

Masonic Philosophical Differences in the 21st Century

By

Sir Knight John L. Palmer

As the editor of a national Masonic magazine, I receive a good many letters to the editor and articles submitted for publication. In my case, most of them are about Freemasonry, Templary, or Christianity. Of those about Freemasonry, several are from Brethren expressing opinions concerning the great controversy about where our leadership should be leading us at this time of crisis in our Fraternity.

As I read and try to understand all this dialogue back and forth, questions come to mind. Is there a crisis in our Fraternity? If so, what are our options? What exactly are those who are offering suggestions wanting us to do? Is there agreement on even the definition of the crisis? How did we get to this point? How many different opinions are there? Which side should I take? How can I help?

Let us explore this situation, try to determine what the facts are, use some logic, and see if we can try to sort this thing out so that we can make some informed, intelligent decisions and take action that will benefit the Fraternity. Above all, let us see if we can achieve or re-establish harmony among the Craft. Is there a win-win to be had over all this?

Now you are probably asking, "which crisis, which conflict is he referring to? Let's look at our history and then see if we can define the crisis.

Historical Precedent for Widespread Disagreement

Controversy is no stranger to our fraternity. I would ask you to look back for a moment at a dispute that arose over two hundred years ago, not too long after the Grand Lodge system was established. A group of Masons perceived that this new entity called a Grand Lodge had begun to change the fraternity in ways with which they did not agree. The new Grand Lodge in London, from their prospective, was attempting to consolidate the views and practices of many of their newly termed "subordinate" Lodges into a consistent fraternity. The group who objected to the actions of the Grand Lodge broke off and formed their own Grand Lodge calling themselves the "Antients," because they advocated going back to what they believed were the ancient ways of doing Freemasonry. This, of course, resulted in the original Grand Lodge being fashioned the "Moderns" even though it was older than the Antients' Grand Lodge. This controversy raged on until the beginning years of the nineteenth century when their differences were resolved, and they once again united to form the United Grand Lodge of England. Evidence of this controversy is found all over American Freemasonry as some of our Lodges carry the title "Free and Accepted Masons" while others are known as "Ancient Free and Accepted Masons" or even "Ancient Freemasons." Most of the brethren in the United States didn't even understand what the fuss was about, and there is even evidence of some Lodges taking a strong stand against one side or the other not realizing that they had been chartered by the very side they were opposing.

Historical Perspective

The Grand Lodge of England 1717-1813

Moderns

Antient Grand Lodge of England 1751-1813

“The Grand Lodge of England According to the Old Institutions”

The Antients’ Grand Lodge

Antients

The United Grand Lodge of England 1813-Present

The Crisis Proliferating the Current Disagreement

The dictionary informs us that a crisis is “a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined; turning point.” The current crisis can be traced back to a single graph and the interpretation of its significance.

