

A TEMPLE OF LIVING STONES: EXAMINING THE CONCEPT OF A CHAIN OF UNION

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Many brothers reading this will already be familiar in some way with the Chain of Union, if they are not already using such a ceremony in their own lodge. A common misconception among some, however, is that the general concept of a Chain of Union, or even a closing charge itself, is an import from European Masonry, recently brought forth by a few American Masons who are seeking a more profound experience of bonding when closing their lodges. In fact, the idea need not be imported at all; it may be found right here in the United States, within the rituals of our own Grand Lodges.

How could Masons in a given jurisdiction not know about their own ceremonies? Very easily. Many of our lodges have a virtual attic of discarded ideas and practices that have been worn away by fear, lack of interest, or general laziness. In the same way that some Grand Lodges have done away with the penalties of the degrees, or allowed elements of Craft ritual to be removed away into appendant bodies, elements of lectures or charges that convey a special meaning or indicate a particular experience can find themselves lost before our very eyes. In some situations, we might find ourselves engaged in an activity that is clearly derived from a more specific point of origin, but those engaged in it are not aware of what precisely they are doing, or how it was meant to be done. This is the case with the Chain of Union.

A number of Grand Lodges in the United States, most of them east of the Mississippi, have in their work a *closing charge*, intended (as the name makes clear) to be used at the end of tyled meetings. In most cases, the charge is derived directly or taken as a whole from the charge composed in 1795 by Thaddeus Mason Harris, and later included in the exhaustively titled 1819 work, *Discourses Delivered On Public Occasions, Illustrating the Principles, Displaying the Tendency, and Vindicating the Design of Freemasonry*. Harris was the Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, at a time when a brother with such an office might very well be called upon to compose such a charge to the brethren. Over time this charge has become so well-known that it may even be found in the ritual books of some lodges in the British Isles.

For most of the Grand Lodges where this charge is made available to the brethren, the use of the charge is optional. Human nature being what it is, optional too often—unfortunately—translates to “feel free to ignore”. However, in a few Grand Lodges, a truncated version of this closing charge is a mandatory part of its ritual.

While its form varies slightly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, the text is essentially some variation on the original, one example of which is as follows:

Brethren: You are now to quit this sacred retreat of friendship and virtue, to mix again with the world. Amidst its concerns and employments, forget not the duties you have heard so frequently inculcated, and forcibly recommended in this Lodge. Be, therefore, diligent, prudent, temperate, discreet. Remember also, that around this altar you have solemnly and repeatedly promised to befriend and relieve, with unhesitating cordiality, so far as shall be in your power, every brother who shall need your assistance: That you have promised to remind him, in the most tender manner, of his failings, and aid his reformation. Vindicate his character when wrongfully traduced. Suggest in his behalf the most candid, favourable, and paliating circumstances, when his conduct is justly reprehended. That the world may observe how Masons love one another.

These generous principles are to extend farther. Every human being has a claim up on your kind offices. So that we enjoin it upon you "to do good unto all," while we recommend it more "especially to the household of the faithful."

By diligence in the duties of your respective callings, by liberal benevolence, and diffusive charity, by constancy and fidelity in your friendships, by uniformly just, amiable, and virtuous deportment, discover the beneficial and happy effects of this antient and honourable institution.

Let it not be supposed that you have here laboured in vain, and spent your strength for nought; for your work is with the Lord, and your recompense with your God.

Finally, brethren, farewell. Be ye all of one mind. Live in peace. And may the God of love and peace delight to dwell with and to bless you.

This charge is given by the Master, after he has instructed the brethren to assemble about the altar, and in this act, the circle is formed which constitutes the chain of union by way of forming a temple of living stones. It is the custom to cross the arms and join hands, as well as joining the tips of the shoes. Depending on whether or not the charge is included in the ritual, the Master will either close the Lodge, or, if the ceremony comes after the Lodge is closed, he will dismiss the brethren by circumambulating out of the Lodge.

In any case, the actual joining of hands is not the measure by which such an assembly should be judged; the image of Stonehenge and the concept of a sacred circle points to the higher purpose of the chain therein created.

Some might point out that there is no reference to a chain in the charge quoted above. But interestingly enough, using language that is in part almost identical to that quoted above, the older Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania adds the following line:

Remember always, Brethren, that these solemn rites of which you have been partakers, and your parts in them, are as binding on your conscience outside the lodge as within it. They are links in that chain made in life for eternity.

Beyond that allusion to an actual chain, one should look closely at the words that are used throughout the charge. The purpose of a chain of union is to signify and validate the unbreakable oneness of the brethren by the bonds of the fraternity. In this particular charge, while the brethren are assembled, they are told that “around this sacred altar”—not *at*, when each man himself was obligated, but *around*, as a circle of brethren assembled in a chain of union—“you have solemnly bound yourselves” to each look after the other. At the end of the charge, an extraordinary line for an organisation of free-thinking individuals is uttered: “*be ye all of one mind*”. In this simple phrase, a psychological chain is formed to reinforce the physical one. Clearly, the brethren who composed and enacted this charge nearly 250 years ago knew the nature of what they were doing.

Considering the number of American Grand Lodges where this exact version of a closing charge—or a variation thereof—is “on the books”, it would behoove brethren to take a closer look at their respective rituals to see if they might find something in their history which would take them to their own native version of a chain of union.

The lesson to be learned from such an investigation is that often the things we think we need to improve our Craft are not necessarily to be found from without, but from within. In this case, the Chain of Union is something to be found within our own histories and rituals as American Masons. In putting this ceremony to use within those boundaries, we bring to life the notion of the “temple of living stones” alluded to in our ritual, and demonstrate a tangible meaning of that concept to every brother present.

As brothers consider how they might implement a Chain of Union in their lodges, it is apparent that far from being a “foreign innovation”, it is instead a forgotten treasure of our own Masonic history that merely need be restored.



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