

Grand Commandery of New Mexico State News for December 2022



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Sir Knights,

For this holiday season we have a special guest contributor, Companion Tyler Anderson. Tyler Anderson has been giving presentations and contributing to Masonic knowledge for many years. Because of his active participation in the Lodge of Research of New Mexico, the New Mexico Masonicon convention and as Grand Historian, many New Mexico Masons have had a chance to see his entertaining and informative presentations. For this month's message from the Grand Commander, I have asked Companion Anderson to submit the text of a talk he gave a few years ago at a York Rite meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Enjoy.

WB Tyler Anderson is a Past Master of Sandia Mountain Lodge No.72, Past Master of The Lodge of Research of New Mexico, and Past High Priest of Santa Fe Chapter No.1. He currently serves as Historian of Noah Council No.569 (AMD) and as the Grand Historian of the Grand Lodge of New Mexico, AF&AM.

Why/Is the Commandery Christian?

by Tyler Anderson

When he was Commander of Santa Fe Commandery No.1, SK Jeff Johnson asked me to put together a presentation on a very particular topic, one which sits at the center of many conversations I have had over the years, and a topic which in general seems to be of some debate.

If American Freemasonry is religiously non-sectarian, how did it come to be that the Commandery is a Christian body?

In playing around with the idea, and looking through books and speeches and resources, I decided that there are actually three questions here. Or rather, there are two questions that must be answered first, before the main question can be addressed.

1. **Is membership in the Commandery intended exclusively for professing Christians?**
(And specifically trinitarian Christians, if we are being precise.)
2. **Is the Commandery actually part of Freemasonry?**

These two questions are then followed by the third and original:

3. **How did we end up with a body within Masonry, that is, apparently, religiously sectarian?**

These questions, in fact the mere approach to them, are somewhat complex, because the questions themselves—I have noticed through my own experience—are cause for very personal opinions and occasionally awkward exchanges.

In digging into this topic as a matter of historical research, there seemed no demonstrable benefit in reiterating often-ran opinions, neither my own or those of others. To attempt to put the questions to bed, the answers needed to adhere to clear facts, to text, to law.

Question 1: Is the Commandery intended exclusively for professing Christians?

Answer 1: Yes.

I draw this determination very directly and literally from authorized printed materials coming from the various Grand Commanderies, the Grand Encampment of the United States, and the Sovereign Great Priory of Canada. Every indication, from a wealth of sources, clearly indicates that the Commandery is intended to have a Christian membership.

Published guides from the Grand Encampment for building membership are actually great resources for this topic, because they speak directly to who should be recruited for Commandery membership, and contain pretty clear language.

A 1992 membership guide had this to say: (emphasis added)

We must convince the **Christian** Mason that we have something he needs and deserves. [...] that Templary stands for the highest ideals of **Christianity**. It represents the noblest in humanity. It reveals **Christianity** in action!

In Templary a **Christian** finds Masonry expressed in terms he can best understand and appreciate. He finds a **Christian** climate to match his **Christian** commitment. He finds a loyal band of **Christian** warriors with whom he has much in common. He can give service

to the broad objectives of **Christianity** by combining his practical efforts with others of kindred minds and hearts.¹

A similar guide to membership development published in 2002 has a list “Ten Reasons Why You Should be a Knight Templar,” essentially helpful talking points to be used to recruit new Sir Knights. The section is titled “Recruiting Christian Masons for Templary.” (It is reasonable to point out that there is not a separate section devoted to recruiting *non*-Christian Masons for Templary.)

Among the ten points we find these three:

2. It is the mightiest non-theological Christian organization in the world.
3. It is founded, and draws its inspiration, from the Christian Religion and the faithful practice of Christian Virtues.
4. As a vigorous Christian command, we wage war unceasingly in the defense of innocent maidens, destitute widows, helpless orphans and the Christian Religion.²

The same document paraphrases Mathew 28:19, which commands the followers of Christ to go out into the world and evangelize mankind:

“Go ye therefore and teach all Christian Masons, encouraging them to unite under the banner of Templary. Our Grand Master puts it more eloquently, ‘Every Christian Mason Should be a Knight Templar!’”³

