

WHEN
THE CHURCH
WAS
LED ONLY BY
LAYMEN

Gene Edwards

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.

Of what do I speak? This fact: Only the first-century church found its direction from the brothers and sisters. It did not find its direction from ministers nor elders. The individual churches did not find their very existence and survival deposited in ministers. Counterwise, those churches existed by means of *brothers*. Here, today, in this meeting with you men, I mean to prove that fact.

There is something you do not have, but it is your birthright. It is my calling to see that you have it. In fact, *this should be* what every minister should do, for it is our calling. For all of us who minister, this is our calling.

Note that all of you present here are of the male gender. We men have grown up in an unspoken, unchallenged custom. Its ingredients are: A church building. A pulpit. And you, a man ... you of the male gender...now, ask yourself this question: What is your place in the kingdom of God as presently practiced in the present customs of Christianity?

Let us look closely. Here it is. *Man's* role in Christianity:

At 8:30 on Sunday morning you put on that horrendous costume called a *suit*. Then you have a fight with your wife and kids trying to get them off to Sunday School. Then you, man, still screaming, go to the car and "go to church." You, man, walk into a church building. (Remember, you are a man.) You are at this very moment fulfilling Christendom's expectations of you ... the converted human male. Now in the building you sit down.

You, man, then listen to an oration which is delivered in the Greco-Roman tradition laid down by Aristotle in a practice which Aristotle called rhetoric. You, man, have now done your masculine job, you have now fulfilled the male role model of a Christian. So now you can get up out of the pew and go home.

That's it!! That is your role in the kingdom of God.

In the beginning it was not so.

What you think and what you see is simply you, the silent man, in a pew. That is pretty much Christendom for you! You are someone who is utterly dependent upon a priest, a minister, or elders when it comes to the ecclesia.

Listen to your vocabulary, man! All the vocabulary which sails around in the microcosm we each live in is indicative of what we think, and tells of our surroundings.

You, and all Christendom, have accepted that status, and that even without realizing it. Walking into a building and sitting down, and getting up and walking out is you! That is all that you are. At least that is all that you are as "brother." That is all you are as a Christian man. It ought not to be that you walk into a building, sit down for an hour, and get up and walk out. Nor is it right for you to see yourself, and other men, this way. This is not right. And a revolution that changes that is due!! Not a tiny, timid revolution. No! A radical, wrenching revolution!

The greatest creative force on the earth as relates to the ecclesia, remains in chains. Listen, you who are of the male species, it has not always been this way.

Just how appealing is "church" as it is presently practiced ... how appealing is *that* to Christian men? Think about it!

Walk into any church. Let's start with the Catholics and then work our way down the ecclesiastical ladder. Observe:

In the Catholic meetings there are almost no men. Women dominate the pews. Now come down to the Baptists ... it is two women for every one man. When at last you come to the

Pentecostals, the ratio is a hair better. That is it. Quite frankly, that is the way we ought to expect it to be. Why? Because there just is not anything there for you.

Christianity, at this point in time, is not a male religion, nor has it been for nearly two millennia. Has this affected *your life*? If so, pause for a moment and reflect on how it has affected you. Are you ready to see this scenario change? In *your life*? Why are you and other men sleepwalking through today's expectations of you?

Why is there no appeal to men? There are probably dozen of reasons, but the most obvious is this: For a man, church is boring. (The truth be told, the women are bored, too. The thing is boring to everyone!)

In a word, the present-day practice of the Christian faith, my dear brother, has sterilized you.

How shall I begin to show you that it was not always so? Perhaps the best way to acquaint you with this unrecognized loss is to take a peek at the vocabulary of first-century believers. Not the conscious vocabulary used specifically to convey a point, but the vocabulary that is unconsciously spoken, that which seeps out, unconsciously.

In each of us there is a unique vocabulary that reflects a part of those surroundings of ours which are so much part of our lives that we do not even give thought to it. To illustrate: If you are a mechanic, plumber, computer operator, construction worker, each of you has a vocabulary that the rest of us do not have. You are not even conscious of it, yet we find it odd to our ears. Ever have a doctor tell you what is wrong with you? He has a vocabulary that is so much a part of his life that he unconsciously thinks you should understand what he is telling you.

I would not understand two computer people talking together. Yet you are not even aware of the uniqueness of your own vocabulary. You have a specialized vocabulary because of your environment. It is as much a part of you as your own name.

Christians of the first century had just such an unconscious vocabulary.

You can see this is true by listening to the unconscious vocabulary of the different Christian groups which exist in our day. If you were around a group of Fundamentalists, for instance, what might be some words that you would hear?*(repent, salvation, fire and brimstone, Republicans, eternal security, justification, the Bible says, morality.)

*Answers from men in the meeting, in response to Gene's question are in parentheses.

Now let us switch to an interdenominational organization like Navigators, Campus Crusade or YWAM. What would you hear as their unique vocabulary? (Great Commission, God has a wonderful plan for your life, discipleship, four spiritual laws, missions, visions, soul winning, God wants you to win people to the Lord.)

What are some words you might hear just around folks who are called, in America, Southern Baptists? (Annie Armstrong, co-operative program, deacons, tithing, baptism, once saved always

saved, Lottie Moon, ministry, pastor, words that reflect the Southern a carpenter speaks of a hammer, saw, chisel, measuring, plumb, etc.

Among Catholics what would you hear? (genuflect, tradition, rosary, mass, holy water, confessional, obedience, mother of God.)

If you were around Pentecostals? (the Holy Ghost, miracles, signs, power, word of faith, prosperity, baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues.)

What would you hear if you were among Plymouth Brethren? (head covering, communion, Lord's table, the Lord's day.)

Within each one of these groups there is a *mindset*. *That* mindset comes out naturally in routine conversation-an unconscious vocabulary which gives us a peek into the microcosm they live in.

Let's move over to the house church movement. What are some words used in the house church movement? (fellowship, commitment, deeper Christian life, koinonia, Bible study, the Word, outside the organized church, cell groups, social concern, woman's equality, house church theology.)

Let me tell you about a little niche of your thinking, something of which you are not aware, yet that little compartment of your thinking influences your life incredibly.. with or without a vocabulary. In fact, this little rut of thinking is in everyone's mind ... it literally drives Christianity, yet we do not know we are thinking this way.

Of what do I refer? Let me illustrate.

A minister friend of mine calls me and begins telling me how his ministry is doing. As he does this, he shows the minister's side of this very powerful but unconscious mind of which I speak. His words are *ministers'* words and are *ministry* centered. He tells me about *his* work; what he said, what he did, where he has been, and his results. All *minister* centered.

Recently I was on the phone with a brother from Texas who was telling me about all the house churches gathering throughout one of the largest cities in the state. He had five hundred people in home meetings. He must have talked to me, almost without stopping, for over an hour. "The Lord showed me this ... we had this problem and the Lord spoke to me on this ... we faced a different situation and finally I told everyone..." Did you know that in all that conversation he never mentioned you? I did not say he never mentioned "laymen." I mean he never mentioned you. There was no reference to anybody but himself He never talked about *you*. His mind is *ministry* centered, not *you* centered.

And you also think-when you think of Christian work and things getting done-you think "minister" and "ministry."

Dear brother, you as brothers are not in the forefront of your own Christian thinking. Ministers are.

Ministers think ministers. *You* think ministers. You do not think of you. There is a mentality among Christians-this is a mentality among laymen which is international, and it is ancient. *You and all Christendom think in terms of being led by ministers.*

Think about this: Next year you are going to go to a convention. What, dear brother, dear *layman*, are you going to do? You are going to *sit and listen* to a minister.

Next year you are also going to get in trouble in your personal life. You have a friend who is a pastor, and you are going to go talk to a minister about what to do about this problem.

Some of you are in a community where there is no church that is to your liking. You need a church. So? You need to find a minister in order to have a church.

Some day one of you is going to get a little group started in your home. It is going to fall apart, or it is going to go well. After a while, if it holds together, you will all decide you need a church without a minister. All groups which live very long ultimately need a minister. It is your unconscious way of seeing the Christian faith. It is also inevitable. It is a necessity to survival. A minister is a must!

You do not conceptualize in terms of the Christian faith outside of *minister* or leader. (A rose by any other name is still a rose, and a pastor by any other name is still a pastor.)

Christianity wholly without ministers?

Is that ever true? Even in the house church movement, can there be *church without minister*?

