

SO THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST



So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: For many be called, but few chosen." (Matthew, Chapter 20, Verses 8-16)

How fitting that the Mark Master degree is one's first introduction to the Chapter and our beloved York Rite. We know that while this degree is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, Masonic degree(s), it has not necessarily always been conferred as the first Capitular degree. Records show that the Mark Master degree has both preceded and succeeded the conferral of the degree of Royal Arch, but the message heard from the Mark Master is indeed appropriate for initial entrance into the Chapter irrespective of its chronological placement based on the overall sequence of legendary and biblical events.

We learn in the Mark Master degree the vital lesson of honest employment and charity. However, a closer look at the degree's teachings clearly gives us an even more valuable message. As we find ourselves in a time of universal concern regarding lack of participation, rising numbers of Demits and few new members, various solutions abound. The recurring question heard throughout our Fraternity is: "How can we increase our membership?"

Bear with me just a moment as I submit that we are focussing our attention on the wrong issue! I truly believe the answer to increasing membership will be a natural by-product of a yet even more important issue ... Are we allowing and encouraging our relatively new, young, energetic and enthusiastic members to grow and mature Masonically within the sacred walls of our Temple?

Far too often, I must sadly report, we are not. Instead of providing encouragement, we tend to become somewhat alarmed when a new member demonstrates a unique thirst for Masonic knowledge. This caution in respect to the energetic new member quickly fosters such remarks as "Watch out for that new guy," or, "Who does he think he is ... I've been a member of these bodies for 20 years, but he comes in here right from the Blue Lodge and gets an office in no time!"

The result is that the new member feels stifled and out of place. He becomes, at the very least, confused and frustrated. First, he came to the Chapter in hopes of receiving "light added to the coming light" and to better understand what he'd received in the first three degrees. Second, hadn't he been told, over and over again, that he would get out of Masonry what he put into it? Now that he had put a great deal of time and energy into it, he finds subtle criticism rather than encouragement and praise. Before long, he begins to miss a meeting or two, then skips degree work, and, eventually stays completely away. Invariably at that point, the response from within is "See, I told you so. He was just a flash in the pan."

Dr. Hugo Thomas, P.G.M., of the American Canadian Grand Lodge, once said in an address later published as a Short Talk Bulletin: "We need builders not joiners; crewmen not passengers; and the program of the Lodge should be so arranged that all Brothers are attracted to our meetings, and given a chance to actively participate in and push forward our real objectives. " Why then do we stifle our builders and crewmen?"

We must first realize that, painful as it may be, seniority has no monopoly on wisdom and fraternal maturity. While many of our longtime members do ensure the proper atmosphere for growth and participation, some it seems have not been a member for 20 or 30 years, but for one year 20 or 30 times! It's no wonder they are frightened of the hard-charging new member. Allen Roberts, in his absolutely must-read survival book, *The Key to Freemasonry's Growth*, hits the nail on the head when he writes that the new member "soon learns that far too often his eagerness to team about Freemasonry is a detriment. His ability can keep him from being elected to office. . . . He will be warned by his friends to slow up or he will never become an officer. Consequently, many a good man will slow up so much . . . that they will look elsewhere to find an outlet for their abilities. "

To ensure survival of our fraternity, we must recognize and capitalize on the talented members we already have — irrespective of how long they've been a member. If a man displays potential, exploit his potential for his benefit and the good of the order. Let it be known that your Chapter is the place to grow, learn, participate and be recognized. If we take to heart the lessons of the Mark Master degree, and exemplify it within our Chapters' activities, I assure you we will grow as a result. And, we'll attract builders and crewman, not just joiners and passengers.

"A younger brother," said Ray Denslow, "may study more earnestly and receive more light in Masonry as his reward. The Masonic vineyard is open to all, and he who works most diligently, even though he may come in at a later hour, will not find himself placed below those, who, although they may have come earlier, have not put heart and soul into the task. " (From the 1952 Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Missouri).

My Companions, we will increase our membership if we take care of what we already have ... and realize that, indeed, many be called but few chosen. Let us ensure we put the Mark Master degree lesson to work and create an environment for growth within our Chapters. That energetic new member will not only bring his fellow Master Masons into our Chapters, but he may just be the one to guide and inspire the future growth of our time-honoured institution.

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