The Neo-Moderns

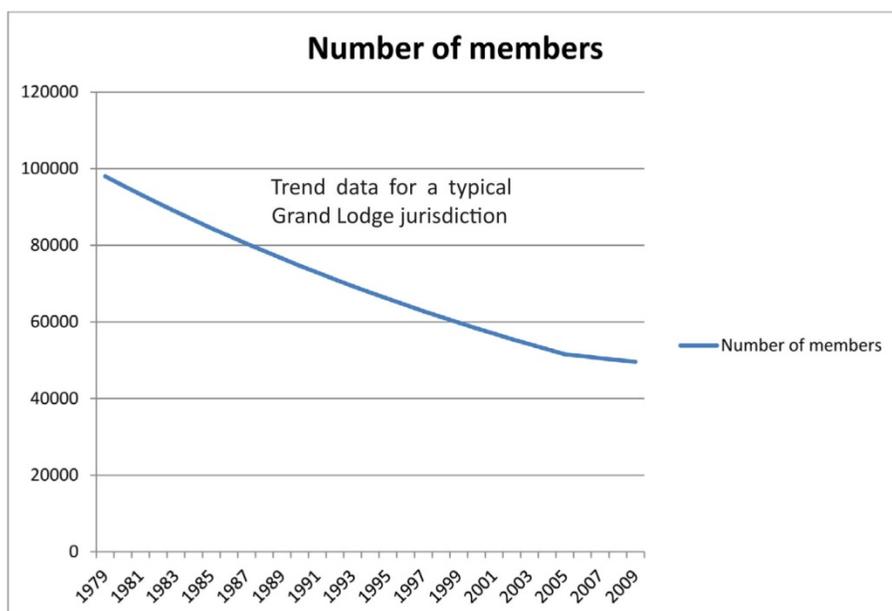
In 1959 the number of Freemasons in the United States peaked out and began to decline. In the known history of Freemasonry, at least since we have been counting Freemasons, the number of members in our Fraternity has gone up and down, but this was, by far, the largest number of members we had ever had. When I speak of Freemasonry, I include the Blue Lodge of Symbolic Freemasonry and all the other organizations which either predicate their membership on the Lodge or are in some way associated with it. I generally refer only to Freemasonry within the United States. The fraternity had established an elaborate and extensive internal infrastructure. Each of our bodies had employees at the state and national level and many at the local level. In addition, most of the bodies had established statewide or national philanthropies that employed literally thousands of people. We had hospitals, orphan homes, retirement communities, foundations, and educational institutions. In addition to the payrolls, we had inherited or built huge numbers of buildings. We had Lodge buildings, Grand Lodge buildings, Scottish Rite Temples, York Rite Temples, Shrine Temples, orphanages, hospitals, museums, libraries, and schools, not to mention the office space necessary to administer this entire infrastructure. All these were supported financially by our members through dues, contributions, fund-raising efforts, and sometimes return on investments which some of our wiser predecessors had established for that purpose.

As the number of members began to decline, our leadership was faced with an issue that none of their predecessors in their memory had faced. Either shrink the infrastructure costs or place a burden on the members. You notice that I did not say, “increase the burden on their members” because as the numbers had gone up during the preceding fifty years, the financial demands on each member had decreased in terms of real purchasing power to a point that it was only a small fraction of what it had once been. Inflation and the consumer price index continued to rise each year and the cost of dues remained the same or even decreased in some instances. This situation was exacerbated by the nature of our real estate holdings. During the first half of the 20th Century, the Fraternity had erected elaborate and impressive buildings all over the country, and these buildings had generally not been well

maintained. They were, in some cases, literally falling down around us and had historical significance not only to the Fraternity but to the communities in which they were located.

As the financial pressure increased, the first to try to address it were understandably the Scottish Rite of the Southern Jurisdiction, the Shrine, and to a lesser degree, the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. Why “understandably?” Because they were very large organizations, centrally managed, and in the case of the Shrine and the Scottish Rite, they had extensive real estate holdings. The hard decisions hit these organizations first. Rightly believing that the source of the problem lay with the Blue Lodge because all their membership was derived from the Lodge, the Scottish Rite and the Shrine decided to try to engage the leadership of the Grand Lodges in formulating a solution to the “problem.” They brought the problem and laid it at the feet of the Conference of Grand Masters of North America. This resulted in the formation of a “Masonic Renewal Committee.” This committee, realizing that they needed more data to make a good decision, hired consultants to gather the data, analyze it, and make recommendations. From this effort several recommendations were offered. Some acknowledgement was made that our members should be better educated about the fraternity. More popular member activities should be adopted. Our existing members should face the fact that they need to step up to the plate and, as individuals, share a greater amount of the financial responsibility by raising dues or conducting more fund raisers, but far and above, the clearest message from the consultants and hence from the committee was that we needed to increase the number of members or at least decrease the “bleeding” loss of members each year.

