

The 15th Masonic Degree: Knight of the East, of the Sword, or of the Eagle

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The 15th Degree begins the Chapter of the Rose Croix in the Scottish Rite, and is elemental in assisting Masons to mitigate against the facets of ignorance, intolerance, fanaticism, superstition, and absence of charity within the Masonic membership. The question that constantly arises in this regard is, if and how we can eliminate the organizational and political biases which continue to prevent us (as Masons) from achieving the virtues of freedom that are taught in this degree.

Writing on this subject is at best a controversial enterprise as Masonic effort is widely variable, depending on the types of Masonic leaders that are present in each of the Grand Lodges throughout the United States. I approach the topic from the perspective of identification of some of the commonly perceived problems that are currently clearly evident in many of the Masonic jurisdictions. Ignorance is an area that is being cogently and uniquely addressed by the College of the Consistory through its curriculum which is freely available to all Scottish Rite Masons. At the root of Masonic ignorance is, perhaps, the shift in professional quality of membership during the past 50 years. Previously, most Masons were primarily professional men. Politically, in the past, membership in the fraternity was often necessary or at the least a great help in attaining political office, inclusive of the highest political offices. Today, the membership is often largely made up of tradesmen, retired blue collar workers, and others who were not academically inclined during their active lives.

Interestingly, the titles, aprons, collars, badges, pins, and other accouterments of Masonic rank or officer status were not of greatest importance to Masons 50 years ago, whereas today, many Masonic leaders attempt to become elected leaders of the fraternity almost solely for the ego driven acquisition of these titles and baubles. In the past (and still in some Grand jurisdictions) some men aspire to the leadership roles only to serve the fraternity, and not for personal engrandizement. Why is this the case? One answer may be that men who have worked in relatively menial vocations and who later become active in Masonry find in it a chance to attain a level of personal recognition that their vocations never provided them. A title, a badge, the adoration of other members, recognition within the confines of the fraternity resulting in ego enhancement. Herein lies a lesson from the 15th degree: Cyrus (wise King of Kings) tempted Zerubbabel with title, wealth, position, and power in the attempt to subvert his principles and have him reveal all of the secrets of Masonry. Zerubbabel absolutely refused all ego enhancing temptation, and in the end received all the offerings and temptations from Cyrus due to his demonstration of absolute incorruptibility. Thus we learn a lesson of the 15th Degree and the major reason for its creation. The King rewarded the absolutely incorruptible man as a lesson to all. Finally the question, can we eliminate or mitigate Masonic ignorance (and should Masons seek higher office as a personal ego enhancement)? Yes we can brothers, at the ballot box, in order to better serve the fraternity. Each Mason must answer for himself at each opportunity to vote.

A second area for consideration herein is intolerance among Masonic men. Should all Masons be tolerant of all of their brothers, or should they be selective in rendering such tolerance?

This is a very difficult issue given the wide professional and intellectual variety present among members of the fraternity. Loud, long winded, argumentative, dictatorial, arrogant, marginally intelligent men usually eventually find themselves derided in those Lodges wherein they are members, given the passage of time, and recognition of their continuing aberrant behavior. Ultimately such individuals become objects of ridicule and often, many reasonable Masons simply avoid attending events and meetings where such persons are in regular attendance. Herein then, is one of the current reasons why membership is dwindling nationwide in the fraternity. The root of this problem is in the investigation process at the time of petition for membership. Such persons can often be identified early and eliminated. Later, once the aberration continues and results become clear, Masons should have the courage to call such members to account and to ultimately eliminate them before they cause many other more appropriate member men to terminate their relationship with the fraternity. Another issue in this subject area is the election of such persons to high office. Consider a new Mason attending a meeting in which such a demonstrative and negative person occupies a chair in the East. The reason(s) for his negative impression and subsequent cessation of membership is clearly evident. Further, and finally, consider for example a university president as a petitioner in a Lodge wherein the officers elected are of the ego driven type who are striving for titles and accouterments notwithstanding their inability to speak correctly or to think analytically. Such a petitioner will in all probability not return and will not believe that the fraternity has anything to offer when its leaders exhibit coarse behavior and speech. Can we deal with this problem successfully? Yes we can by simply electing the best and most accomplished professional men to high office. Thus elect those whose goal is to improve the fraternity and not to simply enhance their own ego decrements which they earned during their educational and working lives.

