

## A Plea for Strong Eldership

"Then fourteen years after, I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain." Galatians 2:1-2.

In this passage, the Apostle makes a remarkable statement - after a time of ministry, he went to visit those "of reputation" to find out if he had run in vain. If such a visit was needed by Paul, how can any of us believe that we need any less?

In the Society of Friends, people named Elders provide feedback to ministers, guiding them around the pitfalls and nurturing them with the spiritual guidance wherein they appear lacking. Most groups of Friends scaled back the duties of Elders in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century because of a reticence that anyone else should "judge" the leadings of a minister. Now, in the early 21st century, the position is beginning to emerge again in various places. In some midwestern FGC yearly meetings, the role of Elder is played by people serving on what are called "anchoring committees." Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has recently started appointing Elders to serve as something of "silent observers" during business meetings, who attempt to foster the sense of worship during the deliberations.

Although these varied interpretations of the office may not be consistent in their intent, some general principles appear to hold among all groups of Friends.

### **Ministers need Elders.**

This statement is so obvious that it seems pointless to mention. No matter how much a minister attempts to be true to the Guide in speaking, mistakes are made. The problem is this: often, when someone speaks under a false leading during worship, there is a possibility that a hearer will be turned away - not from the speaker - but instead from Christ Jesus. Such an event is a major problem, particularly if it continues. One role of the Elder is to look out for anything that takes away from a person's ministry, emphasizing the strengths and guiding the minister away from shortcomings. Elders are not the enemies of ministers - in fact, Elders work to help ministers grow in their gift and improve their ability to follow the guidance of the Light of Christ even better. The two therefore have a

### **Joint exercise of gifts.**

Meetings of ministers and elders were instituted over 300 years ago. Of course, in the 17th century, Friends understood there to be more of an overlap between the two offices, and Friends were not being specifically named to either office until the early 18th century. The overseers have participated in these meetings since 1958. When Friends with diverse gifts gather to discuss the things of the Spirit, individual gifts are sharpened as Friends grow in their yearning to help each part of the body to function at its best. Those in all three stations need to be good listeners, both to the Lord and to each other. To use an analogy from the world, they are all part of the same team, and not in competition with each other.

### **No.**

It is a great irony that one of the most powerful words in the English language is also one of the shortest. The word "no" is a word that those who speak on the Lord's behalf need to hear sometimes. Most Elders are able to work around a direct "no" by saying something like "I wouldn't do that now," but the fact stands that ministers need to know when they are straying from the path. The relationship between a minister and an Elder must be well-nurtured and strong in order that the caution may be received in the right spirit. Ministers need to hear "What thee is doing is undermining thy ministry" if the Lord has shown that to an Elder. As someone who hardly ever hears "no," I can say without hesitation that when I hear it, I take notice.

Last year, a woman was telling a story in a conversation among four Friends (including me). As part of the conversation, the woman said that if God told someone to do something but the Elders counseled against it, the person should go ahead and do it anyway. This really bothered me. To begin with, if the Lord gave a person direction, that person should be able to convey a sense of the gravity of the leading to the Elders. If rightly appointed Elders believe it not to be "of the Lord," I told her that I would definitely hesitate to do the thing. There is safety in the multitude of counselors, because whether we like it or not, each of us occasionally finds it difficult to discern between ego and God. Last, if it is a true leading, the Lord would grant the Elders strength to see His hand in the matter.

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