It was suggested that Freemasonry had fallen behind the times and was not responsive to the needs of the current generation. It was touted that the modern prospect was not interested in ritual and didn’t have the time to spend night after night at lodge meetings because of the work and family demands of our modern society. It was even stated that we appeared to be discouraging men from becoming Masons because of our policy of non-solicitation, our demands that initiates memorize and recite back pages of lectures, and the long three to five months required to complete the initiation process. So the recommendations included proposals to reduce or eliminate the need for any memorization, to reduce the time and effort required to become a Mason and even to have one day classes where a man could lay down his money, attend a half day or full day meeting, observe what was going on, and go home at the end of the day as a bona fide, card carrying, Master Mason. In addition, there were recommendations concerning the visibility of the Fraternity. After all, we would need to advertise to attract good prospective Masons. Out of this came the recommendations that our buildings be opened to the public more than ever before, that our charities and their benefits be publicized more than ever, and that our fund-raising activities for charities increase and involve more public participation. In order to attract the right sort of men, it would be necessary that we make them aware of the good things we do.



Neo-Moderns

Masonic Renewal Committee of the Grand Masters Conference of North America

Shrine

Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite

Grand Lodge of Florida

Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania

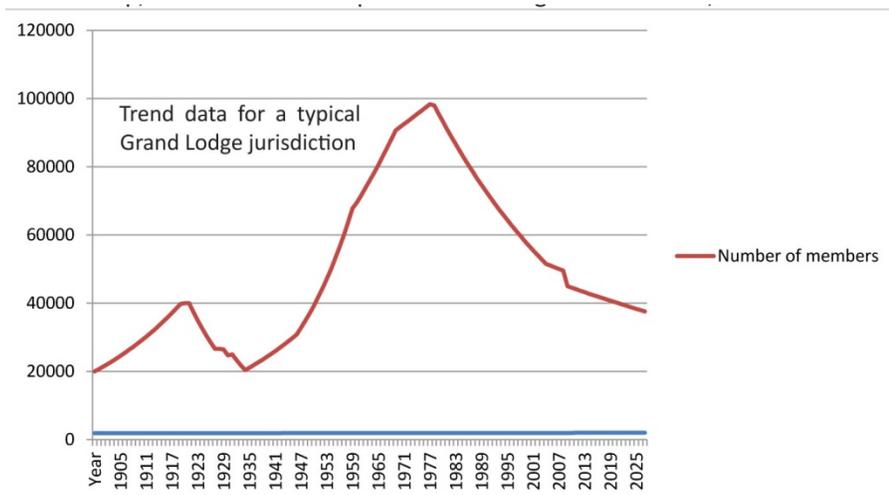
Now considering the definition of the word “crisis” as a time of significant change, everyone on all sides of this issue seemed to agree that there was a crisis. Many of the Grand Lodges took the recommendations of the committee and began immediately to implement the suggestions. Others rebelled.

The ones who were on board with the recommendations of the committee began to confer one day classes, to allow solicitation, to relax memorization standards, and to adopt publicity campaigns. They often touted that the Masonic family of organizations donated over two million dollars each day to charity. Open houses and “bring a friend” nights began to spring up almost everywhere. This was the genesis of the group which constitutes one of the factions in the debate about where we should head in the twenty first century. I shall call them the “Neo-Moderns” in memory of that faction of Freemasons called the “Moderns” in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century division that occurred in our Fraternity.

There were others that saw things quite differently. They expanded the graph to include more years and got the following picture of the situation.

This expanded view led to two different interpretations. One interpretation is that this phenomenon of rising and falling membership is a natural one and that there is little that can be done about it except wait it out. There is clearly a relation between large wars and Masonic membership, but that relationship is not understood well enough to control the results. Those who take this position believe that we have no real control over the situation and that we certainly do not want to destroy Freemasonry by engaging in radical, knee-jerk reaction. I call these the “Status-Quos” and will tell you more about them later.

Another interpretation of the data is that these Status-Quos somehow caused the problem, and that it needs to be solved in an entirely different manner than that suggested by the Neo-Moderns. These folks were in agreement with the Neo-Moderns that something had to be done, because they believed that as numbers swelled, the character, intellect, and focus of the membership declined. Although the numbers increased, the entire nature and purpose of the organization faded away. Let’s look at these folks next.



