

CONCERNS ABOUT THE TEACHING OF *GENE EDWARDS*

I write this with some sadness. I have benefited from some of Gene Edwards' works. I share his great concern for the contemporary church. I too believe that we have messed things up big time. Some of his books, particularly his earlier ones, proved very helpful to me at a painful time when I struggled with leaving a church which had grown into an authoritarian machine after serving it faithfully for ten years. I note that we share a love of some great authors on the subject of radical ecclesiology (e.g. T. Austin Sparks, Watchman Nee, various Brethren writers).

I hadn't read any of Gene's works for some time, and recently read his newer books to prepare me to meet him at a conference. What I read disturbed me. This is why I had to write this paper.

Extracts From Books

WHEN THE CHURCH WAS LED BY LAYMEN

No Publisher, No Date

1 Racy Language, extreme exaggeration in emphasis of an argument.

'You dear brother, have been denied the greatest privilege a Christian can know, and you do not know it. Not only you, but virtually every Christian who has ever lived for at least the last 1700 years has not known of this loss.'

(Opening words, p1)

As the title suggests, this book is addressed to '*brothers*' and teaches that the Biblical form of church government is an unstructured domination by these 'brothers', i.e. men in a sort of chaotic free-for-all where policy emerges as a result of fellowship. Quotes like that above emphasise the masculinity of fellowship and state that such experiences have been denied male believers for hundreds of years and that the church has not known Biblical leadership since the first century.

Does this male emphasis mean that the sisters cannot enter in to: 'the greatest privilege a Christian can know'? Although given a sort of power of veto, the sisters seem to be ignored from this privilege of intense *koinonia* reserved for men.

Is it not also arrogant to suggest that only Edwards has known of a Biblical church vision and Biblical church leadership in the last 1700 years? It isn't true anyway; there have been many genuine Biblical expressions of church communities built on *koinonia*. What about Hernnhut under Zinzendorf? What about Craik and Muller? What about current meetings in many parts of China, Africa, South America. What about the Anabaptists (see *The Pilgrim Church* by E.H. Broadbent). What about meetings in England, and elsewhere, that were prompted by the Holy Spirit in the early 70's? etc.

The use of sensational language does not help make a solid case for the proposition. Wild statements that are inaccurate at the head of his argument bode ill for what follows.

'You have not lived until you have learned how to loathe every brother in the church. Unmitigated, unbridled hate mixed with the lust to murder. Slowly!' (p53)

No doubt his intention is that the church should be living realistically instead of hypocritically. Even so, there is no need for wild statements like this. Encouragement to hate is not the way forward. The NT everywhere encourages us to love. The fact that in many churches this is a sham does not give us the warrant to turn the Biblical command around. We must love one another.

2 The condemnation of Elders

'Only the first century church found its direction from the brothers and sisters. It did not find its direction from ministers and elders.'
(Second par. p1)

'The church is not led by a minister. Nor is the church led by elders.'
(p24, emphasis of bold and italic type original).

After his inaccurate historical assessment Gene launches immediately into an inaccurate Biblical statement. This is repeated throughout the book.

The apostles took the role of eldership very seriously. Peter even tells us that he was one (1 Pt 5:1). We do see a gradual development of this role as we do with many church practices. The church was not clear on many issues at the beginning (e.g. use of lots before the Holy Spirit's indwelling in the believer was properly understood; the position of the law in the Christian's life, especially before the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, despite Paul's clear teaching on it in Romans and Galatians).

A brief analysis of the NT position of eldership is called for.

- Elders were appointed by the apostles as soon as gifted men became obvious within the congregation. Churches planted by Paul on his first missionary journey had elders appointed on a later visit, possibly only months later (Acts 14:23, 20:17). These churches did not exist for years without leadership.
- Paul tells Titus that it was *defective* not to appoint elders in Crete (Titus 1:5). This was to be done *in every town as Paul directed*. Jerusalem, the oldest church, had elders early on (Acts 11:30, 21:18).
- Eldership was plural and equal (notice appoint '*elders*' not 'an elder').
- Elders govern the church (1 Pt 5:1-5), this includes honouring their authority in church matters (Heb 13:17).
- The church has leaders who are elders, even though they may be called by different names like guardians, bishops, leaders, shepherds etc. (Heb 13:7; Acts 20:28).
- There is no evidence of a senior elder or a pastor ruling as an individual.

