



Province of East Lancashire

Commentary on

“The Charge after Initiation”



All will have heard the words of the Charge after Initiation which I am invited to comment on this evening. There then came the day when we had to learn them as Junior Warden of a lodge and, from that moment, we begin to wonder what exactly it was that we, and others, were saying to new members of the Craft. Not of course, with any idea of increasing the words we already use, but thinking of what could be learnt about them in a real lodge of Instruction.

What is clear from the start is that we have not now joined a group of working masons. The very words 'ceremony', 'admitted a member', 'honourable Society' all point the difference between men working on a building site and others who are formally accepted into a special group that has little or nothing to do with actual building work. When, therefore, we are told that this Society is ancient, 'having subsisted from time immemorial' we are not to think of Egyptian, Greek or Roman builders, nor even of medieval or Templar craftsmen, for they were of a different type to ourselves. When we speak of 'time immemorial' we go back to the reign of Elizabeth I when the wealthier freemasons had what we call a 'guild' and were now admitting to that guild other tradesmen who were Freemen of the local city or borough like themselves. Being masons the guild had a lodge and as these other tradesmen joined that lodge they were described as being 'accepted'. It is from that development that we get the title 'Free and Accepted' which is how we are known to this day. When you hear the word 'ancient' it is to those days in, the 1500s and 1600s that we refer.

We are next told that this is an honourable Society. Let me point out at once that what makes it honourable is not any special status or privilege but the fact that its members put into practice the good things that they are shown in it.. This is a fundamental point about Freemasonry. Just as it is one thing to know what a hammer and chisel are for but quite another to be able to use them to carve a stone for a building so there is a real difference between SAYING what is good and right and putting it into practice. Our honourable society depends on you and me being willing to carry out its precepts Here we can learn from what we do in lodge. If we do not try to carry out what our Preceptor asks us to do then it is all a waste of time. Outside in ordinary life as well as in the lodge we shall be honourable as we carry out what our Masonic ceremonies teach us. We do not become honourable just by belonging. That is why we are told that the 'foundation' of our Craft is solid when there is the 'practice of every moral and social virtue'. Words have to become deeds.

On the basis of what Freemasonry displays we are next told that even kings have not been unwilling to enter this Society and take the humblest position. This is what is meant by the words, 'exchange the sceptre for the trowel' .The trowel today is seen as the jewel attached to the almoner's collar. It was appointed to be worn there not too long ago because it had in earlier times been the symbol of care for the brotherhood and that which secures the well-being of the brethren. This was seen in the 18th century when there was no office of Inner Guard and the latest initiate to the lodge was the one who was at the inner side of the door when the next candidate was due to be admitted. As each initiate was given a trowel as well as an apron it was with a trowel that he gave knocks on the door and also pricked the flesh of the new candidate. It was thus that the trowel acquired the qualities of making sure that only fit men were admitted and the security of the lodge was maintained. Here the mention of a trowel means that whilst the ruler of a kingdom was entitled to wield a sceptre as the top person in the land yet when he came into Freemasonry he was humble enough to become the lowliest member for a time. It is a lesson that we all must learn. Every time you join another branch of Freemasonry you have to start at the bottom again.

Our attention is now turned to the V.S.L. Here we are to remember that in English Freemasonry such a volume has to be present before we begin, and remain open whilst the lodge work is done. In fact the version of the V.S.L. that is needed at all times with us is the whole English Bible. If any candidate wishes to take his obligations on another sacred book he may do so but that must be on, or beside, the Bible. It is the constant presence of the V.S.L. which mainly dictates what is a lodge that is regular and therefore one which you and I may attend elsewhere. If there is no open sacred book on the pedestal of a lodge you attend then you should not be there.

Whilst we are taught that the V.S.L. contains teaching that is to be our 'unerring' guide I want you to notice that what I said earlier is still the rule. The Bible is not there to be just a guide but is 'to regulate your actions'. Having the V.S.L. present is not for appearance's sake. It is meant to be the assurance that those who gather round it are those who LIVE by its guidance. That is why the object of all our Masonry is summed up by the Hebrew words written below the Ark of the Covenant on a M.M's certificate, as well as on the Royal Arch one, 'Holiness for the Lord'. Our whole life is to show where we stand and the charge now spells that out.