In the house church movement I notice not so much the life of the ecclesia but, rather, something that is a glorified home Bible study group. Everybody comes in and talks. The talk is shallow. Talk, with a bit of the Bible thrown in, then some fellowship, cookies and cake, and "oh, it was wonderful" and everyone goes home. (This is a return to the body of Christ!?)

But there is another aspect of a typical house church. A group meets in a house, yes, but a *minister* comes around and preaches to you, and edifies and strengthens you. While he is there, you get perked up. Then you, as a people, start gradually downward until the *minister* comes back again and boosts you up again.

The house church movement is as dependent on ministers as are all other types of movements and denominations. (If not ministers, then elders.) All churches find their direction either from ministers or elders.

If you listen carefully to your Christian vocabulary, then your vocabulary will tell you that all this is true.

You do not know it, but you have fetters all over you.

The path of church history remains unchanged century after century, even into its third millennium. Regardless of all the news you will ever hear, regardless of how long the Christian faith rolls on, *you* are still a *layman*. A sit-and listen layman. That is the way it is going to stay. How bad is it? Next Sunday morning when you "go to church," count how many laymen in the meeting do something-anything except sit and listen!

I am a minister and grateful to God for that. But I must not think "me." I must think "you." And you must join me in this perspective. My job: to utterly work myself out of a job. My job is not ministry nor to minister. My job is to turn a church over to brothers. Again, here in this room I intend to prove the fact-from Scripture-beyond all question! *The church is to find its leadership and direction through brothers.*

Careful or you will catch yourself saying, "Yeah, that's right. Let's go back and hang the preacher." That is not going to work. Things in Christendom are so constructed that without your minister, everything will fall apart.

Christianity is simply not prepared to shift paradigms. In the way Christianity is presently constructed, there is utter dependence on a local minister and a local continuous ministry. This man is literally the key to all things being held together. Remove him and all else collapses.

Christendom does not know how to raise up a church led by men. We have not known for 1700 years.

This may be the most important message you, the poor, sit-and-listen laymen will ever hear. You are hearing one of the most revolutionary statements that has ever been placed upon this earth, Martin Luther notwithstanding. But you are not about to hear of deliverance from this mold. This mold is here. Forever. We cannot change the way things are.

You will *never* hear anything more important (unless someone shows you how to touch and know and embrace and fellowship and walk with the Lord Jesus in space/time and outside space/time). I warn you, after this day, you may never again go to church, not as long as you ever live. Also, unfortunately, you may never have the privilege of experiencing what you are about to hear. But after 1700 years, it is time you were informed about something that is not and has not been for nearly two millenniums.

I return to this word, *vocabulary*.

The Fundamentalists have fundamentalism to protect. The Bible study people are into Bible classes. The interdenominational groups are into soul winning. (Whether they can ever find a dropper full of these converts a year later is not important, the great commission *has* to be fulfilled.) The Baptists have institutions and organizations to preserve. The Brethren have John Darby and the Bible to protect.

None of them have room *for you*. *Yet you*, as men, once had an incredible heritage. That heritage is so utterly lost that we find it virtually impossible to conceptualize this simple matter which is central to our faith.

I would like to apologize for what I am about to say. But it may help us to see the utter futility of trying to change this present pattern.

There is a very wonderful new movement abroad in our land. It just recently emerged on the evangelical scene. But it is up against this same granite mindset of 1700 years.

What mindset? The silent male sits silently in the silent pew.

It is exactly what we have now, only on a livelier, grander scale. Ultimately, even in this new movement, the pew is still your lot. I refer to a large men's movement which often fills stadiums of 60,000 men or more. In those great rallies the men grab one another, cry, shout, praise. This is wonderful. But then, they sit down! Guess what? They listen to a minister, they sit and listen, then they go home. (Ever hear of that before?) These men are all told to go to church. What will these men do when they get home? Get dressed in a suit, walk into a building, sit down and ... you know the rest. Therefore, ultimately, this beautiful movement has no place to go.

This "sit down and listen" practice has not only lived with us for 1700 years, it is still going strong. It will be here on the day the Lord Jesus comes. I, for one, am not going to make any effort whatsoever to change this way of doing things. I accept it as part of the past and the future of Christian history. Why try to change this situation? There are too many other things to do. My life is spent in one of the areas of the impossible, but it is not to reform a present situation, but to begin anew from the dirt, up.

Brother, you ought to be delivered from this entire scenario. You are a man of the male variety and you have an ancient heritage to reclaim, and it needs desperately to be reclaimed. Radical, yes. Scary, yes. Dangerous, yes! But no more so than it was back in *Century One!* After today, what *is* your part in the Christian faith? To sit? To listen? Or...

We don't have the foggiest idea what the Christian faith is supposed to look like. Brothers, we have had our testosterone taken away from us. For one moment let's tear down your present conceptualizations and look at what the Christian faith should look like.

LOOK AT THE RECORD. *WHO* IS CENTER STAGE IN CENTURY ONE?

If you will read the record, from Pentecost forward to the end of Acts and all through the epistles, you will see only *two or three* types of people at the center of the stage of the first century. One of them *is you*.

The first thing you see is church planters. They are all over the place, on every page. There are about twenty such men in the first-century drama. These men *planted churches*. Apostles are men whom God sent out to plant churches. That is what "sent ones" *do*. Not "sent out" to evangelize the world, mind you. No, rather, they are men "sent out" to enter a town and *raise up a church*. That, and that alone, is the primary function of *sent ones*. (Lay aside what came to your mind when you read *church* just now. Those men did *not* raise up church buildings.)

What next?

Who else is center stage throughout the book of Acts?

The second thing you will find is the ecclesia. She is wild and free and wonderful and glorious!

Let me digress a little here. A present-day minister may see everything we have covered up to this point. He says to himself, "Yes, this is what we need. I'm going to go plant churches. Let's return to the ancient pattern. I'm going to be a church planter and raise up a church. We are going to have something wonderful and new and different. This is going to be great."

When ministers hear about church planters, a hope rises up in their hearts to see again the way it was in Century One ... their eyes light up and the gears start turning. "...yes, we're going to have something different."

May I make a request? To both those of you who are laymen and to ministers, please do not stop here. Put aside all that passes through your head about church planters and about the ecclesia. What is in your thoughts simply is *not* radical enough. Try to lay aside the modern concept of the minister, ministry, laymen and ecclesia.

Why? Because the first century church planter, having raised up a church, *leaves!* He leaves soon, quick, fast! (Try to get a present-day minister to do that!)

If you are a Plymouth Brethren, or if you belong to the house church movement, there is a very central word which pops into your vocabulary right about now. There are very few church planters of any kind in our day, but even among these men this same word also pops up in their vocabulary right about now. It is a word to fear... at least to fear the way the word is used, and more to be feared when that word is stuck on a human being ... and the way that human being is apt to treat you. That word is *elder*.

For a moment then, put aside your conceptualizations not only of "minister," ministry," and "laymen," but also "elder. Also "ecclesia."

This business of minister and elder are tied together especially among groups outside the organized church. Both minister and elder think in terms of the church with all the "arrows of

importance" pointed toward them. ("Arrows of importance" should only point toward Jesus Christ and the brothers and sisters who *are* the ecclesia.)

"We are going to have a house church, we are going to preach, we are going to study the Bible, and pray and sing, and we are going to have elders, just like they did long ago."

When you hear this, run!

Brother, if that is what you are doing, you might as well go back and join the Roman Catholic church. In fact, move into the Vatican. Why? Because you have actually moved right back where you were before you left the traditional church. You are back to 1700 years of the wrong *practice*.

If you listen to men speak about the way eldership is supposed to be, you would conclude, listening to them, that the word "elder" is on every page of the New Testament.

Or you have the same disease that prevails in the traditional churches. They see 'pastor' on every page of the New Testament. (Pastor appears once in the New Testament. But he never appears in the story. Try to find him, for instance, in Acts. Elder? How many times does the word appear in the New Testament in reference to *Christian elders*? Wait and see!)

Again, we are back to men's very revealing vocabulary. Elder, elder, elder. Deacon, deacon, deacon. Serve, serve, serve. Witness, witness, witness. Pray, pray, pray. Minister, minister, minister. Pastor, pastor, pastor, pastor! You would think these words were every fifth word in the New Testament.

Open your ears and begin to listen to the Christian vocabulary which surrounds you. These are the words which predominate. Today! But what of the first century?