The Neo-Antients

At about the same time that the Neo-Moderns began to evolve, or perhaps a little earlier, a Lodge in Australia was dealing with the same, or at least a similar problem of declining membership and interest, and in response to their problem, proposed an entirely different type of solution. They decided that the reason that membership was declining was that their own membership, and therefore the public, really did not understand what Freemasonry really was, that as a result, the Lodge had been changed into something entirely different than it was intended to be, and that the members and prospective members were apathetic about this “new” organization called Freemasonry, not Freemasonry itself. They noted that emphasis had shifted from fellowship, philosophical study, and spiritual development into stale donuts, casual dress, and superficial discussion about mundane topics such as how the roof should be repaired. They insisted that if the Fraternity would return to what they believed it once was, men, both members and non-members, would be attracted, and the problem would solve itself. They insisted that men were attracted to things that they perceived to be valuable and that Lodge membership should be portrayed as being of immense value in order to attract men who would profit from the intellectual and spiritual growth the Fraternity offers. Putting their theory into practice, they created a Lodge with a dues structure ten to one hundred times higher than the ones they had been paying. They required that members dress formally and to some degree uniformly. They placed emphasis on intellectual discussions of Masonic philosophy and history, and they reduced the number of meetings, thereby eliminating much of the opportunity to scrap over the cost of building insurance or how the roof should be repaired.

Neo-Antients

The Masonic Restoration Foundation

Traditional Observance Lodges

European Concept Lodges

Lodge Epicurean No. 906 (Victoria, Australia)

Lodge Amalthea No. 914 (Victoria, Australia)

Washington-Alexandria Lodge No. 22

Throughout the United States, there were a number of Freemasons who were not really happy with what was going on with their Lodges. When they finally obtained membership in the Fraternity they were disillusioned. When they saw what the Freemasons actually did in their meetings, they were greatly disappointed. They had expected stately, impressive ceremonies; profound discussions of subjects which would challenge them mentally; and the opportunity to learn of great mysteries to which they would have otherwise not been privy. Many of these young Freemasons were Senior DeMolays. They had great respect for the Fraternity before they petitioned and for the men they knew as Freemasons, but something was missing. They saw instead Masters conferring degrees clad in flip-flops, cutoffs, and a tee shirt with holes in it advertising beer. They were ridiculed if they wore a tie to Lodge even though they had seen their grandfathers put on a tie before each Lodge meeting. They saw ceremonies which could or should have been most impressive read from a book by a cast member who read poorly and didn't understand some of the words much less the meaning of the rituals. They saw men taking solemn obligations to do all sorts of lofty things and then promptly behaving as if they had not done so. When they asked “why?” about parts of the ceremonies or of the rituals, they were told just to memorize the words correctly, that nobody knew why they said what they did. They saw men arguing ceaselessly over whether to spend small amounts of money to fix a toilet in the Lodge that these same men would not have hesitated one second to have repaired in their homes. They looked at the shabby, ill maintained, and sometimes just dirty buildings, and they asked themselves, “What have I gotten myself into? Isn't there some better place where I want to spend my time?”

Many of these men fell away from the Fraternity, lost and disillusioned. Some, however, actually took the time to learn the ritual, to read the literature, and to think about what Freemasonry ought to be and decided that it needed to return to the institution that

they perceived it once had been. They saw what the small group in Australia had done. They learned that this Australian Lodge now had a waiting list of men wanting to become members, and they perceived that this was the Freemasonry that they had bargained for, and by George, they were going to have it. Out of this has grown a fairly new movement in the United States of establishing "Traditional Observance" Lodges, or "European Concept" Lodges. These lodges typically have a higher dues structure, dress more formally, meet less frequently, are more demanding of their members, and discuss more esoteric and philosophical subjects. Some also emphasize excellence in the initiatic experience imparted by well done, impressive ritual. Although there are subtle differences in these types of Lodges, they fall under the umbrella of what some call "Masonic Restoration," and there has, indeed, been an organization established to promote these ideals. I shall call these folks "Neo-Antients" in honor of the "Antients" who feuded with the "Moderns" two hundred years ago. Remember that both these groups are trying to change the status quo in response to what they believe to be a crisis situation. Of course, many of the members who do not see eye to eye with these folks are horrified and have rebelled and have tried to suppress this movement. These Neo-Antients are often seen as "elitists," especially by the Status-Quos.

