

This is Gene Edwards. I've been asked to do this tape. I'm not speaking to an audience. This is actually a result of visiting a small village and a group of Christians, and those messages were transcribed. Unfortunately, it was not possible to make those tapes available because they were recorded by a boombox sitting on the other side of the room. I've been asked to do a summation of them. I'm going to assume that the person or persons listening to this tape are Christians who live in a small town, in a wilderness, or in a village.

I always think of Wyoming. You folks up there don't have anything but space, and towns are 4,000 and 5,000 people, sometimes separated by scores, if not hundreds, of miles. Your situation may not be quite that way, but there is a great deal of interest in church life among folks in small towns and villages. I'm going to start by saying to you: don't dream a dream. It's going to be difficult for you to have church life in your town, your village, or even more so if you're out in open country and everybody has to come from many places to be together, or there's a village and half the people drive in from out of the country. Don't live in a dream world. This is not easy. Also, I want you to know that when you have finished listening to this recording, chances are excellent that there will be disagreement. It'll be mild. I don't mean anything difficult, and the chances are this will all just wander off. A few years later, you'll look back, boy, I wish you would look back and remember you didn't do this. There was a prescription for things to do, and it fizzled out. And the reason is that somebody will believe too much in human nature.

Perhaps the best thing I can say to all of you is you're fallen, and the chances of you getting along together for the long haul are remote. There's a lot to church life, and it's not just coming and getting together and doing a few simple things. Those fall apart on the long haul. If they don't fall apart, invariably it is because one strong person arose, possibly two, who kept things going. Nonetheless, that well is shallow and the bucket doesn't hold much. Somewhere along the line, there will be problems, and the thing will fall on its face. Don't let that happen. I would ask you, exhort you, to listen. These requests are simple, and they are based on, no, not a lifetime, just 30 years of observation and experience.

Alright, I'm going to assume now that you are in one or two categories. You're people who don't get together, or you're a person who would like to have church life in your town that has 2,000, 5,000, even 15,000 or 20,000. All of those are pretty insurmountable prospects to take on. 200, 300, then you're going to have to listen really carefully. 100, with people driving in from other places, you're going to have to listen more carefully than anyone. That's one possibility, that you're just people who would like to get together. Maybe you've heard some recordings of mine, or you visited somewhere, or you heard somebody else. The second one is a cohesive

group...meeting...I'm going to try to imagine somebody driving in from out of town. Others of you are there in your area. Maybe all of you are from that same town.

Which situation is worse? People wanting to get together who never have? A person who wants to get others to meet with him, who has nothing more than this recording to draw folks in? Or folks who are already meeting? And the answer is "yes". Each one of them is the most difficult situation. If you're all alone, the chances of you being able to bring together a group of people who will ever be like-minded are remote. If there are five or six of you, or ten, gathered in the room, and you've known one another, and maybe you can get together, chances are remote. You're already a cohesive group, but you know you need some help. You've ended up with this recording. Chances of going on from here, certainly in the way that I'm going to present to you, are very remote.

Why, Gene, did you emphasize "very remote" with this last group? It's because you have leaders, and leaders don't give up their positions, and positions will have to yield if you're ever going to have church life. The world is made up of those who passively follow and those who aggressively lead. Passive followers will not always follow passively, and aggressive leaders make too many mistakes and impose on God's people. Sometime or other, this thing will rip, break, or tear, and of course, as I just said, leaders don't give up their positions, whether titled or untitled. There is a certain, well, you know, "because I'm leading this group, God must love me." Now, that's a very subconscious feeling. I'm sorry, it is there. For a group of people to yield totally to one another, to start from the beginning, or to start all over again, is rare indeed.

Alright, we've come through step one, the kind of people who probably are listening. To those of you who would come together for the first time, there is certainly a lack of understanding and unanimity. When you begin to seek to gel that unanimity together, then many opinions arise, and a lot of questions, and folks just plain flat don't understand, and therefore, they wonder what this is all about. Why can't we just get together every once in a while and love each other? I would say to you, you're going to need to listen to a lot of ministry, and I would urge you, urge you, each and all of you, pile into a car or an airplane and come to one of our conferences and meet people who have been in church life and listen to them.

