

LET US HAVE HARMONY: THE MASONIC TABLE

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*Whatever action you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice,
whatever you give in charity, whatever austerities you perform,
all that you do; make as an offering unto Me.*

BHAGAVAD-GITA 9:27

Dining and Freemasonry are inseparable. Historically, the Masonic banquet is an essential part of any assemblage of brothers, so much so that one of the stated reasons for convening a 'Grand Lodge' in London in 1717 was to restore the solstitial banquet held in the name of an adopted Christian saint. And in Scotland, just over a hundred years earlier, three of the thirteen points of the Second Schaw Statute of 1599 deal with the banquets held for 'prentices and fellows of craft'.

In making such a statement, one certainly does not suggest that dining is more important than the ritual or philosophy of the Craft. Quite the contrary: early Masonic dining was intertwined with both, so the purpose of this document is not to retread a history that can be read more extensively elsewhere, but to examine the *manner* in which Masonic dining is to take place.

In other words, we are not discussing *if* or *when* to dine, but more importantly *how* to do so. How we dine speaks to who we are, and as with all of our other actions, it demonstrates who we seek to be as Masons. Simply put, how we dine should be as mindful as everything else we do when assembled together as craftsmen.

In my book *Observing the Craft*, published in 2010, I described these ideas in conceptual detail in the chapter entitled *The Festive Board*. This document will briefly revisit some of those ideas, towards the goal of providing a more specific idea of how to create a Masonic dining experience, as well as address the matter of what we should properly call such a thing. On that point, I will offer a different term; so here I'm not only asking you to consider changing your minds, I'm also asking me to change mine.

It's Not Just 'Dinner'

For many Masons who read this, the need to draw attention to Masonic dining will seem a bit strange. That is because in the world of Masonry outside of the United States, formal Masonic dining is as commonplace as the square and compasses, and always has been. However, in the United States, the practice has fallen away so noticeably that almost every document which has referred to it in the past hundred years laments the fact that it is in a state of disuse.

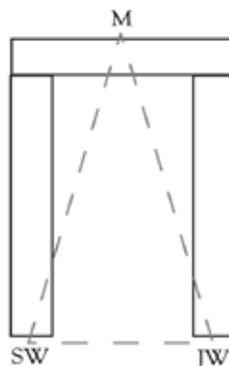
That is not to say that blame is to be placed anywhere for this lapse. So many brothers have just never learned that the meal after a Masonic meeting was ever supposed to be anything other than an inexpensive and informal dinner. But before the 20th century, it was just as common for American Lodges to practice some form of ceremonial dining at the end of their meetings, as one would find anywhere else in the world. And it was always meant to be more than just ‘dinner’.

The Masonic dining experience is actually meant to be a second Lodge meeting, where the things we do not do in the first one are allowed in the second—within the boundaries of our obligations, of course. Much like breathing, we contrast the inhalation with the exhalation, and both go together naturally. The same pride we take in the solemnity of the ritual meeting can become the considered joy of the fraternal banquet.

The event has a ritual, as well as its own etiquette, because it holds significance. Just as with everything else, Freemasons have developed a way of doing things in relation to dining which is meant to be observed. Otherwise one might just as well have a dinner with a group of friends. Masons are people who think about what they are doing and why; it only stands to reason that this would apply at table as well as in the temple.

The form of this second meeting is a U-shaped arrangement of tables, with the Master at the head, or what would be the bottom of the U. The Wardens sit at the ends of the tables, at the top of the U. The Master is usually joined at the head table by his guests, or any Masonic dignitaries who might be in attendance that evening, at his discretion.

There is a reason for this particular arrangement. In operative Lodges, and indeed to this day in a few lodges throughout the world, both wardens are placed in the West, sitting at the end of the brethren on either side of the Lodge, not in the way we find them in most Lodges today. If we consider that each warden is responsible for his area of the Lodge, then we can see how the arrangement of the tables, with a warden on each end, evokes this older arrangement in the Lodge, where each warden was responsible for his column of brothers. The dining room, then, is arranged in the form of a Lodge, even if it is not the specific form of our Lodges. There is also something that might be said for the sense of fraternal connectivity communicated by a contiguous seating of brethren, as opposed to islands of round tables scattered about the room.



