

# A DEFINITION OF FREEMASONRY

BY PETE NORMAND, 33°, EDITOR, *THE PLUMBLIN*

The Scottish Rite Research Society has received a number of articles in which the authors include their own definitions of Freemasonry. One of these articles even went so far as to boldly state that Freemasonry has “no definition in circulation.” This, of course, provided the opening for that author to offer his own.

Now certainly, a healthy examination of the basic elements of Freemasonry is something that we should always encourage. It is, after all, what Masonic research organizations do, or should do. But let us at least give credit where credit is due. Definitions of Freemasonry are very much “in circulation,” and have been for centuries. Some better than others. But to suggest that Freemasons don’t have a definition of Freemasonry is not only wrong, but it is a means used by some to re-define it as something that it never was, and never should be.

This rush to offer new and different definitions of Freemasonry may be the result of too many members who simply don’t know what Freemasonry is. It is as if they cannot see the forest for all the trees. Or, it may be the result of too many members who confuse the many non-Masonic affiliated organizations with Freemasonry.

The benign practice of calling an organization “Masonic” simply because it is sponsored by Freemasonry or has Masonic membership prerequisites has created a confusion among our own members so that many are no longer able to distinguish the clear difference between Masonic rites and orders on the one hand, and the many non-Masonic affiliated organizations on the other. A good definition of Freemasonry, and therefore a ‘Masonic body’, as a rule of thumb or acid test would be very useful.

The great Masonic encyclopedist, Henry Wilson Coil, 33°, provided a good working definition of Freemasonry in his *Coil’s Masonic Encyclopedia*. A copy of that single-volume work should be in every Masonic lodge, in every Masonic library, and in the home of every American Freemason. Coil’s definition of Freemasonry includes ten parts, which I will treat separately.

Any organization, whether appendant or affiliated with Freemasonry, can be measured against this ten-part definition to determine whether it is a ‘Masonic’ organization, or one of the many non-Masonic affiliated organizations. At the same time, members of Masonic rites and orders can compare each part of the definition to the customs and practices of the Masonic degrees to which they belong.

**1. Freemasonry is an oath-bound fraternal order of men.** Freemasonry is a fraternity, first and foremost. I’ve known Masons that could not even give this most simple of explanations. Further, the fact that it is a men’s fraternity, and not a mixed social club, is one of the most important aspects of describing Freemasonry. Freemasonry provides a wholesome environment where good men can gather and enjoy the company and brotherhood of other good men.

**2. Freemasonry derives from the medieval fraternity of operative Freemasons.** This part of the definition answers the question, “Where did Freemasonry come from?” The Freemasons of the middle ages were so-called because they were free men, and worked in freestone. Scottish lodges began accepting non-operatives during the 1630s, and the practice increased throughout the British Isles during the seventeenth century.

**3. Freemasonry adheres to many of the Ancient Charges, laws, customs, and legends of the operative Freemasons.** Many of the ancient practices, customs and usages of the fraternity have been carefully handed down to us from our operative forebears, and it is our duty to see that they are carefully preserved.

**4. Freemasonry is loyal to the civil government under which it exists.**

Although individual Freemasons may rebel against the state, the fraternity itself does not concern itself with plots and conspiracies, in spite of what the paranoid conspiracy theorists may claim. During the Age of Revolution, many patriots—Washington, Franklin, Bolivar, Miranda, Hidalgo, Marti, Garibaldi, Austin, Houston, and others—were Freemasons. But whereas rebellion or disloyalty is not a Masonic offense, these remain the action of the individual, and not of the fraternity.

**5. Freemasonry inculcates moral and social virtues by symbolic application of the stonemasons’ working tools and by allegories, lectures, and charges.** This practice, as much as any other part of the definition, describes ‘what Freemasons do.’ In addition to being a fraternity of men deriving from and adhering to the customs of the medieval Freemasons, Freemasonry is a teaching order - an educational institution - and utilizes the working tools and allegories in its degrees to teach its lessons and virtues to its members.

