This message is dedicated to the brothers and sisters living in England. I'm dedicating it to you because you have earned it. You went out of your way to get this tape. Let me tell the folks who I'm speaking to here in the United States of America that in March I was in England, an innocent colonial over visiting Her Majesty's country. I got up to speak and did what I always do. I threw the thing open to questions. One or two, three, somewhere down the line, someone asked me about elders. As innocent as a man going to slaughter, I answered that. Whoa. a

I've never had anything like that happen to me in the United States. I don't know if it's the difference in the history of Christians outside the organization here or over there, or if I've been moving around in different company, or if the brothers and sisters in Great Britain had never heard anyone give those particular kinds of answers, but then neither have the folks in America, because I can assure you the answers that I'm about to give would not be heard anywhere else in the world. I have to be really careful here with the British, because they take it very seriously. I'm saying all this more or less lightheartedly…Nah. Some of this stuff, I'm going for the jugular. (laughter)

Anyway, I had to come home and reflect on why I believe what I believe about elders, and for clarity, it has to be done contextually. I gave you brothers and sisters here in Denver a little context Friday night and this morning, but I'm going to give my brothers in Great Britain a little background on why they believe in elders the way they believe it…that it's completely wrong…and why it sounds so valid, even though it is completely wrong. It has nothing to do with elders; it has to do with the Christian mind. So I'm going to talk to the brothers and sisters in England a little bit about where we got our Protestant mind.

In Germany, with Martin Luther, John Calvin, the Frenchman in Geneva, Melanchthon, and all the other stars of the Reformation, the Protestant mind was born. By the way, for those of you who don't know this, the Protestant Reformation affected almost nobody. We hear preachers waxing eloquent about what great things it did; it sounds great in oratory, but here are the facts. Virtually everything that happened to establish Protestantism in Europe and give birth to the Protestant Church, other than the writings of these men and the confines of a small group of people, the rest of it was done by the sword.

Probably fewer than 10,000 people in Germany were involved in the Reformation, and the reason is simple: only 10% of Germans could read, and half of that 10% could read only at a very basic level. That left only 5% of people in Germany who could read the things being thrown around at the time, and most of them weren't very interested.

The printing press and the pamphleteers played their part, but the sword did most of the work. It was the sword of Frederick the Wise that freed Germany from Catholicism. The same was true in Geneva, Switzerland, and in the Scandinavian countries, though with precious little bloodshed. It was a government action, but out of it the Protestant mind evolved. The Protestant mind is very theological. It was the Protestants who blessed us with the New Testament that is in absolute chaotic order. It was the Protestants who gave us—we Protestants—this battle with chapter and verse. You and I think today not in wholes, but in parts, and not so much in parts, but in fragments, or to put it another way, numbered sentences. Ephesians 2:4 says; Colossians 1:7 says; there's no such thing as Colossians 1:7 or Ephesians 2:4. Those were living, breathing letters to people.

Throughout its history, the Protestant church has never given much value to context. If you pick up a book on Romans, you'll read five pages on context. If you pick up one on Thessalonians, you'll get four or five pages on context. Then you come into this great theological morass, but nobody has ever built a model of the entire context. It has never been done in the English language; if it has, it is hiding somewhere that none of us have ever been able to find.

Did you understand what I mean by a model? A complete model. A contextual model from the day of Pentecost to the end of Revelation, telling the story in chronological order and a clear, clear presentation of everything that's going on. You've never seen it or heard it. I've never met a theologian, including all the seminary professors that I sat under. I've stood in meetings over and over again and just briefly stated the most elementary way the context of the first century, and have laymen and ministers stand in line with pen in hand asking me questions about what in the world I was talking about, and that sounded real interesting, and I'd like to know a bit more.

Now, we came out of the Protestant mind into the evangelical mind, and out of the evangelical mind came forth the fundamentalist mind. The fundamentalist mind flows from the Plymouth Brethren, who began in about 1820. Although they are not well known, they nonetheless are the fathers of fundamentalism. Now then, it just so happens that most of us who are Christians outside the organized church are fundamentalists. Therefore, the mind of John Darby and the mind of the Plymouth Brethren pervade our thinking outside the organized church.

I want to come to the front of the room and stand up, take my hat off, and say, I am not a fundamentalist. I'll go even further: I may not even be a premillennialist. You can't prove I'm not, but after reading *The Return*, you won't know whether I am a pre, a post, a pan, or a who-cares. I do not have the mindset of a fundamentalist. After I presented my views on eldership in England, someone asked whether I knew anything about the New Testament, and the answer is…I probably don't, but whatever it is I don't understand about the New Testament, however poor a Bible scholar I may or may not be, brother, I know ten times more than you fundamentalists do.

