

GUIDANCE TO METHODISTS ON FREEMASONRY (1985)

1. The Conference of 1984 directed the Faith and Order Committee to produce a report on Freemasonry in order that the Methodist people might be guided as to the advisability of membership.
2. After the Conference the United Grand Lodge of England, the controlling body of Craft Freemasonry in England and Wales, approached the President and offered to provide information to assist the Committee in its work. In subsequent correspondence with the Convener of the Faith and Order Committee, the Secretary of Grand Lodge suggested a meeting between the Convener and a Freemason's Lodge Chaplain. This offer was accepted in November, 1984. At the same time, the Secretary was invited to offer comments on the draft report when it was ready, particularly to correct any errors of fact. Grand Lodge was also asked to arrange if possible a meeting with a Methodist minister Freemason who carried the confidence of Grand Lodge. No reply was received. A draft of this report was sent to Grand Lodge after the January meeting of the Faith and Order Committee, and it was indicated that meetings with a chaplain and a Methodist minister Freemason were still wanted. In February 1985 the Secretary of Grand Lodge replied with detailed comments on the draft report. He supplied the name of a Methodist minister Freemason who also commented on the draft. The same minister was present at a meeting between two members of the Committee and Provincial masonic officers, which was also attended by an Anglican clergyman mason. Comments on the draft report were also received from a former Vice-President of the Conference who is a Freemason.
3. The Committee gratefully acknowledges the help it has received from Methodists and non-Methodists, Freemasons and non-Freemasons. It has received many documents, including copies of reports on Freemasonry by other churches, and has benefited from the presence of an observer from the United Reformed Church. Among the documents made available to the Committee is a copy of a leaflet entitled 'What is Freemasonry', published by the United Grand Lodge for Freemasons. Quotations in this report are from that leaflet.
4. Freemasonry describes itself as 'one of the world's oldest secular fraternal societies' and claims to be 'concerned with moral and spiritual values'. In basic, or Craft, Freemasonry there are three levels of membership, known as degrees, through which the member may progress. Almost all members progress through all three degrees. On reaching the third degree, the highest of the three, masons may be invited to take up other forms of Freemasonry. One of these, known as the Holy Royal Arch, is described as the completion of the third degree, though many Freemasons do not take it up. The other forms of Freemasonry draw their members from Craft Freemasonry, but have their own governing bodies distinct from the United Grand Lodge. Some of the other forms of Freemasonry are specifically Christian in intention. Most Freemasons know little about forms other than Craft Freemasonry.

5. Membership of the society 'is open to men of any race or religion' who have 'a belief in a Supreme Being' and 'are of good repute'. (Organisations of women Freemasons exist, but are not recognised by Grand Lodge and are not considered in this report). Each mason is a member of a Lodge and is expected to attend its meetings. Part of the business of a Lodge is the teaching of the precepts of Freemasonry through ritual dramas, which include an initiation rite for the first degree and rites of passage between degrees. Underlying all the rites is a legend loosely connected with the Biblical story of the building of King Solomon's Temple.

The rituals of Freemasonry were originally passed on orally, and although printed versions are now available, there are differences of detail from place to place. In preparing this report we have used printed copies of the most widely used versions of the rituals of Craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry. These are found in two books, listed in the Appendix; copies of the books were bought openly by a non-mason at a shop specialising in masonic regalia. The printed rituals contain many instances of words replaced by their initial letters or by abbreviations, for example 'light' appears as l and 'obligation' as obl; other words are omitted and replaced by rows of dots. Many of the hidden words are numbered among the secrets of Freemasonry which masons are sworn to conceal, and are supplied in Freemasonry by oral tradition. We have made use of the full versions of the rituals published by Walton Hannah in the books listed in the Appendix. The accuracy of Mr Hannah's versions has never been challenged, and has been publicly attested by some Freemasons.

6. Freemasonry claims to follow three great principles: brotherly love, including tolerance and respect for the opinions of others; relief, including the practice of charity to the community as a whole; and truth, including striving for high moral standards. It is beyond question that the society encourages high moral standards, and that masonic charitable giving is generous and includes masonic and non-masonic charities.
7. Among the demands made of the mason is 'a respect for the laws of the country in which a man works and lives'. The mason's 'duty as a citizen must always prevail over any obligation to other Freemasons'. Similarly, 'The use by a Freemason of his membership to promote his own or anyone else's business, professional or personal interests is condemned, and is contrary to the conditions on which he seeks admission to Freemasonry'.
8. Despite these official statements, some Freemasons feel obliged to promote the interests of other Freemasons, other things being equal, as part of the duty of brotherly love. It is frequently alleged that this practice leads to unfair treatment of non-masons, and for some such allegations we have been offered evidence which in the nature of the case cannot be tested. Christians will not be surprised to find that some men fail to live up to the high standards demanded of them, but abuse of membership by some is not peculiar to Freemasonry, and the society cannot be condemned because of the conduct of some of its members.
9. Freemasonry is condemned by some on the grounds that it is discriminatory. Membership is restricted to men, who must be of good repute, and has financial implications which cannot be met by all. Other forms of discrimination are alleged, for example discrimination against the handicapped. Only the

restrictions mentioned above are found in the society's constitution and regulations, and we have been given evidence of Lodges which include handicapped members and men of different races and religions.