I receive a great deal of Christian literature in the mail with postmarks coming from all over the planet. So many letters are a cry for help. The contents so often are "We need to raise up pastors," and "pray for pastors," "our pastor," and "your pastor." Go into a seminary library. The largest single section in the library of any seminary or Bible school will be on *pastoral ministry*. The word is everywhere. In jungles, in Antarctica, everywhere. You would think the concept and practice of the modern pastor dominates the word -of God. Tell me, does it? Look again. Ask yourself what is center stage in first century writings? It is (1) church planters, (2) the ecclesia.

But neither these words *church planters* (sent ones) nor the word *ecclesia* dominate our vocabulary.

"Bible study" keeps reoccurring in our vocabulary. I am not against Bible study. Consider the word *witness*. Does it not seem to be every third word in Scripture? (It is not, but listening to our spoken vocabulary you would think it was.) These words are our present vocabulary. These words tell us what is emanating from our thinking. And our concepts. And our ways and actions. Our matrix.

In the first century, there was also a vocabulary emanating from believers. But note, the words which floated out of them were not hammered into their heads. No, these are not words they

heard repeated in sermons. These are the words which simply seep out of the entire first-century environ. These are unconsciously spoken words paralleling the daily matrix they lived in. These words *also* tell us of things which men today know not of!

Hear these words, words which simply come out of the action, the decision making process, the daily functioning of the ecclesia. These are like the carpenter's words: saw and ruler and plank. One does not think about these words. For the one speaking, these are not special words. No. These words are just part of communicating the lifestyle going on around you. Please note, those words which so naturally fall from the lips of first-century believers are not: Bible study, witness, win souls, go to Bible school, fulfill the great commission. Such words may be the ones surrounding our entire lives but they are not the "seeping out" words of the early believers.

Go through Acts and the epistles and see what words just casually come out of the believers in their daily living. When you do that, may the God of heaven and earth shake your foundations. And, in the process, may you who are of the male species get a little of your testosterone back.

We now come to the third person who is center stage in Acts and in the epistles. He is mentioned over and over. First, church planters. Second, ecclesia. And third? Behold what has to be the most overlooked word in the New Testament. We will begin with Acts.

3

Read it and weep. Or join the revolution! That third person, so often mentioned in the saga of the first century is ... you are about to see the third main person on the stage of the first-century drama. There is the church planter, the church and...

Watch that word seep out all over the place.

1

Peter stood up in the middle of the *brothers* and said, "*Brothers*, the Scripture has been fulfilled."

2

Brothers, select out from among you seven good men.

3

When the *brothers* learned of this, they brought Paul down to Caesarea and sent him to Tarsus.

4

On the next day, Peter rose up and went away. Some of the *brothers from* the church of Joppa went with him.

(You will never discover anything greater about true church life than you will in reading these simple, unvarnished passages as they flow unconsciously out of their matrix. This is the way things really were. This *is your* lost heritage!)

5

And the *brothers* in Antioch sent relief to the brothers in Judea.

6

Report these things to James and the *brothers*.

7

Therefore, being sent on their way by the ecclesia, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles and were bringing great joy to all the *brothers*.

There are more. Many more, as you shall see. But let us pause a moment and consider.

Do you belong to a church with *this* vocabulary? Do the acts of *brothers* in the ecclesia fill your daily vocabulary? Automatically, spontaneously, unconsciously... simply because such sights and actions and ways fill so much of your daily matrix?

In the next few moments I will try to explain the place of men in the ecclesia of the first century. But what I am really pointing out (1) goes to the heart of everything that is wrong in 1700 years of church history and (2) reveals what is so desperately needed.

What you see unfold in Century One as over against your present status quo is *inorganic versus organic*.

You will see *civilization versus tribe*.

You will see *organization versus discovery*.

You will see the contrast of role as over against *creativity*.

Let us return for a moment to the word *tribe*. It will, in some small way, help you to grasp what we struggle to communicate ... but can't.

To illustrate just what a tribe is, come with me to Thailand.

I was in Thailand just about the time that Vietnam fell to the communists. There were refugees all over Thailand pouring in from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. I was there trying to locate, in the refugee camps, a group of Christians who were *a jungle tribe*. Their home was the jungles of Laos ... but they had fled to Thailand. This is their story.

Some fifty or sixty years earlier, a Christian missionary had gone into the jungles of Laos and led an entire tribe of Mongh to the Lord. Knowledge of the whereabouts of that tribe had

disappeared off the face of the earth. Like all Mongh tribes, these Christians lived deep in the jungle. Consequently, they had become no more than a legend.

Remember, they were Christians and they were also tribal.

I found them, an entire tribe of over 4,000 Christians. Previous to crossing into Thailand they had been walking for weeks through the jungle, single file. Sometimes, because of the thickness of the jungle, they moved no more than a foot in one day.

I met with the tribe. We all sat down together there in the refugee camp. The question was put to them, "Should Gene bring one of them Pao Xiong, to America and, perhaps, by doing so, find a way to get all the rest of the tribe out of jeopardy?"

(At that moment, the Thaicong, the Vietcong, the Laocong were trying to annihilate that *specific* tribe.)

They talked. Tribal, yet Christian. All the men, nay, all *the brothers*, sat together and talked. (It was very much like an American Indian *pow-wow*.) They discussed the matter for a good long time. Finally one of the brothers turned to me and said, "We have made a decision. If you can bring Pao Xiong out, do so, and if you and he can find a way to bring the rest of us out, this is a good thing."

As God created man, He created man *tribal* (*Not* civilization-al) Man was never intended to be part of something called civilization, for civilization is a very systematized state which man was brought into after the Fall. Every day you go to your job, you are part of the inner working of a great network of systems which compose *civilization*. Some of you brothers here in this meeting are, fight now, in the agony of losing your job because of politicking. Most of you have been desperately hurt, even stabbed in the back, in many work environments. Sorry, brother, but that is just the way *civilization* is. It is your lot that you have to earn your living out there in it. We lost the tribal nature of man and found ourselves in the prisons of civilization.

Yet civilization is not, and cannot ever be, a thing instinctive to your new, biological (Christian) genetics. The ecclesia-the church as she is supposed to be-when she is known in experience and reality...is not organization, nor is she anything remotely like civilization.

She is a girl! A beautiful, living, breathing girl!

What you see around you every day is not what the church is supposed to be. What you see around you is not what the church *is*.

Then what shall we say in seeking to explain the inexplicable? *What* is church life?!

The closest thing on this earth the church can be compared to is a tribe. Ecclesia is not a tribe, but the tribe comes closest in helping us gain a tiny peek into what ecclesia is.

You can ask any anthropologist and he will say, "There is civilization, it is predictable, it has a pattern, it works in a certain way. Over against civilization and unlike civilization is the tribe. The tribe is dissimilar to, and does not work in a way similar to, civilization."

Brothers, here are some of the saddest words you will ever hear:

You have never known the privilege of belonging to a tribe! That is, a Christian tribe ... or to use a better word, you have never known "assembly life"..."gathering life," the ecclesia version of tribal life. You have never been in tribal meetings. What a tragedy! Not an organizational meeting, not a committee meeting, nor civilization, but a *Christian* tribal meeting. There is nothing else like it on earth. You could almost call it a Christian version of an Indian pow-wow.

You were meant for something not totally dissimilar to a tribal-type life. Nonetheless, you have never been in such an environment. Consequently, you also do not know what the Christian faith is about ... that is, you do not have the foggiest idea how the church really functions. There is a *Christian* tribal instinct in you, the believer. The believer hungers for it, but he gets a stone! That instinct, that drive, is in you. You know how you have chased after every teaching, doctrine, movement, organization, vision, nut and screwball ... and it all ended in disaster. Well, your innards are still crying out for the Christian tribe! Christian...tribal. It is the greatest life on earth.

Reread the Scripture. There are only three kinds of persons who hold center 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 in the entire epistles and the book of Acts. Anything else? You're chasing up trees for squirrels that don't exist. You are putting organizations, people and teachings at center stage which should not even be in existence!

"Yeah, but what about elders? Elders are center stage."

No. Not center stage. *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.)

Do the *brothers* and do the sisters just barely squeak on to the stage? You be the judge.

In just *Paul's* epistles there are over *eighty* references to Christian brothers and/or sisters. (That is the very reverse of today's vocabulary.) The book of Acts has nearly thirty references to *brothers*, referring to Christian men. The tally: some thirteen references to elders in ecclesias. About half those references describe *action* taken. Over against this you find more than one hundred references to brothers and/ or sisters with most describing *action* taken. That is six to fifty!