Now I'm going to move into something quite interesting, and that is, let's say there are five families of you, and three of you go. One of you wanted to, but your mama was sick, and the fifth one didn't see the need for it. I have a question. Did the three of you families pile into that car or that plane and go? This really brings up, boy, a problem that has no resolution. What if there are some of you...you are a group...and some of you want to go on and experience a true first-century type experience of church life? Several don't. Question: Do you therefore stop and wait on the other

person, which pretty well ruins everything? Or do you move forward and make progress with one or two protestations, and maybe they will even drop out? The pain will be great, and you will fall on your face—same conclusions.

I want to say to you that you're going to have to make these decisions individually, and hope and pray that when the smoke clears, there will be at least four families, maybe five, who can see these things and move together. I would implore those of you who do not, you don't see this. We love one another, and the Bible says where two or three are gathered together in the name of the Lord, He's there, and why can't He just lead us, and why do we need to go to a conference, and why do we need a church planter, and I don't see this stuff and I'm just not ready for it. I would just implore you: please go visit a church or a conference, listen, learn, ask, doubt, and question. More than anything else, behold a dimension of the Christian sphere that you have never, nor ever, bumped into before.

I say this to each one of you. Whichever situation you're in right now, I say to you that some of these things cannot, and will not, come to you except by revelation. A home-brewed interpretation of Scripture, a cursory view of what you vaguely get out of an idea of the New Testament, really will be a stumbling block to you in these early, very tender moments. I know you'd have a lot of questions, but don't try to get those questions answered among yourselves. You're going to have to go to people who have gone through the experiences upon which you stand at the threshold. Failing that, your situation is hopeless; not "kind of" hopeless, or "maybe" hopeless. It is hopeless. Gene, why can't we just do these things together? Well, perhaps in all the history of this century and the time to come, but in the last hundred years, it's never happened. You can believe God's going to do it; won't He take care of us? No, He doesn't. You're going to have to go and look.

There's also another problem: a mixed view here. Well, why don't we go join a group of really neat people who just do this or that? I was at this organization last summer, who did that, and somebody else says we've really got to get into the Bible, and someone else says we've got to get into evangelism. These iron gates must yield. I say to you again, talk to those who have gone the way you're considering. I'm not talking about talking to me. In fact, I will tell you exactly who to talk to. Talk to the women. Talk to the sisters in the church. These are the people most apt to be hurt. In every movement, in every organization, in everything, they are the ones who bear the blood of suffering and pain. They've got husbands running around chasing things. They are very responsive to being told you've got to submit. There's a sense of guilt and yieldedness, and precious sisters that you don't find anywhere else, and they're the ones most apt to be abused by such scriptures as "submit, if you don't, it's worse than witchcraft" and all that junk.

Well, Gene, don't you believe in submission, women submitting themselves to their husbands? I'm going to talk to you about that before this is over with, so just let it titillate until then. Talk to the women. See if you have any sense that they speak of their love for the body of Christ and church life, out of having been indoctrinated, or because they really, truly haven't been, and they are absolutely in love with the situation that they are in. Church life should be the most wonderful thing in the world a woman can touch. Ask them, and while you're doing it, ask how they arrived at that. Talk to the women. Don't talk to the brothers. Talk to the sisters. After you've talked to the sisters, talk to the brothers. If I don't miss my guess, they will speak to you straightforwardly, and they will speak of their own personal feelings. They will warn you about all the pitfalls. But listen to what those pitfalls are. It's not authoritarianism or all of these things that most of us have been bruised over. It will be the discovery that we're fallen, and that living together brings that out, and that we need help. I think you'll at least run across that.

