

# *The Struggle Over Freemasonry*

by James A. Beverley Ph.D.

## **Can a Christian be a member of a Masonic Lodge?**

Should Christians join the Masonic Lodge? Is Christian faith compatible with Masonry? These questions have generated enormous controversy since the formation of the first Grand Lodge in London on June 24, 1717. Roman Catholic popes have condemned Masonry and many Protestant denominations forbid membership in the Lodge. The Southern Baptist Convention recently had a major debate over Masonry, with nasty political and verbal assaults on all sides.

The war over Masonry stems in part from the extreme charges laid against the Lodge. In his book *The New World Order* Pat Robertson, host of The 700 Club, targeted the Lodge as a part of the emerging world conspiracy. Gary Kah argues in *En Route to Global Occupation* that Freemasonry is “the hidden catalyst” in the “secret agenda for world unification.” Stephen Knight, a British journalist, created a storm on the secular front with *The Brotherhood*, his political exposé of Masonry. His untimely death after the book's publication led to charges that he was murdered under orders from the Lodge.

According to various critics, Masonry is racist, pagan, occultic and demonic. It is argued that top Masons (such as Albert Pike) admit that Lucifer is the god of the Lodge. Further, Masons are said to kill to protect their secret and bloody rituals, and their ideology denigrates the Bible, Jesus and God. The critics argue that Masons worship the figure Hiram, said to be a stone mason from the days of Solomon. Also, it is contended that Masons turn a blind eye to criminal acts done by fellow members. Selwyn Stevens states in his booklet *Unmasking Freemasonry* that Lodge participation can lead to Alzheimers, bulimia, insanity and molestation, among other things.

Jim Shaw and Tom McKenney argue in *The Deadly Deception* that key Masonic symbols are sexual in nature and represent a revival of pagan mystery religions. Texe Marrs includes Masons in the schemes of the Anti-Christ to establish one world order. William Schnoebelen, who claims to be an ex-Satanist, ex-Mormon and ex-Mason, argues that Masons are involved in many of the 50,000 ritual murders that take place every year in North America. Ed Decker, a famous cult expert, states in *What You Need to Know About Masons* that Lodge members infiltrate libraries across the United States to steal anti-Masonic books and “sensitive” Masonic documents.

What is one to make of such incredible accusations? First, they must be examined carefully, especially since they represent popular sentiment against Masonry. Second, they must be assessed individually since some might be true while others are half-true or totally false. If these charges are largely true, the Masonic order represents an evil empire that defies comprehension. If largely untrue, Masons will properly resent much of the “Christian” witness about the Lodge.

In addition to the extremely negative view of Masonry, there are two other general assessments. There are those who argue that Masonry, while not the evil force suggested above, is essentially religious in nature and is not compatible with Christianity since it teaches a deistic version of God gives only lip service to biblical truth and the lordship of Christ, and advocates secrecy involving bloody oaths. This view is defended by Steven Tsoukalas, one of the most informed researchers in primary Masonic writings.

There is also the view that Masonry is not a religion. For most Masons and to many non-Masons, the Lodge is simply a fraternal order of males. Masons must believe in God, but no specific designation or description of God is allowed simply because the Lodge is a place where all religions can be represented. Nothing in Masonry forces a Christian to deny any essential gospel claims, whether the supremacy of Christ or salvation by grace alone. The wild and extreme claims about the Lodge are a result of bigotry and lies. This perspective is defended by Wallace McLeod, one of the world's leading Masonic historians and a professing Christian.

What does the evidence suggest as the best reaction to Masonry? First, the wildest accusations against the Lodge are largely a result of fabrication and poor research on the part of careless and extreme critics. For example, the charge that Albert Pike, a leading nineteenth-century Masonic scholar, advocated the worship of Lucifer is an outright lie. This falsehood was started by Leo Taxil, a pen name for Gabriel Antoine Jogand-Pages, an anti-Masonic writer who invented a quote from Pike to carry on a vendetta against the Lodge.