10. It is natural that those who meet together in a fraternal society will discuss matters of mutual interest. It has been alleged that some church business, including that relating to the stationing of ministers, has been discussed and decided informally at Lodge meetings. Such practices, if they occur, are to be condemned. The business of the church must be done in the duly elected committees of the church, by those involved, and should not be settled, however informally, anywhere else.
11. Suspicions about Freemasonry are encouraged by the excessive secrecy practised by the society. While officially the secrecy applies only to the recognition signs of the society, and so may appear reasonable, in practice it is applied to most aspects of the society, including avowal of membership. The secret signs enable masons to recognise one another instantly and secretly but it is difficult for non-masons to discover whether or not someone is a Freemason. There are no public lists of Freemasons or Lodges. The society thus encourages suspicion and lays itself open to charges of corrupt practice which can be neither proved nor disproved.
12. For Christians the secrecy practised by Freemasons poses a problem in that secrecy of any kind is destructive of fellowship. The Christian community is an open fellowship. Within it there will inevitably be some secrecy, for example pastoral confidentiality, which is entirely proper; but secrecy should be kept to the minimum necessary, and must be capable of careful and public justification. Freemasonry does not publicly justify its secrecy, and it is hard to see what reasonable justification might be offered, particularly of secrecy with respect to membership.
13. The Secrecy of Freemasonry is protected by the oaths sworn by members at different stages. These oaths are of an extravagant nature and include blood-curdling penalties for those who break their oaths. For some Christians the swearing of any oath is forbidden. For most, swearing an oath in, for example, a court of law is acceptable. However the masonic oaths are so extravagant that they cannot be taken at face value, as most masons agree. Freemasons admit that the penalties have never been inflicted, and most agree that they never could be inflicted. It is claimed that the true penalty of breaking one's oath is that of being known as a wilfully perjured individual, and the oath in the first degree refers to this penalty. A so-called 'permissive' alternative form of the oath was approved by Grand Lodge in 1964 in response to masonic concern about the oaths; in it the candidate swears only to bear in mind the traditional penalties. The permissive form has not been widely adopted, and most masons still swear the traditional oaths including the traditional penalties 'without evasion, equivocation, or mental reservation of any kind' (words from the rituals, quoted in many places). The swearing of such oaths thus devalues the use of oaths or solemn words. Methodists might look to the Covenant service for an example of the proper use of solemn words. Certainly oaths should never contain extravagant words just to add colour, nor should they refer to penalties which cannot be enforced.

14. A further problem with the oaths of Freemasonry, and with much of the ritual of the society, is that the candidate at any stage is not supposed to know in advance the full content of the ritual to be followed or the oath he will be required to swear. While the candidate will doubtless trust those whom he knows who have been through the ritual before him, entry into rituals and obligations whose content is unknown and whose implications are shrouded in secrecy as far as the candidate is concerned cannot be commended as a course of action for Christians.
15. Freemasons are bound by their oaths to an allegiance to one another. Some critics claim that this allegiance takes precedence over all other commitments. Freemasonry explicitly denies the claim: 'a Freemason is encouraged to do his duty first to his God'. Christians recognise an allegiance to God in Christ which takes precedence over all other commitments, and there are commitments to family, society, church, and so on which are of great importance. As with all commitments, priorities must be weighed carefully: if membership of Freemasonry takes precedence over Christian commitments, such membership is unacceptable to Methodists.
16. Freemasons are required to believe in a Supreme Being, sometimes called the Great Architect of the Universe. At various points in masonic rituals prayer is offered to this Being. Freemasonry claims to draw together those of different religions and Freemasons are required to respect one another's religious beliefs, and this is reflected in the prayers offered. However, the worship included in masonic ritual seems to be an attenuated form unsatisfactory in any religious tradition. Christians must be concerned that the Supreme Being is not equated by all with God as Christians acknowledge Him, and prayer in craft and Royal Arch Freemasonry is never offered in the name of Jesus Christ. There are documented cases of masonic services in Christian churches in which Christian prayers have been altered to remove the name of Christ.
17. Another difficulty about Freemasonry for Christians is the allegation that masonic practices imply salvation by works, through charitable giving and mutual aid. Again, while these elements of Freemasonry can become dominant for an individual, the masonic rituals do not contain any such doctrine.
18. The case is rather different with the fear that Freemasonry offers salvation by secret knowledge. The suggestion of secret knowledge becomes stronger as one proceeds through the degrees of the society, and becomes explicit in the exaltation rites for the Royal Arch degree. The rites here include a dramatic enactment of the re-discovery of secrets claimed to have been lost. The references to these secrets carry clear implications of a secret knowledge whose possession helps one to obtain immortal life, but there is no explicit reference to salvation and no claim that this is the only way to immortality. Christians believe that the knowledge of the sure way to salvation which includes eternal life, should be freely available to all and must be offered to all.
19. The rites of Freemasonry raise further questions for Christians and the questions are made more difficult by the different interpretations of the rituals offered by Freemasons themselves. Freemasonry concerns itself with spiritual values and many masons regard their progress in the society as a spiritual journey marked by the various rites. In the rite of initiation for the first degree the candidate is

