

The Ecclesiology of Gene Edwards

Geir Lie

There are a number of individuals and groups characterized by a combined doctrinal affinity towards Holiness (i.e. Keswickian) anthropology and Plymouth Brethren ecclesiology. One individual who rightfully belongs within this sparsely researched category is the American Gene Edwards, despite his wrongfully claiming of himself:

Christians outside of the organized church run in two very definite strands. One of them is a Pentecostal (i.e., the successor of the Holiness movement) strand. The other one is very much a Plymouth Brethren type strand. I know of no other major lines of thinking outside the organized church. I would like for you to very definitely know that I follow neither one of those categories.¹

Edwards not only praises the Plymouth Brethren's emphasis on 'simple meeting with no clergy present' during its early years prior to Darby's success in transforming the movement into 'a Bible teaching movement'. In spite of the fact (according to Edwards) that genuine 'church life' hereby was choked, Darby and the other Bible teachers among the Brethren are described as 'among the greatest teachers in church history. They have virtually no peers. What those lay-people listened to as they sat out there on those chairs was some of the greatest stuff since the Apostles.'²

Edwards was born on 18 July 1932, the son of an illiterate oil-field worker and a teacher, and he grew up in Texas as a Southern Baptist: 'My grandmothers on both sides, my mother and my father were all Southern Baptists. [...] I became a Baptist when I was 6 or 7 at First Baptist Church in Bay City, Texas.'³

1. Gene Edwards, letter to the author, dated 28.04.1997.

2. Gene Edwards, *Our Mission* (Augusta, Maine, 1984), pp.150-51.

3. Gene Edwards, 'Minister to Minister (1).' Taped message from Atlanta, Georgia, 1986 (Auburne, Maine: Message Ministry).

Despite his Christian upbringing, Edwards was not converted until 1950 as a student of Commerce in East Texas State University. In fact, Edwards claims to have enrolled when he was as young as 15-years old.⁴ This is truly remarkable, considering the fact that Edwards, in another context, claims to be handicapped with a severe case of dyslexia.⁵ After graduating from college as an 18-year old, during which he had supported himself 'roughnecking' on the oil fields,⁶ he attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, but his first year in 1951 was spent as an exchange student at Rüslikon Baptist Theological Seminary in Switzerland which was near Zürich.⁷ Edwards further claims to have received his Master's Degree in Theology when he was 22. Simultaneously with his theological studies he pastored the England Grove Baptist Church in Commerce (1954-56) and Tabernacle Baptist Church in Pickton (1957-58).⁸

After having pastored for five years, some four to five years as an itinerant evangelist followed. Edwards was no revivalist, but on the contrary, led 'campaigns in personal evangelism on a large scale, sometimes city-wide'. He trained Christians from the churches which invited him. As a result he claimed: 'The number of believers who went out may have been as many as 1,000.'⁹

In the mean time Edwards had relocated to Tyler, Texas. During the rare occasions when he was home, he gathered around himself a group of some ten individuals who studied Watchman Nee's classic, *The Normal Christian Life* (1961). As a direct consequence of reading this book, Edwards claims he decided to leave the 'ministry'. After

4. Gene Edwards and Tom Brandon, *Preventing a Church Split* (Scarborough, Maine, 1987), p.3.

5. 'An Interview with Gene Edwards.'

<http://www.geneedwards.com/autobiography.htm> [accessed May 2006].

6. Gene Edwards, *How We Began* (Santa Barbara, California, n.d.), p.v.

7. Since c.1994 it has relocated to Prague.

8. Bill Sumners (Director of Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives in Memphis, Tennessee), letter to the author, dated 17.02.1995.

9. Edwards, *How We Began.*, p.vii.

several years of suffering from sickness he moved to California, where later he came into contact with some twenty youngsters from Isla Vista in Santa Barbara County. These people were the remains of Campus Crusades for Christ's activities in the area. Edwards chose to take a virtually apostolic responsibility for the young people there:

The students from Isla Vista were looking for direction. They finally invited Gene to come up from L.A. once a month speaking to them. That was the beginning of the Church in I.V.¹⁰

In order to get a better grasp of what really happened in Isla Vista, I would like to examine first Edwards' theology, and in particular his ecclesiology, before returning to his biography. However, certain components pertaining to his history will be touched upon here to the extent to which they throw light on the reasoning behind Edwards' theological conclusions.

Theological basis for Edwards' ecclesiology

Although Edwards' ecclesiology is our main focus, it is nonetheless impossible to comprehend it, if it is not placed within a larger overall understanding.

1. The religious system versus organic church life

In agreement with Brethren-influenced devotional writers such as Watchman Nee (1903-1972),¹¹ Theodore Austin-Sparks (1888-1971)¹² and Witness Lee (1905-1997),¹³ Edwards claims that the concept of 'God's eternal purpose' must be sharply distinguished from the fall and salvation of mankind.

The concept of 'God's eternal purpose', related to humanity's reigning position, must also be seen in the context of Watchman Nee's understanding of *cosmos*—'the world'. Of the various ways in which Nee claims that the New Testament understands *cosmos*, the one

10. Chuck Snekvik, letter to the author, dated 08.03.1996.

11. For the biography of Nee, cf. Angus Kinnear, *The Story of Watchman Nee: Against the tide* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1978).

12. For the biography of Austin-Sparks, cf. Geir Lie, 'T. Austin-Sparks—a brief introduction', *Refleks*, 3-1 (2004), pp.48-52.

