

CONFIDENTIAL to Freemasons

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Short Talk: On Exegesis of the Ritual

by W. Bro. Alan Branford (© 11 September 2012)

Brethren, when did you last indite!?

Relax, Worshipful Master, I did not ask when the Brethren were last indicted – I-N-D-I-C-T-E-D – but rather when they last indited – I-N-D-I-T-E-D.

You don't remember? <pause> Oh ... you don't know what I'm talking about? But you made a solemn obligation, in open Lodge, kneeling on your left knee, with your right hand on the Volume of the Sacred Law, promising that you "will not write those Secrets, **indite**, carve, mark, engrave, or otherwise them delineate". So, you promised not to do something, but you didn't know what that was? So, what did you do about it?

I am Alan Branford, and this evening I shall speak to you "On Exegesis of the Ritual". Exe-what!! I'll come back to that.

Brethren, when did you last hele!?! No, I'm not talking about the laying on of hands, and I'm not addressing our medical clinician brethren. I'm addressing you all! You promised that you would always **hele** – H-E-L-E – the Secrets or mysteries of Masonry. So, you promised that you would always do something, but you didn't know what that was? So, what did you do about it?

Exegesis is the critical explanation or interpretation of a piece of text. The root of the word is in "guiding out", guiding or teasing the meaning out of the text. And, it means that you have work to do.

When you first entered a Lodge, hoodwinked in a state of darkness, you came "of (your) own free will and accord, ..., humbly soliciting to be admitted to the mysteries and privileges of Freemasonry". But there is no such thing as a free lunch, or a free Festive Board for that matter. You have work to do.

Freemasonry is a fraternity that not only promotes community service and charity, but also places a great deal of emphasis on the continuing self-development of the individual. Freemasons' Lodge meetings are deeply infused with centuries-old ritual and ceremony, highly allegorical and filled with wisdom, and brethren are encouraged to reflect on the deeper meanings behind them.

When you promised that you will not *indite* those Secrets, you were promising that will not *announce* those Secrets. When you promised that you would always *hele* the Secrets, you were promising that you would always *keep them concealed*.

So, am I advocating a rewriting of the Ritual, a modernization of the text? Most definitely not! It is only through repeated critical reflection and interpretation that we may guide out the hidden mysteries. As we grow in the Craft, more and more of those mysteries become clear to us. To advocate a reworking of the Ritual is not just taking the lazy way out, it also risks the loss through translation of mysteries still yet hidden to the translator.

Let me remind you of the First Tracing Board. "In all regular, well-formed, constituted lodges, there is a point within a Circle. This Circle is bounded between North and South by two grand parallel lines, the one representing Moses, the other King Solomon. On the upper part of this Circle rests the Volume of the Sacred Law supporting Jacob's Ladder, the top of which reaches to the Heavens; *and were we as conversant with that Holy Book as those parallels were, and adherent to the doctrines therein contained*, it will lead us to Him who will not deceive us" This is making clear to us that we will always have yet more to learn.

The immovable Jewels, the Tracing Board and the Rough and Perfect Ashlars "lie open and immovable in the lodge for the brethren to moralize upon" – constant reflection and contemplation. The Working Tools are explained to us so that we may seek "the moral to be derived from the contemplation of these tools ...". The Charge after Initiation charges you "to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge". We have work to do.

In the initiation ceremony itself, the newly invested Entered Apprentice has it explained to him "the reasons for (his) preparation which, at first sight, to (his) untaught mind must have appeared somewhat strange, ...".

As Freemasons, we are constantly being exhorted to reflect upon the ritual, to contemplate its meaning and to make its moral significance our personal objective. And, of course there are not just the static symbols and the verbal allegories. Let us not forget the lessons to be drawn from the physical ritual.

For example, the penal sign in the first degree "... is an allusion to the ancient symbolic penalty of the degree, which implies that, as a man of honour, an Entered Apprentice Freemason would have submitted to having his throat cut across rather than improperly disclose the secrets entrusted to him". It behoves the Freemason to reflect on this allusion when giving the sign. If through familiarity the penal sign degenerates into a stylish wave to the Master, the ritual loses its allusion and therefore its entire point. If this observation is extended to the ritual generally, our ceremonies become merely the eccentric circus that our detractors often accuse us of being.

Thus I would recommend to all brethren regular exegesis of the ritual, and attention to its correct execution, the better, as the chisel reminds us, to "cultivate our minds and render us better members of society".