



Sussex Freemasons - West Group

'The West Wing'
(Bognor, Chichester, Clapham, Littlehampton,
Midhurst, Pulborough, Steyning and Worthing)

'The West Wing' Learning and Development Team.

'The West Wing' Lodge of Instruction.

Lesson 6: Vows of 'Fidelity.'

Preceptors Notes

'The West Wing' Learning and Development Team.



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Vows of 'Fidelity'.

Lesson / Tutorial Aim & Objectives

Understand the meaning of "taking a vow of fidelity".

By the end of this lesson/tutorial you will be able to:

- Define 'Fidelity'.
- Differentiate between a promise, an oath, a covenant and a vow.
- Understand the reason for kneeling and placing the hand on the Volume of the Sacred Law.

Video Link

<https://www.thesquaremagazine.com/mag/article/202112vows-of-fidelity/#>



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The Taking of a 'Vow of Fidelity'.

Standing in a state of darkness at the Worshipful Master's Pedestal the candidate is informed that "vows of fidelity are required" The Worshipful Master then goes onto say, "but let me assure you that that in those vows there is nothing incompatible with your civil, moral, or religious duties". So what is a 'vow of fidelity'?

Vows or promises take several forms but first shall we just look at what the word "fidelity" means.

A definition by the Cambridge Dictionary, Fidelity - "The state of remaining loyal to someone and keeping promises you made to that person" "Loyalty to a person or organisation"

From these definitions of "fidelity" we get an indication of the type of people that Freemasonry attract and what is expected of them from the institution itself. Loyalty to friends and brothers and a person who keeps their promises. Someone who prizes honour above all else.

During my life I have made several promises to organisations, to the establishment and to God.

As a Scout I promised that "I will do my best to do my duty to God and to the Queen, to help other people and to obey the Scout Law.

As a police officer I took an oath to "truly serve the Queen in the office of constable, with fairness, integrity, diligence and impartiality, upholding fundamental human rights and equal respect to all people; and that I will, to the best of my power, cause the peace to be kept and preserved and prevent all offences against people and property; and that while I continue to hold the said office I will to the best of my skill and knowledge discharge all the duties thereof faithfully according to the law."

Giving evidence at court I swore "that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God." Lodge of Union No. 38.

Tutorial - Oaths, Vows and Covenants

At my marriage I made a promise to my bride and to God that "I take thee to be my lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth."

In Freemasonry I made vows to keep the secrets of each of the degrees in craft masonry and that of the other orders that I joined.

All lasting promises of significance.



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So what is a 'vow' and what is its relevance as opposed to a promise, a covenant, or an oath.

James Hough, a Catholic who teaches catechism writing for Quora, explains the difference between a vow and a covenant:

A vow "is a one sided arrangement from a man to God." A covenant is a "two sided arrangement usually between God and man"

A person making a vow commits a serious sin for which they are punishable if that vow is broken. The obligation in the first degree ceremony goes quite vividly into the punishment for breaking such a vow quoting 17th Century law. But more importantly God's punishment by showing a lack of integrity, that of being branded a person of little or no moral worth.

A covenant is usually written and in the case of Moses and the Jewish people's arrangement with God, it is written in stone. The Ten Commandments.

When asked the question - what is the difference between a promise, an oath and a vow Len Freedman, also writing in Quora said:

A promise is something you promise someone else." For example "I promise that I will do my best, to do my duty to God and the Queen." The first line of the Scouts Promise that a Scout makes to their Troop. To an honourable Scout the breaking of that promise is a serious matter but there is no punishment attached to it except that which the Scout imposes on themselves. A feeling of guilt.

"An oath is a promise you make invoking God."

For example "I promise to tell the truth, so help me God," in a court of law before giving evidence. Calling on God, to a person of faith the highest authority, to witness the promise on the assumption that if that action was false a punishment far worse than anything physical that man can bring about will happen. That of being branded "a wilfully perjured individual".

"A vow is a promise you make to God."

"I promise to love, honour and cherish" a marriage vow made in church before God and the congregation. You are not only promising your spouse you are also promising God. Again to a person of faith making a promise to the highest authority on the assumption that if that promise is broken a punishment far worse than anything man can bring about will happen. A stain on their honour.

The Holy Quran verse 2:225 states "When you clearly state something and swear by Allah, and in your heart you mean this oath to be solemn, then breaking it will be sinful unless you make atonement for it"



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The Holy Bible: Numbers 30:2 "When a man voweth a vow unto the Lord, or sweareth an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth."

A vow is a serious personal promise whilst an oath relates to a sacred and solemn obligation.