13. For the biography of Lee, cf. Geir Lie, 'The ecclesiology of Witness Lee and the 'Local Church' movement,' forthcoming in *Journal of Asian Mission*, 2006.

which is relevant for our present purpose is his definition of ‘worldly affairs’, i.e., ‘the whole circle of worldly goods, endowments, riches, advantages, pleasures, which though hollow and fleeting, stir our desire and seduce us from God, so that they are obstacles to the cause of Christ.’ In Nee’s understanding of *cosmos* it is identified with a fixed system ruled by the devil, albeit ‘from behind the scenes.’¹⁴

Cosmos, according to Nee’s definition, then becomes the antithesis to the Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ:

Politics, education, literature, science, art, law, commerce, music—
such are the things that constitute the cosmos [...] Satan is utilizing
the material world, the things that are in the world, to head
everything up eventually in the kingdom of antichrist.¹⁵

The very opposite to Satan’s organized *cosmos*-rule then is the Kingdom of God, the very substance of God’s eternal purpose, which, in turn, is ‘to have on earth an order of which mankind would be the pinnacle, and which should freely display the character of [God’s] Son.’¹⁶ Satan’s *cosmos*-rule, however, is anchored in, and reflects his characteristics. Salvation in the New Testament sense, consequently, is to escape from an order or a system. Nee proclaims: ‘I am saved *now* out of that whole organized realm which Satan has constructed in defiance of the purpose of God.’¹⁷

This all-penetrating *cosmos*-rule is expressed in uncountable ways: sin, lust of the world, culture, philosophy, and religion. ‘Worldly Christianity’ is said to belong within this latter category, and especially its practical expressions: ‘Wherever the power of natural man dominates, there you have an element in that [worldly] system which is under the direct inspiration of Satan.’¹⁸

Edwards seems to agree with Nee’s cosmology. Referring to Jesus’ confrontation with the tempter in the wilderness after having been

14. Nee, *ibid.*, p.13.

15. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

16. *Ibid.*, p.37.

17. *Ibid.*, p.38.

18. *Ibid.*, p.38.

baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan, Edwards claims, in consistency with Nee, that Jesus recognized Satan's legitimate authority over the earth.¹⁹ A peculiar accentuation in Edwards, which is absent in Nee however, is the 'religious system':

In every city to which we may journey... there you will face a religious system... In Nepal, it may be the religious system formulated by Buddhists; in Afghanistan, one constructed by Moslems; in Rome, a religious system built by Catholics; in East Texas, one built by Baptists; and in Isla Vista, one erected by inter-denominational organizations.²⁰

Theologically, Nee seems to be Edwards' most important provider of theoretical premises through his teachings on Satan's *cosmos*-rule. Edwards identifies the 'religious system' with 'organized religion'. Organization, though, is said to be God-given. However, it was never meant for humanity, but was intended exclusively for the angels in heaven: '*Angels*, if you please, turned around and super-imposed *their* civilization—their systematization, their angelic organizational life, their culture—on *man*.'²¹ The angels seem to represent a lower form of life than us, and were consequently created for the purpose of being subservient to both God and the human race. They were originally subdivided into three equally large divisions, each being led by an archangel. Edwards explains: 'God had set up the original *chain-of-command!* This is a system of "order from the top" that permeates down to the lower levels.'²²

Lucifer, one of the three archangels, rebelled and was together with his legions thrown out of heaven. In his search for a new home they finally arrived at 'the regions around earth.' Edwards tells us that through Lucifer organization and order arrived at our planet: 'Organization was never intended for planet earth. It is an alien thing. It is foreign to earth and to man.'²³ Humanity was created in the image

19. Gene Edwards, *The Divine Romance* (Augusta, Maine, 1984), p.96.

20. Edwards, *Our Mission*, p.81.

21. *Ibid.*, p.83.

22. *Ibid.*, p.84.

23. *Ibid.*, p.85.

of God, in other words, to *reign* in contradistinction to being controlled or organized.²⁴

In his search for historical roots of how humanity became subject to organization, Edwards appeals to secular history. The old Assyrian Empire is declared to be the world's first great power and is referred to as 'the granddaddy of human systematization': 'They were military people and imposed their military organizational pattern on every country, city and person they captured.'²⁵ The Babylonians, however, conquered the Assyrian Empire. 'Now Babylon was also a military dictatorship, so every facet of human life was set up like the army itself ... chain-of-command. This was man in angelic order!'²⁶

The Babylonian Empire was not destined to endure. Following the Babylonian Empire came the Medo-Persian Empire, led by Darius the Great (521-486 BC). In order to emphasize the latter empire's influence on the surrounding nations, as far as organization and structure are concerned, Edwards leans on historian D.C. Trueman in her Canadian high school textbook:

The Persians made two outstanding contributions to the ancient world: The organization of their empire, and their religion... The system of imperial administration was inherited by Alexander the Great, adopted by the Roman Empire, and eventually bequeathed to modern Europe.²⁷

Not only our modern, secular civilization, but also the current 'religious system' is our heritage from Darius and the Old Medo-Persian Empire, who, in turn, were influenced by the Babylonians. In his search for how organization further developed on planet earth, Edwards again leans on Trueman. This time she 'sheds light' on how the Roman Empire subjected itself towards Lucifer's organizational structure:

24. This sounds like a version of American individualism and dislike of 'big government'. Therefore it could be an example of how encultured his message is.