The website of the Sovereign Great Priory of Canada lists three requirements for joining a Commandery, namely that the applicant be a Freemason in good standing with his Lodge; a Royal Arch Mason in good standing with his Chapter, and

A Christian, recommended by two members of the Order, who profess a belief in the Christian Doctrine of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit.⁴

Finally, Chapter XI, Section 177 of the 2019 *Constitution and Statutes* of the Grand Encampment defines the qualifications for membership by four points:

Section 177. Anyone,

- (a) Who is a Master Mason and Royal Arch Mason; [...]
- (b) Who is a firm believer in the Christian religion;
- (c) Who is physically able to conform to the ceremonies of the Order;

¹ Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States, “Guidelines for Membership.” <https://web.archive.org/web/20170703205755/http://www.knightstemplar.org/membership.pdf> Now housed at the Internet Archive. (accessed 27nov22), page 3

² Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States, “Building and Sustaining Templar Membership.” <http://www.knightstemplar.org/newsrelease/MembershipBooklet.pdf> (accessed 27nov22), page 23

³ Ibid, page 3

⁴ Sovereign Great Priory of Canada, “How to Join.” <https://sovereigngreatprioryofcanada.ca/how-to-join/> (accessed 27nov22)

(d) Who[...]has resided for at least one year within the Jurisdiction of the Grand Commandery

All four of these qualifications are simple, binary points of fact, and are extremely similar to analogous lists of qualifications for petitioning the Blue Lodge. Further, a contextual note at the bottom of the same page reads: “Any candidate who signs a petition for membership and agrees to the profession of faith therein, can become a member. (1916, p. 52 & 294 No. 23 Mac Arthur)”⁵

And the following section of the *Constitution and Statutes*, which governs “Contents of Petition” notes, “**Section 178:** The Petitioner shall declare that he is a firm believer in the Christian religion, that he has read the Petition and that he has personally signed the same.”⁶

The *Constitution and Statutes* is not speaking metaphorically here, or offering points for philosophical debate. These are statutes, not poetry. It does not read “a firm believer in the existence of the Christian religion” or “a firm believer in the goodness of the Christian religion.” The *Constitution and Statutes* is 232 pages of literal, specific law.

These may be but a few indicative examples of textual language pointing to the intent that the members of the Commandery should be professing Christians. But further examples abound, almost endlessly.

Question 2: Is the Commandery actually part of Freemasonry?

Answer 2: Technically, no. However, we definitely treat it as such. So, in practice, yes.

This issue hinges on how you define what Freemasonry is. What is a “Part Of Freemasonry?”

Like several Masonic Grand Lodges in the United States, the Grand Lodge of New Mexico traditionally accepts Mackey’s Landmarks, and holds as its second Landmark: “[...] that Ancient Craft Masonry consist[s] of the three degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason, including the Holy Royal Arch.”

This Landmark accepts that Symbolic Masonry is not purely limited to the degrees conferred in the Blue Lodge. This verbiage defines “What is Freemasonry,” rather than “What is the Blue Lodge.” Mackey’s sources (and authority) for his Landmarks are at best difficult to nail down. However, in his second Landmark Mackey was himself quoting from the 1813 Articles of Union which ended the Moderns vs. Ancients schism in England and created the United Grand Lodge. So in this case, Mackey holds a significant provenance for the particular argument.

The Landmark does not mean that all of these other groups and systems and degrees and orders to which so many of us belong are not *Masonic*; but it does suggest, if by omission, that they aren’t *Freemasonry*.

⁵ Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States, *Constitution, Statutes, Disciplinary Rules [etc]*, 2019 Edition. <http://www.knightstemplar.org/csd.pdf> (accessed 27nov22), page 103-104

⁶ Ibid., page 107

Less well known than Mackey's work, but of significant interest here, was the position of Thomas Smith Webb as to the place of the Commandery within the Masonic constellation. Webb—who was absolutely central to the creation of the Commandery system in the United States; who wrote early iterations of the chivalric rituals now in use; and who ardently supported the expansion of Templary—wrote in his *Freemason's Monitor* that he did not believe that the orders of knighthood were an actual part of Freemasonry.