Now I'm going to talk to those of you who are already meeting. A little more difficult, a little touchier. I'm so glad I don't know who you are. I'm so glad I don't know who I'm talking to, and if the shoe fits, wear it. How did you begin? Perhaps some sisters got together, and their husbands followed in. That's not bad. A woman-dominated—I don't mean "dominated by," that they're dominating, but I mean numerically, there are a lot more women than men. Women are trying to encourage the men to take responsibility, and men, not knowing exactly what to do, and one man finally rises up among them.

Or did you start a Bible class with a brother or a sister, bringing you together? Are you into something? Gosh, what? Well, Gene, we really believe in homeschooling. God bless you. We're just really into winning people to the Lord. Well, Gene, we really believe in helping others and feeding the poor. We're into Bible study, or we're in the Lord's coming, or we're into something...Well, you've got to get out of that. First of all, no matter what you're into, the fact that you're into it makes you an unbalanced person, emphasizing one portion of the verses of Scripture in the New Testament. You can yield...you can make virtually any and all verses in the Scripture yield to whatever it is you're interested in. The human mind, with its great powers of logic, can simply do that.

Okay, the one thing I want to talk to you about is if you survive over a long period of time, which is unlikely, then you tend to be a "bless me" club. You're just there to get blessed. The meetings are sweet. Hallelujah, thank God. Boy, you don't want to mess with a group of people like that. It's all flowing in one direction. God's just been sweet to you. His presence is always there, and, man, people can get really upset if you even consider muddying that water. Well, four years from now, they won't be there. Somebody's going to have a problem. Somebody's going

through rough waters. The cross is not there. There's an improper beginning. There's no planting. It's not direction. Most of all, it's a bunch of empty buckets that come and get filled, then go back home. Brothers and sisters, it simply isn't the Ecclesia of Jesus Christ.

Now, I would love to come join you. As soon as you fall apart, I'd like to run out and find another group where the Lord's presence is rich. Don't ever forget that the first year of Jesus Christ's ministry was sweet. Miracles, blessings, food given freely and spontaneously. The last year of His life, suffering and the cross. A group of Christians meeting together cannot bear suffering and pain corporately, and if somebody will stand up and say, "the devil must be in this", or "God couldn't possibly be in this with all this pain", people just fade into the woodwork. A "bless me" club, quite frankly, is a very pitiful thing in the long run, and it is built on selfishness. Aren't you glad I don't know who you are? Or maybe you thought I was thinking of you when I sat here in my home, in my chair, and had you in mind. No, I'm speaking of things universal in every nation and every place.

The Bless Me Club will eventually fall apart as well. Saints, if it wouldn't, I would tell you there would be little groups of Christians in every city in the English-speaking world. There would be hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of them. They don't exist. Dry times come. Try to find one that's 15 years old. Try to find one that's 20. They don't exist. If you should find one of those remote creatures that's 20 years old, you're going to find it dead. Wall-to-wall dead. Being held together, probably mostly by marriages and intermarriages. Then, a guest speaker once in a while, and books you read. They're, oh, I don't know, but dead is it.

Well, usually, it falls apart, or some brother comes in and leads the group. Sometimes there's a split. Sometimes it stays together. Sometimes he's a wandering man who comes in and out and ministers to you. Sometimes he stays around a lot. Sometimes he becomes your pastor. Sometimes you end up in a church building. But most of all, you crash and burn. So, question: Can you cohesively make a decision to head for higher ground?

Now I'm going to bring up a tantalizing question. It's a question I've posed in the past. It's a very simple question. You went to visit the brothers in a small-town USA. Yeah. Are they interested? They are. Are they a group cohesive enough to make a corporate decision? The answer to that is virtually always "no". They can't make a corporate decision. Let me tell you that that is very difficult to arrive at, and it is very rare. Let me repeat it. Has your group reached a point in its history where it can make a cohesive decision together about something other than when you're going to have coffee or a meeting?

Now let's talk about this because it's very important. Groups cannot make cohesive decisions,

certainly not dramatic ones, because they're not built together for stress. They're not built together for crises. There's just not that much unity in that group of people that they can suffer over long periods of time, go through major crises, and also act like "the church". The church is a vibrant, living, breathing woman who kicks down the gates of hell. People meeting together, singing pretty songs and sharing, or whatever you do, and then going home, cannot handle a major crisis, cannot do all of those marvelous things that the church is supposed to do.