25. Edwards, *Our Mission*, p.86.

26. *Ibid.*

27. D.C. Trueman and J.H. Trueman, *The Pageant of the Past: The Origins of Civilization* (Toronto, 1965), p.105, quoted in Edwards, *Our Mission*, p.87.

The church modelled its administration units [!] on Roman political subdivisions, and in time the successors of St. Peter, the bishop of Rome, came to exercise a certain authority so that the church, like the Empire, had its chain of command and carefully linked administrations. No other religion could boast such a complete and efficient organization.²⁸

Just in the same manner as the Messianic Kingdom of God in Nee's writings is presented as the antithesis to Satan's *cosmos*-rule, Edwards emphasizes the church, the 'Body of Christ', as the antithesis to our organized civilization:

The church was, and is, anti-world system. The church is *not* an organization. The church is anti-establishment. She does not operate by chain-of-command. The church is the one thing Lucifer doesn't head. Jesus Christ is *direct* Head of His Church, His Body.²⁹

During the first two hundred years, Edwards assures us, the history of the Church was in direct accordance with the purpose of God. Being the 'Head' of 'every member' within the 'Body of Christ', God interacted with each and every member. Just as is the case in a family, the church also is 'a living entity', as 'every person reports to the head' without having to contact God by way of 'chain-of-command'. However, the golden age of the Church, was to be short lived. Under Emperor Constantine the Christian religion became one of the public recognized religions and was supported financially: 'As these events evolved the church gradually took on the organizational structure of all other departments in the Roman system.'³⁰ The hierarchical structure with priest at the bottom, next bishop, archbishop, cardinal and emperor was, according to Edwards, 'purely Babylonian.'³¹

28. Trueman, *The Pageant of the Past*, p.311, quoted in Edwards, *ibid.*, p.88.

29. Edwards, *ibid.*, p.90.

30. *Ibid.*, p.93.

31. Edwards also quotes the lapsed Catholic writer Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization, volume III, Caesar and Christ. A History of Roman Civilization and of Christianity from their beginnings to A.D. 325*, 17th printing (New York, 1944), pp. 671-72 (Edwards' reference to pp.670-71 is not correct): 'When Christianity conquered Rome, the ecclesiastical structure of [paganism], the title and vestments of the pontifex maximus, the worship of Great Mother ... passed like maternal

When the Roman Empire collapsed the succeeding European national states were organized as the former Roman Empire in miniature. Until the Reformation the Catholic faith was the only public religion within each and every national state, but even the Reformation left the ‘chain-of-command’ concept *un*-changed: ‘The structure of all great denominations today are exact replicas of the organizational structure of the Catholic Church, of the Roman Empire, of Greece, Persia, Babylon, and angels!’³² Edwards’ judgment is not exclusively meant for liturgical churches, but is also intended for the Pentecostal-charismatic churches and the various ‘non-profit, non-denominational religious organization[s].’ ‘My dear brother,’ Edwards admonishes, ‘denominations and tax exempt religious movements are all organizations. That is *all* they are ... no more. *Religious* organizations. These things are *not* the Bride of Christ.’³³ Modern Christendom is characterized as ninety-nine percent organization and one percent ‘church life’.³⁴

Organic church life, the antithesis to the ‘religious system’, has no opportunity of survival within organizational structures according to Edwards. He feels he has a lifelong calling to re-establish the genuine church life which existed during the first 200 years of the history of the Church. The main hindrance to this reestablishment, however, is the very system itself. According to Edwards there lies within the structure of each organization much to oppose Christians who refuse to submit to Lucifer’s hierarchical structure:

Be it Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, organized Judaism or organized Christianity . . . at the very least, it is the tendency of religious organizations to oppose Christians who refuse to organize.³⁵

Fortunately, I might say, Edwards is sufficiently realistic to recognize the futility of attempting to *completely* escape the ‘world

blood into the new religion, and captive Rome captured her conqueror’, Edwards, *ibid.*, pp.102-3.

32. Edwards, *ibid.*, p.88.

33. *Ibid.*, p.96.

34. *Ibid.*, p.99.

35. *Ibid.*, p.104.

system'. Also Edwards' disciples are called to a life *within* this world. He adds, though: 'But there is one system inside the world system we should stay as far away from as we can get: we should stay out of the *religious system*. Not help it, not feed it, not encourage it—yet not fight it, either. Just ignore it.'³⁶

2. *Non-theological basis for Edwards' ecclesiology*

With his point of departure in his own Church History 'research', Edwards claims that despite publicly stated reasons, schism within Christendom is never theologically motivated.³⁷ If Edwards were to be correct, the consequence would then be (and is probably correct in this particular case, as well) that Edwards' own rejection of organized Christianity lacks original basis in theological reflection. Does Nee's Brethren-influenced ecclesiology in hindsight serve as legitimization of Edwards' withdrawal and resignation from the 'religious system'? That is the assertion of the current writer.

If we delve into the various books and pamphlets by Edwards, we find that he has had several negative encounters with Christianity 'in its organized form', encounters which definitely have coloured his present ecclesiology. As a 9-year-old, still living in Bay City, he experienced a traumatic split in the local Baptist church that he and his family attended:

Seared in my mind forever is the scene of a Wednesday night business session. All I knew is that there was some sort of dispute, and Christians were going at one another tongue and lip. My mother, Gladys by name, tried to stand and say something but instead managed only to break into tears. That night, before the eyes of a nine year old kid, the church split.³⁸

In spite of her Baptist convictions, Gladys 'led her two boys over to the First Christian Church, there to continue the family's religious life.'³⁹ Because of a new church split shortly thereafter, Gladys experienced a nervous breakdown and from then on never set foot in a

36. *Ibid.*, p.105.