Let me describe some of the ways we get into a fundamentalist mindset and don't even know it. I said this to the brothers and sisters here in this room this morning. Almost every one of us went to some sort of home Bible class, and we got in on the first session, and the very first session was: we need to get in the Word of God. Then we began learning verses from the Old and New Testaments about why we need to know and understand the Word of God, and those verses overwhelmed us so much that we never realized that it is actually nothing in the world but a group of sentences stitched together and then interpreted. We think that it is established that the Word of God is just the Bible.

By the way, the Bible is the Word of God, but that's not my point. Sometimes the Word of God means Jesus Christ and not a Protestant New Testament put together by Martin Luther, and we totally ignore the fact that Christians throughout the history of the Christian church have always been illiterate. Until the late 1800s, the Scripture was not available to God's people in any number. I don't mean it became available during Gutenberg's day; I mean most people couldn't afford it or keep it in their homes, or they were illiterate. The Bible as being something a family would read is a fairly new phenomenon in Christian history.

Now, that's true, but you could never convince anybody with all the facts in the world that that's true. An indwelling Christ is virtually unknown, and a knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ is

virtually unknown among those who are very much into saying, you've got to know the book, you've got to know the Bible, you've got to know the so on and so on. For those of you who are having apoplexy right now, who are listening to this in your car, yes, I believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture, and I'll bet you a nickel I know the New Testament better than you do, and I stand by it. In fact, I'm practicing it a lot closer than most of you are, and I'm just really in a tear here, am I not? Anybody going to say anything to me here in the colonies? Excuse my humility, brother. You are chained to a way of thinking and don't know it.

I told the brothers and sisters this morning that most of us aren't even aware of the term revival theology. Yet, most of what's preached today from any evangelical pulpit is revival theology, and it is not correct. Revival theology, in one sentence, is simply this: à la Dwight L. Moody and R. A. Torrey, virtually every sentence in the New Testament says one of two things—you're lost, get saved; you're saved, win souls. All the Bible, New Testament teaching we have… would you people bear witness to that, that most of the sermons you've heard in your lifetime had basically that context to it? Am I being fair here? You're lost…get saved; you're saved…win souls.

I said this morning that the issue of the church has rarely come up. Even today, the church isn't an issue. The church isn't mindful of itself today. Now, you take the fundamental mindset, and you take it outside the organized church, and you do find people who are really, really interested in the church. They don't know it, but they begin establishing in their mind and in their teachings the fundamentalist John Darby string of verses, putting them together and thereby creating a teaching of many different things, such as submission and authority. All those wonderful, beautiful verses put together will scare the liver out of you, but they're not the only verses. Sometimes I'd like to go through with you, brothers and sisters, and show you how many times Paul of Tarsus went out of his way to command nothing, to be non-authoritarian. Scripture is full of it, but this pattern of verses prevails right now.

Now that brings me up to elders and eldership in most of the thinking of Christians outside the organized church. I want to postulate two or three things real quickly. One: dear elder, you might not be an elder. Secondly, this is a great illustration. Does anybody know why the FDA was founded? Have you ever heard of Mother's Helper? Pure opium. We had five million babies who were addicted to opium. You could buy it over the counter in the late 1800s and early 1900s. If Mama needed to wash the dishes, she'd give her child Mother's Helper. Well, after having five million children, not yet one year of age, totally, absolutely, and completely addicted to pure opium, we set up the Federal Drug Administration and finally figured out that what we were doing was wrong.

Dear sir, who believes so strongly in eldership, from your viewpoint and John Darby's, I would like to present the possibility that you may be Mother's Helper, and that so much disaster has come from your concept of elders. Why don't you stop and think about it? It's not God's people rebelling against elders; it's because your view and your practice are untenable and utterly, totally without scriptural foundation. Let me give you an idea of where most elders come from. Remember, these are brothers and sisters who are really swinging right and left about elders, elders, elders, elders, elders. Okay, let's look at it.

This is a fairly typical situation. Brother Smith starts a home Bible class. By the way, Brother Smith probably has ulterior motives the day he does this. Forgive me for being so gentle and kind

to those of you who are listening. There's a good chance that, without him even noticing, money is involved in his "non-thinking." He may also like the grandeur of being adored as a religious leader. That could be true. There's another one, too: his pride in knowing the Word of God. But he's not in touch with that, and he gets this little Bible class together, and the very first thing you hear in his Bible class is, we need the Bible, Bible, Bible, we need to read the Word of God, Word of God, Word of God, we need to memorize, memorize, memorize, and we need to obey and obey and obey and obey. And he's not talking about Scripture; he's talking about a bunch of verses strung together, out of which philosophies and theologies and teachings come. Every brother and sister in this room is a victim of that.