Though Masons are to care for fellow members, their oaths forbid them to break the law or harbor any criminal. Accusations about Masonic murders are strong in only one case, a famous one involving ex-Mason William Morgan. This New York resident was killed in

1826, probably at the hands of a few zealous Masons who were enraged by his exposé of the secret rituals of Masonry. Kenneth Lanning, the FBI's expert on Satanic ritual theories, has argued persuasively that there is no hard evidence to support the wild but popular theory that Satanists or Masons are on a killing spree involving 50,000 ritual murders per year in North America alone. That is twice the total of all other kinds of homicide for the entire continent.

Do Masons steal anti-Masonic books from libraries? Ed Decker says so but provides no objective evidence. Ron Carlson, another cult watcher, charges that Masons take Albert Pike's pro-Masonic work *Morals and Dogma* out of libraries because of Pike's alleged occultic and demonic views. Masonic scholars Art DeHoyos and Brent Morris replied to this accusation with a long list of libraries where Pike's work is available, including libraries in Carlson's home state.

The charge that Masonry has some occult connections and is viewed as a revival of ancient mystery religion has some truth to it. As Tsoukalas shows in *Masonic Rites and Wrongs*, Albert Pike, the most influential Scottish Rite leader, recast many Masonic rituals by drawing parallels with what he knew of ancient Egyptian religion and occult traditions since the Middle Ages. Today, most Masons have little regard for Pike's mystical and mythical musings. Likewise, although key occult figures like Helena Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley have used Masonic ritual, the vast majority of Masons have no interest in occult paths or ancient mystery religions.

There remain some substantial issues to address in the remaining divide represented by Tsoukalas and McLeod. Of paramount concern is the fact that some Masonic rituals can be easily interpreted as offering a religious path to light, truth and heaven. This seems evident, for example, in the readings given in Lodge funeral services. Also, some Masons have argued that Masonry is a religion, though this is an older view, and has never been the self-understanding of Masons as a whole.

Masonic writings about explicit Christian themes often leave a lot to be desired. This valid concern is not about the popular false accusation that Masons worship Baal or that Masons intend to discredit the gospel. The crux issue here is that some leading Masonic writers, including Pike, have often undermined a Christian understanding of God and Jesus Christ by overt sympathies to all religions and by misapplication of biblical texts. Though a generic view of God opens the Lodge to all faiths, it can easily create the impression that Masons believe that all roads lead to heaven.

Finally, there is the famous issue of secret and bloody oaths. In fairness, as McLeod points out, there are no secrets in Masonry anymore. In fact, the rituals were made public as early as 1730 in Samuel Prichard's *Masonry Dissected*. Though Masons do not take the oaths literally, even a symbolic reading of them has little merit. While some lodges have made significant alterations to the wording, would anything be lost if all Lodges replaced the oaths with pledges that offend no one?

The history of Masonry reflects something of the deeper currents in changing religious ideology since 1717. The earliest Masonic writings manifest a more explicit Christian focus. Then, through the previous century an unhealthy preoccupation with pluralism led Masons to downplay Christian interpretation of Masonic rites. With the rise of secularism in this century, and with a greater sensibility to specific religious claims, most Masons are now very insistent that the Lodge is not a church of any sort. However, the burden of a divided history continues to make the question of Masonry a complicated one.

After considerable debate the Southern Baptist Convention decided to make Lodge involvement a matter of personal Christian conviction. That view deserves respect only when and where it is clear that Masons believe that their practices are not religious in nature. This can be accepted more readily of the three degrees of the Blue or Craft Lodge than the thirty-three degrees in Scottish Rite Masonry. Tsoukalas argues persuasively that Scottish Rite teachings are often in obvious conflict with the Bible's teaching. Masons have to avoid the plain meaning of words to harmonize the two.

In the end, legitimate Christian response to the Masonic Lodge must involve three clear indictments. First, every Christian should be alarmed and ashamed at the false and outrageous charges against Masonry that are spread widely in Christian circles as a result of paranoid and bigoted research. Second, Christians have every right to complain about statements in Scottish Rite degrees that are incompatible with the gospel. In this regard, leading Masonic scholars needs to take Tsoukalas' work very seriously and sort through Scottish Rite ideology that is, at face value, antithetical to the gospel. (Likewise, Tsoukalas should take at face value repeated statements from Masons that the Lodge is not a religion, a point strongly supported by the fact that religion is a forbidden topic in Lodge meetings). Third, Masons of any sort who look to Masonry as a religion and consequently ignore the gospel must not receive the endorsement of the Christian church.