Apart from the appointment of elders being the scriptural norm, there is also the input of gifted men, what Edwards would call 'ministers' here. I agree that a professional class of

clergy is alien to church life, but the NT shows ministers serving the church in their gifts. The early church was dominated by the apostles, surely these are ministers? There is no hint of Edward's assertion that the 'brothers' led the gatherings or took direction in the early Jerusalem church. Even early church plantings had clear leaders who were delegated by the apostles (e.g. Phillip, Barnabus). Ephesians 4 lists the key church gifts. These gifted men (e.g. prophets, evangelists) clearly have a directing role in the body, even if the last word is with the elders.

The true position is that the brothers *are* very important, as are the sisters. The early church took a great deal of notice of them. They were involved in key decisions. Policy and strategy was not decided behind closed doors but involved the whole congregation (not just the brothers). Yet there was also clear leadership, put into the hands of the elders who had input from other gifted men (who may or may not have been elders as well,). Elders were to lead the church like a father, a nurse, and a shepherd (1 Cor 4:15; 1 Thess 2:7; 1 Pt 5:1-5, see numbers 8-9.)

3 Leadership by brothers vetoed by sisters

'The brothers are more or less in charge. They lead, with the understanding that the sisters veto anything and everything which they don't like.' (p44)

'In Atlanta, from time to time, the brothers turn *everything* that has to do with the direction of the church over to the sisters. The brothers take a "leadership vacation." ' (p45)

This statement is just amazing. Needless to say that there is no Biblical basis for it, in fact there is clear scriptural teaching which condemns it. Leadership is in the hands of elders. Women are specifically given no authority, not even to teach, let alone make policy and strategy decisions (1 Tim 2:12).

This does not mean, however, that the NT ignores women. It lifted the role of the women from the subjection she suffered in contemporary life. In fact, it was radical in giving women liberty. It clearly enables women to minister in a variety of ways and specific women are cited as being very significant in the ministry of Jesus and Paul (e.g. Priscilla, Mary, Martha, Phoebe etc.). The point is that leadership is restricted from women. They can serve in a deaconess role but not an elder's, and the elder is the only local church leadership function.

4 Tribal community?

'As God created man, He created man *tribal* ... *What* is church life?!
The closest thing on this earth the church can be compared to is a tribe.'
(p18 emphasis original)

Again there is no scriptural basis for a statement like this. The closest comparison is a family not a tribe. This is even true of civilisation: 'God sets the solitary in families.' (Ps 68:6), 'I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named'. (Eph 3:14-15). The favourable comparison to a pagan Native American pow-wow has no justification from scripture (p19).

The church is called a *family a household* repeatedly in scripture. *Family* is the best picture

we have of a NT church. *Tribe* simply does not convey the intimate concept of NT church life.

5 Male emphasis

'Christianity, at this point in time, is not a male religion, nor has it been so for nearly two millenniums [sic].' (p3)

This is stated as a complaint that it should be a male religion (*'it was not always so'* p3). As explained at the start, Gene is making a plea for an informal, male, group-centred government of the local church. This continual male focus (here and in other works) can be very unhelpful. Men and women are equal in status (but in some respects their functions vary) in the body. We shouldn't be making a case for one or the other. We should be aiming to *all* be of one mind and one soul (Phil 2:2). The NT does not teach this arbitrary division of fellowship.

6 The church planter must leave the pioneer church quickly

'The first century church planter, having raised up a church, leaves! He *leaves* soon, quick, fast!' (p12 emphasis original).

This just is not true. I agree that an apostle should leave the work in the hands of elders; but this is not necessarily done quickly. It is done at the right time under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We cannot make rules about it.