I propose that brother has no scriptural grounds whatsoever for what he is doing. He is in a home where he teaches the Bible. I would like for you to find that in the New Testament. That has never occurred to you in your life, has it? Next, he gets this group of people together, and they all study Scripture, and they're getting into it, loving it, and enjoying it. Then he starts talking about the church. These are Christians outside the organized church, and he begins to teach that God has appointed elders to oversee and shepherd you, and so on. This is a wonderful, beautiful, precious little group that he's got in his home, and pretty soon there are elders, and death has taken flight toward his house.

Interestingly enough, when they select elders, he becomes one of them. Now, let me tell you about the other two brothers who get made elders. I'm really going to win a lot of friends from this. It is the two people…two brothers in the room…who are most agog at his teachings, and that's where so much trouble starts. He makes sure that they become elders. He mistakenly thinks those brothers will follow him and do what he wants. Whether this is conscious or unconscious, I do not know.

Two or three things begin to develop out of this "now almost a church." One is that they are really into Scripture, and they really enjoyed it at first. Still, later on, as they branch out in their knowledge of Scripture, they begin to run across all these things they're supposed to be doing, like wives submitting to husbands and tithing, or who knows what goodness comes up out of this. And it begins to break down. Some of this is very unhappy stuff, and dear sisters, those sweet sisters, just can't live up to it all. The brother quotes some verses to them, makes them feel good, and they go back.

Then there's this prayer and stuff, and how to pray, and fifteen things about prayer, and the Lord's people are just not doing very well on the praying business, and it's getting boring too. The power of that Bible studying is starting to wane, and there's restlessness. This brother, being unbroken…I love this, Gene, if you don't get hung for this…this brother, unbroken, and with his claws into being what he is being or wants to be, doesn't understand the concept of losing, and he starts to protect. Then we learn all about rebuking. Then we learn all about witchcraft. Those who rebel are worse than witches. You never heard that, did you?

Then the two other brothers, the elders, one of them begins to slip, starts asking questions, and suddenly this man faces a situation he hadn't anticipated. He's got a dissenter among his elders…and then a fight starts. Then the word arises: D-E-V-I-L. He's of the devil…and the devil is into this, and this is in verse so-and-so out of some dark, dank part of the Scripture, and that gets thrown in. Then there are threats and people's voices, and again, an unbroken man is defending his little turf as hard and fast as he can.

Then a lot of people leave, and a lot of people get hurt, and a lot of people never, never follow the Lord again, and those are the people I meet who say, “Gene, we had this wonderful, wonderful group of Christians; it was just wonderful, and then one of two things: we built a building, or we got elders.

I’m going to stop a minute. How many people do you figure in this room? How many of you have some identification, or a whole lot…let’s start with a whole lot of identification of what I just described. Would you raise your hands? What do we have here? Half the people in this room? Okay. That wasn’t quite half, was it? Well, it’s too many. I want to re-present my proposition, brother. Fifty-seven people; thank you, brother. About half the people in here have been hurt by this. It’s either been a church building or elders. I want to propose, sir, that you’re not an elder.

I’m not even going to back down. I propose, sir, that you’re not an elder. I propose that, by scriptural means, you have absolutely no right to use the word "elder" in anything you do. I would like to believe that this recording could be put everywhere and slow you down, because eldership, as you teach it and practice it, is destroying God’s people outside the organized church all over this planet.

So at this point, you have concluded that I do not believe in elders. Brother Jim Milnick told me something a few minutes earlier, after the meeting was over today, that blew my mind. Jim, would you come up here and stand close enough to me that this could be heard? Jim: I met with this brother a few years back, and he asked us at that time—this is in 1980—he asked us to write this in our Bibles—one line. I got here at the end of this quote; it says, G-E 8-2-80. So that’s August 2nd, 1980. Gene Edwards said, “The Church of Jesus Christ will die without elders and workers.” And that’s it.

Thank you. I believe in elders, and I believe in workers, but not the way either you or John Darby ever proposed. I believe that they are one of the most destructive forces, as they are presently presented, unleashed in the world.

In England, actually, almost everybody in the room was happy and smiling from ear to ear. Brother Mike, were you a witness to that, to what I was saying? They just loved it. Several brothers came up to me, or I came to them—I hate that term, “he came up to me”—I was talking to some brothers, and they said, “Gene, I used to be an elder, and I wasn’t an elder.” Or “my husband used to be an elder, and he wasn’t an elder.” Brother, you probably are not an elder either. It’s just a pipe dream, and it is a way of control, and it usually ends up being despotism on God’s people.