For that same reason, Non-Masons should not be invited. In the same way that a brother earns his place in the Lodge through initiation before he can take part in its assemblies, so does he earn his place at the Masonic table. The occasion is not for those who have not earned that place. This is also because the brethren have the right to feel secure in their surroundings should they wish to discuss the rituals and philosophy of Freemasonry.

No brother wants to feel as if he must be guarded in his discussion of the Craft when he sits down to refreshment after a meeting. After the labour of the Lodge is finished, the brethren are often eager to discuss the Craft amongst themselves, and they have every right to do so in the exclusive presence of their own company. In the presence of non-Masons, however, the mind of a courteous brother is always on the ability to include one's guests in the discussion, and this cannot be achieved to the benefit of either Masons or non-Masons at the end of a Masonic meeting. Let the Lodge, then, provide special outside events to be shared with our families and friends, and let us have our internal events for ourselves.

The choice of food for the Masonic table need not be ostentatious. Filet mignon in a Périgord truffle sauce is not to be expected, but more important, neither are sandwiches and beans. The guiding idea is that the food should be of the same quality one would find in any respectable restaurant, and it should be presented and served in a way that conveys dignity even if served on paper plates. It is also important to consider the possible dietary restrictions of both members and visiting brethren. As would apply to any general event planning, religious sensitivities and allergic concerns should be accounted for in advance, so as to not make a brother feel unwelcome, and thus become an obstacle to harmony. [In other words, it might be better for each brother to enjoy pork or shellfish on his own time, and not seek it in the more universal atmosphere of the Lodge.]

As to the protocol of the evening, Masonic tradition confirms that whereas national songs, toasts to the head of state, or other forms of patriotic expression are not appropriate in the body of the Lodge room, they have quite commonly been found at the Masonic table since the late 1700s. It is here where brethren may express those good-natured and sincere salutations that we do not take into the universal and spiritual space of the Lodge.

The Masonic table, therefore, is where we may give voice to our own sentiments, as regards life cycle events, the acknowledgement of the particular accomplishments of a brother, and toasts to our respective nations and their leaders. When done properly, this takes nothing at all away from the Lodge meeting. On the contrary, bringing these things to the Masonic table instead of trying to insert them all into the Lodge meeting, adds a superb dimension of true brotherhood and friendship to the entire evening, where the brethren can enjoy a Masonic refreshment that is every bit as valid and hearty as their previous Masonic labour.

Throughout the world, there are many ways to conduct the event. Consequently, many Lodges have procedures and traditions that are unique to their particular Lodge. Some Lodges may follow very traditional forms of toasts, salutes, and songs, where other Lodges may have a more simpler protocol, one that has a more natural and spontaneous feel.

It is common in some Lodges to appoint a Master of Ceremonies, who will formally announce that ‘the Worshipful Master wishes to take wine with the brethren’; another Lodge may have the Master direct the proceedings himself, speaking directly to the brethren. Some Lodges will use the well-loved tradition of the ‘quick fire’ with every toast; others will prefer to use a different salute, or take a more subdued tone altogether.

It may be the custom of one Lodge to have the brethren process into the dining hall, where another might use the more common approach of having the Master of the Lodge announced as he processes in to the rhythmic applause of the brethren.

Regardless of how a Lodge goes about crafting a dining experience, any Lodge that does bring this important component of Masonic fellowship back to life within its walls, will immediately understand why so many of our most esteemed brothers thought it to be so necessary to our gatherings.

The Issue of Nomenclature

Now that we have established how we are going to dine formally, another question arises regarding what we should call this assembly, this additional meeting of the Lodge. A few terms have existed, both ancient and recent in their popularity. We need to consider this, because words matter to Masons. They always have, because it is through words that we form the very temples in which we sit. The terms we are going to deal with here are *agape*, which has been used by a handful of lodges in North America, and the previously mentioned *festive board*, which is used by a majority of English-speaking lodges that give a name to the dining experience.

When in Rome, Do As the Greeks Do?