The difference between a vow and an oath according to Jewish religious law is that a vow changes the status of some external thing, a verbalisation of a promise to do something which to that person is serious, whilst an oath initiates internal change, a change in mindset, of attitude, according to a religious doctrine.

If a vow is taken that is sinful it would be breaking God's law. So no one should make a vow or swear an oath frivolously or indiscriminately.

After taking a Masonic obligation the candidate is asked to seal that obligation on the VSL as a seal of fidelity and establishing it as more than a serious promise. In other words turning what is a promise to those assembled in a Freemasons Lodge into a binding vow before God with a punishment which goes far beyond that of which man can give, a spurn on one's honour.

At the end of the day it doesn't matter what label you put on an action that you promise you would or would not do, it is what is in your heart and what is in your mind when that obligation is made. Your 'belief' as an honourable, God fearing person. Your faith, for Jesus said, "I say to you, 'Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King'" (Matthew 5: 34-35). For God is "omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent" and will know as you know if any such promise is broken. "Let 'yes' mean 'yes' and let 'no' mean 'no'." (Matthew 5: 37).

Vows and oaths should be reserved for occasions of great importance and lasting significance.

In our Lodges we are asked to put our right hand on the VSL, as we do in a court of law before giving evidence, and to kneel when we take our obligation, our promise before God and in the presence of the membership to keep the secrets of Freemasonry. The hand on the VSL is an indication of your faith and the seriousness with which the obligation that you are about to take means as a person of 'faith'. So what is the significance of kneeling?

Kneeling is a behaviour used by primates to convey deference - submission or passivity – in order to look smaller and to establish a hierarchy within a social structure. Kneeling at the feet of another was common practice in ancient times as a mark of submission, honour and respect. There is a connection between kneeling and worship as in some cultures kings were often regarded as deities.



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In the royal courts of Europe it is a sign of submission, humility and respect. The most common being when knighted the person being dubbed with that honour is showing respect and humility to the monarch, and therefore to the country, the monarch being the country's most senior representative, who in the UK is also the 'defender of the faith'.

In Judaism, Islam and Christianity it is the sign of humble submission to God, a higher authority, when in prayer. Psalm 95.6: "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker." The Hebrew word for worship literally means to 'bow down' something that would be done from the kneeling position.

In Freemasonry candidates kneel before the WM and the VSL because they are on Holy ground which has been so blessed. They are, therefore, kneeling before the most senior representative of the Lodge and before God as a sign of submission, humility and respect.

An oath, a vow, a covenant, a promise whenever made and for whatever purpose means nothing if the person making it has no integrity, no honour, no respect and if made in the name of God, no faith. For such words and actions must be truthful and come from the heart of the person making it.

Stephen J. Goulding ProvSGD. SLGCR

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SUMMARY

"This text explores the profound significance of the 'Vow of Fidelity' within Freemasonry, defining and distinguishing between promises, oaths, vows, and covenants. It draws upon linguistic definitions, various religious scriptures, and historical practices to explain that these commitments represent a person's honour and faith, emphasizing that the physical act of kneeling symbolizes submission and respect to a higher authority."

Key Questions & Answers

How does the Cambridge Dictionary define 'fidelity'?

Fidelity is defined as the state of remaining loyal to someone and keeping promises made to that person or organization.

What is the primary difference between a 'vow' and a 'covenant' according to James Hough?

A vow is a one-sided arrangement from a person to God, whereas a covenant is a two-sided arrangement, usually between God and man.

According to Len Freedman, how does an oath differ from a promise and a vow?

A promise is made to another person with no punishment for breaking it other than guilt; an oath is a promise that invokes God as a witness; and a vow is a promise made directly to God.

What does Jewish religious law say regarding the difference between a vow and an oath?

A vow changes the status of an external thing or is a verbalization of a promise to do something, while an oath initiates an internal change in mindset or attitude according to religious doctrine.

What is the historical and biological significance of kneeling?

Biologically, kneeling is a behaviour used by primates to convey deference, submission, or passivity. Historically, it was a mark of submission, honour, and respect in ancient times and royal court.

Why do candidates in Freemasonry kneel during their obligation?

They kneel because they are on ground that has been blessed as holy, showing submission, humility, and respect before the Worshipful Master and God.



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What is the final conclusion regarding the validity of any oath, vow, or promise?

The text concludes that these actions mean nothing if the person lacks integrity, honour, respect, and faith, as the words must come from the heart to be meaningful.

How does the text relate the 'Vow of Fidelity' to 17th Century law?

The obligation in the first-degree ceremony uses 17th Century law to vividly describe the punishment for breaking such a vow.

What biblical advice from Matthew 5 is cited regarding oaths?

