



## PAPER

### Point within a Circle

**Summary:** An examination of the phrase 'a point within a circle' and what it means to Freemasonry.

During the Opening of the Third Degree the Worshipful Master enquires of his Wardens:

*'What is a Centre?' to be answered: 'A point within a Circle, from which every part of the circumference is equidistant'.*

The Worshipful Master then asks: *'Why with the Centre?' to be informed: 'That being a point from which a Master Mason cannot err'*

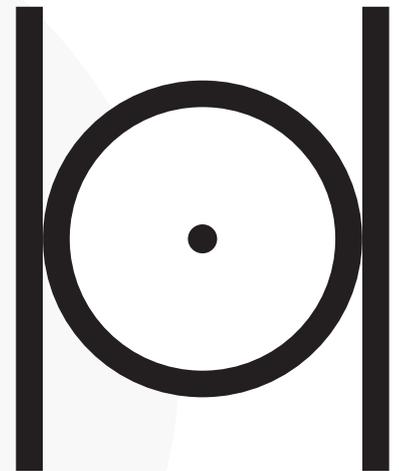
What does this dialogue mean?

The Circle, familiar to every Mason, is an ancient symbol, particularly important, not only for its antiquity, but because of the bond it makes between the old Operative Craft and the modern Speculative Masonry.

No-one can say with any certainty where and how it became a symbol. From the dawn of history, the Deity was depicted in enclosed figures. The circle for some people and the triangle for others. The enclosed figures represent the concept of there being no beginning and no end, the ineffable all in all, therefore God himself. The circle is for this reason also considered as the symbol of eternity.

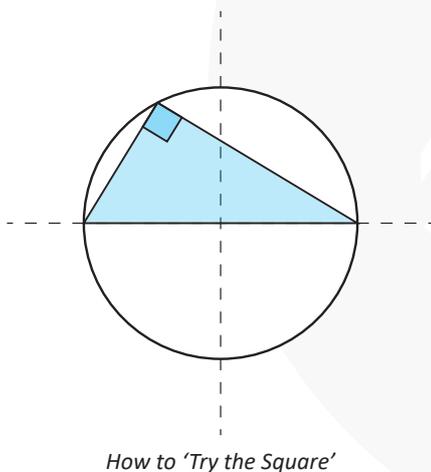
As ancient as this symbol is, it is considered by some to represent a late development in the intellectual history of mankind. Long before man had created language, the circle represented the radiant disk of the Sun. In the science of astronomy, a circle with a dot in the centre remains the symbol for the Sun. We find in connection with Sun worship, the most ancient of all religions, ruins of circular ancient temples, which were devoted to the worship of fire and the Sun. In India, its antiquity is beyond calculation. It evidences fire and Sun worship in ancient temples, circular in form with a central altar or 'point' which was the Holy of Holies. An early example in England is of course Stonehenge; still the focus of the Druid worship of the Sun.

To fully understand just how 'The Point within a Circle' came into Speculative Masonry by way of Operative craftsmanship, it is necessary to have a mental picture of the life and times of Operative Mason in the early middle ages. The vast majority of operative masons were unable to read or write. Firstly because there were few, if any, books to read, and secondly because there was no need for them to write. Skilled craftsmen they undoubtedly were, who through long apprenticeship and careful teaching, developed the art of cutting and setting stone. However, despite a manual skill founded on generations of experience, they were without learning.



This was of course not true of the leaders, or Masters, as we would call them. The great Cathedrals of Europe, which ran into hundreds, were not planned and overseen by ignorance. The Architects, Overseers, and those who laid out the designs and planned the cutting of the stones must have been educated men, with knowledge of practical and theoretical mathematics. With hundreds, if not thousands, of men working on a great structure, some sort of organisation and simple management must have been essential. Part of this exercise would have been the supervision of the tools of the trade. Good work cannot be done with faulty instruments, e.g. a major building could not have been erected with a defective square, level or plumb-rule. The working tools used by Operative Masons would also have consisted of the gavel, heavy maul, hammer, chisel, trowel, and the twenty-four-inch gauge and yardstick to measure the work.

The square, level and plumb line would have been made of wood, cord and a weight for the plumb-bob. Wood wears when it is used and rubbed against stone, it warps when exposed to inclement weather. The metal straps used to fasten together the two arms of the square, would rust and become loose with constant wear and tear. Therefore, squares had to be constantly checked for accuracy to ensure that they were exactly at a right angle. Some standard had to be adopted by which this vital tool could be compared. So that when the Operative Masons squares were tried and tested, they would not *'materially err'*. This simple, but extremely clever, geometrical operation, knowing how *'to try the square'* was in those days a closely guarded secret of the Master Mason.



This is how it is done. Lay out a circle, of any size upon a sheet of paper. Establish the centre of the circle. Draw a line with a straight edge across the circle passing through the centre point to create a line that is an accurate diameter. Put a dot anywhere on the circumference of the circle. Draw two lines from the point on the circumference to intersect at each side of the diameter. The result is a perfect right-angled triangle!

This was possibly the Operative Master's great secret; knowing how to *'try the Square'*. It was by this means that he tested the working tools of the Operative Masons on a regular basis, so that they did not *'materially err'*. As a result, it becomes clear how important the words used by The Worshipful Master are at the opening of the Lodge in the Third Degree:

*'Brethren, in the name of the Most High I declare the Lodge duly open on the Centre for the purposes of Freemasonry in the Third Degree.'*

Confirming that *'on the centre'* is a point from which we as Master Masons cannot err. Our ancient Brethren used the point within a circle as a test for the rectitude of their tools, to square their work and construct their buildings. In today's Masonic Lodges, we use this in a speculative sense; to test the rectitude of our actions, our intentions and to square our conduct. They erected Cathedrals; we build a *'House not made with hands'*. Their point within a circle was Operative Masonry, ours is truly Speculative.

Let us therefore, give the *'Point within a Circle'* the reverence it deserves; as a direct descendant of an operative practice. The use of which produced, square-work, true-work, good-work.

## Recommended use of Papers

Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
  - Followed by 'any questions'
  - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
  - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

\*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version and any reference to ritual will be from Emulation unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

For further papers and other learning materials visit *Solomon* at <http://solomon.ugle.org.uk>

## Acknowledgement:

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