

What's a Mason?

That's not a surprising question. Even though Masons (Freemasons) are members of the largest and oldest fraternity in the world, and even though almost everyone has a father or grandfather or uncle who was a Mason, many people aren't quite certain just who Masons are.

The answer is simple. A Mason (or Freemason) is a member of a fraternity known as Masonry (or Freemasonry). A fraternity is a group of men (just as a sorority is a group of women) who join together because:

- There are things they want to do in the world.
- There are things they want to do "inside their own minds."
- They enjoy being together with men they like and respect.

(We'll look at some of these things later.)

What's Masonry?

Masonry (or Freemasonry) is the oldest fraternity in the world. No one knows just how old it is because the actual origins have been lost in time. Probably, it arose from the guilds of stonemasons who built the castles and cathedrals of the Middle Ages. Possibly, they were influenced by the Knights Templar, a group of Christian warrior monks formed in 1118 to help protect pilgrims making trips to the Holy Land.

In 1717, Masonry created a formal organization in England when the first Grand Lodge was formed. A Grand Lodge is the administrative body in charge of Masonry in some geographical area. In the United States, there is a Grand Lodge in each state and the District of Columbia. In Canada, there is a Grand Lodge in each province. Local organizations of Masons are called lodges. There are lodges in most towns, and large cities usually have several. There are about 13,200 lodges in the United States.

If Masonry started in Great Britain, how did it get to America?

In a time when travel was by horseback and sailing ship, Masonry spread with amazing speed. By 1731, when Benjamin Franklin joined the fraternity, there were already several lodges in the Colonies, and Masonry spread rapidly as America expanded west. In addition to Franklin, many of the Founding Fathers -- men such as George Washington, Paul Revere, Joseph Warren, and John Hancock -- were Masons. Masons and Masonry played an important part in the Revolutionary War and an even more important part in the Constitutional

Convention and the debates surrounding the ratification of the Bill of Rights. Many of those debates were held in Masonic lodges.

What's a lodge?

The word "lodge" means both a group of Masons meeting in some place and the room or building in which they meet. Masonic buildings are also sometimes called "temples" because much of the symbolism Masonry uses to teach its lessons comes from the building of King Solomon's Temple in the Holy Land. The term "lodge" itself comes from the structures which the stonemasons built against the sides of the cathedrals during construction. In winter, when building had to stop, they lived in these lodges and worked at carving stone.

While there is some variation in detail from state to state and country to country.

If you've ever watched C-SPAN's coverage of the House of Commons in London, you'll notice that the layout is about the same. Since Masonry came to America from England, we still use the English floor plan and English titles for the officers. The Worshipful Master of the Lodge sits in the East. "Worshipful" is an English term of respect which means the same thing as "Honorable." He is called the Master of the lodge for the same reason that the leader of an orchestra is called the "Concert Master." It's simply an older term for "Leader." In other organizations, he would be called "President." The Senior and Junior Wardens are the First and Second Vice-Presidents. The Deacons are messengers, and the Stewards have charge of refreshments.

Every lodge has an altar holding a "Volume of the Sacred Law." In the United States and Canada, that is almost always a Bible.

Masonry does things in the world.

Masonry teaches that each person has a responsibility to make things better in the world. Most individuals won't be the ones to find a cure for cancer, or eliminate poverty, or help create world peace, but every man and woman and child can do something to help others and to make things a little better. Masonry is deeply involved with helping people -- it spends more than \$1.4 million dollars every day in the United States, just to make life a little easier. And the great majority of that help goes to people who are not Masons. Some of these charities are vast projects, like the Crippled Children's Hospitals and Burns Institutes built by the Shriners. Also, Scottish Rite Masons maintain a nationwide network of over 100 Childhood Language Disorders Clinics, Centers, and Programs. Each

helps children afflicted by such conditions as aphasia, dyslexia, stuttering, and related learning or speech disorders.

Some services are less noticeable, like helping a widow pay her electric bill or buying coats and shoes for disadvantaged children. And there's just about anything you can think of in-between. But with projects large or small, the Masons of a lodge try to help make the world a better place. The lodge gives them a way to combine with others to do even more good.

Masonry does things "inside" the individual Mason.

"Grow or die" is a great law of all nature. Most people feel a need for continued growth as individuals. They feel they are not as honest or as charitable or as compassionate or as loving or as trusting or as well-informed as they ought to be. Masonry reminds its members over and over again of the importance of these qualities and education. It lets men associate with other men of honor and integrity who believe that things like honesty, compassion, love, trust, and knowledge are important. In some ways, Masonry is a support group for men who are trying to make the right decisions. It's easier to practice these virtues when you know that those around you think they are important, too, and won't laugh at you. That's a major reason that Masons enjoy being together.

Masons enjoy each other's company.

It's good to spend time with people you can trust completely, and most Masons find that in their lodge. While much of lodge activity is spent in works of charity or in lessons in self-development, much is also spent in fellowship. Lodges have picnics, camping trips, and many events for the whole family. Simply put, a lodge is a place to spend time with friends.

