

The Square and Compasses

Hoyt O. Samples, 33° is the Sovereign Grand Inspector General

Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry

Southern Jurisdiction, Orient of Tennessee

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One of the earliest lessons that we are taught in Freemasonry is that the three great lights are the Holy Bible, square, and compasses. While it is relatively easy to understand why the Holy Bible is given us as the rule and guide of our faith and thus considered one of the great lights, it may require additional explanation to understand why the square and compasses are also considered two of the great lights of Masonry.

When most people are asked what constitutes the “secrets” of Freemasonry, many would justifiably reply that the grips and words are the secrets of this fraternity. However, the grips and words can be obtained by non-Masons through a brief perusal of the Internet or basic research at a local library. In a much more complete sense, Freemasonry can best be understood as being a fraternity based on symbols, and it is perhaps the meaning of such symbols which constitutes the true “secrets” of Freemasonry.

In that regard, the square and compasses must be very important symbols if they are given such an elevated status in our fraternity. Thinking about a square reveals that it is an instrument that can only be applied to flat surfaces. In ancient times, the Earth was presumed to be flat, and so the square became a symbol of that which is earthly. Likewise, the Earth was thought to be square and thus the phrase “the four corners of the earth.”

The compasses are used to describe circles and shapes in trigonometry and geometry that cannot be adequately described by a square. Thinking for a moment, you will realize that the sky or heavens above constitute a half-sphere or half-circle which can be drawn by the compasses. Thus, the compasses came to symbolize the heavenly or spiritual.

Every human being has a double nature. One aspect of human nature involves the animal and material, while the other involves the intellectual and spiritual. Man’s body is said to be formed from the dust of the Earth, while his soul, spirit and intellect are formed in the heavens. The physical body arises from the Earth and returns to the Earth and is considered earthly and material. The soul, spirit, and intellect are immortal and are heavenly and spiritual in nature.

There are competing forces affecting human conduct. The compasses represent those forces which are heavenly and spiritual, while the square is a symbol of those forces which are earthly and material.

The compasses’ two arms represent man’s moral sense and reason. Moral sense can be defined as that which has been given to man to discern right from wrong. The concept of reason is one in which a man discerns what is the wisest and best course of conduct.

On the other hand, the square represents the earthly, material nature of man and can be described as the sensual appetites and passions of a human being. These characteristics are those that man shares with animals, and so far as they rule a man, he is but an animal.

When a candidate is prepared to be initiated, he represents man in the state of barbarism, ignorance, and subjugation. You will recall that the candidate is neither naked nor clad, barefoot nor shod, meaning that his faculties are but half developed and that moral sense and reason, though they exist in him, are in a dormant condition.

Furthermore, the candidate is hoodwinked and so symbolically deprived of the light of knowledge.

The candidate is also deprived of all metals. This was originally directed at the most precious metals of gold and silver and symbolized the deprivation of the light of reason and moral sense. Going even further, gold originally represented the sun and silver the moon. Therefore, a blindfolded candidate deprived of all metals is denied a vision of the light and vision of the sun and moon, or, in other words, deprived of the ability to find moral sense and reason.

During the obligation, the candidate's attention is drawn to the square and compasses on the altar. Remembering that the two points of the compasses represent moral sense and reason and the two arms of the square represent man's sensual appetites and animal passions gives us great insight into the real meaning of these most significant symbols.

It is with great care that it is pointed out to the candidate that the two points of the compasses are under the square in the entered apprentice degree. As the candidate is deprived of light, the candidate's moral sense and reason are symbolically overpowered and ruled by his earthly (represented by the square) appetites and passions which constitute his animal nature. Thus, without moral sense and reason, man is destined to be no better than an animal and governed only by the basest instincts.

In the Fellowcraft degree, one point of the compasses is elevated above the square, and this fact is specifically pointed out to the candidate. Such teaches the candidate that by zealous work he can begin to attain light and that the progressive journey of a faithful man is from darkness to light. In our teachings, the candidate is reminded that Freemasonry is a journey and can be attained only by degrees. This represents the journey of a man traveling from darkness to light and that of a man maturing from his animal instincts to a willingness to serve the greater good. The Fellowcraft degree represents that the candidate has attained a moral and intellectual condition whereby his earthly appetites and passions no longer have complete control over his moral sense and reason.

The third degree is the cement of the whole, and as a Master Mason, the candidate is instructed that both points of the compasses are elevated above the square. This is designed to teach the candidate that he is supposed to have obtained the condition in which the moral, intellectual, and spiritual forces of his nature have become superior to his material and animal forces. This represents the progressive journey of a man from darkness to light. It is the recognition that man owes a greater duty than just to himself and that the best expression of his nature is one of self-sacrifice and service to others. Thus, as a Master Mason, one is supposed to have obtained the condition in which the moral, intellectual, and spiritual forces of his nature have become superior to its material and animal forces. The candidate becomes a Master Mason because, symbolically, he has become a Master of

himself.

We are all familiar with the phrase describing a Master Mason as one who has “passed from the square to the compasses.” Knowing the meaning of the symbolism gives us much greater insight and a more complete understanding of this phrase. As one “passes from the square to the compasses,” one is growing in maturity and evolving from the earthly and sensual appetites to those heavenly and spiritual virtues which are the ultimate rewards for those who seek the true light.

We are also taught that the principal tenants of Masonry are said to be included between the two points of the compasses when properly extended. By understanding that the principal tenants are the whole moral law, we can now see that the moral law can only be discerned by the application of moral sense and reason, which are the two prongs of the compasses. Likewise, the compasses are said to circumscribe our desires, which means that by the application of moral sense and reason, we keep our sensual appetites and desires in check and make them subordinate to those higher and nobler virtues of service to God and our fellow man.

One of the great Masonic scholars of all times was Albert Pike, Sovereign Grand Commander of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of the Southern Jurisdiction from 1859 until his death in 1891. He felt very strongly that symbolism was of critical importance in the Blue Lodges, and one of his goals was to help Masons understand the symbolic meanings and applications of the symbols in their Lodges. Our ritual is what sets Masonry apart from other good and useful charitable and fraternal organizations. Grand Commander Pike realized this and noted that the ceremonies of Freemasonry served two primary purposes: (1) to inculcate and promote moral and social virtues; and (2) to serve as a vehicle for transmitting symbols.

Thus, we would be well-served by undertaking a diligent study of Masonry’s symbols whereby we can obtain the true secrets and gifts that Masonry has to offer.