Unfortunately, the Masonic Restoration Foundation at its inception was largely responsible for the use of the term *agape* in North America. But ideas evolve, and new information should overtake old misperceptions. So let us now be very clear on this point: an *agape* is a Christian religious feast. This is simply a fact. The adoption of the term into Masonry is an innovation in Masonic language, and derives from latter-day French Masonry, perhaps as a poorly veiled imposition—be it intentional or not—of sectarian religious or spiritual attitudes onto the Craft. Consequently, one should no more call a Masonic dining experience an *agape* than one would call a lodge meeting a *mass*. There is no precedent for the use of the term in English-speaking Masonry.

The use of the term in *English-speaking lodges* in North America would seem to be a result of innocent ignorance, and is likely to offend both Christians and non-Christians alike (the former because of the implication of assimilating their religious ceremony into the Craft, and the latter for the imposition of the same upon the Craft). Masons who wish to participate in an *agape* should seek it out in their respective religious institutions, and not attempt to manifest such a thing in the universalist atmosphere of Freemasonry, where all who believe in a Supreme Being are welcome.

Looking at it from an entirely different perspective, this author has also been to Masonic dinners in European lodges that are called *agapes*. The curious thing about those experiences, however, is that those *agapes* were simple dinners at round tables, with no intention

whatsoever to make them stimulating opportunities for either discussion or ceremony. The brethren were telling jokes and complaining about their jobs and other things, and serving themselves from open pots. In other words, they looked just like the kind of Masonic dinners one would find in any other lodge where eating is nothing special, and is done in the cheapest way at the cheapest cost. In fact, there is even a website for French lodges where one can buy what are essentially MREs, along with cheap plastic plates and plastic wine goblets, to be used for their *agapes*. So despite the romance of the word, the grass is not necessarily greener on the other side, no matter how much one might want it to be so.

But what is *wrong* with calling this an *agape*?

The reason explained above should suffice, but there is an even more important one than the problem of it being the name for a sectarian religious ceremony. That primary reason is very simply, because **it is the wrong Greek word**.

Masons misuse words just as well as other people. One only need mention the ridiculously overused word ‘esoteric’ and it should become obvious that so many Masons use this word incorrectly every time we want to say ‘philosophical’ or ‘exegetical’ in reference to the repertoire of Masonic thought.

But observant Masons should be concerned with accuracy. If we wish not only to be serious, but to be taken seriously, then we must be more concerned with what is correct than what some of us might find appealing. Further, if we are going to step outside of ourselves by using someone else’s language than our own, then it is absolutely necessary that we use it correctly, and understand what we are saying.

In an English-speaking Lodge, the use of the term *agape* appears as more of an attempt at affectation than respecting an actual tradition [because again, there *is no tradition* of an *agape* in English-speaking lodges]. That becomes clear when one considers that if the intention of using the term is to communicate a sense of brotherly love, then as stated above, the entire word is wrong. That word is not *agape*, but *philia* [φιλία], and no one has ever used that word to describe any ceremony in Masonry.

If one must use Greek, there are at least three other Greek words that are arguably more appropriate to describe a gathering of human beings who would see themselves as brothers, or which would denote an extension of unconditional hospitality to each other in a spirit of brotherly love. We have already touched on *philia*, so let us consider two others:

Storge [στοργή] reflects the reality of sitting down with those who you may not really like, or must live with despite disagreement. It is often translated as familial love, which one thinks of as being between parent and child, or amongst siblings. But that translation focuses on a certain unconditionality which avoids the more clinical definition of such love being one of obligation, without *choice*. As many of us know, that is sometimes a far more honest interpretation of most Masonic gatherings than any romanticised notion of an ethereal and perfect affection for one another. Whilst not optimal, it is soberly realistic.

Xenia [ξενία] may well be the most accurate description of an event where the goal is to make everyone feel happy and welcome. It means, quite surprisingly, ‘fraternal hospitality’

and that is only surprising in the sense that one wonders why the brothers who brought you ‘agape’ either never knew or never gave any thought to that. It’s not as if this is in any way *esoteric* [yes, I did use the word correctly]; C.S. Lewis did an extensive study of comparative words for love in Greek over half a century ago. If the function of Masonic dining were purely exoteric, it would be the ideal word for it, even though difficult for some to pronounce.

What becomes clear now, with just a bit of examination, is that it is just not good enough to use a borrowed word—that is also not the correct one—merely because ‘we like it’. Innocent ignorance is one thing; wilful ignorance is quite another, and observant Masons cannot accept that under any circumstances.