For members only, two basic kinds of meetings take place in a lodge. The most common is a simple business meeting. To open and close the meeting, there is a ceremony whose purpose is to remind us of the virtues by which we are supposed to live. Then there is a reading of the minutes; voting on petitions (applications of men who want to join the fraternity); planning for charitable functions, family events, and other lodge activities; and sharing information about members (called "Brothers," as in most fraternities) who are ill or have some sort of need. The other kind of meeting is one in which people join the fraternity -- one at which the "degrees" are performed.

But every lodge serves more than its own members. Frequently, there are meetings open to the public. Examples are Ladies' Nights, "Brother Bring a Friend Nights," public installations of officers, cornerstone laying ceremonies, and other special meetings supporting community events and dealing with topics of local interest.

What's a degree?

A degree is a stage or level of membership. It's also the ceremony by which a man attains that level of membership. There are three, called Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. As you can see, the names are taken from the craft guilds. In the Middle Ages, when a person wanted to join a craft, such as the gold smiths or the carpenters or the stonemasons, he was first apprenticed. As an apprentice, he learned the tools and skills of the trade. When he had proved his skills, he became a "Fellow of the Craft" (today we would say "Journeyman"), and when he had exceptional ability, he was known as a Master of the Craft.

The degrees are plays in which the candidate participates. Each degree uses symbols to teach, just as plays did in the Middle Ages and as many theatrical productions do today. (We'll talk about symbols a little later.)

The Masonic degrees teach the great lessons of life -- the importance of honor and integrity, of being a person on whom others can rely, of being both trusting and trustworthy, of realizing that you have a spiritual nature as well as a physical or animal nature, of the importance of self-control, of knowing how to love and be loved, of knowing how to keep confidential what others tell you so that they can "open up" without fear.

Why is Masonry so "secretive"?

It really isn't "secretive," although it sometimes has that reputation. Masons certainly don't make a secret of the fact that they are members of the fraternity. We wear rings, lapel pins, and tie clasps with Masonic emblems like the Square and Compasses, the best known of Masonic signs which, logically, recall the fraternity's early symbolic roots in stonemasonry. Masonic buildings are clearly marked, and are usually listed in the phone book. Lodge activities are not secret - picnics and other events are even listed in the newspapers, especially in smaller towns. Many lodges have answering machines which give the upcoming lodge activities. But there are some Masonic secrets, and they fall into two categories.

The first are the ways in which a man can identify himself as a Mason -- grips and passwords. We keep those private for obvious reasons. It is not at all unknown for unscrupulous people to try to pass themselves off as Masons in order to get assistance under false pretenses.

The second group is harder to describe, but they are the ones Masons usually mean if we talk about "Masonic secrets." They are secrets because they literally can't be talked about, can't be put into words. They are the changes that happen to a man when he really accepts responsibility for his own life and, at the same time, truly decides that his real happiness is in helping others.

It's a wonderful feeling, but it's something you simply can't explain to another person. That's why we sometimes say that Masonic secrets cannot (rather than "may not") be told. Try telling someone exactly what you feel when you see a beautiful sunset, or when you hear music, like the national anthem, which suddenly stirs old memories, and you'll understand what we mean.

"Secret societies" became very popular in America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. There were literally hundreds of them, and most people belonged to two or three. Many of them were modeled on Masonry, and made a great point of having many "secrets." Freemasonry got ranked with them. But if Masonry is a secret society, it's the worst-kept secret in the world.

Is Masonry a religion?

The answer to that question is simple. No.

We do use ritual in meetings, and because there is always an altar or table with the Volume of the Sacred Law open if a lodge is meeting, some people have confused Masonry with a religion, but it is not. That does not mean that religion plays no part in Masonry -- it plays a very important part. A person who wants to become a Mason must have a belief in God. No atheist can ever become a Mason. Meetings open with prayer, and a Mason is taught, as one of the first lessons of Masonry, that one should pray for divine counsel and guidance before starting an important undertaking. But that does not make Masonry a "religion."

Sometimes people confuse Masonry with a religion because we call some Masonic buildings "temples." But we use the word in the same sense that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes called the Supreme Court a "Temple of Justice" and because a Masonic lodge is a symbol of the Temple of Solomon. Neither Masonry nor the Supreme Court is a religion just because its members meet in a "temple."

In some ways, the relationship between Masonry and religion is like the relationship between the Parent-Teacher Association (the P.T.A.) and education.

Members of the P.T.A. believe in the importance of education. They support it. They assert that no man or woman can be a complete and whole individual or live up to his or her full potential without education. They encourage students to stay in school and parents to be involved with the education of their children. They may give scholarships. They encourage their members to get involved with and to support their individual schools.

But there are some things P.T.A.s do not do. They don't teach. They don't tell people which school to attend. They don't try to tell people what they should study or what their major should be.

In much the same way, Masons believe in the importance of religion. Masonry encourages every Mason to be active in the religion and church of his own choice. Masonry teaches that without religion a man is alone and lost, and that without religion, he can never reach his full potential.