In the area of fanaticism, some Masons illustrate this trait their self efficacy, and others in service to others. As I write this and you read it, we can both think together of examples of each type of fanatical Masonic behavior. Can we deal with this ongoing problem in the fraternity among brothers? Again, I suggest the ballot box as the potential answer to this long standing negative element in our beloved body. For example, if a man is in an officer line and clearly proves that he is unsuitable for leadership in spite of a fanatical level of attendance and participation, then we can remove him from that line before he achieves the chair in the East. Imagine for a moment the devastation in membership and member attendance that occurs when several inappropriate men are in officer lines adjacent to each other, and when all are allowed to reach the top chair. Far better to elect only our best to leadership roles and thus to begin to render all three of the foregoing (ignorance, intolerance, and fanaticism) less destructive to our fraternal order. To first do very careful investigation of each petitioner, to then control those less desirable and less intelligent men through the ballot box, and through Masonic election procedures, is our duty so that these persons do not continue to erode our rapidly dwindling professional membership.

Superstition among our brethren of today plays little role in any listing of our decremental problems. Few current Masons exhibit superstitions which negatively impact our membership. I believe that superstition no longer exerts a strong influence in Masonic organizations as was the case in the past. Thus, we do not, in my opinion, need to focus attention on this characteristic of the past in order to improve our current fraternity. Outside the fraternity, however, many citizens seem to continue to hold superstitious beliefs concerning the fraternity. In this regard, we do need

to stress the truths concerning the fraternity in our public relations efforts. Many profane groups and individuals continue to spread unwarranted and superstitious untruths concerning the fraternity, and our Grand Lodges should recognize this as a strong detriment to membership increase, and aggressively begin to expend effort and funds in a public relations campaign exposing the truths we espouse. We can accomplish this through open house events and media publicity in a variety of venue choices provided to the public at large.

In the area of charity among and between Masons, we seem at present to be holding our own. Masonic aid to brethren is prevalent throughout the nation and Masonic funerals and support to family members is clearly evident. We should, however, be letting the public know of our extreme benevolence as compared with all other fraternal organizations through a massive public relations campaign concerning this subject. Fifty years ago virtually all citizens knew what Masonic fraternal membership was, yet today virtually no non member has any idea about its importance in our American founding. This is, again, a fault of our elected leaders who do not expend funds or effort on public relations activity. This can be corrected by simply letting the public know about our internal and external charitable efforts through our electing only appropriate and competent leaders.

In summary, how can we eliminate the Masonic organizational and political biases that continue to hold us back from the virtues of freedom as taught in the 15th degree? We can begin by carefully evaluating each petition for Masonic membership. Then by voting only for those who we honestly believe will make good men and Masons. For the few undesirables who slip through this process undetected, we must not elect them to office, and if their behavior is intolerable across time, we should take the steps to eliminate these men from membership. Thus the ballot box and the Masonic vote are our tools for use in correcting past and current problems within our ranks. The politics of Masonic fraternal relations often cause major problems due primarily to ego driven rather than service driven candidates for office. All of us have been involved in election situations at all levels in the fraternity wherein a man is elected because he "has been through the chairs". We must overcome this outmoded concept and elect only those to higher office who have done well in the previous chair. This simple change in our modus operandi will enable us to begin to solve our leadership crisis (which continues as this is written). Finally, if we can overcome our inertia (in these regards) we may be able to extricate ourselves from the current Masonic tailspin in membership, and reestablish the fraternity as a desirable place for professional men to become members and for such men to enjoy Masonic fellowship.