It may be necessary to premise that the orders of knighthood compose no part of the system of freemasonry: they are in comparison to it societies of but yesterday; and all of them fall short of the excellence, harmony, universality, and utility of that noble institution. [...] In America they are only conferred as honorary degrees.⁷

Thus, many Grand Lodges and the arguable founder of American Templary would say that the Commandery is not a literal part of Freemasonry.

And finally we come to **Question 3: How did we end up with a body within Masonry, that is, apparently, religiously sectarian?**

The answer to that question is quite literally, part of the history of the Grand Lodges in England.

We actually need to reverse momentarily to Question #2, in order to get the answer to this third question lined up. And if the reader will allow, it is necessary to rephrase that question just slightly: Are the Commandery *Degrees* an actual part of Freemasonry?

In 18th and early 19th Century Britain, the answer to the question phrased in that slightly different way was an unequivocal Yes, at least in some places.

The original Templar degree (it seems at the start that there was just one) was a Blue Lodge degree conferred in many Lodges that would eventually join the Ancient Grand Lodge and/or its ally, the Grand Lodge at York. The practice of conferring more than the three degrees was one of the several points of conflict in early British Freemasonry, which led to the formation of the Ancient Grand Lodge in 1751.

Craft Lodges which aligned with the Moderns Grand Lodge in London tended to limit their work to the three degrees we know today. But other Craft Lodges, which ended up aligned with the Ancient Grand Lodge, conferred additional degrees, within their Craft Lodge. This was done under the power and steam of their Lodge Charter (in the cases that they had one), not as a separate body like we do today.

Even more so, the Grand Lodge at York, which was aligned with the Ancients against the Moderns, explicitly recognized the Knight Templar Degree as the fifth degree of the Masonic

⁷Webb, Thomas Smith. *Freemason's Monitor*. Salem, MA: Cushing and Appleton, 1818. p.208

Lodge, after the three craft degrees and the Royal Arch.⁸ So the early Templar Degree was taken by some, probably not by all, right there in the Lodge.

Another pain point that pushed some Lodges away from the Moderns and toward the Ancients, was that the Moderns were increasingly secularizing their Masonry. In the pre- and early-Grand Lodge eras, some Lodges practiced a Freemasonry that was overtly religious (meaning, Christian), and they were, in effect, conferring Christian degrees—and that early Templar degree was one of those explicitly Christian degrees.

Thus, the Christianity associated with the Commandery is absolutely core to the tradition itself. The Templar Degree was Christian, because the Lodges which conferred it were overtly Christian. More, just as today, the content and themes of the Templar Degree was overtly Christian. And this was part of the 18th Century schism which split English Masonry into the Ancients and the Moderns.

The Grand Encampment's counterpart in Canada, the Sovereign Great Priory of Canada, puts it this way:

[The removal of Christianity from Masonry by the Moderns] was truly unfortunate for those who interpreted the Lodge symbols as Christian doctrines. To deprive Freemasonry of the Ancient Craft of its Christian symbolism in an attempt to make it more universal, was, to them, unmasonic, and characterized as being compared to removing a Masterpiece of Art from a gallery, or depriving a Crown of its Most Precious Jewel.⁹

We should not assume—notwithstanding the Great Priory's observation of the discomfort brought to some by the secularization of Masonry in general—that the Ancient Grand Lodge intended for Freemasonry to remain sectarian and Christian. The Ancients may have stood by the Lodges who chose to confer the Templar Degree with its inherent faith orientation. But at the same time, there are also indications that they too were interested in broadening the scope of the Craft Lodge to allow non-Christians to enjoy membership without religious frictions.¹⁰

And interesting to note, the connection of the Templar Degree to English Blue Lodges was not actually severed with the Union of 1813 between the Ancients and the Moderns. Our Second Landmark, which Mackey pulled from the Articles of Union, is only a partial quote from the source. Yes, the Union document says that Symbolic Masonry consists of the Three Degrees and the Royal Arch. However, that section of the Articles of Union goes on to say this:

But this article is not intended to prevent any Lodge or Chapter from holding a meeting in any of the degrees of the Orders of Chivalry, according to the constitutions of the said Orders.¹¹