Okay, you’ve got your string of verses; I’ve got context. Here’s my context as opposed to your string of verses. Context—you who want to be scriptural. There is no elder in the New Testament, but that he came into being at the hands of an itinerant, non-local, extra-local, trans-local church planter. Not a single one. Are you going to be scriptural? Then, sir, be scriptural. Eldership comes out of the practice in the hands of extra-local church planters, and those men are so rare that it pretty well negates virtually anybody today—and I know I’m being a little extreme here—but virtually anybody. I didn’t say anybody; I said virtually anybody being an elder by scriptural means.

Taking the book of Acts, we're starting with Pentecost. Taking the book of Acts, we don't have to worry about Christian eldership before the birth of the church. Would you agree with me on that?

By the way, I don't know how many references there are to elders in the book of Revelation, but it is just sagging with them. They're just all over the place. I'm sorry, sir, but you can't quote anything from Revelation, because all those elders are in heaven; each one is a heavenly elder. They are creatures, not of our species, so just forget the book of Revelation. Every reference in the book of Revelation is to some twenty-four men—I'm sorry, creatures—who are heaven's elders; the elders of heaven.

If you say, "Well, Gene, those might have been human beings," my response is, "Thank God we know, praise the Lord, there were twenty-four elders who got to heaven." You figure you're one of them?

We will start with the book of Acts, then move through the epistles, and we will take them up chronologically. I want to try to communicate something here: that there was something that preceded—and that word is "adelphos" - and that word probably means brothers and sisters. As I noted in the little booklet, there are over 130 references to brothers in Acts and the epistles. This is something that is not understood, and it's one of the reasons I can stand up here and so blatantly say, sir, you're probably not an elder, because a powerful brotherhood in the body of Christ precedes eldership. So does a church planter, and so do several other ingredients; especially, it was very clear in the life of Paul of Tarsus and his way of seeing churches raised up.

Now, if you start philosophizing and say, "Yes, but we don't live in the first century, and those were missionary activities," and so on and so forth, sir, you have flown the coop. You have left Scripture and turned into an Aristotelian philosopher to defend your turf. I'm sorry, sir, but you don't have scriptural grounds to be an elder…and if you do, you're a really rare bird.

Let's go into the book of Acts. Acts starts with twelve apostles. A little later, the church selects seven "waiters." The entire body of believers selects seven waiters. Did you follow that? Thank you. Did anybody not follow that? Okay, they're going to wait tables because, up until then, the church planters had been waiting on the tables; they'd been taking care of the food. Now, there are no elders, but there is brotherhood. You've got the twelve apostles, and you've got God's people, but God's people are meeting in homes all over that city, and a closeness is growing up among them.

When they get in those meetings—and this is something that needs to break down completely—those meetings are not a bunch of people sitting on the floor all in a row with somebody standing up in front of them talking to them while they just kind of nod their heads as we do in our age. Those brothers and sisters were doing the same thing described in Corinthians, Colossians, and Ephesians; they were talking, praising the Lord, sharing with one another, having a grand little time of it, and also having personal difficulties. But out of it was growing an intimate relationship, an incredibly intimate relationship with the freedom of Jesus Christ, thicker than syrup, and it's all over the place.

This goes on for seventeen years, and every once in a while, the church in Jerusalem shuts down. Don't you like this when it's in its chronological order? You get a whole lot of new things in here.

Every once in a while, because of persecution, the church shuts down. I don't know why they appointed elders at any particular time, but I have a notion there are two reasons: one is that the church planters were always running from somebody, and also, at that particular time, the church had lost its church planters, who had gone out into Judea, helping those dozens, if not hundreds, of churches that Paul of Tarsus had forced into existence by his persecution of the church.

Did you follow that? Somewhere around the seventeenth year, you got elders. Now you tell me that on the day those elders got elected, God's people suddenly fell into tyranny. You tell me that they clammed up, that brotherhood ended. You tell me that all of that closeness…now we have a covering of elders who are going to watch us like hawks.

Let me tell you what would happen if I appointed elders in Denver, Colorado today, and suddenly we shut down the freedom you have. Those elders begin to make the plans for the meetings, tell the sisters what they should do, tell the brothers what they should do, and plan the meetings and speak. At the same time, God's people sit there with their open Bibles listening, and they have these little meetings of elders who handle all the problems, and what are we going to do about Mr. and Mrs. so-and-so and so-and-so.