There are *three* themes center stage. Elders, pastors, etc. are not one of those three.

The closest thing the church of Jesus Christ is like unto is a tribe, yes, but she is more than that. It is men with divine life in them, leading the church ... in everything! Let the drama continue!

4

Let us look a little closer at these much-feared elders. We continue numbering as in the previous chapter.

7

Then it seemed good to the church planters and the elders with the *whole Church*, to choose from among them to send to the church in Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, a couple of men, one named Judas, and the other Silas.

Who made that decision to send two men from Jerusalem to Antioch? The apostles, the elders *and* the ecclesia made that decision.

(So should end those terribly secret and mysterious meetings the Plymouth Brethren invented which are called *elders meetings*.)

Why did the church in Jerusalem have identifiable elders when Antioch did not? Why did elders send out a letter (with the whole church) to "the brothers in Antioch instead of to the elders in Antioch? (The letter went from "elders and church" to "church and brothers.")

The answer is because the church in Jerusalem is seventeen years old. Consider this, just before you get elder happy: Those elders came out of *brothers!* In a first-century type atmosphere there were always brothers *before elders*.

Then, out from among *brothers* ... elders. Brothers-*then* later elders. All elders should be brothers in a church of brothers, experiencing brotherness and brotherhood, *before* they ever become elders.

Now let us return to *brothers*.

We come now to a scene in Galatia. The brothers are telling Paul about an outstanding brother.

8

Timothy was well spoken of by the *brothers* in the church in Lystra and the church in Derbe.

If you belong to the Plymouth Brethren or if you belong to the house church movement, or if you belong to the submission and authority group, this passage would read:

And Timothy was approved by the elders, and sent off by the elders.

Brothers, such a concept simply is not in Scripture. Timothy was approved by the *brothers*.

9

When they (the rioters) could not find (the church planter) Paul of Tarsus, they began dragging Jason and some of the *brothers* before the city authorities.

The man who wrote that sentence for us to read wasn't even thinking about it as he wrote "and some of the brothers." Why? Because his entire life is immersed in the atmosphere of *brothers*. It's the brothers...brothers. Luke knew no other world.

Well, the Roman Catholics once read these passages which mentioned brothers, (in about the years 400 to 600 a.d.) and started having something they called brothers. But these were men who dressed in robes and went around barefooted. Eventually these brothers evolved into monks.

The Catholics also read about *sisters* and ended up with *nuns*. Catholics could not conceive of an unordained people, the ignorant masses of people, directing the church. The only sister a Catholic world can comprehend is the nun. The only brothers in the Catholic church wore robes. Listen to me! The ministry of the last 1700 years does not even know you are there. Ministry thinks ministers. You, men, you who are called laymen, you are but tools to accomplish ministry. You are simply a means to an end. So it is. So it has been, so it ever shall be.

The Catholics found this word "brothers" in the Scriptures and made a mess out of it. What about us Protestants? Well, we cannot even find this word. We cannot conceptualize nor see in heart or mind the atmosphere existing in that day which brought these words out so frequently and nonchalantly. As a result, we Protestants fixated on sit, listen, minister, and ministry.

11

And the *brothers* immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.

So insignificant a sentence, is it not? Not when you see the incredible context.

This passage refers to men in the church in Thessalonica, but it is a church which is only *three* months old!

The church itself was under persecution. That is why the *brothers* sent Paul out at night. The church planter was in big trouble. Yet, despite the fact that the church was only three months old, these recent ex-heathen *believers*, *only* three months old in the Lord, had already learned what it meant to be *brothers*. Remember, not a Christian among them over three months old, yet brother-ness in the church had already been born

The brothers in a three-month old church surrounded Paul and got him out of town. The brothers, not the pastor, not the elders. They had no elders. Nor deacons. It was the *brothers* who, corporately, in a crisis, *acted* They acted as one.

What has happened in three months in a young church that could allow something so marvelous to take place? This is what men, men who have divine life in them, do. This is what such men organically do when they have discovered their corporate nature. It is organic for these things to happen among men in ecclesia life, who have Christ dwelling in them!

These men, in Christ, had touched *divine* brotherhood.

Three months as new Christians! An entire church, men and women, is functioning smoothly, no, incredibly, in the presence of persecution. These men-as one-move. That church in Thessalonica had something the male species of the church has not had for 1700 years. The church in Thessalonica had a high testosterone level, and it functioned on a Christian tribal level.

Three months. Think about it. Where does *direction lie* in the church? Something had happened that brought those men so close together. They were literally one organism, moving together as *one*.

For the sake of making a point, let me add this personal observation. Among the churches that have come out of my ministry the brothers have always either outnumbered the sisters or matched them in number. That has *never* been planned. It just *always* happens.

Why?

Because the church is *not* led by a minister. Nor is the church led by elders. Do it that way and women will always outnumber men. Let a church find its direction either from pastors or elders and you have sterilized the most creative force on this planet.

Sirs, be redeemed from sitting, listening, and silence. Place everything in the hands of brothers and-after many crises-a power will be released that boggles the mind. It dumbfounds pastors and elders (and *surprises* the sisters). Direction comes from the men ... all of them. They get together and, *varoom*, they get their tribal instincts back! Their *divine* tribal instincts! A tribe with men and women who have partaken of divine life and who are indwelt by Christ ... you know what that is called? It takes a very *specialized* term to describe this phenomenon: It is called *ecclesia*.

You men in this conference are going to go back home and go to church next Sunday morning. You are going to sit down on your posterior end. You are going to listen to a preacher preach. Then you are going to walk out and go home. And you are going to call that *church*?

Sir, excuse me, but it ain't.

12

And immediately the *brothers* sent Paul to go out as far as the sea.

This is a scene similar to that in Thessalonica. A brand new church, that is, the men in it, enfolded itself around a brother and got him out of town and to the sea. Such is an organism. And it was *men* who did this. It was brothers.

Paul, having remained many days, took leave of the *brothers* and put out to sea for Syria.

Here you see Paul leaving Corinth. The *brothers sent* him back to Syria and sent Aquila and Priscilla with him. Something the *brothers did*.

Well, I think your church should form a committee of laymen and have the brothers have more place in your church, don't you?

Recently I was listening on the radio to a nationally famous Christian authority speaking on the subject of laymen in the church, observing that one of the great needs of our day is for ministers *to allow* the layman to have more of the ministry in the church.
To allow!

The words "to allow" speak volumes.

Do you really think, in a thousand years, such an event will ever actually happen? Whatever the minister gives you to do, will amount to about the same thing as changing diapers. Furthermore, after this forward-thinking minister departs, with the coming of the next minister, even diaper changing by the laymen will vanish. The entire brotherhood of the church leading the church is an idea which cannot come, cannot stay, and will surely go, in the traditional church. It has the same chance as butter sticking to a willow tree in the Sahara desert.

How about this idea, then? A compromise: "Once a week, let's *allow* laymen to preach, instead of the pastor."

Try it. It would be disastrous, because this is not coming up out of the soil of a "brothers" atmosphere. This is something being pasted on to a present mindset. Listen! Laymen do not know how to minister.

Until...

And only until...

Put them in a tribe and get the minister out of town. I mean by that ... *leave* them. Leave those men to *discover*, leave them to sink or swim, and suddenly they do minister! It is called "action born out of the law of preservation." It is the action of survival.

Laymen functioning in a traditional church? Consider this, and you will find how utterly impossible this will ever be.

Do you realize that you belong to an organization which only functions about 5 hours a week! I (I refer to "church." It operates only about that long each week.) Not only that but most of its membership participates only 1 hour per week. Sir, wake up. Just where can 10, or 100 ... or 1,000 men function in a church which is operating only 5 hours per week?

Now if you are in church life, you have a bounty of opportunity to function. In church life the church is open 18 hours a day (sometimes 24 hours per day) 365 days per year.

What if the pastor just up and left your church, turning everything over to the men? What would happen to this church? First, chaos. Then, fights. Then disintegration.

Why?

Because neither pastor nor layman have any idea, any training, or any capacity to even conceptualize nor imagine such a scene. As doomed to failure as it can be, the very idea-in a traditional church-would be radical.

Yet even such a wild, insane act like that in a church today could not share the same space/time continuum with what was taking place in the first century. That was beyond all our ideas of "radical." Helped by church planters, then left all alone. That is beyond our comprehension.