**6. Freemasonry obligates its members to observe principles of brotherly love, equality, mutual aid, secrecy and confidence.** It is these elements of the Masonic obligations that bind the members of the fraternity to one another. Members are obligated to assist one another, to pray for one another, to keep one another’s secrets and those of



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the fraternity, to support one another in times of distress, and to whisper good counsel to one another and warn each other of approaching danger. In short, we are not just taught and encouraged to be good friends to one another, rather we take solemn vows to do so and are therefore obligated to do so. These obligations are what make us Freemasons, and separate us from non-Masons.

7. **Freemasonry has secret modes of recognition that permit members to recognize one another as Freemasons.** The modes of recognition are one of the more ubiquitous practices of Freemasonry. Indeed, it is as if Freemasons invented the "secret handshake." However, there is little evidence to support the notion that the operatives used grips and words of recognition. Coil states that they are probably of late development. Nevertheless, since the early eighteenth century, they have been a defining characteristic of Freemasonry and Masonic rites and degrees.

8. **Freemasons meet in lodges, governed somewhat autocratically by a Master, assisted by Wardens. In higher degrees, these lodges are called chapters, councils, consistories, conclaves, etc., but operate in the same fashion.** The term "lodge" is inherited from the operative Freemasons, who met in lodges where they also ate and slept. Coil points out that the lodge business, although conducted according to rules, by-laws, and grand lodge regulations, is nevertheless governed by a Master who has far more parliamentary power in conducting the business of the lodge than the presiding officer of a non-Masonic body. Parliamentary law in a Masonic lodge is not governed by *Robert's Rules of Order*, but by a much older set of customs and practices.

9. **Freemasonry requires a thorough examination into the mental, moral and physical qualifications of a petitioner.** Freemasonry is not for every man. It does not take bad men and make them good. Rather, it takes only good men and makes them better. It therefore requires a belief in Deity. An atheist cannot be bound by any oath or obligation. Further, there have always been mental and educational standards that a petitioner must meet. An illiterate man cannot be made a Freemason any more than a cat can be taught to sing. There would be no use attempting to teach our social and moral lessons to a man that does not have the capacity to learn them or understand them.

10. **Freemasonry admits men into the fraternity in secret ceremonies based in part on old legends of the Craft.**

Every Apprentice, when he is entered into the fraternity, is required to take an obligation that he will not divulge the secrets of Freemasonry. The secrets of Freemasonry have always included the ritualistic work, and the private business of the lodge.

Increasingly, over the last 20 years or so, many misguided individuals within the fraternity have considered it chic or sophisticated to disregard their obligations, and to announce that "Freemasonry has no secrets," thereby pretending that this frees them from their obligations. Others have, in a twist of illogic, found that, since the modes of recognition and rituals of Freemasonry have already been exposed, either in eighteenth-century exposures, or in bootlegged rituals appearing on the internet, the secrets are therefore no longer "secret," thereby convincing themselves that they are excused from their Masonic obligations. All have acted dishonorably in doing so. Freemasons do not reveal the secrets of Freemasonry because they promised they would not.

This then is Coil's ten-part definition of Freemasonry:

Freemasonry is an oath-bound fraternal order of men; deriving from the medieval fraternity of operative Freemasons; adhering to many of their Ancient Charges, laws, customs, and legends; loyal to the civil government under which it exists; inculcating moral and social virtues by symbolic application of the stonemasons' working tools and by allegories, lectures, and charges; obligating its members to observe principles of brotherly love, equality, mutual aid, secrecy and confidence; which has secret modes of recognition that permit members to recognize one another as Freemasons; and whose members meet in lodges, governed somewhat autocratically by a Master, assisted by Wardens; where petitioners, after enquiry into their mental, moral and physical qualifications, are admitted into the fraternity in secret ceremonies based in part on old legends of the Craft. ☺

Pierre G. 'Pete' Normand Jr., 33°, is a Past Master of Sul Ross Lodge No. 1300 and St. Alban's Lodge No. 1455 in College Station, Texas, and is a Past Master and Fellow of Texas Lodge of Research. He is the Director of Work of the Houston Scottish Rite, and has served on the Board of the Scottish Rite Research Society since its formation.