We start, where I have just said that we finish, with the Lord God at the centre of our life. This is to remind you at the end of the Initiation ceremony of where we began. 'In all cases of difficulty and danger in whom do you put your trust? The answer you should have given FREELY is 'In God'. It may interest you to know that that too is ancient because when the masons had a guild it also had a banner on which were inscribed the words, 'In Domine spero', which means 'In the Lord is my trust'. So here you are again being called upon to respect the very name of God by the way we speak of him, whether frustrated or not, by remembering that here is the source of our very existence; by asking for his help in all legitimate business and turning to him in moments of distress. May I suggest that if we Masons really put these words into practice, in a world in which a university professor can just produce a book called 'God the delusion' then we will indeed be a very distinctive group in society.

The call to serve our neighbour could be equally distinctive at a time when self-interest seems to be very much the visible motivation for people's behaviour. Charity in its fullest sense has always been an especial mark of Masons and it is only right that through the offices of both the Charity Steward and Almoner we perceive the means by which all of us can 'relieve the necessities of others' and 'soothe others' afflictions'. This does not mean that we do not have to put ourselves out privately to serve in these ways but at least a regular report by our lodge representatives can keep this part of our Masonic commitment freshly before us. The similarity of the last sentence at this point to the second great biblical commandment to love our neighbour as we love ourselves, cannot escape our notice.

The third pointer here, which has to do with our own well-being, echoes the requirements of the original mason-workman who had to take care of himself physically and mentally. He had to do this so that he could discharge the work that he was engaged to do. Notice that in addition to being fit, which for us has something to do with food and drink, we are also to keep our minds active so that we can share with our brethren and our local community the talents that we are born with but which need developing. May I remind you that we are one of the few Institutions in this country that encourages its members to use their memory for the retention and expression of knowledge. The learning of ritual is an offshoot of the days when the Mystery Plays were produced, by masons amongst others, and it was thought that what was said in those plays, that were based on the Bible, was so important and sacred that it had to be correctly spoken. The players who got their lines wrong were fined. Let us be grateful that that imposition no longer applies to us but realise that our lines still deserve memorising.

As the charge turns to our duties as citizens we should remember our origins in the Freeman's guilds of each city or town. The guild owed its authority to a charter from the King and it is thus only right that we, their descendants, should reaffirm our allegiance to the monarch of this land where we live. Our Freemasonry had early to suffer the divisions caused by the 17th century Civil War when allegiance to a rightful monarch was a matter of life and death. In an age which is all too aware of plots and disturbances of the peace it is only right that we should be known to be those who are peaceable and law-abiding. I have never forgotten the words of a London policeman: "I come to lodge with relief knowing that for once I am not going to be in the company of rogues and robbers." That is a standard which we ought strenuously to preserve.

So we turn again, as we did earlier, to the matter of our private behavior. It is here that we come to what some Masons may consider an intrusion too far in what could otherwise be thought of as an ordinary club activity. Can you imagine a Rotary, Lions or a golf club recommending the practice of every DOMESTIC as

well as public virtue'. Yet the old tradition from which we stem involved its members in both these spheres. A Master was responsible for the whole conduct of his apprentices, that they would not gamble nor get drunk, but also that they would not behave improperly with a wife, daughter, sister or even housemaid. An apprentice was to be on time at meals, decent in dress, polite to customers and respectful to his superiors. There is even an echo of this side of a young mason's behaviour in the obligation with the five points of fellowship when we promise to 'strictly respect the chastity of ...his wife, his sister and his child'. In our modern situation we are being reminded that what we do in our private lives can have an effect on everyone else in our organization. Now you can perhaps see why some brethren have to be tried and excluded when their public or private behaviour brings us all into disrepute.