⁸ Harrison, David. *The York Grand Lodge*. Suffolk: Arima Publishing, 2014. p.67

⁹ Grand Chapter of Alberta, "Knights Templar." <https://royalarchmasonsAlberta.com/knights-templar/> (accessed 27nov22)

¹⁰ Murphy, Christopher B, "A Just and Exact Account of Masonry," in *Exploring Early Grand Lodge Freemasonry*, Murphy and Eyer, eds. Washington DC: Plumbstone, 2017. p143, 144

¹¹ Haywood, H.L. and Craig, James E. *A History of Freemasonry*. New York: The John Day Company, 1927. p.261

When the section is taken in its entirety, the way I read it is that the chivalric degree (by this point plural) maybe couldn't be conferred inside a Blue Lodge, but a Blue Lodge could open and hold meetings on those degrees, just like we open on First, Second, or Third. So the United Grand Lodge of England actually allowed the continued life of Templary within the walls of Blue Lodges which were practicing it.

That didn't last long. Within a year or so, the phrase which allowed for meetings in the Orders of Chivalry disappeared from United Grand Lodge documents, for whatever reason. A strong possible explanation is that what was then called the "Grand Conclave" (essentially, the English Grand Encampment) was in a period of growth and renewal. Perhaps the Grand Conclave pressed that the Chivalric Orders be pulled out of the Lodges and completely under their purview as a separate organization. Regardless, the admission of a legitimate place of non-Craft, Christian Orders directly within the Lodge was, at least briefly, there in black and white.

Across the Atlantic, that same tradition of associating Templary directly with the Craft Lodge did not develop in the United States. And thus, you have Webb's expressed belief, that the Chivalric Orders were honorary, and not a part of Craft Masonry.

This history of Templary provides the answer to our third question. The Commandery is explicitly Christian because it was always explicitly Christian. It comes from the final phase of pre- and early-Grand Lodge Freemasonry before the tradition of non-sectarianism in English speaking Masonry was originated (in the early 1700s) and cemented (in the early 1800s).

Now, with the facts established for our three questions, I will turn to my own thoughts on the matter. When I went through my York Rite Degrees, I was in Laughlin, NV, at the Colorado River Fall York Rite Festival. A man who (if I recall correctly) was a Grand Encampment Department Commander was sitting at a table with me and some friends there at the hotel. When in the course of conversation he found out that I would not be joining the Commandery, and why—because I'm not a Christian—he expressed what I felt was annoyed frustration, and basically told me that the religious requirement is of no consequence.

One of my friends at the table, who knew the man personally, reminded him that no matter what the reason, nobody has to join any group in Masonry if they don't care to.

The brother's argument, I know now, was not uncommon—and not correct. Even at that time, it was my general understanding that the Commandery was meant for professing Christian Masons. Now, at the end of this research, I can say it with genuine confidence.

However, for me it is a purely academic question, whether I could or "should" join. As in the case of any questions regarding the many Masonic bodies to which I do not belong, I see no point in harboring an emotional opinion. I would rather learn and understand, than opine about an organization of which I am not a part.

But I can offer my best understanding as it springs from my own heart.

If the Commandery is supposed to be for Christian Masons, then it should be. There is nothing wrong with that. I find it rather bizarre that so many Sir Knights have expressed truly awkward sentiments to me personally on the matter. And a number have suggested work-arounds, to essentially cheat the system through semantics, so that I could feel confident in petitioning for Templary. Instead, I think they might have appreciated that I have no interest in joining the Orders based on my own sincerity and respect for the rules and character of their very group. The Commandery does not happen to be “the one for me,” and I am very comfortable with that.

To attempt to side-step traditions is unnecessary, in my view. I never feel awkward discussing my Lodge with women or atheists, just because Freemasonry is open only to men who believe in a Supreme Being. That is our tradition and law, and the very nature of the Lodge. Just the same, it is perfectly okay that the Commandery is meant to be populated by Christians. That is the tradition, law, and nature of the Chivalric Orders. How or whether any Companion arrives there, is between himself and the rules of the organization. To circumvent the tradition seems a sure path to a watered-down experience.