37. *Ibid.*, p.i.

38. Edwards and Brandon, *Preventing a Church Split*, pp.1-2.

39. *Ibid.*

church building. As a 13-year-old Edwards' family relocated to Cleveland, Texas, where he allegedly experienced another church split, once more in a Baptist church. Two years later the Edwards family moved to Commerce, where the church had just dismissed their former pastor. Afterwards, as a 17-year-old, Edwards was converted and, together with several hundred others, recruited to church. The promising evangelical results, however, were not sufficient to undo the ever-increasing dissatisfaction. The pastor resigned, and Edwards witnessed another traumatic schism.⁴⁰ We will take a closer look at this one.

Edwards' conversion experience seems to have taken place in the context of a youth revival among college students:

I was converted to Christ during my junior year in college. At that very time a revival was sweeping America. It is sometimes referred to as the post-war revival. [...] Perhaps the major outcome of that revival was the beginning of acceptance of the interdenominational Christian organizations. The Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ, Youth for Christ, Young Life—all came into prominence and acceptance at that time.⁴¹

Not only did Edwards transfer his membership to the local Baptist church, but he also joined the 'Baptist student fellowship near campus.'⁴² After 'the Baptist Student Director married a Baptist minister' and the 'Baptist Union was suddenly left without a Director', some twenty young people at the age of 18 or 19 began to gather together for fellowship or, as Edwards would call it, 'We were having a spontaneous experience of church life':

The summer after my conversion the Lord came and visited that group of about 20 college kids; it was a time so glorious that even now—30 years later—the remembrance of it still brings chills and tears. That visitation lasted three months, with an afterglow that lasted about a year.⁴³

40. *Ibid.*, pp.2-7.

41. Edwards, *Our Mission*, pp.ii-iii.

42. Gene Edwards, *The Inward Journey* (Goleta, California, 1982), p.5.

43. *Ibid.*

Their natural spontaneity, however, disappeared at exactly the same moment that the new student leader was hired. How important was emotional disappointment as a contributor to the later theoretical construction which would be conceptualized as the 'religious system'? Edwards was chosen as the spokesman to approach the female student leader. But he paid a price for this role:

A few weeks later they chose offices for the Baptist students for the coming school year. And there must be a hundred offices and there were only 25 people. And some of us had one, two, three, four, and five offices. And there was one who didn't get a single office. I bet you can't guess who it was! 17 years old and that was my first encounter with [the 'religious system'].⁴⁴

Later, during his school year as an exchange student in Switzerland, Edwards took 'courses on Anabaptist history.' What he learned during this freshman's course (despite his dyslexia), resulted in his '[coming] out of [the Seminary] knowing [Anabaptist history] about as well as a human could know it.'⁴⁵ The American teenager immediately felt a spiritual affinity towards the Reformation's radicals and felt that these, just like himself, 'didn't belong in the religious system.'⁴⁶ His scepticism towards organized Christendom hardly decreased after he returned to Southwestern after a year and had his missionary application turned down.

Edwards' rejection of Christendom in its organized form is perhaps most strongly expressed in his novel *The Early Church*.⁴⁷ By writing the novel, the author's intention was to lead his readers towards a decision regarding two mutually exclusive alternatives: firstly continuous practice of our current form of Christianity; or secondly total rejection of it where one seeks God in earnest in order to start from scratch and with Him.⁴⁸ Edwards draws attention to the fact that it is not so much the Christian faith as its practice which he finds

44. *Ibid.*

45. Edwards, 'Minister to Minister (1).'

46. *Ibid.*

47. Goleta, California: Christian Books, 1974.

48. Edwards, *The Early Church* (Goleta, California, 1974), p.1.

repulsive: ‘What Christians today believe about the Lord, the Scripture, salvation, etc. is correct and beautiful. But what present day Christians have been led to practice is an abomination!’⁴⁹

As Edwards’ reputation as an evangelist grew, he received invitations to ‘the inner machinery of several religious organizations and denominational headquarters’, in order to assist them to ‘work out a program in personal evangelism.’⁵⁰ Gradually it dawned on him that something was fundamentally wrong with our current Christianity:

I used to come home to Tyler,⁵¹ Texas and go to church on a rare free Sunday. I sat in the balcony and watched the choir, the pastor and the bored young people who also sat in the balcony. *This* was Christianity. This was the expression of the living Lord on earth. I was torn to pieces. I finally arrived at a point that I could no longer bear it. I got to the point that I just couldn’t go to church any more. [...] I simply could not stand the death and the sheer boredom of church any longer.⁵²

Eventually he came to feel that ‘*everything* was dead!’ and that ‘there is no hope for that thing I understood to be the church—not as it exists today.’⁵³

In 1960 Edwards was asked to criss-cross the U.S. in order to interview Christian leaders with political or religious positions in society.⁵⁴ He accepted the task ‘sandwiching it in between personal evangelism campaigns.’⁵⁵ His new employers shared a vision about ‘saving the nation’ by placing Christian leaders in political key positions. Edwards however, who thought he had seen the implications of modern Christianity, felt that such a solution would just ‘accelerate the disaster.’⁵⁶

49. *Ibid.*, p.2.

