



Grand Lodge of Wisconsin – Masonic Study Series  
Volume 2, issue 4  
Special Edition Fall 2016

## “The Obligation”

### ***Lodge Presentation:***

*The following short article is written with the intention to be read within an open Lodge, or in fellowship, to all the members in attendance. This article is appropriate to be presented to all Masons. Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft Masons should be invited to attend the meeting where this is presented. Following this article is a list of discussion questions which should be presented immediately following the presentation of the article.*

### **The Obligation**

For centuries, and throughout the world, conspiracy theorists have had Freemasonry squarely in their sights. While there are many and various reasons for this, one of the most commonly sighted reasons is our obligations. I do not have any intention of taking on any of these theories or theorists as my Entered Apprentice charge clearly tells me not to allow my zeal for the institution to lead me into an argument with those, who through ignorance, may ridicule it.

Our obligations are something that we as Masons take as a simple fact. Here I would like to discuss why we as Masons take our obligations. First, let us define the word “obligation”. Obligate and oblige are sister words, deriving from the same Latin root, ob, a prefix meaning before, or about; and ligare, meaning bind, as in our ligament. An obligation is a tie, or pledge, or bond, by which a man is tied to his fellows, or gives his word to perform certain duties.

Obligations, or oaths are as old as mankind. They were common in the time of the Old Testament. The Kings in early England required their citizens to take an oath of fealty. Similarly, the President of our country and other elected officials take an oath of office prior to assuming the inherent responsibilities.

Throughout society, ties and obligations bind each of us together. The bond of marriage is an obligation; all fraternal orders, good, bad and indifferent, are built on obligations; as are all religious orders and societies.

The world as we know it is held together by oaths and obligations. They tie us together and by taking them of our own free will, we build personal accountability to the duties and responsibilities of that which we are obligating ourselves to. Our Masonic obligations are no different.

From the earliest known records of Freemasonry there is evidence of our obligations. In the “Old Charges”, the obligation was very brief. An example of one of these is: “There are several words and signs of a Freemason to be revealed to you which, as you will answer before God at the great and terrible Day of Judgment, you are to keep secret and not to reveal the same to any in the hearing of any person whatsoever but to the Masters and fellows of the said Society of Freemasons. So help me God.”



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Freemasonry adopted the present penalties at a time when they were familiar to society and were regarded as proper and reasonable. A penalty was, and is, part of all ancient and modern oaths. The Romans said; "May the Gods destroy me!" or "May I die", for the offence of false swearing. The Low Germans, for the offense of robbing a pagan temple, directed that the criminal should be dragged to the sea shore and buried in the sands at low water mark.

When a Mason adds a penalty to his obligations he declares that he is worthy of such a penalty, if he speaks untruly, or that such a punishment would be just and proper. No Freemason entertains the view that he may, or is bound, to take the law into his own hands and punish a Brother Mason for violation of his obligation. We are all bound to observe the current laws of society. The only true Masonic penalty is suspension or expulsion; the scorn and detestation of our Brothers. In Masonic penalties there is an invocation of God's vengeance should it be violated, not a submission to human punishment: "may I die if this be not true, or if I keep not my vow". Not "may any man put me to death"!

Our obligations to include the penalties are part of the universal system of Freemasonry and are the basis of the means of recognition everywhere throughout the Masonic world. It is the focal point of every degree. Our obligations make a man a Mason. Our obligations bind every member to the Fraternity, its aims and objects. They make us feel as one with our Brothers whether of the same Lodge, or anywhere throughout the world, and with all who have taken the same obligations. Our obligations require us to be obedient towards our Craft, reverent toward the Great Architect of the Universe, protect the secrets of the craft, respect all others, and love and care for all Brethren as ourselves.

If there is such a thing as an "ideal" Mason, he is the one whose word is his bond; who can be depended upon to do what he agrees to do and uses our Masonic symbols to be the best version of himself. Through our Masonic obligations we declare allegiance to all the principles of Freemasonry so that we may be accepted as a responsible member of the Masonic family. We accept each other because we knelt at the same altar and made the same promises to each other and the Fraternity.

The obligation is the tie that bonds us to Freemasonry and to each other. It is a voluntary pledge each of us take by virtue of which we are accepted as a responsible member of the family of Masons. For these reasons we take our obligations. Let it be criticized by those that are uninformed, it only serves to strengthen the structure of Brotherhood we have built.

Written by W.: Brother Patrick Cholka for the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin Education Committee  
Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons of Wisconsin



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### **Discussion Questions**

*The following discussion questions are written to be presented immediately following the presentation of the topic above. There is no right or wrong answers to these questions, they are designed to promote thought and engage all the members that are present in conversation. Take care that the presentation of the topic and the discussion questions does not exceed 30 minutes. The presenter can present any part of the questions below, or any additional questions, he feels is appropriate.*

- What are some of the other aspects of Freemasonry that conspiracy theorists frequently cite?
- Outside of Freemasonry, what other obligations or oaths have you taken and have they helped you to become a better person?
- If you find someone that you think may be in violation of their obligation, what is the best way to approach it?
- Bearing in mind the “youngest” Mason in the room, how has the symbolic penalty helped you to keep your obligation?
- If you separate the obligation into four parts: the pledge, the ties, the commitment and the prayer, which part of the obligation had the largest impact upon you and why?
- How have your Masonic obligations impacted your view of your commitments inside and outside of the Fraternity?
- As our penalties are symbolic, what hold us to keep our obligations and how does that differ from other fraternal or civic organizations?
- Why is the sign of a degree an allusion to the symbolic penalty?