By the way, that definitely affects the way you interpret Scripture. You have to overlook lots of things that are blatantly obvious about the church of Jesus Christ, and look for the, well, if mellow is who you are, mellow is what you have to find when you open the Scripture. The church of Jesus Christ should be able to walk through any crisis thrown at her and come out on the other side. That's church life, and church life includes that battle and fulfilling everything that a church does. As I said, most small groups work on the level of the lowest common denominator.

Well, now we come to this matter of the decision, and here is one of the great tragedies that's usually not even noticed: that when a group of Christians comes to make a decision, they cannot, and therefore, they do nothing. Therefore, faced with this crisis, they have to fall back into a mellow state. I want to propose to you that there is something else you could do, and that is for you to be obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ. That, of course, will split your fellowship, or at least will cause the loss of several people. If you decide to go by way of church life, there is no way it's going to be unanimous. Therefore, whether you realize it or not, you have attached your future history of your relationship to Jesus Christ to how far the weakest link in that fellowship is willing to follow Him.

How often have I heard it said, whatever we do, we've got to do it together? Well, the weakest, most confused person who sees the least, that's how far you've been able to go. Brothers and sisters, there are simply times when that doesn't work, and quite frankly, I see no scriptural grounds for it. I know that I'm treading on dangerous grounds here, but I also, having watched this for so many years, know that a group has a very limited lifetime anyway. If it's not this crisis...and listening to this tape is a crisis...if it's not this crisis, there will be another crisis.

You might go home alone, talk to your husband or your wife about how far this group will go, and how many problems the group has. Why not head for higher ground? You can do it. And someone said something to me very beautifully one time. They pointed out a verse in the Song of Songs that says, 'If you go with me, they will follow.' If some of you will say, "Yep," there's a very good chance most will follow. There will be some who will not, those who simply won't be mellow throughout all their lives. God can't give any of us mellow all our lives. The church of

Jesus Christ, the body of believers together, literally must be strong enough and bound together in unity and oneness to kick down the gates of hell.

Now what are you saying “yes” to? Well, actually, you’re saying yes, I’m going to go visit some of the churches, and yes, I’m going to go visit those sisters, and I want to talk with them. I would encourage you then to come back and tell everybody what you saw. You’ll probably see some folks get uncomfortable, and others get excited. And you’re going to see that, yes, it’s true, it’s very, very difficult for a group of people to stay together in the midst of a cohesive decision that is one beyond just the minimum, the absolute minimum that it takes, to keep a group of people coming together and sharing with one another.

If you choose that route, you have chosen to be a Bless Me Club, in which you have cut yourself off from the cross and suffering. But worse than that, more than that, simply the fulfillment of the purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ here on this earth. That’s not going to be fulfilled by a group of people pouring into an auditorium every Sunday, sitting down on a wooden bench, and then going home. It’s going to take that cohesive body of believers who have accepted the great, broad, panoramic sweep of the depths and the heights of what the church is.

Well, let’s say you make it. You go and visit other groups. You go to some conferences and ask every conceivable question. Remember, some will not like you doing that, and some will be fearful. But you will never, I don’t think, get a corporate decision for all of you to go this way, or even to investigate this way. Well, what do you do after that? I would say that if you come home and feel this is the way you should go, I’ve always said that, until the making of this recording, you can do the following things. You can move, or you can hope and pray for that one unbelievable thing: when somebody who knows church life, and is not a threat to your health, comes and helps you, or your bones can bleach in the wilderness and die. You can always go back to the denominational church, and I highly recommend doing so if you decide not to move forward. Oh, considering that I’m not speaking about now, but the day will come when your group splinters or dissolves or fades away. That’s usually what it is.

