

PRAYING IN LODGE

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Critics of Freemasonry often ask, "Do Masons worship Yahweh, the God of the Bible, when they join in Masonic worship with Hindus, Moslems, and members of other faiths?" Let me begin by pointing out that this question suggests "worship" occurs in Lodge meetings. This question is intended to set a certain bias against Masonry before the question is seriously considered.

Worship does not take place in Masonic Lodge meetings. Worship is the function of a religion. Thomas E. Hager, Past Grand Master of Masons in Tennessee, said in an April 22, 1994, letter to Baptist Press, the official press service for the Southern Baptist Convention, "Freemasonry is not a religion, nor is it a substitute for a religion." Earl D. Harris, Past Grand Master of Masons in Georgia, has clearly said, "We do not go to Lodge buildings to worship" (Masonic Messenger, July 1995, p. 34). Lodge meetings might be compared to business meetings held in some churches where minutes of the last meeting are read, bills are paid, and old and new business are addressed.

The question is a great example of a "circular argument." This logical fallacy begins with the conclusion: that Masonic meetings are worship services where men professing various faiths join together to worship a God other than "Yahweh, the God of the Bible." The argument simply travels around in circles until it comes back to its original statement, concluding that Masons worship a God other than Yahweh (or Jehovah).

Praying in Lodge Meetings

Prayers voiced in Lodge meetings do not make the meeting a worship service. If so, then sessions of the U.S. Congress would be "worship services" as a chaplain or invited clergy leads in prayer to open the session. Congress has been accused of many things, but never of holding worship services. If prayers make a meeting a worship service, the same criticism could be leveled against organizations such as the Lions Club, the Boy Scouts, and the VFW.

Until recent years, prayers were offered at high school ball games by clergy in the community. Courts have repeatedly ruled that prayers may not be offered before such events. Critics complain that "God has been taken out of public school" because prayers may not be given by administrators or visiting clergy at the beginning of a school day. Students, however, are allowed to pray on their own initiative, either alone or with other students who wish to join them in prayer. Masons alone have been singled out by critics for praying in meetings while these same critics complain that the official prayers are not allowed in public schools.

Praying in Jesus' Name

Some Masonic critics are not opposed to prayer in Lodge or other meetings, even when non-Christians are present, but are opposed to the prayer when it does not conclude with the specific words, "in the name of Christ." They cite John 14:13-14, where Jesus said to his disciples, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it" (NRSV).

Bailey Smith, a recent president of the Southern Baptist Convention, made headlines in 1980 when he said God does not hear the prayers of a Jew. Smith's position and that of Masonic critics is that God only hears prayers ending with "in Jesus' name" or prayers of repentance.

Preschool-age children are taught to pray simple prayers. They seldom end it with the phrase "in Jesus' name" and most have not made what evangelical Christians call a profession of repentance and faith in Christ. Do Masonic critics believe God hears the prayers of these children? Are we misleading children when we tell them God hears their prayers? I believe God hears the prayers of every sincere person, and I do not think we are misleading children when we tell them God hears and answers their prayers.

It was drilled into my head by my professors during seven years of theological education that a correct interpretation of a biblical text requires examination of the surrounding text, which often helps an individual understand the text in question.

John 14:13-14 can be better understood if we examine the setting for Jesus' statements. Although his disciples had been with him for nearly three years, they still had doubts about him. Philip asked him in John 14:8, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." That is the key verse to understand Jesus' teaching in John 14:13-14.

Jesus responded to Philip's question, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say 'Show us the Father'?"

When Jesus said in verses 13-14, "I will do whatever you ask in my name," he was claiming deity. He was saying, "God will hear your prayers if you pray in my name because "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."

Jesus did not mean that unless a person concludes his prayers with the words, "in the name of Jesus," God would not hear nor answer prayers.

William W. Stevens, my theology professor at Mississippi College, wrote in his *Doctrines of the Christian Religion* (1976), "'In my name' means according to his will and purpose, in direct union with him. It implies unity of thought and interest. One cannot pray in the name of Jesus and pray selfishly" (p. 269).

The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Vol. 9, p. 146) says, "The phrase 'in my name,' however, is not a talisman [magic object] for the command of supernatural energy. He did not wish it to be used as a magical charm like an Aladdin's lamp."

Men look on the outward appearance and judge others by the words used in a prayer (Matthew 6:5-8). God looks at the heart. He knows what we need before we ask. If the prayer is a genuine desire to talk to the Father of all creation, He will hear and answer the prayer, whatever words are or are not used. That is the kind of God I know from my reading of the Bible and from hours spent on my knees talking to Him.

During my ministry as a chaplain supervisor in the Olympic Village during the 1996 Atlanta Olympic games, chaplain volunteers from six major world faiths joined together in prayer every day. Chaplains rotated leading the group in prayer. Out of respect for chaplains who did not share our faith, we did not always verbally close our prayers "in Jesus' name."

