

ELDERSHIP: FINDING A JEWEL IN A HARD SHELL

QUAKERS IN YORKSHIRE

THE BEGINNING OF ELDERS

- We need to recognise the strangeness and intensity of early Friends (their religious language differs from ours): **The hard shell.**
- Return to the simple community of prayer (New Testament): **Titus, 1:5-9. Elders in this context held authority, cared for the needs of the community, and ensured that members kept living a moral life.**
- **Elders (NT): Police the borders of the community:** *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15).*
- **Elders guard what is true and deflect error (in terms of belief and practice).** *Early Friends adopted these descriptions: That if any person draw back from meetings, and walk disorderly, some go to speak to such as draw back; to exhort and admonish such with a tender, meek spirit, whom they find negligent or disorderly.*

THE WISDOM OF THE HARD SHELL

- Liberal Friends today may feel uncomfortable: **The old Elder**: Doctrinaire, authoritarian and snooty (encouraging a closed and maybe close-minded community): We struggle with boundary setting and imposing moral discipline.
- But there's spiritual wisdom, even in the hard shell: In one tract George Fox described Friends as spiritual 'wayfarers' who were thrown out of other communities.
- **And this is the way of the wayfaring men, who have been wayfaring up and down from religion to religion, from worship to worship, from one people to another, from one minister and teacher to another, and could not sit down in any of their ways, but wayfared, travelled and sought.**
- The Elder's role was to draw people back to that original love and true home (including other Elders).

HELPERS IN THE QUAKER “HOUSE”

- **Making a house a home (another image):** Early Elders helped to sustain a spiritual home: But all homes have rules or ways of organising things: Don't leave the towels on the bathroom or put tea cups in the pan cupboard),
- Part of Eldership was transmitting the Quaker Way to others: Helping Friends live deliberately and simply when it is easy to lose motivation or focus: For early Friends Elders drew Friends back to Quaker essentials.
- The Ministry of Prayer: Early Elders took it on themselves to pray for the whole of meeting in Worship and during Quaker Worship for Business.
- Prayer to increase faithfulness, commitment and clarity. (a prayer for Order): 'Right ordering' (Gospel Order): Being in alignment with God.

INSIDE THE HARD SHELL: THE JEWEL OF ELDERSHIP

- We often use the word 'eldering' purely negatively: Early Friends understood 'eldering' in wide terms, encompassing a whole range of responsibility.
- **Essential:** Eldership is not just a role for early Friends, it's a gift of God (the Spirit has led a Friend to provide care for the whole community.)
- **Primacy responsibility of an Elder:** Early Elders were focused on helping Friends recognise their gifts as Ministers (encouraging vocal ministry, preaching/traveling ministry) and recognising the gift of Eldership (other service).
- **Discernment:** Recognising the gifts of Friends and helping them serve Friends with these gifts: Helping Friends work out what they should do and when (We hold onto the Jewel as Liberal Friends but maybe we need some of the shell too)

THE LESSON FROM EARLY ELDERS

- **‘Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life’.**
- Boundaries offer solidity: But the point of the boundaries was (and is) to help us to distinguish between the Spirit and ego (self-will versus divine will): Our life versus the Life and Power.
- The hardshell, the boundaries and the disciplines shouldn’t serve themselves. They serve the Spirit. The shell should serve the jewel.