

OBLIGATION

By WBro Neil Hind, PGD, WM

**Presented to the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No. 305,
at his Installation as Master, 6 August 2001.**

This evening, the Brethren of the Hawke's Bay Research Lodge No. 305, have accorded me the honour and privilege, of being installed as Worshipful Master and, for this, I thank them sincerely.

Being installed as Worshipful Master of this Lodge, will have been regarded as a highlight in their Masonic careers, by all those who have gone before me and we must thank those, who have held this position and those, who over the years, have supported their Worshipful Master to maintain this very important Masonic educational lodge in Hawke's Bay.

Having just invested VWBro. Eric Sweeting as Immediate Past Master, I would like to acknowledge his support and friendship over a period of, about, twenty years, also, those other Brethren from my own Lodge - particularly RWBro. George Curtis, who was my Proposer - and Brethren of the other Lodges of, what was, the Hawke's Bay Provincial District. All have made my years as a freemason, pleasant and rewarding in so many ways.

This evening, my thoughts are very much directed to this Lodge, to the members and to the function of the study of masonry. How we can spread the knowledge, gained from our studies, out to the wider community of freemasons in our new areas of Ruahine and Eastland and, in particular, to the new members of the Craft? We, as members of a Research Lodge, are well aware that the most important function of freemasonry is to train its members to an understanding of the many truths contained in the ritual and the prescribed order of our ceremonies, who then convey those truths, by their actions, into the world outside the walls of our Lodges.

This evening, I have entitled the paper I am to present to you, ***OBLIGATION***, which various resources give the meaning of as, the binding power of a promise, vow or contract; or indebtedness for some benefit or favour and, in law, is a bond to which a penalty is annexed on failure of due performance.

Having decided that this would be my subject, I wondered as to whether I should place an exclamation mark, or a question mark, after the word "Obligation". I decided not to use the exclamation mark, because, I am not crying out in pain or anger or accusing loudly, against an "Obligation" and I decided against a question mark, because, I am not raising doubt about, or objection to, the truth, credibility or the advisability of an "Obligation".

The "Obligation" I want to speak to you about, is the one we, as freemasons, have all taken and repeated and sealed, as required, in each of the degrees we enter into. I am sure that all of you present here this evening, have maintained those Obligations to the best of your ability. Sad to say, we have Brethren in our fraternity, who, for whatever reasons, have not fully understood the Debt we all owe to freemasonry in taking those Obligations and have been unable to fulfil them.

Perhaps when prospective candidates are being interviewed, reference should be made to the Obligation, which they are expected to take as an Entered Apprentice and endeavour to make known to them what may be expected of them as a freemason, after having taken a solemn Obligation.

Those of us who have been members of the Craft for a reasonable period of time and have listened to the teaching in our Lodges and given some thought to them, will have a good general idea of just what is expected of us as freemasons. We must make every effort to foster in our new members, the importance which the Obligation plays in our ritual and which serves to reinforce the teachings, which are to follow.

In every age, initiates have been expected to take an Oath to keep secret what would be communicated to him in any group with mysteries. Craft apprentices in medieval times would have been required to take an Oath. Today, the speculative apprentice takes an Obligation. The two are not quite the same. An Oath is a solemn appeal to God in support of a declaration and in witness that a promise will be kept. The difference is, that an Obligation is a binding agreement, which all freemasons have committed themselves to and have sealed in the prescribed manner - a serious commitment, one, which should not be treated lightly.

Fides servanda est (faithful the servant is) - a Faith given is always to be kept. This was a maxim and axiom, even among pagan people. The virtuous Roman said, *either let not that which seems expedient be base, or if it be base, let it not seem expedient.*

In the Middle Ages, the chivalrous knights had a system with its religious, moral and social code of conduct, the characteristics of which were devotion to service, care for women and the defender of weaker parties. Today, we, as freemasons, should and must, conduct ourselves in a similar manner because in today's world, many good and worthy ideals are not the norm.

All Craftsmen, in medieval times, took solemn oaths to keep secret and conceal what would be communicated to them. For example, the oath of the Barber and Surgeons Guild of 1606 says this – “You shall conceal and keep secret and not disclose such council, as at any time hereafter shall be used or spoken of by or amongst the said company, so help me God, and by the Holy contents of this Book.”