Rev. James Draper, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Life Way Christian Resources (formerly the Sunday School Board), resigned from Estelle Lodge No. 582 in Euless, Texas, in 1984 after election for his second term as president of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and as the Masonic controversy was heating up in the SBC. He had transferred his membership from Dell City Lodge No. 536 in Oklahoma when he became pastor of the First Baptist Church of Euless. In his letter of resignation, Draper, who served one year as chaplain of his Lodge, said he always concluded his prayers "in Jesus' name."

Praying to The Great Architect of the Universe

Masonic critics have long and loudly argued that Masons do not pray to Yahweh when they pray in Masonic Lodges. Masonic critic William Schnoebelen refers to the "generic" god of Masonry, "God-to-the-lowest-

denominator" and

"Mr. Potato-Head God" when speaking of the Great Architect of the Universe (Masonry: Beyond the Light, pp. 44-46).

Another critic, John Ankerberg, quotes from Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia to argue that Masons believe Yahweh (or Jehovah) is inferior to "the universal god of Masonry" (The Secret Teachings of the Masonic Lodge, pp. 113-14).

Ankerberg's quote is not in the 1995 edition of Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia, the most recent edition, except for a single sentence, "The Masonic test is [belief in] a Supreme Being, and any qualification added is an innovation and distortion." This sentence is simply a requirement that men who desire to become Masons must believe in one God (monotheism). Monotheism is affirmed in biblical statements such as Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel!

The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" No statement in Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia suggests that Masons believe Yahweh is an inferior God.

The phrase Great Architect of the Universe came into Freemasonry as early as 1723, according to Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia, when it appeared in James Anderson's Book of Constitutions. Anderson, a Scottish Presbyterian minister in London, did not invent the phrase. It was repeatedly used by Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509-1564). "In his Commentary on Psalm 19, Calvin states the heavens 'were wonderfully founded by the Great Architect.' Again, according to the same paragraph, Calvin writes 'when once we recognize God as the Architect of the Universe, we are bound to marvel at his Wisdom, Strength, and Goodness.' In fact, Calvin repeatedly calls God 'the Architect of the Universe' and refers to his works in nature as 'Architecture of the Universe' 10 times in the Institutes of the Christian Religion alone"

(Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia, p. 516). If we accept the logic of Masonic critics, then Calvin must have believed the God revealed in the Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible is a false god. This, of course, is absurd, as are all of the Masonic critics' arguments.

Federal Reserve Notes (\$1 bills) proclaim "In God We Trust." The U.S. Mint has not defined "God." It is used as a generic name for the Supreme Being. Individuals may define God as they wish. In our religiously diverse nation, individuals of different faiths will define who they believe God is. I do not hear people calling for the removal of "In God We Trust" from Federal Reserve Notes because not everyone defines God as they do.

Praying with Persons of Other Faiths

On February 9, 1999, Baptist Press posted a story about several Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary administrators and faculty members visiting mosques while on a trip to North Africa and the Middle East. Baptist Press states the administrators and faculty "were awed by the mosques which provided an atmosphere for prayer. Though the local worshipers gathered to pray to Allah [the Arabic word for God], Midwestern's group removed their shoes [as is the custom in mosques] and spent time praying to the God of their Christian faith."

Mark Coppenger, president of Midwestern Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, was one of the Baptist visitors to the mosques. Coppenger said, "As we sat, and knelt, and stood [Muslims perform specific rituals which includes standing, kneeling and bowing while praying to Allah] in these moments of praise, confession, petition and intercession, it occurred to us that Christians would do well to have a similar location, atmosphere and posture for prayer." "It is a pity that non-Christians and sacramentalists [Roman Catholics] have appropriated the notion of houses of prayer, when ours is the heritage of orthodox prayer," Coppenger continued, referring to mosques and Roman Catholic cathedrals and retreat centers. "We have let them lead in an emphasis on prayer by default."

When the group returned to Kansas City, Coppenger decided to provide a place for prayer similar to that in mosques for seminary students. He removed hundreds of portable chairs from the chapel and laid down rolls of carpet. Students were asked to remove their shoes when they entered the "house of prayer," and a kneeling position was recommended.

Coppenger, his administrators, and faculty joined Muslims at prayer in a mosque. They reported they were able to pray to Yahweh even while Muslims were praying to God whom they call Allah. Coppenger and his team even followed the Muslim practice of bowing, kneeling, and prostrating themselves during the prayer ritual and still found they could pray to Yahweh. I have never felt I could not pray as my chosen faith leads me while standing next to someone in a Lodge meeting who does not share my faith.

Freemasons Do Not Worship in Lodge Meetings

In conclusion, Masons do not worship in Lodge meetings. Each Mason freely prays as his faith dictates, regardless of who is leading the group prayer, because prayer is ultimately a personal encounter and conversation between a man and his Creator.