I will tell you what would happen. Is there a large river around here anywhere? The Platte River. Three bodies would be dredged out of that river. Wouldn't stand for it, because brotherhood preceded eldership. I want to remind you that traveling, itinerant men, with the church's approval, selected those men.

Now, brother, you may disagree with anything I've said up till now, and you may win your case up till now, but you can't win it one inch beyond right now, because the business of the elders comes into such close focus beyond this point. The next time we know anything about elders, other than the elders in Jerusalem, who, by the way, faced a former brother of the church in Jerusalem and a brother who had never been a brother in the church in Jerusalem, and they conceded that this wild, swinging gospel that those two men were preaching was of the Lord, along with the twelve church planters and James, the half-brother of Jesus.

Now we're going to go to Galatia. That's a part of Asia Minor, southeast. Now we're going to see two men plant four churches. These men didn't belong to those churches, and they didn't stay long. In fact, any Bible scholar who has studied the timeline will tell you they averaged four to six months in each town, and they left them without elders.

What grew up was brotherhood—close, living, breathing brotherhood. Brotherhood that had paid a price of unity, a brotherhood that had suffered, and a brotherhood that had gone to the cross, but those churches functioned, and they were not organized; they were an organism. The people were illiterate, desperately poor, and they did not have any New Testaments. In fact, the first piece of Christian literature ever written on this planet was written to them. And no, they did not have the Old Testament, as we call it, because finding Scripture in those days was extraordinarily difficult, and it was usually kept under lock and key in synagogues. That's not all.

The particular kind of weather in Judea, and that part of the world, ate up and melted the papyrus and caused the ink to run off most Scripture. When you have a Scripture that has taken years and years to produce, and it rots—did you know not a single piece of papyrus has ever survived in

Israel other than those hidden in pots, away from the weather? You've got scrolls coming out of Egypt by the truckloads because it was dry. You've got scrolls by the truckloads in other parts of the world, but you don't have anything Jewish that survives today intact because of the weather. Those people constantly had to throw away the Scripture and rewrite it. They had people who did nothing but that, and it was long and laborious, and that stuff was expensive to come by. You never heard that before in your life, did you? And the people in Galatia had none of this, but they had brotherhood.

Now then, saints, Paul of Tarsus and Barnabas came back, and this is the difference between that and your little Bible class and those two or three people who really love your teaching who've got to be an "elder." It was the process of time alone, in a situation where everybody was functioning and holding anything to them for their life, and carrying on the total responsibilities of the church, brothers and sisters alike. You could walk in there in the midst of a people—not people who had sat in the living room and had somebody teaching the Scripture to them—but people who had been in a living, breathing, organizing, painful, exciting, glorious experience together.

That's a world of difference between you teaching a group of people in a home while everybody sits there quietly. The two men came back, and they said, "Well, look here, look who the Holy Spirit has made elders." So there are ordained elders in all four of those churches. I'll declare that Barnabas and Paul agree with me. There should be elders in the church, but the three of us do not agree with how you practice that, brother. In fact, what we're about to see right now torpedoes almost every concept you have of what an elder is.

See what happened after Barnabas and Paul ordained these men who had been part of this breathing, living, churning, powerful church brotherhood. Everybody shut up; everybody sit down; and the men they ordained took absolute control of everyone's life. You could hear them saying, "Submit to those whom God has put over you" …*and that's not what happened.*

I cannot tell you what happened, but I can tell you one thing: that brotherhood of those saints… just like I've been telling you folks in Denver, this is a point I've made in two meetings with you. Everybody thought corporately. The church thought corporately, and the church planter thought corporately. He didn't think eldership. He thought God's people, because the church belonged to God's people, and it was God's people who were carrying that church, who were that church. They were that girl.

By the way, I might as well say this right now. When somebody says, "Do you submit to those whom God has put over you?" there's one little word in there that you need to take a really good look at. Well, does anyone want to guess what that word might be? God. Just because a group of Christians starts meeting in a living room or any place else on this earth and they start talking about elders doesn't mean that God's within a hundred miles of you. You can make it out of the Scripture, but you can't say God is in it.

Church planters— itinerant, extra-local, non-local, trans-local church planters—ordained elders. Do you understand that? And not long—two years later—a gentleman by the name of Blastinius Drach Rockmar—that's a fictitious name I have given him, but boy, he existed—came to those four churches with his knife, and he circumcised some of those Gentiles. He got away with it until

Timothy probably stopped him in at least two churches. We don't know what happened in the other two.