We must understand the urgency of the task before Paul and the 12 apostles. There was a wide-open world waiting for the Gospel. They also presumed that the Second Coming was imminent and they sacrificed their lives to hard work. Usually, there wasn't time to stay too long in one place. As a result, the apostle's presence was maintained by his delegate e.g. Erastus, Titus or Timothy (Acts 18:22). Why? because the church needed guidance, direction, teaching and all sorts of help. Even so, Paul still found time, even under these pressing conditions, to stay 18 months in Corinth (Acts 18:11) and two years in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). After Paul left, he returned to strengthen his churches where possible (Acts 15:36, 41).

The churches were not left to suffer and emerge through a period of chaos unless it could not be avoided.

7 Emphasis on the church being a girl

'She (the church) is a girl! A beautiful, living, breathing girl!' (p18)

The church is spoken of as a bride in Ephesians, and symbolically as a lover (i.e. a bride) in the Song of Solomon. This particularly has reference to the heart of God for his elect people (Eph 5:25) and the presentation of the church to Christ (Eph 5:27) at what is called the marriage supper of the lamb (Rev 19:9), or the bridal feast (Matt 25:10). I can find nowhere in the Bible that the present experience of the church on earth is compared to a girl.

There is a difference between the descriptions of the church as a bride and the church as a girl. Constitutionally, the church is incomplete without her husband. She is the fulness of

Christ, she is nothing on her own. As such, the picture of a bride, the complement of the husband is totally suitable. She is the receiver of divine love, set upon her from eternity. This also helps us to be aware of the great importance of Christians to the heart of God. Generically, the church is specifically said to be a man. A man coming to full stature in Christ, a man able to execute dominion (never given to a woman in the Bible). Christ is the firstborn of a new creation. We are in Him and he is male. In the OT God was looking for a MAN after his own heart and has now found it in the church.

The Biblical terminology is:

...that he might create in himself one new man.

...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

(Ephesians 2:15, 4:13)

8 Three kinds of persons

'There are only three kinds of persons who hold centre stage in the first-century faith. A church planter. An ecclesia. And *thirdly?* You have *brothers*; you have sisters. That's it. That's all. That is about all there is.' (p19)

This is just too foolish for words. The New Testament places a great emphasis upon elders (see next item). It makes clear mention of deacons. It also recognises gifted men of various sorts, so that Paul sometimes lists them (Rm 12, Eph 4). Prophets are given a significant role in Acts.

Gene makes much of the frequency of the word '*brothers*'. It isn't just the frequency of mention that is important, but the space given to clear teaching. Elders and deacons occupy considerable portions of Paul's later letters. Paul's mature thought thus gives importance to these offices. Paul wrote his late pastoral letters especially with the care of the church in mind (i.e. the letters to Timothy and Titus).

Edward's statement just isn't true. It isn't even consistent with his own words. The three persons are listed as four, the sisters are thrown in as a sort of afterthought. Since groups of people are included (e.g: he includes the *ecclesia*), what about church councils, one of which occupies a whole chapter of Acts?

9 Inaccurate listing of words for elder

'*Elder* only squeaks onto the stage. You find them among the bushes in the backdrop of the stage's scenery.

'(Acts has five references to *Christian* elders. All the epistles in the New Testament combined have eight. That is a total of thirteen references to Christian elders.)' (p19)

This is wrong. The facts are:

- *presbuteros* - 65
- *presbuterion* - 3
- But these also include the elders of Israel. Christian elders: 17 plus 12 references in Revelation (which are Christian, but in heaven). This is a total of 29 (Acts has 10, 5 in

one chapter alone i.e. c15). To this we must add:

- *episkopos* (bishop, overseer i.e. elder) -4, *episkope* -1, *episkopeo* -1.
- Grand total = 35!
- This does not include references to pastors (*poimaino*) (i.e. shepherds), leader(s) (*proistemi*), rule (*hegeomai*).

There is no excuse for such fumbling of evidence which can be measured.

