

FIVE POINTS

The Five Points of Fellowship, as every Master Masons knows, contain the essence of the doctrine of brotherhood. But many a new brother asks, pertinently, “why are they called “Points?”

In the Old Constitutions, as explained in the Hallowell or Regius manuscript, are fifteen regulations, called “points.” The old verse runs:

“Fifteen artyculus there they sought And fifteen poyntys there they wroghton.”

Translated into easy English, this reads:

“Fifteen articles there they sought And fifteen points there they wrought.”

Phillips “New World of Words,” published in 1706, defines “point” as “a head, or chief matter.” Moreover, an operative Masons “points” the seams of a wall by filling in the chinks left in laying bricks or stone, thus completing the structure.

In older days of the Speculative Art there were “twelve original points” as we learn from the old English lectures, done away with by the United Grand Lodge of England at the time of the reconciliation of 1813. They were introduced by the following passage:

“There are in Freemasonry twelve original points, which form the basis of the system and comprehend the whole ceremony of initiation. Without the existence of these points, no man ever was, or can be, legally and essentially received into the Order. Every person who is made a Mason must go through these twelve forms and ceremonies, not only in the first degree, but in every subsequent one.”

The twelve points were: Opening, Preparation, Report, Entrance, Prayer, Circumambulation , Advancing. Obligation, Investure, Northeast Corner and Closing; and each was symbolized by one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel for ingenious reasons not necessary to set forth here.

The twelve original points were never introduced into the United States, and are now no longer used in England, although the ceremonies which they typify, of course, are integral parts of all Masonic rituals.

Our Five Points of Fellowship are not allied to these, except as they are reflected in the word “points.” We also find this relationship in the Perfect Points of our Entrance, once called Principal Points. Dr. Oliver, famous, learned and not always accurate Masonic student and writer (1782-1867) sums up the Five Points in his “Landmarks,” as follows:

“Assisting a brother in his distress, supporting him in his virtuous undertakings, praying for his welfare, keeping inviolate his secrets and vindicating his reputation as well in his absence as in his presence.”

by which it will be seen that in Oliver’s day the Five Points were not exactly as they are with us now.

Strange though it seems, a change was made in the symbolism of the Five Points as recently as 1842, at the Baltimore Masonic Convention. Prior to that time, according to Cole, the Five Points were symbolized by hand, foot, knee, breast and back. After 1842, the hand was omitted, and the mouth and ear tacked on as the fifth. Mackey believed that:

“The omission of the first and the insertion of the last are innovations and the enumeration given by Cole is the old and genuine one which was originally taught in England by Preston and in his country by Webb.”

Some curiosities of ritual changes, though interesting, are more for the antiquarian than the average lodge member. Most of us are more concerned with a practical explanation of the Five Points as they have been taught for nearly a hundred years.

For they have a practical explanation, which goes much more deeply into fraternal and brotherly relations than the ritual indicates.

A man goes on foot a short distance by preference; for a longer journey he boards a street car, rides in an automobile, engages passage on a railroad or courses through the air in a plane. Service to our brethren on foot does not imply any special virtue in that means of transportation. The word expresses the willingness of him who would serve our own pleasure and refuse to travel merely because the means is not to our liking would hardly be Masonic.

We assist our brethren when we can; also we serve them.

The two terms are not interchangeable; we can not assist a brother with out serving, but we may serve him without assisting him. For a wholly negative action may be a service; suppose we have a just claim against him and, because of our Fraternal relations, we postpone pressing it. That is true service, but not active assistance, such as we might give if we gave or loaned him money to satisfy some other’s claim.

How far should we go “on foot” to render service?

Nothing is said in the ritual, but the cabletow is otherwise used as a measure of length. That same Baltimore Masonic Convention defined a cabletow’s length as “the scope of a brothers reasonable ability.” Across town may be too far for one, and across a continent not too far for another. In better words, our own conception of brotherhood must say how far we travel to help our brother.

Mackey expressed thus:

“Indolence should not cause our footsteps to halt, or wrath to turn them aside; but with eager alacrity and swiftness of foot, we should press forward in the exercise of charity and kindness to a distressed fellow creature.”

The petition at the Altar of the Great Architect of the Universe before engaging in any great and important undertaking is sound Masonic doctrine. To name the welfare of our brother in our petitions is good - but not for the reasons which the good Dr. Mackey set forth; the great Masonic student's pen slipped here, even as Jove has been known to nod! He Said:

“In our devotions to almighty God we should remember a brother's welfare as our own, for the prayers of a fervent and sincere heart will find no less favor in the sight of heaven because the petition for self intermingles with aspirations of benevolence for a friend.” Apparently we should pray for our friends because God will look with favor on an unselfish action on our part - which is un Masonic and selfish! Cole, writing years before Mackey (1817) said of his Third, our Second Point:

“When I offer up my ejaculations to Almighty God, a brother's welfare I will remember as my own, for as the voices of babes and sucklings ascend to the Throne of Grace, so most assuredly will the breathings of a fervent heart arise to the mansions of bliss, as our prayers are certainly required of each other.”