blindfolded, and is required to ask for the restoration of light. The explicit reference is to material light, but the context of the ritual, and the accompanying charge to the candidate suggest strongly a spiritual passage from darkness to light as well. During the exaltation ceremony for the Royal Arch, the candidate is blindfolded and required to ask for light; this time there is no reference to material light and the candidate is congratulated on being admitted to the light of the Order. The rite of raising to the third degree includes the symbolic death of the candidate and a raising from this figurative death by ritual means. In Christianity the symbolic rite of passing from death to life is the rite of baptism in the name of Father, Son and Spirit; and the passage from darkness to light is through faith in Jesus Christ. Freemasonry thus provides ceremonies which on some masonic interpretations are equivalent to essential parts of Christian practice and offer alternatives to important elements of Christian faith.

20. The most serious theological objection to Freemasonry for Christians lies in the name given to the Supreme Being in the rituals of the Royal Arch degree. One of the secrets revealed in this degree is that the name of the Supreme Being is JAHBULON. It has been suggested to us that this word is a description of God, but the ritual refers to the word as a name of God. The name is a composite, as the ritual explicitly states. The explanation given of the name in the ritual is acknowledged to be inaccurate, but is preserved to bring out the traditional meaning for Freemasonry of the word. The best explanation of the derivation of this word seems to be that two of the three parts, JAH and BUL, are the names of gods in different religions, while the third syllable ON was thought by the composers of the ritual to be the name of a god in yet another religion; modern scholarship suggests they were wrong. In any case, it is clear that each of the three syllables is intended to be the name of a divinity in a particular religion. The whole word is thus an example of syncretism, an attempt to unite different religions in one, which Christians cannot accept. We note that some Christians who are Freemasons withdraw from any ceremonies in which this word is to be used.
21. Our study has shown that many of the complaints directed against Freemasonry can be directed against other societies, and arise from abuses which the society itself condemns, but which are compounded by its own secrecy. Nevertheless on the most generous reading of the evidence there remain serious questions for Christians about Freemasonry, especially theological questions relating to syncretism and the replacement of Christian essentials. Although Freemasonry claims not to be a religion or a religious movement, its rituals contain religious practices and carry religious overtones. It is clear that Freemasonry may compete strongly with Christianity. There is a great danger that the Christian who becomes a Freemason will find himself compromising his Christian beliefs or his allegiance to Christ, perhaps without realising what he is doing.
22. Consequently our guidance to the Methodist people is that Methodists should not become Freemasons.
23. We recognise that there are many loyal and sincere Methodists who are Freemasons, whose commitment to Christ is unquestionable and who see no incompatibility in their membership of the Methodist Church and of Freemasonry. We urge all Methodists who are already Freemasons to study this report and consider carefully the questions raised here. We recommend that

Methodists who think it right to remain Freemasons, might consider whether they should, on appropriate occasions, declare their membership in order to remove suspicion and mistrust.

24. In the light of this report, questions arise about the use of Methodist premises by Freemasons. A Standing Order referring to masonic services was revoked by the Conference of 1981, on the grounds that the position is covered by paragraph 14 of the Model Trusts and S.O. 910. This is still the case, but in the light of this report and the evidence it has received, the Committee believes it wise to make explicit the position with regard to Freemasons' meetings. It therefore proposes the following Standing Order:

919 Masonic Services and Meetings.

- (1) Meetings of Freemasons' Lodges or other meetings for masonic purposes may not be held on Methodist premises.
- (2) Services exclusively for Freemasons may not be held on Methodist premises.
- (3) If a Freemasons' Lodge requests that a service be held on Methodist premises, the trustees may at their discretion either withhold permission or grant permission on the following conditions:
 - (i) the service shall be one of public Christian worship held in accordance with Methodist practice and complying with the Model Trusts;
 - (ii) the contents of the service shall first be seen and approved by the Superintendent;
 - (iii) it shall be conducted by a person appointed by the Superintendent.

Appendix

Books used in the preparation of this report include:

Emulation Ritual	Lewis Masonic, 1980 (6 th ed.)
The Aldersgate Royal Arch Ritual	Lewis Masonic, 1983 (9 th ed.)
United Grand Lodge of England Constitution	United Grand Lodge, 1984
Harry Carr	The Freemason at Work Lewis Masonic, 1981
Walton Hannah	Darkness Visible Britons, 1975 (13 th ed.)
Walton Hannah	Christians by Degrees Britons, 1964
W. L. Wilmshurst	The Masonic Initiation Rider & Son, 1924

RESOLUTION

That the Conference adopt this report on Freemasonry and direct that it be printed in the **Minutes of Conference**.

(Agenda 1985, pp.628-635)

The Conference adopted not only the above resolution, but also the Standing Order proposed in paragraph 24.