But Freemasonry does not tell a person which religion he should practice or how he should practice it. That is between the individual and God. That is the function of his house of worship, not his fraternity. And Masonry is a fraternity, not a religion.

What's a Masonic Bible?

Bibles are popular gifts among Masons, frequently given to a man when he joins the lodge or at other special events. A Masonic Bible is the same book anyone thinks of as a Bible (it's usually the King James translation) with a special page in the front on which to write the name of the person who is receiving it and the occasion on which it is given. Sometimes there is a special index or information section which shows the person where in the Bible to find the passages which are quoted in the Masonic ritual.

If Masonry isn't a religion, why does it use ritual?

Many of us may think of religion when we think of ritual, but ritual is used in every aspect of life. It's so much a part of us that we just don't notice it. Ritual simply means that some things are done more or less the same way each time.

Almost all school assemblies, for example, start with the principal or some other official calling for the attention of the group. Then the group is led in the Pledge of Allegiance. A school choir or the entire group may sing the school song. That's a ritual.

Almost all business meetings of every sort call the group to order, have a reading of the minutes of the last meeting, deal with old business, then with new

business. That's a ritual. Most groups use Robert's Rules of Order to conduct a meeting. That's probably the best-known book of ritual in the world.

There are social rituals which tell us how to meet people (we shake hands), how to join a conversation (we wait for a pause, and then speak), how to buy tickets to a concert (we wait in line and don't push in ahead of those who were there first). There are literally hundreds of examples, and they are all rituals.

Masonry uses a ritual because it's an effective way to teach important ideas -- the values we've talked about earlier. And it reminds us where we are, just as the ritual of a business meeting reminds people where they are and what they are supposed to be doing.

Masonry's ritual is very rich because it is so old. It has developed over centuries to contain some beautiful language and ideas expressed in symbols. But there's nothing unusual in using ritual. All of us do it every day.

Why does Masonry use symbols?

Everyone uses symbols every day, just as we do ritual. We use them because they communicate quickly. When you see a stop sign, you know what it means, even if you can't read the word "stop." The circle and line mean "don't" or "not allowed." In fact, using symbols is probably the oldest way of communication and the oldest way of teaching.

Masonry uses symbols for the same reason. Some form of the "Square and Compasses" is the most widely used and known symbol of Masonry. In one way, this symbol is a kind of trademark for the fraternity, as the "golden arches" are for McDonald's. When you see the Square and Compasses on a building, you know that Masons meet there.

And like all symbols, they have a meaning.

The Square symbolizes things of the earth, and it also symbolizes honor, integrity, truthfulness, and the other ways we should relate to this world and the people in it. The Compasses symbolize things of the spirit, and the importance of a well-developed spiritual life, and also the importance of self-control -- of keeping ourselves within bounds. The G stands for Geometry, the science which the ancients believed most revealed the glory of God and His works in the heavens, and it also stands for God, Who must be at the center of all our thoughts and of all our efforts.

The meanings of most of the other Masonic symbols are obvious. For example, the gavel teaches the importance of self-control and self-discipline. The hour-glass teaches us that time is always passing, and we should not put off important decisions.

What are the requirements for membership?

The person who wants to join Masonry must be a man (it's a fraternity), sound in body and mind, who believes in God, is at least the minimum age required by Masonry in his state, and has a good reputation. (Incidentally, the "sound in body" requirement -- which comes from the stonemasons of the Middle Ages -- doesn't mean that a physically challenged man cannot be a Mason; many are).

Those are the only "formal" requirements. But there are others, not so formal. He should believe in helping others. He should believe there is more to life than pleasure and money. He should be willing to respect the opinions of others. And he should want to grow and develop as a human being.

How does a man become a Mason?

Some men are surprised that no one has ever asked them to become a Mason. They may even feel that the Masons in their town don't think they are "good enough" to join. But it doesn't work that way. For hundreds of years, Masons have been forbidden to ask others to join the fraternity. We can talk to friends about Masonry. We can tell them about what Masonry does. We can tell them why we enjoy it. But we can't ask, much less pressure, anyone to join.

There's a good reason for that. It isn't that we're trying to be exclusive. But becoming a Mason is a very serious thing. Joining Masonry is making a permanent life commitment to live in certain ways. We've listed most of them above -- to live with honor and integrity, to be willing to share with and care about others, to trust each other, and to place ultimate trust in God. No one should be "talked into" making such a decision.

So, when a man decides he wants to be a Mason, he asks a Mason for a petition or application. He fills it out and gives it to the Mason, and that Mason takes it to the local lodge. The Master of the lodge will appoint a committee to visit with the man and his family, find out a little about him and why he wants to be a Mason, tell him and his family about Masonry, and answer their questions. The committee reports to the lodge, and the lodge votes on the petition. If the vote is affirmative -- and it usually is -- the lodge will contact the man to set the date for the Entered Apprentice Degree. When the person has completed all three degrees, he is a Master Mason and a full member of the fraternity.