Forgive the personal reference. Yet I do this to answer the question, can this happen again today? The day I arrive, I arrive telling the brothers and sisters I am leaving. We plan for my departure from *day one*. As far as "allowing"...I do not "allow" the brothers to do anything. How can I allow them to be-how can I allow them to *do* ... what is already theirs? I allow nothing. I only set them free. In case you are wondering, the brothers never "allow" the sisters to do anything. All you do is set them free! Then duck!

Ask what some foolish folks have asked the sisters. "What is your place in the church?"

Like Popeye looking at Bluto, you may get an answer something like this.

"What is the place of a 900-pound gorilla? It is wherever she wants it to be."

What we are seeing here in these simple, almost offhanded passages in Acts is the vocabulary of first-century believers as it seeps out; and it seeps out because it was literally the atmosphere in which they lived.

You have a right to this same lifestyle, this same atmosphere.

You have a right to the word "brothers." You have a right to the word "sisters." For those words to naturally be part of your natural vocabulary simply because it is the way things *are* ... this is your birthright.

It is difficult to even begin to explain such an atmosphere. It is something you have to *see*.

I will pick out one story that may help just a little to contrast a "minister mentality" and an "elder mentality" over against a "brother" matrix.

I was leaving for Europe for a long stay. I felt that, in the event of an unexpected emergency the church I was leaving might need something other than the weekly brothers meeting to

handle some unforeseen crises. Just in case such a crisis arose, this is what I did to prepare them for it.

I passed out a sheet of paper in the brothers meeting to each man present, then said, "I want each of you to write down the names of three people. Here is how to pick them. Let's say that *you* commit adultery. Who are the three brothers in the church you want to handle your situation?"

It was a stunning question. The room was silent, the brothers in shock. Everyone groaned at the thought. I knew I had asked the best possible question to discover *elders*.

As far as I can remember, there were only three names on all the slips of paper the brothers handed back to me. Not a fourth. Only three.

The church knew who their elders were.

But here is the rest of that story. Later, two of the three brothers, not wanting to be placed in such a position of responsibility, *resigned!* Both men wanted the responsibility to be placed back into the hands of all *the brothers!*

If I have to report in some day to my Lord, that is one of the events in my life I want to remind Him of. What happened there was organic, living real, unpretentious. Those men did not want eldership. They wanted brotherhood. Repeat: Those two men did not want the job of eldership. Think about that.

You are well aware of Christian movements, submission movements, authority movements, house churches and denominations where "elder" is so important that some men would just about kill to be one. Well, these two men wanted to go back to being *brothers!*

Ecclesia is not an organization. Gentlemen, she is a girl, a woman. She is a living, breathing creature. But you are in an organization. And your job? Ah sir, your job is to sit and listen.

It is like we Christian men have been castrated and don't know it. We cannot dream what the early church was like, nor can we peer into what the often repeated word "brothers" implies.

The tribal instinct in this modern age is lost. The Christian tribal instinct of church and of brothers is also lost. Let's get it back. I will help you start: I promise to leave! You? After I leave, all you risk is being murdered by the other brothers. Tribal life can prove to be very dangerous. In the church of Jesus Christ the closest thing that can describe what we are and what we do is this: men-all of them-in charge of the church's direction, sink or swim.

In the Christian faith we are known to one another as *brothers*. It follows that if we are brothers, we have the same DNA. It is the DNA of Christ. Every one of us is related by having the same Father. But never misunderstand this: Our life in ecclesia reaches far, far beyond family and far beyond the heathen practices of a tribe. A tribe does not know anything about, has never touched, cannot comprehend what we have. Neither does a family. Never! What we have makes a tribe look like nothing and at the same time, ecclesia is utterly different from family. Why? Family is human DNA, and the group is small. It has one leader.

The ecclesia?

The brothers in the ecclesia? Why is it different? Because we are not physically kin. We must have another element working in us-unknown to tribe or family. Divinity is in each one of you men.

You corporately bear the responsibility of evangelizing your city and for planting churches in other places in your province. And for backing the brother who is planting the ecclesia in cities all over the world. Between *brothers and church planters* the entire kingdom of God on this earth rests on your shoulders. Such sweeping, practical brotherhood within the ecclesia falls just a hair short of fellowship which "is like to that above."

So we shall now see, for we are going to take a look at church life ... from the "brother" perspective.

5

How great is it when ten or more men get together to shape the direction of the kingdom of God? In all your Christian life, what Christian meeting or gathering can you remember which you really wanted to go to ... *every* time I met? A meeting you look forward to every week of your life? Have you ever known such a drive? Such meetings exist.

Brothers meetings! (Following (in parentheses) are comments brothers who experience brothers meetings had to say)

(They might last from two to eight hours long.) (Often sisters have to bring us meals, when we are stuck on something wonderful, important or messy.) (We experience Jesus Christ together in brothers meetings.) (Brothers meetings are light burden.) (In a brothers meeting it is not who I am but who *we* are.) (When you have experienced what we brothers have laid hold of in church life, then you have become something more than you are as an individual.) (Our church planter is not the author of brothers meetings, nor have we been trained in how to have brothers meetings.) (I am an individual. I have kept all of my individuality, but I am also part of a larger thing. I am more than I am. I am a brother in the midst of brothers. This, though I cannot explain it, is true.)

If you have never seen a church where direction of the church is from all the men-utterly cut off from any leader, any clergy, any deacon, any elder, even any roving church planter, then you are, right now, hearing things of which you know nothing.

You may have touched it. You may have known it for a few days. You may even try to have such a relationship on a "buddy-wise" level, an old friend of yours you like to get with. Well, the

church in the hands of all the men is not "buddy stuff." We are speaking about divine dimensions that cannot be explained.

What is it like? I cannot tell you.

You are free not to be reverent. You are free to get things off your chest. There is confidentiality. A place even to pontificate or philosophize. (Brothers love to do that.) You are free to be who you are. You are free to be a pain to the other brothers. You are free to make mistakes. Lots and lots of mistakes. You are even free to make the death move of all death moves: You are even free to try to become the leader of the brothers. We get a discount rate at the graveyard where such men are buried!

Such freedom among men is built into the very fabric of the male species; yet such a desperately needed relationship has been lost to brothers in our time.

(It is also a place where the Lord Jesus, on occasion, comes and manifests Himself as head of the church.)

I cannot explain what organic church life is like. I cannot tell you what it means for brothers and sisters to cast off into the high seas of discovery! I cannot tell you what such an adventure holds. Nor can I speak to you of the ability, nobility, the creativity-and a dozen other wonderful things –stunning, awesome things-which *emerge* from such meetings and from such a relationship. Discovering. Blossoming out of the soil of their own lives, an *organic* expression of the church. I cannot tell you what church life is like that finds all its directions from among all the brothers and sisters. I cannot explain free-wheeling community. You have to go visit such a thing.

Can I tell you what a brothers meeting is like? Only this: From one week to another they are almost always different. But no, I cannot. Why? Because on this earth there is nothing like them. Nothing. But should you visit one, or some, remember: such is your birthright, sir!

These innocent words "brother" and "brothers" which you have perhaps only today noticed for the very first time in Scripture, belong to no other religion. They belong to no present experience.

May such a matrix live again on this earth, for these words belong to you.

Christian-wise, because of the way church history set its sail some 1700 years ago, you (and all of us), have been castrated from divine brotherhood, fight from the outset of our conversion.

The ownership and the direction of the church belongs to *no* pastor and to *no* elders ... it belongs to the brothers and the sisters! And to Jesus Christ. But to no other!!

You do not know what it is to be with Christian men daily, weekly, meeting with them, sometimes on the street or other places-or often in a brothers meeting, in a desperate struggle to keep the church in life. A battle, alongside other men, between either life or death. (Yes, that is church life!)

Today, you have neither your little place nor your big place in His kingdom. You just sit. And you just listen.

You have not got *brothers meetings*. You have not lived in a matrix where you and a few other men-all of you claw your way toward the mind of Christ. Get it back! You have that right. You are a *brother*.

Sure, there is high drama in church life! Weekly, *drama* Men in Christ and sisters in Christ-void of all religious leaders-with no one present but leaderless, untutored *laymen* struggling together toward body life and towards the laying hold of Christ ... that is something to see. That is something to be a part of. When you have it, it is something indescribable.

Here, sir, is a pursuit worthy of a man's entire life.

