

Walnut Street Edition

WESTERN RECORDER

Masons making case known as SBC study nears debate

By David Winfrey
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WASHINGTON (BP)—From letter-writing campaigns and special meetings to a call to attend the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Houston, Masons are defending their lodge membership and denying any conflict with Christian doctrine.

"We are simply trying to set the record straight," said John Boettjer, managing editor of *The Scottish Rite Journal*, which expanded and dedicated its February issue to the topic of Freemasonry and religion.

Masonic response comes as Southern Baptists await a study on Freemasonry by the Home Mission Board's interfaith witness department.

Meanwhile, Freemasonry critic Larry Holly said he will publish a second book on the subject to be available at this year's convention. Holly, a Beaumont, Texas, physician who initiated the call for a study of Masonry, mailed his first book to several thousand Baptists prior to the SBC 1991 meeting in Indianapolis.

Holly said his second book also will be mailed to HMB trustees before they vote at their March meeting on whether to accept the study by the board's interfaith witness department and send it to the convention for consideration.

Holly contends that a sound study of Freemasonry will find it to be occultic and incompatible with Christian doctrine.

The HMB study is similar to those by other Christian denominations that have raised such questions as whether Masonry teaches that salvation can be achieved through good works.

Masons counter that critics misquote Masonic writings, use outdated material or elevate one Mason's beliefs to the level of doctrine. Freemasonry encourages church involvement, they say, and it simply refuses to allow religious differences to prevent good men from becoming better

through civic and charity projects.

"Even a casual perusal of these pages should convince any person open to reason that Freemasonry is not only compatible with religion but also confirms and complements religious faith and church participation," wrote Fred Kleinknecht, sovereign grand commander of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, in the *Journal*.

The *Journal*, which has a circulation of 550,000, features essays and letters by Southern Baptists and others such as *Guideposts* publisher Norman Vincent Peale.

Its cover features a photo of Baylor University as well as photos of Baylor President Herbert Reynolds and President Emeritus Abner McCall. The issue contains articles by both men.

Essays also note that George W. Truett, former pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, was a Mason, as is U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms of North Carolina.

Holly said the reaction is not surprising: "Anyone could expect that the Masons, who are very powerful and very wealthy, were not going to roll over and play dead."

Officials with the southern jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry have mailed about 2,800 copies of the journal to Southern Baptist leaders, Boettjer said.

Also in the journal, two Baptist laymen call for Baptist Masons to attend the June 14-17 annual SBC meeting in Houston as messengers.

Meanwhile, some Masonic lodges have held special meetings on the subject of the study, Boettjer said. Masons also have written letters to Southern Baptist leaders, stating they are Christians and see no conflict between their church and lodge.

The HMB's report will be reviewed in early February by the HMB trustee administrative committee before being mailed to the full board prior to the March meeting, said HMB President Larry Lewis.