Brothers and sisters, Paul of Tarsus sat down to write a letter to those four churches who had been devastated by a circumcision knife, and there was all sorts of confusion. Paul started by saying to the *elders* in the churches in Galatia… (not true). Now, I don't know what in the world you're going to do to leap over this, but my brother, listen: not one reference was made to those elders. Not one implication was made to those elders. Abraham Lincoln said, "Your argument has less weight to it than the shadow of a homeopathic remedy." You don't have an argument that even has the shadow of a homeopathic remedy. There isn't one verse you can twist, turn, or do anything else with in the book of Galatians that implies elders were thought of in that great tragedy in Galatia.

Now, brother, read it and weep. I want to propose there's a possibility you're not an elder. Or, if you are so, you are functioning in a way that is utterly, totally, absolutely unscriptural…and will you please give me the name of the itinerant church planter who chose you?

All right, are you with me? We come to 1 Thessalonians. First and Second Thessalonians—go look it up. Look into any chronological study of how long Paul and Silas were in Thessalonica. By the way, this only happened probably no more than three to four months after he wrote the book of Galatians. You knew that, didn't you? You all knew that. The church is just barely a church. Paul gets run out of town. He's arrived in Corinth, and somebody sends word that they're having problems in our very little, new, young church. I don't know anyone who has ever proposed that the church in Thessalonica was over six months old when they asked Paul all the questions they asked him—a six-month-old church.

Now, brother, you can quote Thessalonians all you want, and you can point to something in there as a reference to elders. Still, when you put that book in its total context, when you put it in the story, you are left with not even the shadow of a homeopathic remedy. There's a verse in 1 Thessalonians that says you should respect, listen to, and obey those whom God… submit to those whom God has put over you…that's elders! I submit to them. You would never convince me that a church six months old has already got men who, six months ago, had never heard the name of Jesus Christ and were blood-drinking heathens. You would never convince me that those men have already taken up eldership and that Paul is telling them to submit to them. I'm sorry. That reference is not to elders.

That reference is to Silas and himself, and that's all it is, and the word elders doesn't come up there, and you don't have that scripture, brother. I don't know of any place on this earth where anybody has walked into a situation like Thessalonica and, at the end of three months, has elders whom you would dare say, "whom God has put over you," and you submit to them and their authority or anything else like that.

Now we come to the Corinthian letters. Your first impression is that Paul was in Thessalonica, then went to Athens, then went to Corinth, and stayed eighteen months. He must have written a letter shortly after that. That's not true. Let me show this to you.

First trip: two years. Four churches in Galatia were raised up. Second trip: two years. He's in Philippi for a few weeks. He's in Thessalonica for a few weeks. He's in Berea for a few weeks, and then he gets to Corinth. He stays eighteen months. He comes home to Antioch. He goes on his third

trip, which lasts four, four and a half years. From the time Corinth is founded until Paul writes First Corinthians, at least six or seven years have passed since that church was born. My brothers and sisters, a church seven years old ought to have elders. Did the church in Corinth have elders when, at about seven years old, Paul wrote First Corinthians? This church was seven years old. Did it have elders? Did it have elders? Anybody know? We don't know. My guess is they didn't.

Now, brother, if you want to hold to your teachings about eldership, then you've got one of two things to say. Either they had elders, and they were the laziest men who ever lived, or they had elders and eldership doesn't mean what you think it does, because if there was ever a church that needed elders to step in and do something, it was Corinth. You have incest in the church. People get drunk at the Lord's Supper. People steal food from one another during the Lord's Supper. You've got people drinking and passing out at the Lord's Supper and becoming gluttons, while others sit there and don't get a bite of food. You've got vegetarians fighting with carnivores. You have questions about women's head covering that still haven't been answered.

What else is going on in this madhouse? Oh, you've got maybe five, ten, fifteen people standing up in Gaius's living room talking at the same time. You also have not only five or six or seven or eight or ten people testifying at the same time, but you've also got some others standing up at the same moment speaking in tongues. Not one, not two, but many. This is a really nutty church. This church is as bad as some of the churches I have to deal with. This is a wild, woolly place. I hate to bring up this homeopathic thing again - there's not a verse in First or Second Corinthians, I don't care how hard you pump, that implies elders in any way.

Now, if you say elders are there for Christ's ease, my dear brother in the Lord Jesus Christ, I'll tell you something. Those are the worst elders the church has ever known, because they hadn't done diddly. Nothing. The church was obviously functioning, over-functioning, and super over-functioning. There was brotherhood there. In fact, there were four brotherhoods—the Jesus people, the Paul people, the Barnabas people, and the Apollos people, and the Peter people. Actually, that's five, isn't it? Man, and that takes brotherhood to do that.