The earliest known Masonic manuscript, the Regius Poem, contains these words ~

*To be true to the Ordinances
A good true oath he must then swear
To the Masters and Fellows that be there
And all these points herein before
To them thou must need be swore
And all shall swear the same oath
Of the Masons be they willing or loath
Amen, Amen, so mote it be.*

There are a number of manuscripts, the first being, The Grand Lodge of England M/s No. 2 (dated about 1650); The Harleian M/s No. 2054 (dated 1650-90) and The Buchanan M/s (dated 1650-80), which, apart from the odd archaic word, would be similar in content to our present day Obligations.

It is noted that some of the Old Charges required the oath to be kept "without any manner of equivocation or mental reservation". Mental reservation, on the part of one who takes an Obligation, means, simply, the intentional failure to disclose something that effects the meaning of the statement made and, which, were it disclosed, would change the import. Thus, the Obligation, as the individual intends and well knows, means one thing to him that enters into it and another to those that receive it or hear it recited. The full phrase is found for the first time, it is believed, in the Protestant Declaration or Oath of 1678 and 1679. The phrase has formed part of the Declaration made by the English Sovereign before taking the Coronation Oath.

And I do solemnly, in the presence of God, profess, testify and declare that I do make this declaration and every part thereof, in the plain and ordinary sense of the words read unto me, as they are commonly understood by the English Protestants, without any evasion, equivocation or mental reservation whatsoever.

So you see the Obligation of a freemason has some very solid connections and foundations. It is, as we all know, difficult to take in the Obligation, particularly the first one, as a new candidate can be quite nervous in the early stages of the ceremony. Perhaps we should present a copy of the Obligation to the candidate and have some senior brother discuss with him its implications, shortly after the ceremony of the First Degree.

The mention of the ancient penalties associated with the Obligation, serve to reinforce the serious nature of a breach of an Oath or promise. While there is no historical record of these penalties being inflicted, the retention of what we would regard as quite barbarous penalties, as applied in medieval days, serves to reinforce the importance of maintaining the Obligation free of blemish. It has been argued that the oaths taken by operative brethren, in days of old, did not include barbarous penalties, but that 'THE PERIL TO A MAN'S SOUL, FOR THE BREAKING OF A VOW', was nearly always insisted upon.

The first three Obligations, in Craft masonry, require the candidate to solemnly swear and observe, without evasion, equivocation or mental reservation of any kind, the articles contained in those Obligations.

What does this mean?

Evasion (as defined in the Oxford Dictionary) - *act, means of evading, shuffling excuse.*

Equivocation - *to use ambiguous words to conceal the truth.*

Mental reservation - *a qualification, tacitly added, in making a statement or oath.*

Without evasion, equivocation or mental reservation, is a big commitment for someone who knows little of freemasonry. We should take great care in our choice of candidates and endeavour to give them the correct lead into the Craft, possibly through some form of pre-initiation education, by way of printed material, which could be given to Lodges to assist with this education. It appears that we have been remiss in not producing Masonic educational material, which, should be readily available to members by way of ongoing programmes within lodges. Research Lodges, it seems to me, have a duty to be more active in making this Masonic education more readily accessible to our members.

In our own Research Lodge, we have a splendid collection of Masonic books. How many brethren know about this library and how to obtain these books on loan for study?

Not only is a new candidate Obligated, but we, as brothers of the new candidate, are Obligated to assist our brother, in his formative time as a freemason, to grasp and understand the wonderful organisation of which he has become a member. The early education of a new member is absolutely essential to putting in place a solid foundation for the Masonic knowledge, which he will be able to learn and enjoy, then put into practice in the wider aspects of his life.

What should we expect of a freemason after his obligation?

Here are a few thoughts.

- * Firstly, he should be prepared to support his Lodge and Worshipful Master by his attendance at stated meetings;

- * He should try to make a daily advancement in Masonic knowledge, as is stated in our charges;

- * He should, by his actions and conduct out in the everyday world, remember that he is a freemason, so that it is evident to his fellow beings that he belongs to a great fraternity which is good and just;
- * He should listen carefully to the charges and endeavour to put them into practice;
- * He should be prepared to carry some of the responsibilities as a member of the Craft, so that he can rightfully claim his fair share of benefits, which those responsibilities will bring.

Finally, let us all re-assess and re-affirm our Obligations to the Craft and to the task of Masonic education.