50. *Ibid.*, p.viii.

51. Edwards had apparently relocated once again, this time to Tyler, Texas.

52. Edwards, *How We Began*, pp.ix-x.

53. *Ibid.*, p.viii.

54. Edwards, ‘Minister to Minister (1).’

55. Edwards, *How We Began*, p.x.

56. *Ibid.*, p.xi.

That same year a Presbyterian by the name of Howard Pue called together in the city of Philadelphia some twenty to thirty of the nation's 'key Christian leaders'. The goal of this gathering was to discuss possible measures in order to 'save America' from moral and spiritual decay. Each individual was asked to deliver a fifteen minutes speech about what Christians might do in order to 'save America'. The meeting is described by Edwards as 'a real Christian's 'Who's Who.''⁵⁷ Edwards had Lemuel Nelson Bell (Billy Graham's father-in-law) on his one side and the founder of the National Association of Evangelicals on the other. Edwards himself was shocked by the suggested solutions which were delivered, such as more personal Bible studies among Christians, a refrain Edwards had heard since he was 17-years old.⁵⁸

Mr. Bell, who more or less represented his son in-law, was asked to initiate the deliveries, which meant that Edwards would be last man out:

By afternoon, when they got to me, I was out of the religious system. I knew that if what I was seeing and hearing was the best that Christians had to offer this earth, if these were *the* giants, and these were their answers, then there wasn't any hope for the church as we understand it in this age.⁵⁹

Edwards still rose up and gave *his* plan on how to 'save America' 'from top to bottom.' Unfortunately, he writes, he gave up his own plan in the midst of his delivery 'because at that moment [he] didn't think [America] worth saving.'⁶⁰

3. *More on Edwards' ecclesiology*

Just as important as the *basis* (theological and non-theological) for Edwards' ecclesiology are his teachings *per se* on the New Testament *ekklesia*. In the following paragraphs I will take a closer look at Edwards' understanding of the calling and function of the 'genuine church', both towards its own age and ages to come. I will also touch

57. *Ibid.*

58. Edwards, 'Minister to Minister (1)'.

59. Edwards, *How We Began*, p.xi.

60 Edwards, 'Minister to Minister (1)'.

upon Edwards' understanding of what needs to take place before believers may legitimately categorize their fellowship as a 'church'. As previously in this paper, I will continue to draw on relevant occurrences in Edwards' life in order to, if not anything else, at least *suggest* on what basis Edwards' conclusions are drawn.

Church historians have traditionally divided Christians into Protestants and Catholics, but Edwards identifies with a so-called *third* category which tends to be mentioned only in the Church historians' footnotes: Christians who have decided to be separate from 'organized religion' and who have existed within every century since 325 A.D. Edwards does not refer to one specific group, nor an unbroken apostolic succession as far as 'organic church life' is concerned.⁶¹

These little groups have been there in *every* age of Church history.

They have been called by dozens of different names. They stand as a witness to the simplicity of faith in Jesus Christ.⁶²

At least indirectly inspired by the Plymouth Brethren, Edwards promotes the view that God had a specific job to be done on earth which was carried out by a numerically insignificant people who were hand-picked from among God's original people:

[God's] work was usually small, His people usually nameless. His work with each group, you might say, was short-lived. [...] God would use that group for forty to eighty years, perhaps a hundred.

During *that* time *He* had His people ... and as the light faded in that group, God moved on to work again, somewhere else.⁶³

From 315 to 1517 A.D. we exclusively hear about small groups who spread tiny flashes of light into a dark world. From the Reformation onwards however, these small groups composed of people of God, according to Edwards, are not only called to be lightbearers, but to *restore* God's standard.⁶⁴ Edwards also claims that every new group which God has appointed, seems to have been aware of which former

61. Edwards, *Our Mission*, pp.3-4.

62. *Ibid.*, p.4

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

group God 'removed the candlestick' from so that *they* might carry on the work God initiated within his former people:

Turn around and look back. Who do you see first? The ones who stand out the most in the recent past are the Little Flock. But a line can be traced. The Little Flock took the banner from the Brethren. Prior to them we know the Moravians seized the banner from a people called the United Brethren. They in turn got it from the Hussites and the Waldensians.⁶⁵

With reference to what is on God's programme now that God has allegedly removed the 'candlestick' from Watchman Nee's Little Flock assemblies, Edwards concludes:

What [God] desires now is what He desired in the first century: the church ... practical, locatable and rich in its daily outworking. Yet the very thing God wants does not exist today! It has been lost. You have never experienced true church life.⁶⁶

Simultaneously with leaving the ministry due to the new insights gleaned from Watchman Nee's book *The Normal Christian Life*, Edwards also dissociated himself from the 'religious system'. 'I am out of it, and I will be out forever by the mercy of God,' he claims.⁶⁷

He did not know, though, that there were Christians outside of 'organized Christianity'. Desperately he attempted to locate Christians who 'knew the Lord'. In Louisville, Kentucky he met a former missionary to China, Ms. Beta Sheirich (1893-1967)⁶⁸ who was in her early 70s. She was actively involved in a Christian fellowship with spiritual roots which reached back to T. Austin-Sparks in England.⁶⁹ Edwards immediately felt a closeness towards the elderly woman, whom having withdrawn her membership from the Methodist church, wrote home to her supporters in the U.S. asking them to cease all their

65. *Ibid.*, p.18.