This seems to be interpretable as meaning that we should pray for our brethren because we love them, and because, knowing our own need of their prayers, we realize their need of ours.

Anciently, it was written “Laborare est orare,” - to labor is to pray. If indeed prayer is labor, then to pray for our brethren we may labor for our brethren, which at once clarifies the Second Point and makes it a practical, everyday, do-it-now admonition. To work for our brother's welfare is in the most brotherly manner to petition the Most High for him.

We often associate with the idea of a “secret” something less than proper; “He has a secret in his life,” “He is secretive.” “He says one thing but in his secret heart he thinks another” are all expressions which seem to connote some degree of guilt with what is secret. We keep our brother's secrets, guilty or innocent, but let us not assume that every secret is of a guilty variety. He may have a secret ambition, a secret joy, a secret hope - if he confides these to us, is our teaching merely to refuse to tell them, or to keep them in the fine old sense of that word - to hold, to guard, to preserve. The Keeper of the Door stands watch and ward, not to keep it from others, but to see that none use it improperly. Thus we are to keep the secret joys and ambitions of our brethren, close in our hearts, until he wants them known, but also by sympathy and understanding, helping him to maintain them.

Even without this broad interpretation, the keeping of a brother's confidence has more to it than mere silence. If he confides to us a guilty secret, since to betray him may not only make known that which he wishes hidden, but places him in danger. To betray a trust is never the act of a brother. In ordinary life an unsought trust does not carry with it responsibility to preserve it; in Freemasonry it does! No matter how we wish we did not share the secret, if it has been given us

by a brother, we can not suffer our tongues to betray him, no matter what it costs us to remain silent, unless we forget alike our obligation and the Third Point.

“Do you stumble and fall, my brother? My hand is stretched out to prevent it. Do you need aid? My hand is yours - use it. It is your hand, for the time being. My strength is united to yours. You are not alone in your struggle - I stand with you on the Fourth of the Five Points, and as your need may be, so “Deo volente,” will be my strength for you.”

So must we speak when the need comes. It makes no difference in what way our brother stumbles; it may be mentally; it may be spiritually; it may be materially; it may be morally. No exceptions are noted in our teachings. We are not told to stretch forth the hand in aid “If,” and “perhaps,” and “but!” Not for us to judge, to condemn, to admonish . . . for us only to put forth our strength unto our falling brother at his need, without question and without stint. For such is the Kingdom of Brotherhood.

More sins are committed in the name of the Fifth of the Five Points than in the name of liberty! Too often we offer counsel when it is not advice but help that is needed. Too often we admonish of motes within our brother’s eye when our own vision is blinded by beams. What said the Lord? (Amos VII, in the Fellowcraft’s Degree.) “Behold, I will set a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will not again pass by them any more.”

“In the midst of my people Israel” - not in the far away land; not across the river; not up on the mountain top, but in the midst of them, an intimate personal individual plumb line!

So are we to judge our brethren; not by the plumb, the square or the level that we are each taught to carry in our hearts, but by his plumb, his square, his level.

If he build true by his own tools, we have no right to judge him by ours. The friendly reminders we must whisper to him are of incorrect building by his own plumb line. He may differ from us in opinion; he may be Republican where we are Democrat, Methodist where we are Baptist; Wet where we are Dry; Protectionist where we are Free trade; League of Nations proponent where we are “biter ends” - we must not judge him by the plumb line of our own beliefs.

Only when we see him building untrue to his own tools have we the right to remind him of his faults. When we see a brave man shrinking, a virtuous man abandoning himself to vice, a good man acting as a criminal - then is his building faulty judged by his own plumb line and we may heed the Fifth of the Five Points and counsel and advise him to swing back, true to his own working tools. And finally, we do well to remember Mackey’s interpretation of the Fifth Point:

“. . . we should never revile a brother’s character behind his back but rather, when attacked by others, support and defend it.” “Speak no ill of the dead, since they can not defend themselves” might well have been written of the absent. In the Masonic sense no brother is absent if his brother is present, since then he has always a champion and defender, standing upon the Fifth Point as upon a rock.

So considered - and this little paper is but a slender outline of how much and how far the Five Points extend - these teachings of Masonry, concerned wholly with the relations of brother to brother, become a broad and beautiful band of blue - the blue of the Blue Lodge - the True Blue of Brotherhood.