Not once does Paul call anybody by name as being the villain, and he never says, "I command you," except on the things of sex. The rest is, "Brothers, I would suggest… let those…and I speak to you as one who…" but his only commandment has to do with immorality. In the rest, he is oblique and very cautious. He doesn't read the riot act to them. He starts by telling them they're holy, blameless, and unindictable. Where are your elders, sir? Where are your vaulted elders? Where are your vaulted elders' meetings?

Next, we come to Romans. I don't care how hard you pump that; you won't find an elder in it. Romans was written not too long after First and Second Corinthians, somewhere between no time at all and maybe a year or a year and a half. Now, we're running out of epistles. Ephesians has no reference to eldership. "Well, Gene, there are a few things in there you could say might be to elders," and I'd like to turn around and say yes, and it might be about church planters. I don't question a church planter's authority over a church, but he'd better take his model from Paul of Tarsus, and he's no authoritarian at all. Paul himself confessed how weak he was, and he always struggled with churches not respecting him. Reread it.

Okay, Colossians—not a whisper. Ephesians—virtually nothing. Then we get to the last letter Paul ever wrote to a church. We come to Philippians, and we, for the first and only time, find the word elders. Read it very closely. This, to me, is funny. "To the holy ones in Philippi, including the elders." Thank God they got included as holy ones. We finally got elders being mentioned in a letter by Paul.

A couple of things I'd like for you to know about the church in Philippi, and these are true. One of them is that the church was 9 years old when the letter was written. Another one: it was a women's church. Did you know that? We'll come back and find that out someday. I'm not implying that's why they had elders; I'm just telling you it was a women's church, but they did have elders. I concede it had elders; I give to you that it has elders. How many times, Mike Brody, did you read the word "you," plural, in the Philippian letter, which is four chapters long? You got 68 times. 68 times in four chapters—a plural "you." It was a brotherhood. He spoke to a functioning body. I don't know what those elders did, but whatever it was, it didn't change the fact that that living organism was highly functioning on all levels long before they got elders.

Alright, now, Gene, we're going to catch you here. We've got First Timothy, and we've got Titus, and then we've got Second Timothy. You sure do. I'll tell you what else you've got. You've got Nero on the throne, who has just blamed the Christians for the burning of Rome, or possibly it has preceded that. He references island communities and says, go to every one of the places where God's people gather and appoint elders. Boy, Gene, we got you here. No, you don't.

Do you know who appointed those elders? Who appointed those elders? Church planters - traveling, itinerant church planters whom he had just called to come to Rome. That's who appointed them. I'm coming back to another simple proposition, brother: unless a traveling church planter has ordained you as an elder, you have no scriptural right to exist. And the rest of the elders are in heaven in Revelation, except in Ephesus. Perhaps it is in Ephesus that we get the impression that we give up all democracy and it is "elders meetings."

Now, if you've never been to a Plymouth Brethren church, you don't know that Plymouth Brethren have their little meeting of the elders right before the church gathers. When the church gathers, all the elders walk in together and sit down on the front row. Don't you know that? Have you ever been in the local church? Have you ever seen how they do it? The meeting starts; out in the back, these guys walk in, sit down in the front row. Well, you get that out of Ephesus—the Ephesian thing. I guess you all know this came far later in Paul's third journey. He has already been prophesied over and warned by everybody that if he goes to Jerusalem, this is the end of it. So, he asks the elders of the church in Ephesus to meet with him.

I admit with all my heart that there were elders in the church in Ephesus, but I also want you to know that Paul of Tarsus had spent four years in Asia Minor and another two had passed. The church was at least six years old, and brotherhood had preceded eldership. Here's what else you should know: dagger men were going all over the country killing people who did not teach the law of Moses. All of the churches were under threat of their leaders being killed, and especially Paul of Tarsus. Paul assumed he would see those people never again…and that is not all. Somewhere in all of this, this gentleman whom I have given the name Drachma Blastinius seems to have made a vow that he would do everything he could to destroy any church Paul ever raised up, because the strong

implications in every letter are that Paul expected that man to come to the other churches just like he had come to Galatia. He was Paul's thorn in the flesh.

Now, I'm not telling you something that's just an Edwardian idea. I am telling you that that man who went to Galatia and almost destroyed those churches went to the other churches, and he was Paul's thorn in the flesh. I don't care what kind of theories you have ever heard. I am telling you, and telling you dogmatically, that Paul's thorn in the flesh was a man, because the Greek says he was a man. It's masculine—he. It is not an "it." It's a "he." It is a human being whom Paul asked three times to get out of his life, and the Lord said, you keep building with gold and silver and precious stone, you arrogant Jew, and you walk out of those churches, and you trust the Holy Spirit. Let him come and see if he can burn down your work. I am too strong, Paul said, too full of revelation, and the Lord has put somebody—a man—in my life to make me weak.