Perceptions and Positions

In reality, both Neo-Moderns and Neo-Antients are reacting against the practices of the Status-Quos. They just disagree about how the status quo should be radically changed.

Let's look at the perceptions of each of these groups and how it influences the positions they take. I begin with the Status-Quos. There are really two sub groups under the Status-Quos, the "actives" and the "inactives." Although the inactives are not major players in the drama that is unfolding, they will have some influence and cannot be ignored. The inactive has been a member of the Fraternity from fifteen to fifty years, but he pays his dues each year although he rarely attends meetings. He contributes to the charities of the Fraternity when asked and may even show up and help with fund-raising activities. He is proud of what the Masons do for charity and is proud to be a part of it. He believes that Freemasons are good men and is proud to be associated with them. He is not interested in doing ritual or teaching lectures but has great respect for the ones who do these things well. He thinks his son should become a Mason and is intensely proud if he does. He is not aware that there is a crisis and does not understand that there is even disagreement between the Neo-Moderns and the Neo-Antients. He is very happy with the level of his involvement and sees no reason to change anything. Because he is used to the current dues structure which has been in place for his entire Masonic career and because he is receiving nothing more tangible for his dues than a 2"x 3" pasteboard card and perhaps a 50 year pin, he is somewhat resistive to any increase in the annual dues. He does not have a vote in the Grand Lodge session and wouldn't attend if he did. Most importantly, he comprises about eighty percent of our present membership.

The other segment of the Status-Quos consists of the "actives." As I describe them, remember that they are only the active Status-Quos. Almost all of the Neo-Moderns and Neo-Antients are active.

These Status-Quos are the folks who have kept our fraternity alive for the last fifty years. They respect above all others the ones who can do the ritual in an accurate and impressive manner although less than ten percent of them actually do this. They are institutionally oriented and generally don't ask why we do the things we do. They are proud to be members of a fraternity which has included so many presidents, heroes, and other celebrities. They have a firm view of the origin and the history of the order, and although they may disagree with each other about these things, they do not consider them to be important enough to argue about. The important thing is that the bills be paid, the building kept habitable, the charities be funded, and the membership cease to decline. They believe that the inactives are the key to the financial survival of the Lodge and fear greatly that raising the dues will effect a mass exodus of inactives, bankrupt the Lodge, and spell the end of Freemasonry. They believe that Masonic office is primarily a reward for faithful attendance and hard work and feel that the primary duty of the leadership is to serve the brotherhood by extolling the virtues of Freemasonry, primarily to the brethren. They see the current decline in numbers as temporary and part of the cyclic nature of the Fraternity. They certainly don't want to be involved in anything that might be termed "occult" and probably do not know the word esoteric. They do not believe that the relaxation of any kind of standards will benefit the Fraternity, but rather that by the introduction of bad materials, it will destroy it by changing it into something entirely different than it was intended to be. They see the Neo-Ancients as "elitists" who believe that they are better than anyone else and fear that the study of philosophy will lead the fraternity down the path of heresy and ignore the prohibition of the discussion of religion in the Lodge. They

see the Neo-Moderns as attempting to discard the ritual and lower the standards of character required for membership. They see impending disaster but believe it is still possible to convince the inactives to become active and that the Neos of both varieties will either go away or just give up and demit. They continue to advise new initiates of the evils of both the Neo-Ancients and the Neo-Moderns but with decreasing success. At the same time, remember that for the most part, these are the men who are actually holding the Fraternity together at this time.