I will warn you that some brothers cannot handle such a life. Some, for instance, simply must have some kind of status. I fear that kind of person. Fortunately, this one does not stay around very long. Then there is the brother who cannot stand so much drama. He thinks nobody should have so many problems nor face so many decisions or pass through so much crises, so often. He wants to go back to a safe, solo life. Can you blame him?

Then there is the brother who can't handle inequalities; he is the brother who says, "We are all equal."

We are as unequal in a brothers meeting as we can get. We are different. We are not equal. There are some of us who have wisdom. (It rarely ever shows itself.) There are brothers who have insight. (Watch those kind.) There are brothers who are absolutely clueless. They walk into the meeting clueless, they walk out of the meeting clueless. They stay clueless. Yet all the above are still brothers. But not equal.

Some men are natural leaders. Thank God for that. But oh, watching God (and brothers) break that natural leadership is a ghastly sight to see. (Just as God also breaks the brother who wants no part of anything but peace and love, who faints at the very idea of two brothers in the meeting having opposite opinions. God breaking him is also not a pretty sight!)

Such breaking of men is a gruesome thing to behold.

Don't ever try to make it an equal thing. It is never an equal thing. The perimeter shifts around all the time. Sometimes that really clueless brother becomes the most important person in the church because he has an ability to love and care which nobody else has. Then there is a brother who has great wisdom who absolutely is in the wrong place at the right time doing the wrong thing. Or he is so clearly right, you wonder how he could have been such an ignominious last week. The paradigm constantly shifts.

There are times when a brother has to stand up and take absolute charge of the entire situation. Right now you may not like such an idea at all, "one brother taking charge of everything?!" Believe me, when the hour comes and the situation calls for it, in *that* hour you will thank God for that brother and for what he has done. If you have been born and raised in brothers meetings, such

a thing won't bother you a bit. You know that what is being done in that moment is exactly what is needed for the hour. (Furthermore, be assured that the same brother will be murdered if he ever tries to take charge at a wholly inappropriate time.)

It is not easy to have brothers meetings. But normally you would not miss them for chocolate. Why? Because as a human being you have tribal instincts. As a Christian you have instincts woven into you which cause you to long for your natural habitat.

Something in you longs to be part of a gathering of people who-as brothers and sisters-discover together an organic ecclesia. Do you not realize that your spiritual innards cry out to you to return to your inborn spiritual need for the ecclesia ... to the *divine* tribal life.

You may have come to this conference to look at Gene Edwards, to inspect him, to see what kind of minister he is. And how he was going to talk about whatever he would say to a room full of men. May the life of the body of Christ deliver you. I am nothing more than an observing biologist.

I watch a girl named Ecclesia. I watch her grow. She teaches me.

Come, watch with me.

You very likely came in here with your philosophies and theologies and who knows what else. You brought all the pain of being in a group where the leaders deeply hurt God's people. You dragged those memories and pains, all those doubts in here with you.

Well, here is your problem in a nutshell: You don't know anything about *brothers meetings!* That's your whole problem. Pure and simple. That is the only thing you need to learn, *brothers meetings.*

What is it like to be part of a living, breathing, messed up ecclesia in which only the brothers and sisters are in charge of finding the church's direction ... every week?

Well, the word, "insane" comes to mind.

Let me share some of the observations I have made watching this girl grow up. What stages do brothers meetings pass through starting with the very first one? Well, obviously there are different passages they go through along the way. Here is what I have observed.

6

Brothers meetings?

Though they pass through several stages, only *the final* one is worth anything.

First you start off with high expectations. You actually are foolish enough to believe that man is not totally depraved ... you actually believe there is worth, value and hope for mankind. Oh,

foolish soul. You are in for a shock. You have not met *brothers!* *We* brothers are fallen. *Very* fallen. *That is stage one.* Expectations fail in the midst of shocking discovery.

My best advice to a new church and to all the men trying to reclaim brothers meetings: Lower your expectations.

Stage two. You learn to accept that there is nothing spiritual, nothing worthwhile ... nothing at all of worth from your fellow brothers. During this time you almost kill one another. (This stage lasts from two to five years. Such is the lot of pioneers, pathfinders and restorers of things long lost.)

Now, if you are an outsider and you come in *after* this terrible stage of hate and carnage has passed, you see only the beautiful results. **YOU** never know the price paid. Everything the men do seems to be as much a part of life as breathing. Well, "just as natural as breathing" is a natural result when someone is trying to kill you by strangling you. Natural? Sure.

I would say being in love with my wife and being with brothers are the two longest lasting can't-wear-them-out experiences of my life. These are the only two things ever to enter my life which *never* wear out: marriage and brothers meetings! Sometimes they both are difficult, but they don't wear out. You can't find such things in any other lifestyle you will *ever* pursue.

I am telling you, sir, that you have a biological need of brothers, and brothers meetings. I am not talking about some secular need. I refer to you as a creature who has divinity in you. This element, call it what you may, is part and parcel of your spiritual need ... just as sure as the ecclesia is part of your spiritual need.

You just *need* brothers. And you need brothers in a place of freedom, in a free-wheeling place known as ecclesia.

Here is one of the best of all parts: No one is watching you. Do you understand what I mean?

You belong to a cell group? Do you feel like there is someone watching you? A church's home Bible class? You belong on a church committee of some sort? *Somebody*, somewhere is watching you.

I suggest you have not the slightest idea of what it means to be free in Christ. Think about it, "laymen" in every church, in every Christian endeavor where men are involved ... look around, sir, have you not always had someone over you? Someone *watching* you! You just cannot be free in Christ when supervisory eyes are out there. You are being monitored. Especially if that fellow who is doing the watching has even a single religious bone in his body. *And* a title! (They *always* have both!) There is freedom to be found, to touch, to live, to grow into ... in brothers meetings.

Ask men in church life, ask men in a brothers meeting: Do you feel like someone is watching you? In the church and in brothers meetings ... no one is watching you. The only person above you, watching you, is Jesus Christ! (Someone interrupted Gene and said, "There is someone else watching us: the sisters!")

You have a right to such a life and to such freedom.

What about submission and authority? Ah! Submission and authority are in there, in those same epistles, and in Acts, just like brothers are in there.

Yes, kind of.

Actually what you are referring to as the doctrine of submission and authority" is a few verses, scattered around the New Testament, taken totally out of their true contextuality, picked out by someone who then wove those verses together into a teaching so he could scare the living daylights out of you. Teachings such as those, when hammered away at as if they were the only thing found in the entire New Testament ... such teachings come from only one source. From frightened men. Why?

Because they are afraid. They are afraid of you, that if you actually start to think or feel or speak, you will cause problems which they have no idea how to control. Submission and authority are taught by frightened, insecure men who need the sense of being in charge, otherwise they cannot lead. Without submission and authority being wielded over your poor head, these men cannot succeed. It is the crutch of little men! Men who are not important but who must rule others to feel important and powerful. Men who do not know how to lose. And in this world we live in, in this world of ecclesia, if you do not know how to lose, you do not know anything.

Such frightened men who wield this idea have no true spiritual authority. True authority from God never crosses the mind of a man with true spiritual authority. Nor would he ever stoop to teaching submission to others.

Men in leadership need to learn to submit more than anyone!

By the way, no authority figure will last for zip in a body of believers where brotherhood has found *deep* roots. Such is the difference between an organization and an organism, or biology vs. verses!

Brothers meetings teach all of us submission. Brothers meetings-when well expressed-put only one in authority, the King Himself.

I trust this will help you a little to understand brothers meetings.

In Acts and the epistles when specifically referring to Christians, the word *brothers* appears about 115 times. Let's move on now and see how powerful a picture this word *brothers* presents to us.

7

Let us move on and see Acts as it reveals *brothers* to us. Then we have amazing things to see in Paul's letters.

And the *brothers* when they had heard we had arrived, came out (from Rome) to meet us at Three Taverns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage "and so we came to Rome.

This is a very emotional passage, indeed. See the picture.

Paul is on his way to prison in Rome. He is shipwrecked but finally lands in Italy. This passage says, "We found some brothers and decided to stay there for seven days." Note this passage does not say, "We found the church or leaders." Luke and Paul look up. They see the brothers from the ecclesia in Rome coming toward them. At last he took courage.

Such a simple scene. Yet you might read it in Scripture every day and never take note. But it was, by its very unconscious rendering, a key to true insight as to what the church in the first century really was like. Luke and Paul, beat up, half drowned, half dead, see brothers coming from Rome to greet them. They were safe at last, and at last they were home.

