

## **The *Book of Constitutions* and Life as a Freemason**

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How many here have ever picked up the Virginia *Book of Constitutions* and browsed through it? How many here have any idea what is in it?

The point of this program is neither to expound on the history or origins of *The Book* nor on the accuracy of the legend of *The Book*. Instead, we want to discuss its contents and its relevance, and to detail some of the curious and unexpected exhortations to a moral life.

And a curious book the *Book of Constitutions* really is. Sure, it has all the usual material you'd expect to find in a constitution: how one becomes a Freemason, the duties of officers both of the Grand Lodge and the subordinate lodges, how to elect officers and all of the usual detail that lawyers delight in and love to confound us with – rules, rules, and more rules of governance.

But *this* Constitution has headings like:

“CONCERNING GOD AND RELIGION.”

“CONCERNING PRIVATE QUALITIES AND DUTIES.”

“OF BEHAVIOR IN THE LODGE WHILE OPEN.”

“OF BEHAVIOR AFTER THE LODGE IS CLOSED  
AND BEFORE THE BRETHREN DEPART HOME.”

“CONCERNING THE BEHAVIOR OF MASONS  
IN THEIR PRIVATE CHARACTER.”

“OF BEHAVIOR BEHIND A BROTHER'S BACK  
AS WELL AS BEFORE HIS FACE.”

“CONCERNING DIFFERENCES AND LAW SUITS,  
IF ANY SHOULD UNHAPPILY ARISE AMONG BRETHREN.”

To some, these headings may sound more like the subjects of sermons than the governing instrument of a Fraternity. But those very headings demonstrate the uniqueness of our Craft. Those very special rules governing our behavior as Freemasons exemplify part of what makes our Fraternity so special.

As we review some of those rules, I would ask each of you to listen for echoes and expansions of the duties you have assumed under oath in the Obligations you took in becoming a Master Mason. You also may want to look inside yourself and measure your own behavior as a Brother against these rules. This is not meant in any negative way, but rather to renew your appreciation of the comprehensive, all-encompassing guidance that Masonry provides.

In Chapter I, Section III, we are taught circumspection and told that "The ancient philosophers and wise men (the princes of whom were Masons) were so fully persuaded of the great virtue of secrecy, that it was the first lesson which they taught their pupils and followers. Thus, in the school of Pythagoras we find it was a rule that every novitiate was to be silent for a time, and refrain from speaking, unless a question was asked of him, to the end that the valuable secrets which he had to communicate might be better preserved and valued."

In Chapter I, Section I, we are taught to be religious yet tolerant. "[The Mason] will likewise shun the gross errors of bigotry and superstition; making a due use of his own reason, according to that liberty wherewith a Mason is made free....Whence it follows that all Masons are to be good men and true - men of honor and honesty, by whatever religious names or persuasions distinguished; always following that golden precept, of 'doing unto all men as (upon a change of conditions) they would that all men should do unto them.'"

In Chapter I, Section III, we are taught moderation. "In regard to himself, whoever would be a Mason should know how to practice all the private virtues. He should avoid all manner of intemperance or excess, which might obstruct all the laudable duties of his Craft, or lead him into crimes which would reflect dishonor on the Ancient Fraternity."

In Chapter II, Section IV, we are taught civility and plain dealing. "Free and Accepted Masons have ever been charged to avoid all manner of slandering and backbiting of true and faithful Brethren, with all malice

and unjust resentment, or talking disrespectfully of a Brother's person or performance. Nor must they suffer any others to spread unjust reproaches or calumnies against a Brother behind his back, nor to injure him in his fortune, occupation or character; but they shall defend such a Brother, and give him notice of any danger or injury wherewith he may be threatened, to enable him to escape the same, as far as is consistent with honor, prudence, and the safety of religion, morality, and the state, but no further."

How many of us have always heeded these words about backbiting? Thoughtful reflection on these matters will remind us of our obligations to be courteous and respectful towards each another and of our duties to warn each other of approaching danger.

By now you should be getting the picture that the *Book* contains a great deal of moral guidance, and you also can see how it both adds detail to the various duties and obligations we have undertaken and expands on the manner in which we may fulfill them.

We have heard virtually all of these principles before in different forms, but the *Book* spells out our duties explicitly and memorably: For example, it states in Chapter II, Section III that "No private piques, or quarrels about nations, families, religions, or politics, must be brought within the doors of the Lodge, as being directly contrary to the rules already laid down - Masons being declared of the oldest Catholic [that is, 'Universal'] religion, universally acknowledged as such and of all nations, bound to live upon the square, level, and plumb with each other, following

the steps of their predecessors in cultivating the peace and harmony of the Lodge, without distinction of sect or political party."

Interestingly, it may surprise you to learn that the *Book of Constitutions* addresses not only the rights and expectations that Master Masons have with respect to each other, but it also addresses those of the prospective candidate. In Chapter I, Section IV, it states with respect to the candidate: "In the first place, then, you have a right before admission, to desire your friend to show you the warrant or dispensation by which the Lodge is held; which, if genuine, you will find to be an instrument printed or written upon parchment, and signed by some noble Grand Master, his Deputy and Grand Wardens, and Grand Secretary, sealed with the Grand Lodge Seal, constituting particular persons (therein named) as Master and Wardens, with full power to congregate and hold a Lodge at such place, and therein 'make and admit Free Masons, according to the most ancient and honorable custom of the Royal Craft, in all ages and nations, throughout the known world; with full power and authority to nominate and choose their successors,' etc."

Nor is this all the prospect is entitled to examine within the doors of the Lodge to which he submits his petition. The *Book* goes on to provide: "You may request a perusal of the by-laws, which being short, you may read in the presence of your friend, or he will read to you, and show you also a list of the members of the Lodge, by which, you will be better able to judge whether you should choose to associate with them, and submit to conform to their rules."

Imagine that! Was anybody in this room allowed or invited to see a roll of the Craft before petitioning his Lodge? But the *Constitutions of Masonry* clearly provides that, while we must require of the candidate that he be of good report, that the candidate may peruse our list of members to determine the quality of the Brethren who may ballot on his petition. Did you know it was a two way street?

Brethren, I would encourage each of you to take the time to enrich yourself by studying the *Book of Constitutions*. Private study is useful, but it is even better to assign a member of the Lodge to select and present a small part of the *Book* at each stated communication and then have a short discussion about it. Not only does this serve as a reminder of the duties and obligations we all have assumed, it helps us to relate those duties and obligations to current aspects in our daily lives.

In this way we may, as we have been urged, maintain the character of a good and true Master Mason and “strengthen our efforts towards perfection, while growing in the wisdom that complete perfection is ultimately unattainable.”

Thank you.