Perceptions and Positions

Status-Quos

- Low dues
- Ritual is king
- Casual dress
- Emphasis on NPDs
- Masonic education de-emphasized
- The problem will go away

Neo-Moderns

- One day classes
- Lower memory requirements
- Recruitment
- Casual dress
- Require more votes to reject
- More public charity
- Focused on money
- Marginally higher dues structure

Neo-Ancients

- Much higher dues structure
- Formal dress
- Emphasis on philosophy
- Excellent ritual
- Emphasize “initiatric experience”
- Masonic education

So where do the Neo-Moderns stand and why? These folks are business men. They understand the value of the bottom line, and they are men of action. If something is broke, you fix it. They believe that the two things that are broken about Freemasonry is that we don't have enough members to support our charities and infrastructure, let alone influence society outside our organization and that we don't have enough money to pay our bills. They believe that the active Status-Quos' approach to finances of simply cutting the budget each year is undermining the purposes of the fraternity and will ultimately fail. They firmly believe that substantial dues increases to offset the loss of numbers will drive off the golden goose of the inactive Status-Quos and spell the end of the Fraternity. Their primary objective is to preserve the existence of Freemasonry at all costs. The only option left, therefore, is to increase the number of members back up to the level necessary to sustain our charities and infrastructure. It will probably be necessary to sacrifice some of our elaborate and grand buildings along the way. They are practical men. So how do we increase the numbers? The Neo-Moderns believe that there are many good men out there who would make good Masons, at least good enough to be acceptable. If we can get these men to join, to pay the bills, and enough of them to become active in lodge activities which are attractive to even more men, we can perpetuate the Fraternity indefinitely. They believe that the Fraternity has always evolved and must evolve as the society in which we live continues to change. They agree with the Status-Quos that we should continue to relax dress requirements so that men will feel comfortable when they come to Lodge. They believe that we must include more family activities, because today's good young man is much more interested in spending the limited amount of leisure time he has with his young family than in bonding with other men. Due to the increasingly urban and suburban life styles, our prospective member no longer has time to spend night after night at the Lodge and untold hours learning lectures. He will be attracted to the order partially because of its good works, so we should continue these on the current level and increasingly advertise our involvement so that the best men will be attracted. He does not agree with the Neo-Ancients and Status-Quos that men attracted and initiated this way would be worthless or even detrimental because after all, they would be paying dues and supporting the charities, and some would even become interested in the ritual and perpetuate the fraternity. Besides, if we run out of ritualists, we now have the modern capability to video tape the whole thing and show it to hundreds at a time. After all the modern man now learns from videos, not

books, and certainly not from an individual sitting alone, mouth to ear; this is too inefficient, and the young men aren't even trained to learn that way anymore. They no longer have this kind of patience. Isn't the entire ritual published somewhere on the internet anyway, so what is the harm in videotaping it? This is the position of those who I call Neo-Moderns, and although some of these folks have tried this approach and determined by measured results that it was not successful, these folks seem to be supplanting the Status-Quos in positions of leadership in several of our Grand Lodges and some of the appendant bodies, notably the Shrine. The Shrine has already relaxed its standards to eliminate the requirement of membership in one of the rites. This position of the Shrine is completely understandable. The organization has only two stated purposes, to support the charities and to fellowship. Moreover, they have been among the hardest hit from the membership decline, and the cost of their hospitals is spiraling up.

So where do these new kids on the block, the Neo-Ancients, stand on all this? First, while they are appreciative of the Status-Quos for preserving the Fraternity all these years, they feel that we have gone too far in the United States with this "on the level" thing by extending it to profanes. Good Masons allow a marginally "good man" to become a member in the confident expectation that exposure to the Fraternity will polish his rough edges. This man brings in someone who is marginally "less good" than he with the hope that Freemasonry will "make him better." Eventually you have a situation where we are having Masonic trials to try to get rid of those who are damaging the reputation of the Fraternity and destroying its harmony, men who obviously do not have the character to fulfill their obligations or perhaps the understanding to know what they are. Even worse, we are not having these trials, but are rather tolerating this sort of behavior. Our initiates come into the Lodge and are suitably impressed by our solemn obligations only to shortly discover that in spite of all these lofty sounding principles, many of our members are blatantly behaving as if they had never heard them. We are then classed as hypocritical by the quality initiate and written off as the fading remnants of something that was at one time surely a great institution. You see, the young man petitioning our Lodges today is quite different than he was only ten years ago. He has seen all the movies and searched the internet looking for and finding information about the fraternity. He may even have read some of the books. Although the information he has acquired may be true or false, he has a favorable opinion of the fraternity, because he has solicited membership even though he may not actually know a Freemason. He has great expectations of being received into an institution with an ancient history and many mysteries to reveal that will enhance his reputation and satisfy his intellectual curiosity. He does not expect for this endeavor to be easy or to be cheap. Nothing easy and cheap could be that valuable. He expects to have to study and to work for what he receives, and he expects it to be worth it. He expects his new brethren to be just like him, only better informed. He wants to be part of a mystical brotherhood that has come down from ages past and which is engaged in great and important undertakings, important not only to him but to civilization as a whole.

