

If The Question Is, "Will You Be Off Or From," What If You Are The One Who Is Off?

by **Richard D. Carver**, PM

A story is told about two friends who daily commuted by train. One day, Harry said to Jim, "Have you ever noticed that the conductor never takes a ticket from that guy wearing the funny ring. I've seen those rings in the pawn shops, and I think I'll get me one and see what happens."

The next day Harry was flashing his new ring when the conductor came by. Noticing the ring, the conductor asked him, "Will you be off or from?"

Harry thought for a moment, and then replied, "I'll be off."

The conductor told him he was right, and Harry was put off at the next station.

Being a Masonic imposter, Harry did not understand the significance of being off or from, but you could likewise say that neither do the majority of regular Masons. I confess that I have met some Masons who most definitely seem to be off, and most of us are in transition from some place to another, but in this instance, the intended meaning is a bit more complex.

On the surface, off or from sounds like a simple catch-question - much like the hundreds of others found in the catechism of Ancient Craft rituals. However, as Harry learned, it involves more than a simple right or wrong answer with a 50/50 chance he could guess correctly.

In most Masonic jurisdictions, the question; "Will you be off or from?" is still used as part of the ritual when a candidate is advanced to a higher degree, (i.e., for passing from the grip of one degree to the one immediately above). The proper response to the original question is never "off" in many jurisdictions. This begs the question: why is "off" an option at all?

In other jurisdictions, the question, "Will you off or from" is asked yet again as a test to determine a Brother's level of enlightenment. If he is yet an Entered Apprentice or a Fellow Craft, he eventually reaches a point in the catechism where he answers "off," and the further response of "until further instructed." His being off is the acknowledgement that he has not yet received the further enlightenment provided in a higher degree.

A lesser-used example occurs when a Lodge is conducted from labor to refreshment or from refreshment to labor. This process is sometimes erroneously referred to as "calling the Lodge off," but in reality, the Lodge is always being conducted from one state to another, and off typically has no part in the process.

Another usage of off or from is not a question at all - it is another example of changing the state of the Lodge in regards to the degree being communicated. In one Scottish

ritual, taking the Lodge either off or from is a short method of passing or raising the Lodge from one degree to another. For example, if the Lodge is open on the First Degree and the next item of business is to pass a Brother to the Fellow Craft Degree, the Master orders the Lodge to be proved tyled in the usual manner, and the Brethren stand to order while the Lodge is passed to the new degree. The Master then asks the Senior Warden, "Will you be off or from?"

The S.W. replies, "From" (if the Lodge is going up to a higher degree).

The Master then says, "From what to what?"

The S.W. says, "From the Degree of Entered Apprentice to that of Fellow Craft."

The Master then says, "By virtue of the authority vested in me as Master of this Lodge, I declare it closed in the Entered Apprentice Degree" (gives knocks of E.A. Degree) "and opened in the Degree of Fellow Craft" (gives knocks of F.C. Degree). This provides a much quicker means of transitioning the Lodge as opposed to all the usual questions, responses, and so on.

If the Lodge is coming down from a higher to a lower degree, the Senior Warden will answer "off" instead of "from" followed by the Master asking; "Off what to what?"

This method of getting the Lodge up and down from one degree to another is quite popular and is widely used by the Scottish Lodges. It is also used in Lodges when coming down from M.M. at the end of a raising unless there is no more business to be conducted, in which case the Lodge will usually be closed on the third degree. The Scottish workings also allow the Lodge to be closed on the second degree.

In Hong Kong Lodges of Scottish origin, it is the Junior Warden who gives the answers if the Lodge is "going up" from first to second degree and "coming down" again. The Senior Warden replies to the questions when moving to the third degree and coming down again. These Lodges close finally on the third degree in the manner described earlier, which necessitates that all other business must be dealt with prior to the conferment of a degree.

This question eventually began to appear in standardized Masonic rituals in the United States. Many attribute being off or from as being from a purely Scottish practice. While Scottish influences in Craft customs have always been strong, we discover that the "short method" was used in Derbyshire as well.

Several English documents of the mid-1700s show it as a catechism for testing candidates and visitors, but it is not shown as a short method of raising or lowering the Lodge from one degree to another. The following excerpt is from the 1760 circa English ritualistic catechism: 1

Mas. Will you be of [sic] or from?

Ans. From.

Mas. From what, Brother?

Ans. From an enter'd Apprentice to a Fellow-Craft.

Mas. Pass, Brother.

This was followed by the (then customary) exchange of the pass-grip and word of the Fellow Craft Degree and further questions and responses embodying the token and word of a Fellow Craft.

The same text is also contained in a chapter describing the examination of a visitor seeking admittance to a Lodge, where the of or from question appears twice, once with the word "of" and once as "off."²

By these examples of how they were and are today used in Speculative Masonry, we can conclude that off and from are often used to convey a change or transformation of the Lodge from one state to another. Speaking using more esoteric terms, we would call this change a transmutation. This transmutation might also be a better representation of what occurs in the philosophical sense as well. Through the process of illumination, a man makes a transmutation from his current state into one that is more spiritually satisfying and fulfilling and as such, better. Masonry makes good men better. From is the metaphor for how a Mason transmutes from being a good man to being a better one.

But, what about off? In each of the speculative examples, off metaphorically allows us to set something aside, such as a degree being put off in order to work in another degree. Notice that the previous degree is not cast out, cast off, or completely abandoned as one might cast aside sin or a bad deed. Instead, it is temporarily set aside for later use. Metaphorically speaking, Masons are taught to put off certain emotions. As is the case when a degree is put off, we can conclude that the emotions being put off are not dire traits, but instead are ones that merely need to be subdued in order to assure harmony. This precisely parallels the lessons a Mason is taught regarding his passions. He is taught that his passions, most especially those for religion and politics, must be kept off in the Lodge. In Old English terms, he is taught to hold these passions off by subduing them in Lodge.

Therefore, we discover that there are times when a Mason is from, and there are times when he should be off. I hope that you now have a better understanding of the meaning and speculative usages of being off or from and will be disposed to give further reflection upon these more esoteric lessons. By the way, I do not recommend you try to exploit this new found knowledge by attempting to ride the rails without a ticket. I hear that the other conductor is an Odd Fellow.

End Notes

1 Samuel Pritchard, *Three Distinct Knocks*, Auckland Press, 1760.

2 This is an amalgamation of oral explanations provided by Bro Peter Taylor of Scotland and from *The Masonic Monday Question of the Grand Lodge of A.M & A.M. of Minnesota* edited by Brother Edward R. Halpaus, Grand Lodge Education Officer, and came from the book *Freemasons at Work*, by Brothers Harry Carr and Frederick Smyth. The book is published by Lewis Masonic. Parts were also quoted from Brother G.S. Draffen who was at one time the Senior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of Scotland. The web address for the Masonic Monday Questions is <http://www.mn-masons.org/page1002.aspx>. Used with permission.

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