The Greek language just doesn’t give us a singular or simple word for love. But perhaps the real problem is that we should not be using the word ‘love’ for the Masonic dining experience in the first place. It is—although not without love— not really the primary action taking place at this moment of the brotherly evening. Something else is taking place. Let’s come back to that, after we have discussed the more common term for Masonic dining, the *festive board*.

But the term *festive board* just doesn’t seem to communicate the more formal, or serious intent of our dinners.

Fair enough. But first let us understand that the more serious or profound portion of a Masonic gathering should properly take place *within the tyled Lodge* and not outside of it. This is where Masonic education was intended to be presented, as part of our work, and that principle should be adhered to in every possible instance, lest the tyled Lodge be diminished in importance in the eyes of the brethren.

The line between meditation and mastication becomes blurred historically when the 18th century Lodge is meeting at one table for both light and libations. This is what we now call the Table Lodge, which used to be—in many places—simply the Lodge. In today’s Masonic world, the idea that one might continue the discussion of whatever theme was presented in lodge at the table is perfectly in order, and should certainly be encouraged. However, what one does not want to happen is for the observant aspect of the evening to be found only at the festive board afterwards, because the Lodge is not doing its proper work.

It is understandable that some may find the term *festive board* to be inadequate, even though it is the term used for generations—as well as today—to describe a Masonic dinner. Our brethren in Canadian lodges have made the valid point that since their lodges commonly have festive boards, which, like the previously mentioned ‘agapes’, are just what the brothers in their jurisdictions call eating, there is no indication of quality or a specific tone to the event when a lodge says it will be having a festive board. While the addition of ceremonial toasts in one lodge may be the very element that raises the bar for an otherwise mediocre dinner, in other lodges it is merely what is expected, and sits in the midst of bad food and inappropriate humour. It is certainly festive, but not in the way that Masons intended.

What do we do then, for those brethren who would like their festive boards to be a bit less festive, and a bit more contemplative? What about the brothers who are dabbling with Greek, and who perhaps feel they must have an exotic language to validate their ideas?

Brethren, the answer to this semantic inadequacy may be found in Scotland, where most Masons call the Masonic dining experience by yet another Greek word, although one which long ago found its way into English, as well as the language of Freemasonry. That word is *αρμονία*, or *harmony*.

Before one advocates for the use of that term, let's be clear about something. One can find the exact same degree of laxity and frivolity at a harmony in Scotland as one can find at one of the European *agapes* I mentioned earlier, or at a 'too casual' festive board in Canada. The clarification of terms offered here is meant to clarify the focus of our minds, when we consider what it is we are seeking to do at table. Structurally, a harmony can look as much like a first rate festive board as it can its own unique creation. It is proposed here as an ideal name for something, the quality of which is entirely up to each lodge. This is the reason why:

As thoughtful, observant Masons look for a meaningful term to describe the Masonic banquet, *harmony*, more than any other term, provides a perfect description of what is to be sought in that dining experience. *Harmony* speaks to the activity of the moment in both the literal and spiritual sense. The brethren assembled find harmony first by joining their voices in song, and then again in the expression of Masonic harmony by joining together in a conscious effort to create a shared experience. This now goes beyond the notions of both a 'festive board' or the '*agape*' ceremony, to explicitly state a purpose for the banquet. Brotherly love is the by-product, but *what is being made at the Masonic table is harmony*, expressed more tangibly at that moment than in the Lodge room, where it is a no less deeper but yet intangible bond. We are making a harmony that we can sense more exoterically, as we prepare ourselves to return to the exoteric world.

While the tyled Lodge introduces the concept of harmony, and may realise it in different ways through ritual, the Masonic dining experience allows for the active manifestation of that concept through all of the senses. It completes the evening, and then once more *harmonizes* the two different modes of meeting experienced by the brethren. Harmony is thus expressed in multiple ways, and as one finds with overlapping circles, it finds a place in the centre to help unify the entire evening into a complete whole.

Therefore, I respectfully suggest that you consider that what we should rightly call the Masonic dining experience is a *harmony*, and by so doing, more enthusiastically install that noblest of Masonic aspirations into the regular practice of our Craft.



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