mark our political system. We have members drawn from all walks of life, representing all classes or shades of society, so far as we have such. We want it thus. So long as we assert that the internal and not the external qualifications of a man are our great concern, we desire a fraternity, a brotherhood of men of very divergent points of view and divers theories of human affairs. The interest of good order and the seemly conduct of our communications, along with our awareness of the weaknesses and frailties of human nature, all press firmly upon us the necessity of eschewing the devious paths of political dissension. There is no hope of bringing men in these matters to a single common opinion. There is point and value in preserving brotherly fellowship, in maintaining points of contact and doing something to have men of all views well acquainted and friendly with each other.

Nevertheless, on the other side, it is to be made clear that economic issues and questions of public welfare are more than political arguments. We cannot agree to regard as taboo the very concerns under which men and their families make their very livelihood. These interests which employ the major portion of our wakeful thoughts are issues of life. They pertain to character and conduct. Right and wrong are not abstract concepts that abide in a vacuum. They are determined and take their shape in the circumstances of common living.

It is here, however, that Freemasonry possesses distinct advantages. It is a beautiful system of morality. We are speculative, not operative masons. Our concern is with the philosophy of life which men accept and develop in their minds and hearts. Yet here is our advantage: Our philosophy is developed from our working tools. The instruments of

labour and structural design have given us our principles of living, and likewise react as the symbols of no other organization upon the conditions of human toil and economic welfare. We can openly advocate and seek to exemplify the square deal in human life. The useful lesson of natural equality and mutual dependence taught to every brother on his initiation does set up a major consideration which must have its influence on our economic arrangements. To have a vigorous organization of men who are seriously concerned with doing the right thing, with giving a square deal to every one in the land, is worth more than to have a clamour our host dictating the possession of property or the distribution of taxation. It is a concern to us that men are employed and that they get a fair deal, not that we are behind any specific economic programme, but because it is right. Nothing but the stubborn selfishness and the grasping greed of hard-hearted men has this world in the chaos of depression and war.

Labour is the lot of man and therein we see both its necessity and its dignity. When we affirm that it is the internal and not the external qualifications of a man that Freemasonry regards, we affirm that personality is superior to property, and that too in the social. and economic world, in all that pertains to human relations.

While therefore we participate in no programme, we advocate no three-year nor five-year plan of economic change or development, while we do not accentuate, but rather seek to obliterate class distinctions, I submit that we are at the beginning builders of a new social order.

Then again, social conditions of the personal and family range need in our day the healing influences of men both of broad sympathies and kindly spirit and also of steady, firm principles. War always brings decline and leaves problems that are not solved in one generation, by any means. It has been said that the first casualty of war is truth. The influence of propaganda upon public speech and common veracity cannot be ignored. The complete upheaval in our ways of living, in the tremendous task of marshalling the nation for the war task, the transformation of our business organization to a new basis of war production, the control of labour, the introduction of vast numbers of women not only into industrial plants, shipyards and munitions factories, but also into the armed services these themselves are revolutionary changes and the restoration to a peace basis as a permanent condition of life are problems of staggering magnitude.

Home conditions have changed -- mothers and the older sisters are away from home and at work all day child problems multiplied delinquency among youth enormously increased. To bring life back to its normal level and to establish upright standards of behaviour, to restore some of the common courtesies of life respect for womanhood and consideration for childhood, to recognize the dignity and honour of old age o all these issues demand attention.

There is a challenge to Freemasons, as there is to the church and synagogue, as to whether we truly believe the things we profess and publish, as to whether the things that have the stamp of eternal validity, the square, the level and the plumb, have meaning for us, whether the things men of the past have treasured, because they bought them with their life-blood are valued by us too as to whether we have a real faith in God and a sincere love for our fellowman. This challenge confronts us in this age as in the day when our brethren united in the Premier Grand Lodge, and it demands of us that we offer our best.

What I have had in mind is simply this, we have a fundamental purpose which tallies with the human philosophy of life, the way of thinking about life, and that our contact is with the morals and spiritual conceptions, not only of those who sit in lodge, but of society in general. In this day we are making a new social order whether we want it or not and whether I have a vision of these men going out with no other purpose than to make human society fit to live in. I think we have a tremendous task in that very same field today. Note, there is another reason why he dwells in that phase, the whole thing is very fluid in my own mind as far as we may do to make a better social order. I am just feeling my way in so far as my opinion is concerned. I can see ours is not a spoken programme, ours is the mind of youth toward life, of the citizen looking forward for guidance and help and I may perhaps desire to see a little more clearly what possibilities are round.

***Presented at the
Western Canada Conference, 1943***