He is certainly not expecting some sort of superficial civic club where men pretend to be profound and wise and yet behave no better than anyone else he knows. The Neo-Ancients want to find and initiate this man. They believe that respect for the institution demands that a Brother attending a Masonic meeting dress in the best clothes he possesses if he possibly can. On the other hand, if circumstances really dictate that this is a white shirt and bib overalls, he is welcome among them. These Brethren believe in excellence in ritual just like the Status-Quos, but they insist on the excellence part and believe that the fellow delivering it ought to know what it means and mean it when he says it. Ignorance of the symbolism, history, and philosophy is tolerated, but apathy towards them is not. They simply prefer not to spend their time attending Lodge with those who are not interested in these subjects. Fellowship is important to these Neo-Ancients but frequently in a more formal setting and involving a higher quality of food and surroundings. They are willing to pay for these things. Contrary to the opinion of the Status-Quos, they do not believe that they are better than the other brethren, but they do believe that they should be allowed to form Lodges so they can associate primarily with brethren of similar interests. These Neo-Ancients have very high standards of conduct for the consideration of prospective Masons. They believe that just because a man appears to be of good character, he is not necessarily "entitled" to membership in their Lodge, and that if he is not a good fit concerning his opinions and interests, as a member, he might disrupt the harmony of the Lodge. The number of members in these Lodges is normally limited, because the members desire to cultivate a very close relationship with every other member of the Lodge. They believe that this would be difficult to do with a large number of members. On the other hand, these Brethren believe that if you are not interested enough to attend most all the meetings of the Lodge, you may have been motivated to join for reasons with which they do not agree. There should not be inactive Masons. Although they agree with the Neo-Moderns that change is necessary, they differ from them in several significant ways. They believe that the initiatic experience, including the ritual, is extremely important. They believe that men are attracted to institutions such as ours not by the low cost or by the ease of obtaining membership but that just the opposite is true. The more difficult it is to obtain a thing, the more valuable it seems. They also believe that the institution should deliver on its promises

by providing quality associations and intellectually stimulating information, not to mention good food. These brethren are willing to pay for this experience, often several times what they pay for dues in another Status-Quo Lodge. The approach of the Neo-Moderns seems to the Neo-Ancients to be perverting what they perceive as the mission of the fraternity and changing it into something entirely different than what it originally was just in order to preserve the name "Freemasonry."

This article is not intended to try to persuade you to one side or another on the ongoing debate although, it is clear that I have already decided my position. It is intended to make you aware that there is ongoing dialogue on a national scale and that many Grand Lodges are already taking actions as a result of the influence of one side or the other. To learn more about this controversy, I recommend the following web sites. They describe in some detail what is proposed by the Neo-Moderns and also the Neo-Ancients. Remember that these terms are mine and are not to be found anywhere on the web.

Resources for Further Information

Masonic Restoration – (Neo-Ancients)

<http://www.masonicrestoration.com/>

<http://traditionalobservance.com/>

http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/masonic_education.html

Observing the Craft By Andrew Hammer

Masonic Renewal – (Neo-Moderns)

<http://www.masonicrenewal.org/>

<http://www.pagrandlodge.org/gmaster/renaissance.html>

This article was originally presented as a paper to the Tennessee Lodge of Research, and we gratefully publish it with their permission. Sir Knight Palmer is a Past Commander of DePayens Commandery No. 11 in Tennessee and can be contacted at ktmagazine@comcast.net.