

**Grand Lodge
Free & Accepted Masons
Of California
Grand Oration 1988**

**Grand Orator
Charles H. Alexander
"Masonry Into Men"**

Most Worshipful Grand Master, fellow Grand Lodge Officers, visitors from other Grand Jurisdictions, members of the Grand Lodge, Brethren all

What an awesome responsibility, but what a great and distinct privilege it is to have the opportunity of addressing the Grand Lodge of California at this Annual Communication. And what a great privilege it has been to represent this Grand Lodge at various ceremonies and functions up and down this state during this Grand Lodge year. I want to express my grateful and sincere appreciation to Most Worshipful Grand Master Leo B. Mark for this appointment and this opportunity to serve your Grand Lodge, and I am sure that in doing so, I speak not only for myself, but for the other appointive Grand Lodge Officers as well. They, other than the Grand Chaplain, do not have the opportunity of speaking to you. It has been a great and rewarding experience for all of us who comprise your Grand Lodge Officers of 1988.

It is now almost forty years since I was raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason. As I look back on that moment, a young man not yet twenty-two years of age, little did I dream that I would ever be in attendance at Grand Lodge, let alone have the opportunity to address you. But, my brethren, I feel that I am here today primarily because of the fact that when I took my degrees, although I was still a very young man, there were some good brothers who took the time to extend to me, both literally and symbolically, the hand of brotherly love, and truly made me feel a part of this great fraternity. But like most young men my immediate priorities did not allow for much participation in Masonry, except for occasional attendance at degrees and stated meetings. I got married, entered my chosen profession of teaching, and began a family. But let me go back to that first teaching job. I was located about a six hour drive from my home Lodge, so there was little opportunity for me to have Masonic fellowship in my own Lodge. In that town, it was the custom to invite the newly hired teachers to be the guests of the Rotary Club as one way of introducing them to the community. Several members of the Rotary, who also happened to be Masons, noticed my Masonic ring, and invited me to attend their Lodge at my earliest opportunity. What a warm feeling it gave me, and how good it made me feel to have the hand of brotherhood extended to me in those young impressionable years. I will always have a special place in my heart for Ell River Lodge No. 147 of Fortuna because of this experience over thirty-five years ago. And what great pleasure it gave me to revisit that Lodge this past August when your Grand Lodge Officers took part in the observance of their one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary.

I cite these experiences, because these are the experiences that have helped make Masonry real and personal to me, so that later, when the occasion did arise for me to become more actively involved in my Lodge, I welcomed it as an opportunity. But let me say this in all sincerity, that even if I had never become a Grand Lodge Officer, even if I had not received any of the honors and recognition that may have come my way, I would still say that the time that I have spent in Masonry, and in Masonic related activities, is the best investment of time that I could have possibly made. I have received from Freemasonry much, much more than I have given to it. And those of you in this audience today, who have sacrificed time and money to be in attendance at Grand Lodge, undoubtedly share those sentiments. If there are some of us who feel that we have gotten so much out of Masonry, for whom it has been such a rewarding experience, why is it that our Fraternity is in trouble? Why do young men particularly no longer seem to be attracted to our Fraternity?

You know, it is not too hard to find answers to that question. You hear it all the time. In my associations over the years with some of our concordant bodies, I hear that question answered all the time. It always begins with the phrase, "If Grand Lodge would only," and then follows a whole litany of "solutions", such as (a) eliminate the waiting period (b) be more up-to-

date on the Liquor question (c) not require so much memorization (d) eliminate the proficiency requirement to apply for concordant degrees (e) any other number of personal biases about our fraternity.