If you are restrained in your desires by Prudence; curbed in your appetites by Temperance; enabled to sustain injustice or disappointment by Fortitude, and enabled to deal fairly with others by a sense of Justice, you will be both a credit to yourself and a benefit to the brotherhood. In the light of what was said above about serving our neighbours it is surely not necessary to say more about charity and caring.

Thus we turn to the great matters of confidentiality, trustworthiness and cooperation. Our great movement began with men whose keeping of special trade secrets was the guarantee of their livelihood. That idea spread in the guild to a whole new range of matters: how wages were set, how a guild or lodge ruler was to be selected; who received charity and why; what was in their charges; and so much more. When I joined Masonry secrecy was rife but nowadays we are told that only the modes of recognition, passwords and signs merit careful control and yet there are matters discussed in each lodge which are for those members only and are not for general information.

What is important still and is now brought to our attention is that if we want to enjoy our Masonry to the full then we will appreciate each new degree or Order if we wait to be initiated into it and don't try to find out about its ceremonies before then. I can assure you that being patient until your blindfold is removed or a story unfolds is far and away the best way to proceed. That not only proves your trustworthiness but also allows you time to set each part in its true place within Freemasonry as a whole.

The other proof of your trustworthiness is certainly in the matter of recommending candidates. Of course we need candidates in order to survive but we do not need them at any price. When you or I are approached and asked by someone, or even feel impelled to suggest the Craft to another, let us at least first have imagined that person standing where the recipient of this charge would stand and ask the question, "Is he someone who will happily respond to this list of requirements or do they just not fit his character?" That is the least you owe him in giving him your vote of confidence. What is most important is that you do really know him. I can recall very early on in my time as a Mason being an onlooker over a cup of tea when a member of the lodge I was attending asked their Grand Officer if he would second a candidate. "You will have seen him at 2 Ladies evenings", he said, "and I have known him three years. "Really", said the Grand Officer, "and is he married?" "Yes", said the expectant proposer. "Have they any children?" "I think so." "What is his job?" "I have never asked him." "Would his wife be happy if he joined?" "I don't know." "Well", said the Grand Officer, "until you know him and his family a lot better don't propose him or I will have to black ball him." A lodge has to be able to trust us if we are to have the right candidates. If you propose anyone let it always be a happy experience. I had one disappointment in my life and it taught me how right this charge can be.

No lodge can operate unless its members cooperate in what it is decided to do. Get into the habit from the start of putting down all your lodge's dates in your diary for the next year. When the summons comes answer it as soon as you can and if you are an officer and will not be able to get there make that clear at once. That is what is meant by a 'prompt attention to all signs and summonses'. You are here pledging yourself to OBEY and the easiest way is to do it at once. For just consider how upset you would be if the Secretary didn't bother to prepare and send out the summons, book the hail or order dinner. If he does his bigger task then who are you and I to forget to make our reply? This charge is not about words. It is about deeds.

I will not expand, though I am tempted, on the matter of behaviour in the lodge and attention to what the Master & Wardens are trying to do. One day you will be in that position and you will want all the attention that others can give you. What is most important is to realise that when we gather in lodge we are in one of the few places in this land where people of different political and religious views can meet without being embarrassed or angry. We need to keep it that way.

This charge closes with yet another intrusion into our private life by encouraging such hobbies and interests as will keep us decent folk to know, able to be of use locally or nationally and those who add to the lustre and reputation of Freemasonry. In this connection it is the 7 Liberal Arts and Sciences that we are specially to start, or continue, studying. If you don't know what that covers then either look up the second degree tracing board explanation or ask me in the question time after I finish. If you want to know how important those Arts and Sciences have been in ancient Masonry then read about the York Mysteries.

I now hope that as a result of what I have shared with you this evening you have already seen what it is to make a daily advancement in masonic knowledge, not just learning the ritual, and have, above all else, realised that this charge needs not only to be imprinted on your heart but made to come alive in your daily lives so that when people know you to be a Mason they will recognise the qualities herein outlined.

I also hope that one day you will in turn pass on your own thoughts on the First Degree charge to the next generation.

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