66. Edwards, *The Early Church*, p.4.

67. Edwards, *How We Began*, p.xii.

68. Cf. Nancy Mays Price, *On the Cutting Edge. A history of the Louisville Conference United Methodist Women 1878-1984* [Published by the author, 1984], 103. Cf. also *Thy Hand Hath Provided. A Historical Rhapsody in Five Movements* [Franklin, Tennessee, 1996], p.83.

69. Gene Edwards, phone conversation with the author, dated 31.01.1996.

financial support. She then left for Shanghai and established a closer connection to Elisabeth Fischbacher and Mary Jones, China Inland Mission workers. After she returned to the U.S., she started praying that God would raise up a similar movement in her own country that He had done under Watchman Nee's ministry in China. Sheirich continuously prayed that God would 'send workers to America to raise up the life of the church.'⁷⁰ Edwards, he claims, was one of three individuals whom she continuously held up in prayer.

Shortly afterwards Edwards participated at a Christian conference where he 'consecrated himself to the Lord and to His church.' During these days he became sick and returned home. After a few days he felt well again and participated at another conference where he again was knocked out by the same sickness. He was sent home to Tyler by plane, and was bedridden for a whole year.⁷¹

Gene Edwards versus Witness Lee

All newly-established churches we read about in the New Testament, the church in Antioch included, came into being by groups of Christians from an already existing church breaking up from their domicile and relocating to a new town or city.⁷² In spite of the fact that Edwards challenges the legitimacy of having church leaders who have not grown up within the geographical boundaries of the church, this does not seem to have caused problems within the early church. With the Antioch church as a valid exception, the remaining churches were all primarily Jewish. Their members were recruited exclusively from the Jerusalem church, which in its entirety consisted of Judeo-Christians.⁷³

Possibly as a hidden critique of Watchman Nee's radical successor Witness Lee, who had left the Far East and relocated to Los Angeles in 1961 where he initiated the 'Local church' movement, Edwards

70. Edwards, 'Minister to Minister (1)'.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Edwards, *The Early Church*, p.193.

73. *Ibid.*, p.139.

states: '[...] the apostles are a very dominating factor; therefore they *must* be from the local area, or the church turns out peculiar, not fitting the nation it is in.'⁷⁴ If the twelve New Testament apostles should have been Indians or Japanese, Edwards continues, the newly established churches within Judea, after the Jerusalem church was scattered in 38 A.D., would never have matched its surrounding local community.

In 1963, as Edwards was visiting with 'Bill' Bright at Campus Crusade for Christ's headquarters in Arrowhead Springs, San Bernardino, California, he heard that one of Watchman Nee's co-labourers was in the U.S. Edwards attended a meeting with Witness Lee which made an indelible impression on him. Edwards still lived in Tyler, Texas, but his sickness required a change of climate. During August 1965 he took his family with him and moved to California. He soon sought out Witness Lee's group which at the time counted some thirty or forty individuals. On 1st September that same year a group consisting of six persons, Edwards included, left for the Far East. Edwards' encounter with the Little Flock churches, however, was a disappointment. Men and women were sitting on separate sides in the building; the women had their hair rolled up in a bun, and the leaders ruled the assemblies with unlimited control. Edwards' former idyllic mental picture of the Little Flock's continued faithfulness to genuine church life, had to be powerfully adjusted: 'I saw Plymouth Brethrenism with a Chinese face on it'⁷⁵ Edwards confided in one of the men he was travelling with. Except for the Chinese Christians' love, he did not want anything else reproduced in the U.S.⁷⁶ This conversation did not remain between the two, however, because when Edwards returned to the U.S., he was more or less excommunicated from Lee's group which he had begun to attend five to six weeks before the journey to the Far East.

74. *Ibid.*

75. Edwards, 'Minister to Minister (2)'. Taped message from Atlanta, Georgia, 1986 (Auburne, Maine: Message Ministry).

76. Edwards, phone interview with the author, dated 30.01.1996.

Apostles and non-predicatability

A restoration of authentic 'church life' is imperative. The first step along this way, according to Edwards, is a restoration of the ministry of the apostle.⁷⁷ In contradistinction to our current Bible schools or theological seminaries, Christians in the early Church were 'educated' through many years of participation in genuine 'church life', through daily interaction with, and observation of the apostles.⁷⁸ Edwards states: 'Men of God were prepared just by being in church life [...] In the church those men got more training, and better training, than *anyone* in the twentieth century has ever received.'⁷⁹ 'Apostles,' he continues, 'not seminary professors, are who young men called of God are supposed to sit under.'⁸⁰

Although God is the one who equips some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists or elders, Edwards is still clear that the Bible doesn't distinguish between clergy and laity. Particularly the modern function as a pastor is hard for him to swallow: '[...] there is not so much as one passage of Scripture in all the New Testament to justify the modern-day pastoral practice.'⁸¹

Structure and 'predictability' seem to constitute the very antithesis to organic 'Church life'. Edwards himself claims to belong to 'a wholly unstructured fellowship of believers.' 'We have absolutely no idea,' he continues, 'what we will be doing a month from now; where we will meet; what we will do *when* we meet; how many meetings

77. Edwards, *The Early Church*, p.14.

78. This primarily applied to the Jerusalem church. The Pauline churches only benefited from the apostle's presence for a brief period.