Coming back, changing the subject, you say, are you also meeting? No? Well, we get together every once in a while. We went out for Mary’s birthday. Aren’t you meeting? I don’t know. We just, no one’s called a meeting lately, and folks begin to go somewhere else. Somebody moves. Somebody else gets their feelings hurt, and it dissolves. By the way, that’s the most merciful and painless thing that can happen, which is that the group fades away eventually.

Alright. Let’s come back to those. You can move. Well, Gene, I can’t do that. There’s my grandmother, and this house, and I got this 200-acre farm, or whatever it is. We’re about to face

retirement. You can hope someone will come to help you. A few days ago, I said in a meeting, I want you to think of the United States of America for a moment. I turned to the young man, 38 years old, who had been called to the Lord's work for these very things, and I said to him, if you were in perfect health and had all the money you needed to travel, and you just had everything stacked in your corner just correctly, how many churches could you handle at one time? He thought and said, "Ten.

My response to that is that's an absolute maximum I could conceive of. I said to him, " Brother, how many churches could you plant in the remainder of your lifetime?" He thought and said, "Perhaps twenty." And again, I would call that the absolute maximum. That's twenty churches, and that's the only brother I know in the United States of America, other than myself, who could possibly raise up a church that was not damaging to your health. That's twenty. I'd like for you to know that neither he nor I is going to come to your village or small town, and pour out our lives on what it takes to build a living, breathing, functioning body of believers. We already feel our lives are wasted, and we get so little done. We just wouldn't do it in a small town, a village, or an open area, and you need to face that. The chances of it happening are just so astronomical that they're not even calculable.

Well, when that is said, then folks have to start coming up with theories of hope. Maybe we can do this. Maybe we can do that. Maybe, uh, why not one of us do it? Or, I don't know, let's get Brother so-and-so down here. We really enjoyed his visit. And there's your choice. You'll still dissolve, or you'll turn into a church with a pastor. You will dissolve one way or the other. It just doesn't go on. As I said, if it were true that it did, there would be a group similar to yours, not too dissimilar to who you are or what you are, in virtually every town in America, every village.

These things have begun before. Dear saints, there was a movement in the United States of America in the 1880s in which Bible study classes were held all over the country. Everywhere. Those things either dissolved or turned into Bible churches. If you've ever driven by a Bible church, most of them have their roots...are no more than one or two generations away from those great home Bible study classes that came. The problem with the home Bible study classes is that the Bible was the center; Christ was not. The Bible...you'll misunderstand me, I'm sure, but the Bible fizzles. After four or five years, you learn the big things, and you have to start looking at the little ones. Then somebody starts telling you to obey this, that, and the other, which you simply can't do individually. Discouragement or guilt comes. Somebody puts you in the pile. Legalism is bound to come. It is Jesus Christ who is the center of our faith, with the Scripture every day pointing to Him. Alright, I have really drawn a bleak picture here, but I'm really trying to get your attention. Whether you realize it or not, and I do not know who you are, I

am saying to you, I am imploring you, say “yes”.

Alright, now then, from this point on, I’m going to imagine you said yes. This is what I would recommend. Anybody got a pencil and paper? I would first of all recommend what I’ve already recommended, that you go to some conferences, visit some of the churches, and spend a good amount of time there. That’s not difficult to do. Enthusiasm can get it done. Disinterest cannot.

Go visit some of the churches. Talk to the brothers and sisters. Then I would say invite some of them to come down and spend a few days with you. There are brothers not called to this work. Boy, they’re not bad men either. They cast a pretty good-sized shadow when they stand up. Just have them come and visit you, some sisters and brothers, and sit around for a weekend and chat, talk, listen to them. That’s one thing. See if they have any suggestions.

What else can you do? Well, let’s hope that the brother I mentioned, or some other brother whom the Lord has raised up since then, will come and hold a weekend meeting with you - once, probably, in all our lives. Once. Gosh, Gene, that’s sure not much. Well, that’s true, but other things can then begin to happen, and that is, you can begin moving toward church life. What I’m about to prescribe, I’m not chiseling in stone, but I will tell you that it works.

