

Some Lodges Work Differently

From Arturo de Hoyos, Grand Archivist and Grand Historian of Scottish Rite Freemasonry; Director, Department of Education and Heritage - The Supreme Council, 33^o, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, S.J., USA

The requirements for Masonic advancement differ depending upon where you live, and what lodge or jurisdiction you join. In most American Grand Lodges members must learn a catechism (a series of questions and answers), which rationally accounts for the initiatory process, and explains some of its symbolism and legends. There may also be a required time between degrees (a lunar month, etc.). Some States offer a “short form” catechism of only a few Q’s & A’s before advancing, while the time requirements may also differ. In some States (such as Pennsylvania), there is no memorization beyond certain brief essentials which prove membership. The English Masonic scholar Harry Carr once noted that the American process of learning a catechism made members better informed than those who don’t. In most English rituals, there may be several “Questions before Passing [or Raising]” but they amount to 1/10th of what most American Masons memorize. Yet all of these Brothers, however made, are equally Masons.

About 20 years ago I was present in an American Grand Lodge when they held their first communication of degrees in a group setting. One person underwent the formality of the ceremony, and the other candidates received the degree by witness and proxy. Although this is not a method I would use, the Grand Lodge ultimately decides for its membership what is “regular” and lawful.

In the higher degrees something similar might occur. In the Scottish Rite members may receive the degrees in a number of ways, depending upon local resources and ability. In some AASR Valleys the degrees are conferred a couple or a few at a time, over a series of weekends, and it may take months or even a couple of years to receive them all. In others, they are all conferred and received over a couple of weekends; in still others, a few “terminal degrees” are conferred, and the rest are “communicated” by delivering a brief discourse and administering an obligation.

In the Southern Jurisdiction (creators of the Scottish Rite) the degrees tend to follow traditional Masonic legends and themes. In our sister Northern Masonic Jurisdiction some of the degrees employ modern themes to teach its lessons. Although I prefer the traditional themes, members of the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction are every bit as much Scottish Rite Masons as we are in the Southern Jurisdiction. In the Supreme Council for England and Wales, only the Eighteenth, Thirtieth, Thirty-first, Thirty-second, and Thirty-third Degrees are conferred, and it takes many years to attain these grades. Most American Masons will see far more degrees than their English counterparts. And, in many Latin American countries, it takes years to progress one degree at a time. Members must also produce a “piece of architecture” (an essay) which is read in open lodge, and members vote before one is advanced.

Although different, these are all “regular” and lawful practices within their jurisdictions. Again, the governing body decides what is right and proper for its members. (This is really no different than States having different rules by which one obtains a driver’s license).

Having studied the history of our degrees, it is apparent that we are doing things the way they were always done. There is a myth that it normally took years, of even decades, to receive all the AASR degrees. Well, that’s just not true. Early accounts show the degrees being conferred in a variety of ways: they might have taken months, or might have been given one night after the other, or even several in a day. Sometimes, not all were conferred. Pike preferred that all be conferred (as do I), but conceded that it was necessary until Valleys had the wherewithal to do things as intended.

What do we make of this? Even if not all the degrees are conferred today’s Masons have far more educational material available than they did in earlier days. The bottom line is that we should take advantage of those educational opportunities, AND put our Masonry into practice.

Which is preferable to you? A Mason who takes five degrees over a weekend, and participates in Masonic education courses, or a Mason who takes all the degrees over an extended period, yet studies nothing at all? In my idealistic world, it would be slow progress coupled with education.

We all know the grumpy old Past Master (made a Mason before we were even born) who is ignorant of our history, ritual, and philosophy, and who is always “right,” because he stayed around long enough to preside over a lodge. Do not become that person. In the end it’s what you know, what

you've done, and what you can do. The well-educated, active, Mason is always preferred to the old stick-in-the-mud who doesn't like the fact that you obtained your degrees in a manner different than he did. Be pleasant to him (he is your brother) but gently remind him that Masonry is not static. If you want to give him a reality check, remind him that the founders of the fraternity in 1717 received only two degrees, and that the Master Mason (as a separate degree) was unknown before 1725. And be sure to let him know that you learned that through Masonic education. Take due notice thereof and govern yourselves accordingly.