In the end, Scottish Rite masonry is basically incompatible with Christianity unless the Lodge members simply ignore (and many do) a lot of the teachings rooted in ancient mystery religions, Qabbalism and occult thought. Christian participation in Blue Lodge masonry is far easier to accept, though I respect the views of Christians who find such involvement problematic. In the end, even if one is opposed to the Lodge, the Masonic recognition of God is a starting point for witness about God's fifth revelation in Christ. The crux is the hope that all Masons will make the necessary move to faith in Christ, whether inside or outside the Lodge.

## Masonic Secrets

Why does Masonry have secrets? The real question should be, are there any secrets? Most of those who try to criticize Masonry claim to have a fair idea of the so-called secrets, which have been published hundreds of times over the years, ever since the first exposure appeared in London on April 11, 1723. Many of these books are available in the public libraries. The fact is simply that every Mason has undertaken not to disclose certain portions of the ceremonies in which he has participated. This constitutes a bond among the members, and seems to impress the new member with the value of what he is being taught. Obviously, if the alleged exposures are accurate, then there have been many Masons who broke their promise not to reveal the “secrets” of Masonry entrusted to them. And clearly they have not been punished for it - at least not in this world.

Does Masonry have bloody oaths? Quite a few critics get a lot of mileage out of this. Traditionally, every Mason undertakes to keep the secrets that are entrusted to him “under no less a penalty than . . . and then there follows a physical penalty of one sort or another. Actually at the time that modern Masonry was developing, the various punishments that are cited in this connection were imposed by the civil authorities for certain types of crimes. They were taken over into Masonry, never with the intention that Masons would carry them out, but once again simply to impress the candidate with the seriousness of the commitments that he was undertaking. These penalties are mentioned in the earliest extant ritual documents, which go back to the year 1696. Though occasionally misunderstood, particularly by non-Masons, the penalties were clearly symbolic and metaphorical. Actually, in 1964, in order to prevent confusion, the mother grand lodge, the United Grand Lodge of England, offered an alternative wording, that made it explicit that these were simply traditional penalties that the member was to bear in mind.

## No Way to be Christian and a Mason?

First, a few foundational points. (1) Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation for humanity (John 14:6). (2) A fundamental requirement for membership in Masonry is belief in a Supreme Being. Thus Masons are Unitarians, Hindus, Muslims and members of other non-Christian religions. But men of these faiths reject the biblical Christ and his atonement on the cross. If they remain in these beliefs, they will not go to heaven. Masons who profess Christ must therefore believe that their brother Masons who are adherents to non-Christian religions are not going to heaven unless they repent and believe in the biblical Christ. Yet, the Masonic Lodge lays out a plan of salvation for these men, and Christ is not included in this plan. For example, the Masonic lesson of the Common Gavel states. “The Common Gavel is an instrument used by operative Masons to break off the rough and superfluous parts of stones, the better to fit them for the builder’s use. But we, as Free and Accepted masons are taught to use it for the more noble and glorious purpose of divesting our hearts and consciences of the vices and superfluities of life, thereby fitting our minds as living stones for that spiritual building, that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (The Grand Lodge of New Brunswick, *The Ceremonies of Craft Masonry*, 1944, p. 19). The Masonic Lodge applies this lesson to those who reject Christ. Moreover, the Lodge has alluded to two biblical passages (1 Pet. 2:5; 2 Cor. 5: 1), and the only way the wonderful truth of these passages can apply to anyone is if they are in Christ by grace through faith in him alone.

## Is Masonry a Religion?

Yes. Along with its initiates believing in their personal deities, the Lodge has a corporate deity, called “The Great Architect of the Universe,” in whom all the varying deities of individual Masons are subsumed.\* In a Masonic Lodge, this deity is prayed to and his attributes are defined. Masonry also has a plan of salvation, a system of ethical behavior grounded in the belief of (and coming from) the Great Architect of the Universe, ritualistic acts and symbolism focusing on the afterlife (i.e. the reenacted drama play of the slaying and “raising” of the Masonic hero, Hiram Abif, who is played by the candidate for Master Mason), and, in some parts of the world, burial services in which the deceased is said to be in the “Grand Lodge above.” Most Masons say Masonry is not a religion. If Masonry is not a religion, what would it have to teach to be a religion?