Before I tell you the rest of this, I’d better give an introduction here, an explanation as to why I’m saying this. And again, somebody might feel just a little bit uncomfortable. Normally speaking, there are exceptions. Women have a natural instinct for the church; men do not. Some women have to be broken in this matter, but all men do. Let me explain to you that men are very much in their heads, not their hearts. Generally speaking, they do not have a sensitivity to spiritual things, certainly not in comparison to the sisters. Head knowledge of the Scripture they can give to you all day long. Pretty well attached to the thinking that has predominated the Christian faith since the Plymouth Brethren set up a way of thinking toward the Scripture back in the 1830s, and began in the 1880s to dominate our thinking, and today is part of our Bible schools and seminaries all over the world. That is not Scripture, but it is a pattern of verses sewn together that, for some reason, has been accepted as the teachings on major subjects.

What are you talking about, Gene? Oh, the place of a woman in the church. Man, that looks like...Gene, it says, right here...no, it doesn’t. No, you’ve overlooked one little word. In fact, you’ve overlooked one little letter. And elders, it says, yeah, but you haven’t put that in its context, brother. You’ve only put it together with verses sewn together and reason introduced, but not in its great context, chronological sweep, not in the panoramic view of that marvelous story from beginning to end. No. Brothers love to study the Scripture for what they can find in it, and they like to talk about it. They like to reason with one another, but most of all, they like to

philosophize in brothers' meetings. And they can...they just have a hard time. There's testosterone in brothers' meetings flowing deep and wide, with brothers jockeying for positions, and brothers resenting those who are taking a leadership role. I want to repeat that really slowly.

Brothers get together, and leaders naturally rise. Those who are quiet don't care about leading. Those who are introverts, those who don't do those things, where the introverts are extroverts, begin to resent you, brother. And troubles a-brewing. Troubles a-brewing.

I'm going to make several recommendations to save you from a lot of pain. One: Let the sisters begin the Church of Jesus Christ. Not because it's scriptural, just because it works. We're 2,000 years away, and these are things that help. One: All the women get together and have a weekend together. Now, I'm coming back to this question. Is the group cohesive enough to actually put together a weekend retreat for all the sisters? The answer to that is no, unless you are so challenged by it that you just prove me wrong. Generally speaking, the sisters cannot get together to plan a weekend, but that's where you are now. That's not where you will be later. There will come a time when I, or some brother, some way, if we had to set the date ourselves, you'd get together.

Okay, so what are we going to do, Gene? Well, you're going to have fun. That's all you're going to do. If you want to pray a little and sing a little, fine, but most of all, you have fun. I always recommend starting on Friday night and having a pillow fight. I recommend that no sister, no matter how strong she is or how much she's into missions or whatever, that every woman walk into that weekend retreat laying down who she is and whatever it is she's pushing, and have a time when everybody can share. Keep it positive. Everybody can sing, and some of you just share your hearts. Have fun, and I would recommend that if the retreat's not too far from somewhere, you cook some of your meals together, but you all go out somewhere. Come back home. Brothers are going to know what you've done. Well, have a meeting where you tell them what you did, and have fun telling them.

I'm going to go ahead and push this a little further. I want to tell you, brothers, that you're going to lose some territory when the sisters begin to become a cohesive group of believers. You're going to lose territory. You're not afraid of your wife, or maybe you are. You might want to rethink that proposition. Brothers in the churches come to really respect, not the sister, but the sisters, because the sisters begin to have something together. It's just a very, very near unbelievable and unspeakable and unfathomable, it's almost magic, and it's called sisterhood.

They begin to take care of one another. They take care of one another in homes and share one another's burdens. They begin to not tolerate abusiveness on the part of any male toward any

one sister. Brothers, beware. You will not get away with a few of the abusive things that you may be doing. There are some sisters with broken hearts who are really hurting. Sisters have a way, after a few years of being built together, of becoming very helpful toward one another and very protective. And woe be to the man who does not care for his wife as Christ cared for the church.