MASONIC CHARITY PART 1

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Masonic Charity

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing." These are writings from 1st Corinthians, Chapter 13, in that Great Book on our altar. Tonight we will talk about Charity and look to understand some of its meanings. Masonic Charity may be more than we think it is as we generally practice it, and we may come to some understandings about Charity that will surprise us.

We find the discussions of Faith, Hope, and Charity in that part of the Entered Apprentice Lecture which discusses the Covering of a Lodge. This is a very intriguing section, not only for what it says, but for what is veiled inside what it says. There are few sections in any of the Lectures that compare with its raw spiritual power and perhaps no other section that tantalizes us as much with hidden meaning.

First, it says, "The covering of a Lodge is no less than that star-decked heaven or clouded canopy where all good Masons hope at last to arrive...". If we accept, as we should, Masonry's definition of a Lodge as being a certain number of Brothers, duly assembled, with a Holy Bible, Square, and Compasses, then the Lecture is saying that the Lodge is 'covered' by the Divine. The 'covering' has little to do with the actual ceiling of the building; this is metaphor for the blessings of the Divine. We also hear in this phrase veiled traces of ancient religious ideas about the heavens. The allusion to "Star-decked heavens or clouded canopy" may well refer to Ptolemy's crystal spheres, his attempt to describe the physical structure and distance between man and the Gods, a structural belief adopted by the Roman Catholic church for its first 1200 years. The Italian astronomer Galileo got into big trouble with his church for going against this dogma of physical heavenly spheres revolving around the earth. It is safe to say that the Lecture phrase does not just refer to the ceiling; that star-decked heaven or clouded canopy extends Divine Love to cover all Brother Masons, throughout the world.

The Lecture continues with, "... by aid of that theological ladder which Jacob, in his vision, saw extending from earth to heaven...". Jacob's vision was of a ladder reaching from earth to heaven upon which messenger angels ascended and descended, in essence, a two-way conveyance for spirituality. We know that theology is the study of religion or the Divine; the Lecture is saying that good Masons hope to cross the spiritual distance to the Divine by studying the Divine and, given the two-way nature of the ladder, it says that by studying the Divine, it becomes a means for the Divine to come to us, too.

The Lecture also declares that the three principle components of this study, of this means to cross the spiritual divide, are the three principle rounds of the ladder, "...denominated Faith, Hope, and Charity; which admonishes us to have Faith in God, Hope in immortality, and Charity for all mankind." This passage does two things. First, it clarifies that what has already been said is spiritual metaphor: the Divine heavens, our desire to go there after death, and the means by which we may get there. Secondly, the word, 'admonishes', in its Latin root, means to indicate duties or obligations by gentle warning, and in its Greek root word, 'admonishes' means both mind and spirit. So, this phrase states the theological basis by which we may gain our ultimate desire: by dutiful, conscientious practice of Faith, Hope, and Charity in the mind and spirit. So far, so good.

Now, in a theological or 'God'-oriented sense, Faith and Hope are in context; they make sense. But Charity, especially as we have come to apply the term in action, as being general relief of the poor or disadvantaged, does not seem to be as theologically profound as having Faith and Hope in the Divine. Why then would Charity be the 'greatest of these' three? There are hints in the phrase, "...but Charity extends beyond the grave through the boundless realm of eternity.", that we may be acting on its meaning in a material way rather than in its implied spiritual way. If we pursue this hint, we find that the word 'charity' in the Holy Writings is a mistranslation from the Greek into Latin. John Wesley, the English Protestant reformer who first translated the Bible from Latin into English, knew this. The correct translation changes the meaning of the word to 'love', and its context in Corinthians admonishes love among the Greek believers. Paul's message to the Brethren now reads: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not 'love', I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, and have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not 'love', I am nothing."

If we apply this corrected meaning to our Lecture it could now read, "...but Love extends beyond the grave, through the boundless realms of eternity." By considering this translation and extension from its source in Corinthians, this section would then admonish us to focus our Masonic Charity among our brethren, our Brethren found under the broad Masonic canopy, and all found under the whole canopy of Divine love. We should not shrink from this interpretation; Masonry is, and always has been, first, a Fraternity of Brothers dedicated to mutual aid, support, and protection. Our Five Points of Fellowship give us warrant for doing this for the primary benefit of our Brothers. Our warrant is further reinforced by the inclusive Paulian thought which this section of the Lecture paraphrases, the theology of Divine love shared among Brethren by that Brethren.

What is fascinating is that Masonry has chosen to retain the original translation, 'charity', and like so many of its rich concepts, leaves it to the individual Mason to explore its meaning and to decide how to interpret and apply it to his own practice of Masonry. Charity's general meaning here and elsewhere in Masonry's teachings supports and promotes the idea of delivering universal relief for all mankind. However, in pursing that approach, we should not forget the emphasis, "particularly our Brother Masons”.

With this expanded understanding, we may now see why 'charity' is deemed to be the greatest of Masonry's theological rounds. It is more, so much more, than administering relief here on Earth. It is also the mutuality of our spiritual love for each other, for the Divine, and Divine love for us, and the worldly expression of this spirituality as Faith, Hope, and Charity, which we are to administer among our Brother Masons, and all mankind.

Though I have all faith, and have not love, I am nothing.

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