Jesus advises not to take oaths by heaven, earth, or Jerusalem, but to let one's 'yes' mean 'yes' and 'no' mean 'no'.



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Analysis.

1. The Literal Lens (Grammar & Context)

- **The Language of Commitment:** The text uses a progressive stack of commitment: *Promise* (a verbal intent), *Swear* (a legal/formal invocation), and *Obligation* (a binding debt).[1][2][3][4] The word "Fidelity" acts as the umbrella—it is not just about the words spoken, but the state of remaining "faithful" to the bond established.[5]
- **The Witness:** The vow is triadic. It is witnessed by **The Divine** (Most High), **The Institutional** (the Lodge), and **The Personal** (the Conscience). Literally, this means if the Mason escapes the judgment of his Lodge, he cannot escape his God or himself.
- **The Prerequisite:** The text begins with the candidate's name, signifying that the vow is *individual*. It is taken in a state of symbolic "darkness" and "humility" (kneeling), acknowledging that without the vow, the candidate is not yet "brought to light." [4]

1. The Symbolic & Allegorical Lens (The Hidden Wisdom)

- **The Right Hand of Fellowship:** Allegorically, placing the hand on the **Volume of the Sacred Law** (VSL) symbolizes that the Mason's actions (the hand) are now governed by his faith and moral foundation. The "Sign of Fidelity" (hand over the heart) represents the internalizing of these secrets—keeping them in the "safe repository" of the soul.
- **The Square & Compasses:** The vow is taken "on the Square." [6] Allegorically, this means the candidate is promising to "square his actions" by the rules of the Craft. The fidelity mentioned is the "cement" that allows these squared stones to hold together in a structure of Brotherhood.
- **The Evergreen:** Fidelity is the Masonic "Acacia." Just as the acacia represents the immortality of the soul, Fidelity represents the immortality of a man's word. A Mason may die, but his *Fidelity* to his oath remains as his lasting monument.



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2. The Moral & Ethical Lens (The Charge)

- **Incompatibility Check:** The Worshipful Master's assurance—that the vow is not incompatible with other duties—is the "Safety Valve of Conscience." It teaches that Masonry is a *support* to citizenship and faith, never a replacement. A Mason who betrays his country or his faith has, by definition, already broken his Masonic vow of fidelity.
- **The Penalty of Integrity:** While archaic physical penalties are symbolic, the text identifies the *true* moral penalty: being "**void of all moral worth.**" In the Masonic system, "moral worth" is the only currency a man truly possesses. To lose it is to become a "living ghost" in the eyes of the Craft.
- **The Five Points of Fellowship:** Fidelity is the active ingredient in the Five Points. It is the fidelity to stay on one's feet to help a brother, to keep a brother's secrets as his own, and to catch him before he falls.

3. The Operative Lens (The Personal Application)

- **The Speculative Work:** In the world, "Fidelity" is often conditional. In the Lodge, it is absolute. The "operative" application is to treat every person with the same level of integrity that you promised to the Brethren at the Altar.
- **The Internal Altar:** The vow suggests that the Mason is his own "Temple." Every morning, when he wakes, he is "re-obligated." His fidelity is not a one-time event but a daily "squaring" of his Rough Ashlar.
- **Final Reflection:** Fidelity is not a destination; it is the **Plumb Rule**. It ensures that as we build our lives, we are building "uprightly."^[5] It is the tool that prevents our character from leaning toward self-interest or convenience.

Closing Question for Discussion:

"If the secrets of Freemasonry are not the words or signs, but the internal experience of the ritual, how does the Vow of Fidelity act as the key that unlocks that experience?"

Educator's Note: *To unlock the experience, one must first be "trustworthy." The Vow is the "key" because it creates the environment of absolute trust (Fidelity). Only when a man knows his secrets are safe with his Brethren, and theirs with him, can the true "Light" of Brotherhood be shared without fear.*



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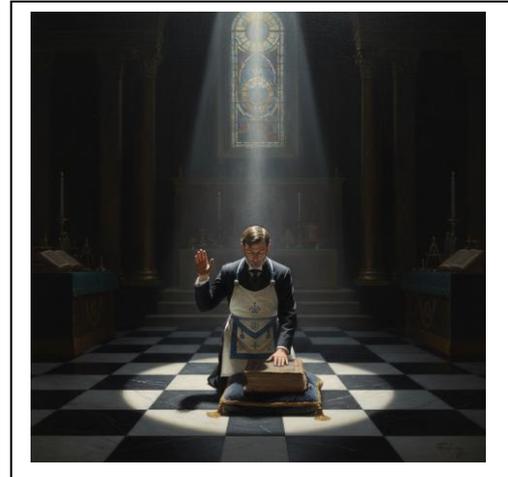
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