

Spiritual Authority in Our Meetings

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Ed. The following reflections are excerpted from a presentation given by Lloyd Lee to the 9th class of On Being a Spiritual Nurturer in November 2013. The full presentation can be heard in an mp3 audio file available at <http://schoolofthespirit.org/library/>. We are grateful for the author's permission to publish these words.

We've got a problem with spiritual authority. Christians do. Quakers do. You and I do.

The reason we have a problem is because we misunderstand the nature of spiritual authority in the Friends worshiping community.

We know about authority. There is political authority, military authority, government authority, personal authority, parental authority. Authority is the power or right to give orders, make decisions and compel obedience.

But when we think that way, we misunderstand the Religious Society of Friends as a worshiping community because we are taking definitions out of one world and bringing them into another where it doesn't work.

The world that God has set for us as a worshiping people is so different that you almost have to be born again to understand it.

Let's listen to what Jesus said authority should be like among Christians.

"And he said to them: the Kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those who have authority over them are called benefactors. But it is not this way among you. The one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest. And the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? Yet I am among you as one who serves." – Luke 22

Jesus turns our understanding of authority on its ear. He doesn't turn it upside down. Jesus is not saying that the kind of people exercising this type of power should be those at the bottom. He doesn't dispense with authority. He does not say that nobody has any authority over anybody else. It is the kingdom of God, not the anarchy of God. It is the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of human beings.

Jesus says that the authority of the kingdom, of the gospel, of the good news, is invitational, self-sacrificing, and inclusive. Authority comes not because I force you to do this but because I invite you into a new life.

Why are we missing the boat? We are missing the boat because we live most of our lives in a dominant culture that is turned exactly against this.

The Religious Society of Friends, contrary to popular belief, is at heart a corporate spiritual journey. It is not a place where each individual gets to have their own self-designed spiritual growth charter. It is only in our joint practice, in our joint experience, and our joint testimonies that we have communities of believers who can do the work that God has set us out to do. God's project, as understood by Friends, is not so much the sanctification of myriads of individuals, as it is the transformation of all creation.

What we do as we worship and live and do our business together, is we learn those skills and abilities jointly that enable us to model the Kingdom of God to the rest of the world. This is our testimony as a gathered people. And we do so by taking the seeds of that learning out beyond the confines of our monthly meetings and begin to transform the world outside the Religious Society of Friends.

And the measure of our faithfulness is not how many hearts we have won to Jesus to God or to the Divine power or the Inner Light. It is how real we have made the Kingdom of God.

This is the Lamb's War. It is no walk in the park. It takes all of our effort, jointly together, and we've got to be lifting one another, encouraging one another, and occasionally saying 'look out, there's a hole there.'

Spiritual authority among Friends rests in the Gospel, the Good News. If it is not Good News for everyone, it is not the Gospel. And if it is not the Gospel, it doesn't have authority over us.

The baptizing power of the spirit of Truth is the true evidence. It is not true because I said it, or because it is eloquent or because it is four-syllable words. It is true because you can taste the Gospel. It baptizes you.

One does not exercise spiritual authority in the Religious Society of Friends. One is exercised **by** spiritual authority, if one is humble enough to follow the Guide closely.

God is being invitational, not coercive. If you don't want to participate in the life, you don't have to. But if you decide that that is what you really want, then God will use you, and God will use you in words or deeds or symbolic actions or whatever, but it will, in fact, be authoritative to those who have ears to hear.

What makes a word authoritative is the baptizing power of the spirit of truth. Not the person speaking it. But it is an event in which God's presence and guidance are received by us.

It is my sense that if we all are properly humble before that experience -- and it is a humbling experience to feel the perceptible guidance of God; to know that our Creator and our Sustainer yearns to be intimately involved with each one of us each moment; to know that God is reaching out to us individually and corporately -- that if we quiet ourselves enough we will hear the conversation that is already going on.

That's the way it is. We don't have to get God's attention. We don't have to punish ourselves for God to love and accept us. But we do have to be humble enough to allow that to happen, and to listen. That's what is going on in corporate worship, that's what is going on in individual meditation.

If I am dealing with secular authority, then it matters whether or not someone obeys the law. If I'm dealing with political authority, it matters whether we get that legislation passed. But in the spiritual authority in the meeting, the outcome doesn't matter.

I hear from a lot of people, "my meeting doesn't give me what I want, my meeting doesn't give me what I need."

The model I am holding up to you says that your concern should be whether you are giving the meeting what it needs. Are you exercising your spiritual gifts fully for the meeting to do its job to bring about the kingdom of God?

God will give you what you need. God will give you exactly what you need, even if it is not what you want.

The question is: are you committed to God's project enough that your top priority is to fully fill your place and do your work on behalf of the meeting so it can do the work of God?

Our meetings are where we learn the discipline of being God's community. In that sense, we should all expect that it is never going to be exactly the way we want it to be, because we are never quite the people God wants us to be. But being a participant in a meeting can be a place where we learn more, where those rough edges are reshaped and we understand that what is best for this group at this time in order to do God's work is not necessarily what I would have chosen. That's okay, that's not a loss; it is a gain. It is a place where we have learned something important.