You will react as they did if ever the word *brothers* becomes a holy, sacred word to you.

That brings us to the end of Acts. What of the epistles? Are there any such peeks into church life there? Or is it all "pastors" "elders" and "leaders"? We will take Paul's epistles chronologically, that is, in the order he wrote them. All the following letters were written to para-church organizations. Oops! All the following letters were written to organic churches!

GALATIANS

In the book of Galatians there are ten references to the *brothers* local to those churches. If you understand the book of Galatians, you would wonder how the word ever got in there. The four churches were in terrible crisis. No, they were in a horrible crisis! Those four churches absolutely need leaders to deal with this mess they were in. Nonetheless, there are ten references to *brothers* and not a single reference to a pastor or an elder or a deacon. There are only references to the *brothers*.

Paul, what a man you are. You, unlike ministers today ... you actually trust *brothers*.

THESSALONIANS

This church, too, was in a mess. There are seventeen references to *brothers* in just five chapters of Paul's first letter to this church. And not one reference to a pastor. Not one to a minister. Not one to an elder. In Thessalonians the word *brothers* appears five times, with no reference to elders, etc. That is twenty-two references to *brothers* in these two epistles, in a total of nine chapters.

I CORINTHIANS

In all of first Corinthians there is not one reference to a pastor or a minister or an elder. But there are over twenty references to the local *brothers*. The Corinthian church, now eight years old, is in a bigger mess than any other of Paul's churches ... still that church has only *brothers*. It is *brothers* who Paul expects to bring the church out of its crisis.

II CORINTHIANS

There are thirteen references to brothers in this letter. None to any leaders of any type, sort or variety.

ROMANS

In Romans there are sixteen references to the brothers who are meeting there in Rome. Not one reference to a pastor or a minister or an elder. (One reference to a deaconess. Phoebe! She did not belong to the church in Rome, but she surely had the right to be called a servant. She had come about 1000 miles just to deliver a letter!)

COLOSSIANS &

EPHESIANS

Both these letters were actually written to the church in Colossae. The name Ephesus was not placed on this letter until after 400 a.d.

There are no references to local brothers in these letters until at the very end of each of the letters.

Why? The answer is simple. Paul did not know anyone in that church. But mark this, there are no references to elders, yet the man who raised up the Colossae church, a fellow named Epaphrus, is a thousand miles away in Rome! Epaphrus, in Rome, is dying. Still there is no reference to elders!

THE ONLY TIME THE WORD *PASTOR* APPEARS IN THE ENTIRE NEW TESTAMENT IS FOUND IN EPHESIANS.

Yet, "pastor" is probably the single most repeated word among Christians all over this entire planet.

PHILIPPIANS

The book of Philippians has seven references to the local *brothers* in Philippi and refers to the brothers in Rome. For the first and only time in all of Paul's letters to the churches there *is* a reference to *elders* (to the holy ones, including elders and servants). Why so? Because the church in Philippi is approximately *twelve* years old at the time he writes this letter.

That is the only reference ever found in all the letters Paul wrote to the churches which includes the word *elders*. *One* reference to elders out of nine letters to churches. Of the nine letters six churches were in extreme crises, yet only saints, brothers and sisters, are addressed.

Now take a moment and just imagine what these Philippian elders are like. Consider this: The church is twelve years old. Where did their elders come from? From out of where did they emerge? Each and every one of them came up in the church, out of brotherhood and brothers meetings in the church in Philippi. Now try to imagine one of these men trying to act like elders do today. He would have been skinned!

Let me illustrate how safe church life can be. I will draw the following illustration from the church in Atlanta. The brothers (at least all of those who show up at brothers meetings) are more or less in charge. They lead, with the understanding that the sisters veto anything and everything which they don't like. (And they often do.) You cannot imagine how wonderfully that works.

Generally speaking, as one who is an observing biologist, I have noticed that the sisters in Atlanta do not want to lead the church in Atlanta, not any more than most wives want to run the entire household and/or the business. (There may be exceptions to this.) Your wife wants you out in front taking the flack and blame. But she tells you what she thinks! She tells you what she thinks you ought to do. She wants to criticize the dickens out of you when she thinks you are wrong. Most of all she wants to know what you are thinking about doing. And, sir, she wants veto power over anything and everything you do which she does not agree with, especially those things which directly affect her. *And* things which you do which are not done with carefully considered propriety.

The brothers in Atlanta meet, knock heads, seek the Lord, have fights, play football and do all sorts of other things. But after a brothers meeting is over-if any decisions were made, the brothers send one or two brothers to (humbly) report their decisions *to the sisters*. The sisters listen to the brothers. (The sisters decide which brothers they want to do the reporting to them.) Sometimes the sisters pow-wow. Sometimes they consult and consider. Sometimes their responses are immediate. Either way, they tell the brothers what is fine, and what *isn't!* The brothers virtually always comply. (Why waste time inserting the word "virtually!") This arrangement works beautifully. Why? Because brothers are dangerous when left alone to their own devices. Anyone would want checks and balances on them. Why? Because brothers are stupid, that's why! You don't think so? Well, look at what emerged out of an organization full of religious brothers who were in charge of *everything* with no checks and balances. We call this organization the Roman Catholic church! It is run by religious single brothers. Here then is the perfect evidence that you need lots of sistorial input. And equality. And equity.

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." The brothers love it. The sisters don't!

But be careful. From what I have said you may get the impression there are brothers meetings over here and sisters meetings over there. Actually there are probably five times as many gatherings with *everyone* present. It is hard to describe how things really work. Community, of this style, is a place where there is daily input from everyone. You have to see it.

Anyway, the point is, if elders emerge out of this soup, you can be sure you will *never* see what is too frequently seen today: the lordship of elders. No way is that what elders are, and it is not what they do. And, again, if elders emerge out of a strong brotherhood and then try to start lording over the church, pity the poor elder. The organic emerging of eldership precludes so foolish an effort on the part of an elder.

So, for a moment, come with me to a group of Christians who has just begun to gather for the very first time.

8

What does a new gathering of believers look like? The following scene will hold true almost anywhere in western civilization.

Welcome to a brothers meeting. A new church and something new to men: brothers meetings! This is what you might hear.

"Well, I don't think we should have a name."

"I don't think we should have a bank account."

"Well, I don't think we should have an offering box."

"I don't think we should have meetings unless the Holy Spirit calls them."

"I think the church exists only to serve the family."

"I don't think we should incorporate."

"I don't think we should send flowers when someone is in the hospital."

"I don't think we should own chairs. We should rent them."

"Well, brothers, if we do this or that or the other, we will end up in ten years from now in the organized church with a pastor."

"Well, maybe, but wait a minute, let's look at this from another viewpoint. I've always believed..."

Men go on and on and on and on like this in *early* brothers meetings. Eventually frustration seeps in. (Not many moons will pass before all the men hate one another.) Finally, after weeks and

weeks they actually get to the point they make one tiny decision. It is a very stupid decision. (How stupid are brothers? *Very* stupid.)

After that meeting in which the brothers made their decision, this erstwhile, innocent, naive brother comes home and says, "Honey, we decided to..." The wife gives you this look. A short time later you brothers go back and change your decision. You know why you will go back and change it? Because we are all afraid of wives. And sisters. That's why! All that testosterone we throw around in the brothers meetings doesn't mean zip when it comes to getting past the sisters.

A year or two passes. Look again at the brothers meetings. There are no longer any principles involved. Nobody is wondering if there should or shouldn't be a name. Nor are they dealing with any of those other ponderous questions they once pontificated over. They don't give a flip any more.

Now, here is a curiosity. You should also know how much the sisters come to eventually admire the brothers. How they become enthusiastic boosters of brothers having brothers meetings. (Yes, it is really true.)

In my entire ministry I have heard of only one sister who complained because her husband went to brothers meetings. Poll the sisters. They are so glad their husbands have brothers meetings. Many will tell you those meetings were the making of their husbands. A few may even concede that those gatherings were the salvation of their marriage relationship.

I know what brothers meetings can do.

They change men. They transform men. In church life I can say unequivocally that I have personally raised some of the dumbest single brothers who have ever lived on this planet. And today, despite all my misgivings and my absolute certainties, some of these men have actually found someone willing to marry them and, more unbelievably, these men have become contributing citizens to society. They can actually get in and out of a door, rarely fall into a fire ... and when they do, usually manage to remember to get out.

Thank God for sisters. And wives. Between the three of us we sometimes raise wonderful men.

