

# A TEMPLE OF LIVING STONES: EXAMINING THE CONCEPT OF A CHAIN OF UNION

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Most readers of this publication will already be familiar in some way with the Chain of Union, if not already using such a ceremony in their own lodge. A common misconception among some brothers, however, is that the general concept of a Chain of Union is an import from European Masonry, recently brought forth by a few American Masons who are seeking a more esoteric experience in closing their lodges. In fact, the idea need not be imported at all; it may be found right here in the United States, within the rituals of our own Grand Lodges.

How could Masons in a given jurisdiction not know about their own ceremonies? Very easily. Many of our lodges have a virtual attic of discarded ideas and practices that have been worn away by fear, lack of interest, or general laziness. In the same way that some Grand Lodges have done away with the penalties of the degrees, or allowed elements of Craft ritual to be removed away into appendant bodies, elements of lectures or charges that convey a special meaning or indicate a particular experience can find themselves lost before our very eyes. In some situations, we might find ourselves engaged in an activity that is clearly derived from a more specific point of origin, but those engaged in it are not aware of what precisely they are doing, or how it was meant to be done. This is the case with the Chain of Union.

A number of Grand Lodges in the United States, most of them east of the Mississippi, have in their work a *closing charge*, intended to be used at the end of meetings. For most of these Grand Lodges that charge is optional, which—human nature being what it is—unfortunately translates to “feel free to ignore”. However, in my Grand Lodge [Virginia] this closing charge is a mandatory part of our ritual, and is used at the end of all Master Mason’s lodges. The language goes back at least to the time of William Preston, and is monitorial in those jurisdictions that include it.

While its form varies slightly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, the text is essentially some variation on the following, used in Virginia:

*Brethren: We are now about to quit this sacred retreat of friendship and virtue, to mix again with the world. Amidst its concerns and employments, forget not the duties which you have heard so frequently inculcated and so forcibly recommended in this Lodge. Remember that around this sacred altar, you have solemnly bound yourselves to befriend and relieve every brother who shall need your assistance. You have promised, in the most friendly manner, to remind him of his error, and aid a reformation. These generous principles are to extend*

*further. Every human being has a claim upon your kind offices. Do good unto all. Recommend it more especially to the household of the faithful. Finally, brethren, be ye all of one mind; live in peace; and may the God of love and peace delight to dwell with and bless you.*

This charge is given by the Master, after he has instructed the brethren to assemble about the altar, and in this act, the circle is formed which constitutes the chain of union by way of forming a temple of living stones. It is not the custom in Virginia to join hands, but it is also not prohibited, and one may well imagine a time when this surely must have been done in Virginia lodges [partially because the joining of hands *is* found in the closing ritual of an appendant body in Virginia]. In any case, the actual joining of hands is not the measure by which such an assembly should be judged; the image of Stonehenge and the concept of a sacred circle points to the higher purpose of the chain therein created. The Master then, while this circle remains intact, moves to declare the Lodge closed.

Some might point out that there is no reference to a chain in this charge. But interestingly enough, using language that is in part almost identical to that quoted above, the older Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania adds the following line:

*Remember always, Brethren, that these solemn rites of which you have been partakers, and your parts in them, are as binding on your conscience outside the lodge as within it. They are links in that chain made in life for eternity.*

Beyond that allusion to an actual chain, one should look closely at the words that are used throughout the charge. The purpose of a chain of union is to signify and validate the unbreakable oneness of the brethren by the bonds of the fraternity. In this particular charge, while the brethren are assembled, they are told that “around this sacred altar”—not *at*, when each man himself was obligated, but *around*, as a circle of brethren assembled in a chain of union—“you have solemnly bound yourselves” to each look after the other. At the end of the charge, an extraordinary line for an organisation of free-thinking individuals is uttered: “*be ye all of one mind*”. In this simple phrase, a psychological chain is formed to reinforce the physical one. Clearly, the brethren who composed and enacted this charge nearly 300 years ago knew the nature of what they were doing.

In a few lodges I have visited, the practice of a chain of union is implemented using words either from other rites or jurisdictions, which then necessitates the Lodge having to close first, in order to do what becomes an unauthorised [but not prohibited] ceremony outside of a tyled Lodge. The advantage of the closing charge I am quoting here in this article is that it is not something that has to be done after the lodge is closed; it is already part of our ritual, and again, in Virginia, required in order to close the Lodge. Considering the number of American Grand Lodges where this exact version of a closing charge—or a variation thereof—is “on the books”, it would behoove brethren to take a closer look at their respective rituals to see if they might find something in their history which would take them to their own native version of a chain of union.

The lesson to be learned from such an investigation is that often the things we think we need to improve our Craft are not necessarily to be found from without, but from within. In this case, the Chain of Union is something to be found within our own histories and rituals as American Masons. In putting this ceremony to use within those boundaries, we bring to life the notion of the “temple of living stones” alluded to in our ritual, and demonstrate a tangible meaning of that concept to every brother present.

As brothers consider how they might implement a Chain of Union in their lodges, it is apparent that far from being a “foreign innovation”, it is instead a forgotten treasure of our own Masonic history that merely need be restored.



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