Let's look at a couple of things. The waiting period and proficiency requirements were added to our Masonic law during our period of greatest and most spectacular growth. Many Lodges were not only conferring degrees on a weekly basis, but in some instances on a twice weekly basis; new Lodges were being formed, and Masonry was enjoying great growth. National magazines, such as Time ran feature articles on the Masonic order. However, in the midst of this membership prosperity, concern began to grow that our lodges were becoming, in the academic jargon, merely degree mills, conferring degrees, but not really making men into Masons. Many of those, it would seem, who were recipients of degrees during that "golden age" were happy to accept the benefits and privileges of Masonry, but were either ignorant of, or reluctant to accept, the burdens and responsibilities of their membership. I had an experience not too long ago that is illustrative of this. We had a new family move in next door to us. The man had been seriously disabled in an industrial accident, but had received a substantial settlement, so they were financially comfortable. They were good neighbors, quiet, well-behaved, and sociable. In conversation it developed that the man was a Mason. I invited him to go to Lodge with me, but he indicated that his health would not permit him to sit for any extended period of time, and this was true. As the months passed, his health steadily deteriorated, with frequent stays in the hospital. He was, in effect living on borrowed time, and eventually passed away. Both as a neighbor, and I thought, as a brother Mason, we offered to help. The discussion of a Masonic service came up, and the widow told me how much her husband's Masonic membership had meant to him, and she was sure that he would want Masonic services. I told her that if she would let me see her husband's dues card, I would have our Lodge Secretary, contact his Lodge and we would make the arrangements. There was no dues card to be found, but she did locate his apron, which had his Lodge name on it. When his Lodge, back in the Midwest was contacted, they reported that he had been suspended for non-payment of dues in 1961, over twenty years earlier. Apparently after moving to California in 1959, he had ceased to pay his dues and let himself be suspended. Yet, as I have already pointed out, he represented himself as a Mason, and had told me that he had participated in the Masonic Club in the large industrial concern where he had worked in Southern California. It was a sad experience for me to go back and tell my grieving neighbor that her husband could not have Masonic services. It was also difficult for the family to see that it was his own shortcomings that had produced this unfortunate set of circumstances.

Unfortunately, there seem to be hundreds, perhaps even thousands of men who were raised during that great membership surge of the 1940 's and 1950 's, who, although they may have continued to pay their dues, and to that extent have maintained their membership, they have graced the Lodge with their presence but a few times since they were raised. We did a great job of getting men into Masonry, but how good a job did we do of getting Masonry into men?

As I have pointed out to you, our concern in this regard caused us to seek some remedy, and we took steps to try and enhance the Masonic education of our members by requiring the third degree proficiency before taking any other Masonic related degrees or orders. In other words, we thought that greater attention to ritual, more emphasis on what one might call our Masonic catechism, would produce the desired result. Now before going further, let me make it clear that few have a greater sense of devotion to our Masonic ritual than I do. One cannot have served this Grand Lodge for nearly eight years as a District Inspector without having a profound respect for our ritual. However, my brethren, I remind you that the word ritualistic is not a term that generally carries with it a positive connotation. To many people it implies an emphasis on form, with perhaps too little attention to meaning. And perhaps we in Masonry have tended to regard ritual as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. Maybe rather than requiring more ritual recitation, perhaps we should have given some emphasis to some of the other aspects of Masonry, some of the "burdens and responsibilities" that are a part of this great brotherhood. What if the Master had called several of these newly made brethren with a message like this; "Brother Smith, one of our fifty-year members passed away last evening. Would you, as one of our newest members, join with me in calling on his widow this evening?" Or perhaps, some means could be taken to get these new members actively involved in calling on those who are hospitalized, who are shut-in, or who can no longer drive to get to the meetings. I would venture

to say that every Lodge in this jurisdiction has members who have never made a sick call to a brother, or have never attended a Masonic funeral, let alone made calls on a bereaved family. Perhaps involving our brethren in these kinds of activities would help to revive the sagging spirit of fraternalism. I heartily applaud the positive step taken by our Grand Master this year when he urged each Lodge to form a calling committee to try and re-establish fraternal relationships with those brethren whose attendance and other forms of fraternal contact have become rare and infrequent. Let's stop worrying about getting men into Masonry and begin concentrating on getting Masonry into men!