I want to stand up on my hind legs and say I identify with that perfectly. I have known such thorns. I'll bet you there's not a one of you…and so, with dagger men around, and with Paul's thorn in the flesh visiting the churches, there were elders. Thank God there were elders in Ephesus. Paul said, "I'm leaving. There's a chance I'll never be back. I promise you wolves will come in." That was a promise, because those wolves had come in everywhere, and he said wolves would come in from within too. He spoke with wisdom from past experience, and we have the only clear idea of what a Gentile elder was.

In case you're not aware of this, most of you are Gentiles, and your eldership is Gentile. That is, elders are to make sure that those who bring the law in from the outside don't devour the church, and those who bring the law in from the inside do not devour the church. That is the strongest single evidence that elders have some control to exercise.

Now, I would like to quote Gene Edwards. I'm going to change one word, because it's what I meant when I first said it. Without elders and church planters, churches will be destroyed. The kind of churches we have must have elders and church planters, but those men, in my judgment, are there for the most extreme cases—the worst situations, like flagrant immorality in the church where somebody won't repent, or you've got something going on in the church where somebody is bound and determined to destroy.

Otherwise, you have a brotherhood and a sisterhood that must never be done away with, and eldership as you know it today can do that. Eldership of the first century did not. I rest my case. I have this to say to you: your little Bible classes have no right to evolve into eldership that is locally appointed. They involve too much manipulation. Brother, you mistreat God's people in ways that God's people have no right to be mistreated. You have no right to mistreat God's people that way, and your authority is minuscule. Somebody outside ought to be reigning you in, and if there isn't, I'll tell you what I suggest everybody who is going to have elders in this day and age do: rotate your elders.

It bothers me that men, for the privilege of being called elders, will do almost anything: it's proof they are spiritual. And those who manipulate men - and there is this in most of the situations where there are elders - men who manipulate other men by giving them titles. I believe there are elders by the truckloads, so-called elders by the truckloads, for the only reason they have not gotten drunk, stolen, or committed immorality is that they are so attached to the word "eldership."

I look back on men whom other men thought were elders in churches, and I can tell you that at one time they might have been, but today they are not, because of their personal conduct. Where do you get off believing that eldership is forever? When you establish a group of men as elders in a church, and it's only them, you have cut off the growth of young people in the church coming up. You have established a hierarchy - a closed club. What you people become as the years roll on becomes a terror or an embarrassment.

A man may look great at 28 or 30 or 32 as an elder. He may look horrendous at 55. Dracula comes to mind. If you are committed to eldership in your church, then rotate it. It's the safest thing on earth you could do, but to have the John Darby string of verses that put together eldership as it is known today, totally outside the context you just heard it in—you are dealing with dynamite. I remember so well in England, I think three sisters there—there were only a hundred people in that conference, and ten of them were Americans—said to me, "Gene, it was so beautiful, and then we got elders."

No, ma'am, you did not get elders…and a tyrant by any other name is a tyrant, and a thief of freedom by any other name is still a thief. You do not get elders. Elders don't take God's people's freedom, nor do they lord it over God's people. Nor do they destroy the living, breathing, active brotherhood. You, sir, are incapable of having that brotherhood in that church, Bible class, or whatever you are. You are utterly incapable of ever knowing or seeing that brotherhood. It's not there, and it never will be for one simple reason. Does anybody like to say what it is? Do you have any idea where I'm headed? *Because you won't leave.* And you'll never discover eldership until you get up and walk out.

That's what itinerant church planters do. As long as you stay, you've corrupted the equation so much that there can be no eldership. If you believe so strongly in eldership, sir, then plant a church, get up, walk out, come back two years later, and ask the sisters who they think the elders ought to be; then you will have elders. Woe to those brothers who ever try to destroy what they were born into and came out of: the brotherhood of the church.

For some reason, I am going to tell you a story that has got nothing to do with anything. This has got nothing to do with the Scripture or anything else. I just found it terribly amusing. I was told the name of this tribe—I don't remember what it was—but they were American Indians, and they had chiefs. And the women had no rights in this tribe whatsoever except this: the women chose the chiefs. Was it the Iroquois? Yeah. Okay.

Here's what I'd like to say to you, brother. Back in the old days of the Baptist, we had an annual call. If you insist on being so unscriptural with your elders, then may I suggest that every year the elders come up to an annual call, a secret vote be taken in which only the sisters vote, and let the sisters decide who the elders are. Then you *may* have a little safety. Until then, you are a walking menace to Christian society. I propose you're not an elder.