10 Emphasis on a method rather than on the sovereignty of God.

My over-riding concern about Gene's writings is his cavalier attitude towards the Word of God and the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit. It is God's Word, not Gene Edwards' which must be submitted to. God must build the house in his way, in his time. We must not pigeon-hole the way God chooses to work by imposing our methodology.

In the early church there was some diversity in the organic way it became established. Out of this arose certain enduring principles (e.g. rule by elders, meetings are for edification of the body by the body, no clergy/laity split). How this works may well differ from one community to another.

If we are surrounded by a catastrophic experience of church life (and I agree that we are), the only hope is for more people to gain a clear Biblical vision of what the church should be and how it should meet. Gene's book is full of racy, sensational statements that can appear attractive to people who have been hurt in church settings and are looking for something new. Gene seems to claim for himself an original and true understanding of God's methods long lost to Christians when in reality, it is just another methodology invented by one man. The church always goes wrong when it follows a charismatic man instead of the Word of God.

EXTRACTS FROM TAPE MESSAGES

THE BROTHERS CONFERENCE

This appears to be the source of the book: *'When laymen led the church'*. It is an informal message in a setting of a hundred or so men, who frequently interject. The language and expression is even more racy.

'Someone will say, " Why don't we put Christ in the centre?" No we don't put Christ in the centre, the minister is in the centre (i.e. the current church practice) ... It's my job to get off the centre of the stage and put non-laymen in the centre of the stage ... My job is to turn the church of Jesus Christ over to brothers.'

Although Gene goes on to say that he has Biblical evidence for this statement and can prove its veracity, he neglects to tell us.

Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and not just the whole church, but every local gathering of the church. Each local meeting is not a part of the church, it is the church in that locality. It represents God's thought as to the whole church. As such, Jesus is the

head of it. Just as we would call it the body (in that locality), Jesus is the head of that body. There is no other centre, focus or head of the church other than Christ.

'This may be the most important message brother, you poor laymen that you are, that you will ever hear as long as you live. This is more revolutionary than the Reformation.'

The arrogance of this statement is overwhelming. Especially when it is realised that this tape was made specifically in order to recapture a previous conference message not properly recorded. It was made to be passed on. It is not a case of unguarded thoughts made in a private gathering.

'If I'm gonna aim at the minister, I'm gonna aim at this fella too and his name is elder ... we begin to see this wonderful new thing (the pure church) ... and then were gonna organise it ... then we have elders. They come so suddenly ... let me tell you, you might as well take her out (the church) and shoot her dead the day you get them (i.e. elders).'

Please refer to the previous studies on elders. Gene's words here are too serious to be dismissed as puerile or facile (though they are that also).

'(the word pastor) it appears once ... that word appears once. The same thing is true of elders.'

We know that this is far from the truth regarding the word 'elders'. However, it is true that the word *pastor* or *shepherd* only appears once. But this occasion is vitally important. It appears in Eph 4:11 where Paul describes the gifts that the ascended Christ has given to the church so that she may be equipped and grow. It cannot be dismissed as unimportant, therefore, because it only appears once.

Furthermore, the words made from this word appear frequently. Firstly they are ascribed to Jesus (Jn 10:2,11,12,14,16; Heb 13:20; 1 Pt 2:25) and the clear reason is that Jesus is described in this way as an example of Christian leadership. We learn how to lead as shepherds by imitating Jesus' role as the great shepherd. Secondly, the reference in 1 Pt 5:4 makes it clear that the word *shepherd* is another word for elder.

'This is not the way things used to be ... these men ... would leave town after doing some real preparation and leave the entire mess. And I don't know that Paul ever left, except he left a mess. No that's not true in Derbe; there's no record of his having left a mess. Everywhere else he left, he left a mess.'