A lot of the things men in church life today know about life itself is the result of being *brothers* and being in brothers meetings. Stretched out over ten years or so, you will see those meetings produce *men!*

Visit them. Dare to inquire of these matters. Ask these men. (Ask them anything.) They will tell you of things physically, socially, psychologically and spiritually and what it has meant to them to be brothers. Brothers in the church.

To you who are men in this room who are in church life, let me observe this about you. A lot of your psychological normality is because you have known what it means to be brothers. A lot of reason why some of you have been spared so much pain in marriage and business (and some of you have not, I realize), is because you are *brothers*.

Now, I must face a very hard question.

9

I have been asked, "What are your scriptural grounds for having brothers meetings?"

Look again at all these passages about brothers, and so few Scripture which mention anybody else (except church planters!) Look at all that "the brothers' got done in those passages. How did they do all those things? How was it that so much action came about by the deeds of brothers? (By mental telepathy, maybe?) Brothers cannot do all those things without consorting with one another.

What would you do if your church planter left you ... and left you headless and leaderless? A *headless wonder!* You would appoint a committee or call a pastor? Or you would have brothers meetings!

Brothers coming together was so common an occurrence and so much a part of the life of the church in those days, they never got mentioned. But the constant use of the references to "what the brothers did," these references are the bread crumbs which eventually lead you to one thing: brothers consorting together.

The brothers did this, the brothers did that, the brothers sent someone off, the brothers wrote a letter, the brothers protected, the brothers agreed.

(How did such coordinated effort come about? Again, maybe by mental telepathy?)

A church-wide experience of brotherhood, and direction, and leadership coming out of nowhere, except from *the brothers*. How can they not meet? Brotherhood was so much a part of their living. Over and over again ... you see brothers, brothers, brothers...producing the action of the local assemblies.

For 1700 years we read these passages and did not see them.

By the way, there is another phrase which gets little attention. It, too, points back to brothers. What is this often quoted phrase you find referred to so often in early writings yet in present-day reality is virtually unknown?

"They loved one another. " And "the love of the brethren."

And "you shall know them because they love one another."

You belong to a nice church, do you not, one in which you can say, "oh, everybody loves one another." Sir, think again! Across this land, across the English speaking world, across the entire world, Christians who are in traditional churches do not even know one another's names! Sir, you do not know what divinity means until you have seen love as it is experienced in church life. Intense, almost insane love for one another. This love is not *because* of anything! It is always *despite*. Despite the runny noses. Despite the weirdness.

It is love which has emerged from the organic soil.

Hear this, dear brother, if you have never known church life but are considering jumping into it: Here is what to expect.

You have never lived, as a believer, until you know what it means to come together as a group of brothers in brothers meetings, there to learn to distrust one another, there to learn to dislike one another, to become suspicious of one another, and learn to question the motives of all the other brothers in the room. You have never lived until you have come to the point where you know beyond all doubt that this "church thing" absolutely will not work.

You have never lived, brother, until you have called me up at two in the morning and said, "Gene, it's not going to work. Not here. There is no hope. We've got no more than a week and this thing is going to blow up." Who would want to miss an hour like that?

Now that is living. That is high drama. That is part of the great adventure. Be encouraged, you are now on your way to church life.

You have never lived until you have written a five-page letter, with big ol' drops of tears all over it, saying something like this. "Gene, what about this? What about that?" And "Please come immediately. Come save us. We are sinking."

Ah, those are truly wonderful hours to be alive!

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!

Is there any hope?

Sure.

There in the darkest, deepest, most hopeless hours ... someone apologizes.

There, someone repents. Someone forgives.

Someone cries.

Someone, finally, *yields*.

Or-just as good-someone blows his top and starts yelling and screaming at everyone in the room. (With that moment as their signal, all the brothers let loose! Each one starts jumping on all the other brothers, venting all their pent up wrath.)

At last! Brotherhood is about to be born!

Somewhere in all that garbage dumping and mistrusting and loathing and dreams of fiendish torture, somewhere in the divine workings of God, in ways I do not understand (and in ways which I play little or no part) somewhere in Christ and realms of the works of the Holy Spirit and Jesus and the Father (by means of a secret wisdom known only to the Trinity), *love is born*. Passionate, unbridled love. Love for the other brothers becomes reality, and at last you have one of the most sacred things earth ever knows.

Outside of church life I doubt you will ever see such love!

A large part of what we mean when we talk about church life is *brothers*. And specifically, brothers when they meet together.

One final word.

10

Dear male, you of the masculine variety, be sure that, when you get back home ... be sure you "go to church" next Sunday! Sit in that pew. Sit hard. Sit long. Put your entire weight down. And listen. And listen. (And keep quiet.)

As you sit there, remember as you do, surrounded by and outnumbered by ladies (two to one), try hard to remember that you are a m f the male gender. And that you are a *brother*. Remember that you have never been part of church life. Remember that when the brothers meet for a rip-roaring brothers meeting, you will not be there. And remember, when they meet, no one else oversees them (except the sisters). Remember that those men, and those men alone, are wholly responsible for the direction of the ecclesia.

There are a lot of wonderful, dear little groups in this country meeting in homes, holding on to one another. They won't be here next year. They die. Why? Well, usually because the men in the group get in a fight! I do not know what to say to you in such groups. Nor do I know what to say to you who are out there all alone, who do not have church life, but who want church life with all your heart. But this I will say: If I were you, I would consider moving. Move where there is church life of this flavor. There has never been a great deal of church life on this earth. Sometimes you just have to move to have it.

Failing that, go *visit* church life.

Spend a few weeks in church life. And don't miss the brothers meetings. Bring your wife. Let her grill the sisters. (*You grill the brothers.*)

Ask every conceivable question. By all means, ask about fear, and head covering, and submission, and authority, and church discipline. And their view on the beast, the man of sin, etc. And when you have run out of weird questions like that, and have become accustomed to blank stares for answers, relax and start having fun with the saints!

Finally, a story. This story has to do with many things, but I tell it primarily to illustrate what I mean by an *unconscious vocabulary* and how much such a vocabulary tells you about people. Unconsciously spoken, yes. But, nonetheless, a vocabulary which reflects the surroundings you are immersed in, words that reflect who you are and what you are doing and how you are thinking and where your heart is, and what your daily experience contains.

I draw this experience from a town called Isla Vista, which is part of Santa Barbara, California, U.S.A.

Those who gathered there did not have a name. I doubt such an idea ever occurred to us. (Oh, by the way, we loved one another. We laid down our lives for one another.) But we were given a name, like it or not. Who gave us a name? We were given a name by the people in Isla Vista. The name they gave us grew out of their observing us and their listening to us talk. Our unconsciously spoken vocabulary!

Baptists did not take the name Baptists. It was given to them because of the doctrine they talked about the most. The Methodists did not take the name Methodist, it was given to them by others, outsiders, who noticed that they were really into methods. The Pentecostals did not take the name Pentecostal church in the beginning. It was given to them. (Along with the word, "holy rollers.")

The early saints took no name, either. They were simply "the church in Ephesus," "the church in Corinth," etc. It was the assembly in a certain town, that is, whatever town the believers were living in. For example, a letter from Paul to those gathering in that city; or in referring to the church, after the opening greeting, he then used the word brothers or brothers and sisters from that point on.

Read the opening of Paul's nine letters to churches. He begins with calling everyone saint or holy one. Then he referred to, the ecclesia in (name of the town they lived in). From that point on his references to the ones reading his letters were simply called brothers.

In Isla Vista it was the world which gave that little gathering of Christians a name. We did not even know they had done this until the government in Isla Vista, such as it was, decided to create a map of downtown Isla Vista.

Each downtown building was given a number. At the bottom of the map was a name telling what the number signified. Number one was the post office, number two was a store, number three was a record shop, number four was a cafe, number five was an arcade. Down about number

nineteen they had listed a building called El Embarcadero, which is where these Christians were meeting (until someone burned it down). Amazingly the city had given us a name based on what they knew of us and what they heard from our lips-that is, our spontaneous, unconsciously used *vocabulary*. A vocabulary coming out of our matrix. We were always calling one another "brother" and /or "sister." What was written out beside number nineteen?

"The brothers and the sisters."

May you live and die in a world where Jesus Christ, ecclesia, and brothers and sisters are the reoccurring words in your vocabulary, and your reality.

So it was, long ago, in Century One, when it was the brothers-laymen-who led the church. All of them! And the sisters, too.

May it be so again.