Masonic authority Allen Roberts states, “In his private devotions a Mason will pray to Jehovah, Mohammed, Allah, Jesus or the Deity of his choice. In a Masonic Lodge, however, the Mason will find the name of his Deity within the Great Architect of the Universe” (*The Craft and Its Symbols* [Richmond, Va: Macoy Publishing, 1974], 6).

Masonry a religion? Those who say that it is a religion quote from certain people whom they call authorities. I can do no better than to follow their example. Here are the words that were spoken in 1952 by the Rev. Thomas Sherrard Roy, D.D., a Baptist minister, when he was Grand Master of Masons in Massachusetts: “We have none of the marks of religion. We have no creed, and no confession of faith in doctrinal statement. We have no theology. We have no ritual of worship. We have no symbols that are religious in the sense of the symbols found in church or synagogue .... Our purpose is not that of a religion. We are not primarily interested in the redemption of

man. We seek no converts.... We raise no money for religious purposes. By any definition of religion accepted by our critics, we cannot qualify as a religion . . . And there is nothing in Freemasonry that is opposed to the religion he brings with him into the lodge.” That seems pretty clear to me!

## Masonic Origins

Where does Freemasonry come from? If the Masonic ritual were to be taken literally, we would conclude that it originated with the builders of King Solomon’s Temple. But, alas, there are unbridgeable gaps of time and space between then and now, and they make it clear that this descent is purely symbolic. Many other theories are current. Perhaps most popular these days is one promoted by two very readable books of the last few years, *Born in Blood*, and *The Temple and the Lodge*. Both of them assert that Freemasonry developed from the Knights Templar who lived at the time of the Crusades. They are unequivocally wrong. I still subscribe to the old view, that the modern Freemasons evolved from the British operative stonemasons of the Middle Ages.

These workmen, the cathedral builders, were organized into guilds, which maintained control, administered the trade, and looked after the interests of the workmen. In London, they were first organized at some date between 1356 and 1376. At some of their locations, these people had a shelter, usually on the south side of the building project, where they kept their tools, rested, and took their meals; it was known as the lodge. These operative masons had a written text (now generally known as the Old Charges, or the Old Gothic Constitutions) that was to be read to new masons; It set the rules for apprenticeship, employment, and general behavior, and also contained a traditional history of the builders’ craft that went back to Jabel, and Nimrod, and Solomon, and Saint Alban. Over a hundred copies of this text survive. It served to remind the craftsmen that this was no servile trade of recent devising, but an ancient and honorable institution.

At some date around 1630 the Masonic groups began to accept people who were not stonemasons, and the non-operatives gradually came to outnumber the operatives in a number of lodges. (This is the biggest question in the history of Masonry: Why did these outsiders, who were generally members of the upper classes, choose to associate themselves with a bunch of artisans?) This heralded the advent of what is called the transitional period. Finally in 1717 four lodges in London formed themselves into the first Grand Lodge. Within twenty years, there were Grand Lodges in Ireland and Scotland as well.

From these groups Masonry spread all over the world, reaching Paris in 1725, Madrid and Calcutta in 1728, Florence and Boston in 1733. Initially every lodge, no matter where it was located, was subject to the British Grand Lodges. But particularly after the American Revolution, the Masonic bodies in the various states declared their independence. The first Grand Lodge in what is now Canada was formed in 1855. Today there are independent Grand Lodges of Masons in most of the states and provinces, and in many countries. There is no worldwide authority that controls them all.

“The Struggle Over Freemasonry”, James A Beverley. Canadian Baptist, ed. Larry Matthews. February 1998, vol. 144, no. 2. pp. 24-28. Dr James Beverley is a specialist in modern religious movements and a member of the faculty at Ontario Theological Seminary. Material from Wallace McLeod and Steve Tsoukalsis was supplied by Dr Beverley. Wallace McLeod is a professor emeritus at the University of Toronto, and one of the most distinguished Masonic historians in the world. Steve Doukalas is executive director of Sound Doctrine Ministries and a well-known critic of Masonry.