Just where is the evidence for such a wild statement? Paul's letter to Thessalonica says that the church had produced a work of faith, a labour of love and had a steadfast hope. That it imitated Paul and his fellow workers. That this church became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and further (1 Thess 1:2ff). Paul tells the Colossian church that he had heard of their faith in Jesus and their love for all the saints. That it was bearing fruit and growing (Col 1:4ff). Paul tells the Philippian church that he was thankful for their partnership in the Gospel, that a good work had been initiated (Phil 1:5-6). Where do we see any trace of the mess Paul is supposed to have left, apart from Corinth - and this mess started after Paul had departed and other influences came to bear upon them in his

absence.

This is another case of Gene reading into the record what he wants to see. He feels that church government should be in the hands of the brothers and solid leading only arises after a time of great chaos, even rivalry, which evolves into something better. Nothing could be further from the truth seen in the NT. Paul established churches on a sound footing. When he left them he either left them in capable hands of local leaders like Stephanus (1 Cor 16:15) or members of his team like Epaphras (Col 1:7) or he returned as soon as possible and appointed elders. Matters were not left in a mess. Paul even demanded that church matters should be conducted 'decently and in order' (1 Cor 14:40). He also warned that God was not a God of confusion (or chaos) but of peace (1 Cor 14:33). Confusion and chaos should never arise in the church of Christ. If it does, it is the work of the enemy, not of God.

'I want you to know something brothers, we men are afraid of women, that's why there's been so much of this submission business. We're terrified of those ladies, we're absolutely terrified.'

Is he serious! This sort of nonsense will gain no credibility from rational thinkers of either sex. It is clearly untrue. The emphasis on submission has much more to do with men's insecurity in themselves or their lust for power. Some men may be afraid of all women. Some men may be afraid of some women. Others are afraid of no one. Some are men-fearers. So what? Wild sensational generalisations with no evidence is not the way to establish a Biblical case.

Final thoughts

Having prepared this paper, I ventured to the conference, not knowing what to expect. In fact, Gene's ministry was so bad that I left after the first session. He had obviously not prepared any ministry and was 'winging it'. This would be acceptable if he was focused upon the word of God and consistent in his thinking. In the event, his thinking rambled all over the place, interspersed with wrong theology, false exposition and historical inaccuracies. He seemed to fasten upon any novelty which seemed to undergird his message. Even gross falsities were stated, like the 'fact' that there were no books available to the public until the 1600's; and that almost all Biblical Christians in the early church would have been unable to read.

On top of this he relied upon typical American laid back characteristics. This commended him to many as being devoid of airs and graces, but it induced a further reliance upon 'atmosphere'. Several followers from America ensured that 'Amen's' and 'Hallelujahs' interjected every few sentences. Minor points were elevated due to roars of pleasure from the audience. Gene often spoke and gesticulated in melodramatic ways to intensify a point in a manner that was unworthy of a Biblical teacher. It had more to do with Vaudeville than church.

His impassioned speech had no solid foundation, no Biblical evidence, no historical basis and was based upon pure speculation, but it was very poetic and dramatic. Despite all this, most of the 100-150 delegates lapped up his every word.

I was the only one who managed to speak to him privately during lunch and personally challenged him about his teaching and gave him the earlier contents of this paper. I asked

what had happened for such strange teachings to begin to appear in his ministry. He explained that he had always believed them, but had been prevented from writing about them earlier as they would reduce his credibility in the Christian world. His editors had published his many books with the extravagances removed, until the time came that he had been established on the teaching/writing circuit. To be fair, he did not seem to be a well man, I would even say that he did not seem to be mentally fit. We spoke for half an hour or more and got nowhere. In fact, he clearly stated that you can prove anything you like from the Bible and can't rely upon it to build a church or anything else. Something more is needed.

For his followers, what was needed was Gene Edward's teaching. Despite it's diversions from the Bible, despite it's deceptions, they were putting their lives into the hands of a man; and happy to do so.

Sometime, later I discovered that the conference sponsor, the main distributor for Edward's books in the UK, had separated from him and ceased to distribute his material. Some serious relationship problem had arisen and this person had begun to realise that something was wrong. What about all the other people who continue to devour his books and tapes?

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