79. Edwards, *The Early Church*, p.44.

80. *Ibid.*, p.45. Edwards may have modified his views since *The Early Church* (1974). In *The Divine Romance* (Augusta, Maine, 1984) he writes under 'acknowledgement' p. xi: 'While a student at the Baptist Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, my favourite teacher was Dr. John Allen Moore—our professor of church history... I find myself now doubly in debt to him, first for igniting a still-burning fire in me for a love of church history, and now for the time he gave in reading this manuscript and advising me.'

81. Edwards, *Preventing a Church Split*, p.44.

there will be next week; or what those meetings are for.’⁸² Such issues are dealt with on a weekly basis. And if they find out that they are tired, they simply do not get together until further notice.⁸³ When the church in actuality *is* church, in other words, a local expression of Christ, Edwards claims that it is ‘too alive, elastic and on-going to follow a locked-in schedule week after week.’⁸⁴

The brief visit in Asia, where they primarily visited churches indirectly bearing the fruit of Watchman Nee’s ministry,⁸⁵ would forever influence Edwards. He claims: ‘I may have seen the only genuine organic expression of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ on this planet.’⁸⁶ This local expression of ‘genuine church life’ purportedly took place in Toyama, Japan. Several university students had been won to Christ through the testimony of white missionaries. However, the missionaries had only been able to meet with the young people for a couple of weeks before they returned to the U.S. The Japanese students heard that there was a Christian conference to be arranged somewhere in the Far East and they managed to gather sufficient money in order to send out two individuals to it, which, it turned out, lasted for six months. After six months the two Japanese individuals returned to their remaining thirty-five to forty friends. Subsequently the Japanese students came together on a regular basis for seven years, according to Edwards, ‘without any human direction.’

They had then written to Witness Lee’s group in California, and Edwards’ travelling company consequently consisted of some ‘spiritual sightseers’, and some from the local church. Among the latter was a Chinese person, who knew the Japanese language. Edwards arrived in Toyama and ‘stepped off in heaven.’

82. *Ibid.*, p.123.

83. Cf. also Edwards, *The Early Church*, p.40: ‘The early church had a very distinct *tendency* to have two completely different places to meet. (Tendency is the correct word. There was nothing about the early church that was dogmatic. It defied neat categories and rules; it had only *tendencies*.)’

84. *Ibid.*, p.143.

85. Edwards, *How We Began*, p.xv.

86. Edwards, ‘Minister to Minister (2)’.

The Japanese group had been saving money for several months in order to receive and take good care of their foreign visitors. Edwards was absolutely fascinated by the fact that they had managed to retain their Japanese characteristics in their way of practising Christianity: 'Japanese Christianity, pure unadulterated Japanese Christianity expressed in an organic fashion uninfluenced by the Western mind!'⁸⁷ They had written their own lyrics and sang them to Japanese melodies. They began to sing and pray, and many of them shed tears as, in devotedness they expressed their love towards God. Not long afterwards though, the church became part of the local church as they initiated contact with Lee's followers in Taiwan.⁸⁸ According to Edwards, this led to the destruction of the authentic work of God in Toyama. Edwards' thundering speech ends in an ear-splitting crescendo:

And today in Toyama, Japan, they worship in a building and they sit on pews and they sing Western songs! And they've got a pastor who's still preaching to them! What a shame!⁸⁹

In the Jerusalem church the apostles only were doing the preaching. Daily the Church met at Solomon's Porch to listen to them preaching *Christ*, in other words, neither systematic presentation of the Christian faith nor some interpretation of the books of the Old Testament.⁹⁰ A further manner in which the Church came together was through the informal interaction amongst one another, as they practised communal living. Edwards argues that only a few of the three thousand newly converted Christians, on the Day of Pentecost were from Jerusalem with all the others being diaspora Jews. As all the first believers decided to stay in Jerusalem The few who already lived there opened their homes to the others,⁹¹ with the Jerusalem communal living model lasted from 30 to 38 A.D.

87. *Ibid.*

88. Edwards, phone conversation with the author, dated 30.01.1996.

89. Edwards, 'Minister to Minister (2)'.

90. Edwards, *The Early Church*, pp.45-48.

91. *Ibid.*, p.34.

The Antioch church, however, seems to have broken with the communal living tradition of the Jerusalem church and the Judean church. Instead, Edwards claims, they chose to move closer to fellow believers. Through this, the Church was represented by ‘clusters scattered here and there all over the city.’⁹² The discontinuity with the ‘Jerusalem tradition’ was attributed to the fact that the need for communal living was non-existent from the very beginning. All the Christians there already lived in Antioch and there was no need to open up one’s home for diaspora Jews as had been the situation in Jerusalem.

If the ministry of the apostle is a prerequisite for the initiation of ‘organic church life’,⁹³ Edwards still claims that it is exclusively through ‘daily experienc[ing] the life of Christ with [one’s] brothers and sisters’⁹⁴ that the remaining ministry gifts gradually can come into function. And if Edwards’ rejection of non-local apostles is really intended as a rejection of Witness Lee, Edwards’ own church building activities are presented as more or less the only church work within the U.S. today which measures up. However, Edwards is also negative in his description of the emergence of the ministry of the apostle within his own sphere as he feels it took years for leaders to emerge in the primitive church rather than the contemporary model of forcing the exercise of gifts.⁹⁵

Probably, at least in part, as a rejection of the legitimacy of mainline denominations, Edwards claims: ‘To see what a real elder or a real evangelist is, we must first see a full restoration of true church life.’⁹⁶ ‘What is an evangelist anyway?’ he asks. ‘Who knows? Only by seeing church life restored do we find out!’⁹⁷ The secret of ‘organic

92. *Ibid.*, p.195.