We have to realistically accept the possibility that it may be a long time before the principles espoused by Freemasonry once again appeal to a large segment of our society. With the decline of the general moral tone of the country that has taken place over the last several decades, it has become popular to ridicule and regard as base hypocrites those individuals who profess to believe in such principles as brotherly love, relief, and truth. In Masonry the word "square" has a deep and profound meaning; it implies a devotion to duty, a sense of fair play to one's fellow man, a commitment, as best one can, to square one's actions by the square of virtue. However, during the tumultuous 1960's the term "square" took on a new and somewhat derogatory meaning. To be square meant that you were "not with it"; you were not "hep"; that you rejected the hedonistic "if it feels good, do it" philosophy of the day.

Out of these changes in our society, out of this atmosphere of permissiveness, a growing pressure has become evident that we too, must make some changes. The large number of resolutions presented at these last two annual communications is indicative of a sense of restlessness in our fraternity. Up until a few years ago, one might say that the Grand Lodge of California, thanks to the 5/6th requirement, was guided by the words of Viscount Falkland, who back in 1641, stated, "When it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change." But one can sense a growing sentiment that we do need to make some changes. As such conviction begins to pervade our thinking, it is time to sound a word of caution. First of all we must avoid falling into the trap that all change is good, and that change for change's sake has merit of its own. The second trap that we need to avoid is the snare that tells us we need to make changes in Masonry to bring us into conformity with the standards and mores of society. The test which should be applied to proposed changes in Masonry, should always be the principles of Freemasonry, which are based upon eternal truth. If we make changes in our legislation on the liquor question, for example (and I do not know when writing this whether this issue will be voted on before or after I speak) such change should not be on the basis that social drinking is more prevalent in our society today, but rather on the question of whether the cardinal virtue of temperance is an individual or a Lodge responsibility. If we begin making changes in Masonry just to make us more attractive to our society, it would be a perilous course to follow. Let me illustrate my point. We are all familiar with the third "I will not" in our Master Mason obligation, which places certain restrictions on our behavior. We live in an age of great sexual permissiveness, in which the traditional standards of sexual morality seem to be observed more in breach than in observance. How easy it would be to argue that, in order to bring our fraternity more in step with society, we need to modify this portion of our obligation. I submit to you, my brethren, that changes must be tested by our ancient landmarks and principles.

Masons, at least for the past several decades, represent a diminishing minority of our society and population. Our membership figures attest to that. It is indisputable. However, we must be careful in attempting to remedy the situation, that we do not "throw out the baby with the bath water". We hope the day will come when our society will return to the basic principles of morality that it once shared with Freemasonry. It may not happen in our lifetime, but our job is to keep the principles of Masonry alive, not to compromise them away in a futile attempt to make the institution more popular. Masonry has faced membership crises before in its history. In the aftermath of the Morgan affair, the number of Lodges in New York State dropped from 227 to 41, and in Vermont not a single Lodge remained in existence. In Nazi Germany, Masonry was ruthlessly suppressed, and its members persecuted, and Masonic communication totally ceased. Masonry recovered from the slanderous attacks upon it associated with the Morgan affair. It recovered from the ruthless suppression of dictatorships. It recovered because those members who remained, adhered to the basic principles of Freemasonry, and by their individual adherence, continued to deserve the admiration and respect of their fellow citizens.

The question that faces us today is not persecution and suppression. We know from our past history that Masonry can survive ruthless attacks from without. Our enemy today is apathy, indifference and internal demoralization. But Masonry will survive because its principles are eternal, and as long as there are a few good men, a few stout hearted men, to fan the sparks the flame will not die out.

Our Father, by whose servants,
Our house was built of old,
Whose hand hath crowned her,
With blessings manifold
For thine unfailing mercies,
Far strewn along the way
With all who passed before us
We praise thy name today.

The changeful years unresting,
Their silent course have sped,
New comrades ever bringing
In comrades steps to tread:
And some are long forgotten,
Long spent their hopes and fears
Safe rest they in thy keeping
Who changest not with years.

They reap not where they labored.
We reap what they have sown,
Our harvest may be garnered
By ages yet unknown,
The days of old have dowered us
With gifts beyond all praise
Oh, Father make us faithful,
To serve the coming days.

(Hymn #505 1940 Hymnal
Protestant Episcopal Church
of USA; words by George Briggs)