93. ‘Without the full restoration of this office, all other discussion, all other hopes, all other dreams and plans of seeing the church again as it ought to be are meaningless,’ Edwards writes in *ibid.*, p.14.

94. *Ibid.*, p.44.

95. *Ibid.*, p.4.

96. *Ibid.*, p.79.

97. *Ibid.*, p.83.

church life' within the early Church, according to Edwards, is what occurred as a result of the works of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost: '3,000 people sat down for eight years and did nothing; they sat under the Apostles; they were in a practical, visible, attendable church.'⁹⁸ If we want to benefit from their success, we will have to follow their examples: 'Yes, we need the experience of Pentecost today ... desperately. Men need to sit down in church life doing nothing for eight years.'⁹⁹ Edwards pokes fun at the term 'going to church': 'There was no such thing in the first century as going to church. Church was not a place, but a way of life.'¹⁰⁰ The first Christians did not go to church. They *were* the Church!

Gene Edwards versus Jon Braun

A rather exciting chapter in Edwards' ministry was his church-building activities in Isla Vista, California, referred to above. We have previously seen that Edwards' ecclesiology is influenced by Watchman Nee. However, Edwards is definitely not the only American whose ecclesiological views have been shaped by Nee, not least within Campus Crusades for Christ, founded by 'Bill' Bright in 1951, in which several of the top leaders were fascinated by Nee. In the late 1960s, however, Bright's organization suffered a significant turnover of leaders.¹⁰¹ One of those who broke away, Jon Braun, had wanted to transform the organization into a church. According to Bright, within this same period, Braun began to stress a radical form of antinomianism: '*whatever* smacked of legalism—like having standards, or training people in a certain structure—was resisted.'¹⁰²

Another one of those who broke away from the Crusades, Peter Gillquist, gives the following explanation for the schism:

98. *Ibid*, p.88.

99. *Ibid*.

100. *Ibid*, p.107.

101. Richard Quebedeaux, *I Found It! The Story of Bill Bright and Campus Crusade* (San Francisco, California, 1979), p.24..

102. *Ibid.*, p.26.

Our particular group was built around the spiritual gift of evangelism, and it's a great gift. But, you see, the only thing Jesus ever established as an expression of Himself to the world was His body of believers called the church. Instead of being centered around Christ we were centered around the evangelization of mankind.¹⁰³

Closer investigation reveals that the schism was not the result of the fact that Campus Crusade did not want to become a *new* church, meaning one more in addition to those already existing. Gillquist asserts a mainline Christian denomination meets 'together under a common denominator other than Jesus Christ.'¹⁰⁴ In hindsight he criticizes the Crusade's individualistic understanding of becoming a Christian as merely 'inviting Jesus Christ into your life and endeavouring to serve him.'¹⁰⁵ Later on, the study of Watchman Nee's books served as a reminder that 'the Church has got to play a prominent role in the whole matter of being a Christian.'¹⁰⁶

Each summer all staff members would gather at their headquarters in Arrowhead Springs, close to San Bernardino, California. These get-togethers served as a welcome opportunity for area and regional directors to meet, share experiences and strengthen friendships. Gillquist writes more than thirty years later:

It seemed as we would open the Scriptures together, the Holy Spirit would speak to us as one man, constantly drawing us to the mercy of God—and back to the Church. 'Why aren't we the Church?' we would ask. 'Here in the New Testament, the only thing Jesus ever

103. Peter Gillquist, *Farewell to the fake I.D. An extraordinary handbook for spiritual survival in our pressurized society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1971), p.110.

104. Peter Gillquist, *Love is now*, 5th printing (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1971), p.109.

105. Peter Gillquist, letter to the author, dated 07.01.1997.

106. *Ibid.* Nee's influence within the Jesus Movement is indubitable. Cf. C.F.H. Henry, 'Footnotes. Sharper Focus on Watchman Nee,' *Christianity Today*, May 9 1975, p.31.

started was the Church.’ We loved what we were doing, but in the Book of Acts it was the Church, not the parachurch.¹⁰⁷

The summer of 1966 became a turning point, as Ballew and Gillquist, and sometimes also Gordon Walker, met every morning in order to have breakfast and study the Bible together. ‘That summer,’ Gillquist writes, ‘we became convinced that whatever form it took, ultimately we would have to become a Church.’¹⁰⁸ Both Gillquist and Braun handed in their resignations in February 1968. That same summer they gathered together a growing amount of Crusade deserters, rented a Lutheran church building in La Jolla (California) and lectured on ‘the New Testament church’ according to how they at the time pictured it to be.¹⁰⁹

During springtime 1969 Gillquist moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and got a job at Memphis State University. He was immediately introduced to some fifteen to twenty ‘non-aligned Christian students’ who did not feel at home in any of the already existing Christian student organizations. After having arrived at a more or less identical vision regarding the restoration of New Testament ‘Church life, they decided to come together for meetings in Gillquist’s home every Sunday night.¹¹⁰

In accordance with Watchman Nee, Gillquist at the time criticized schism among Christians as a result of divergent doctrinal views and he felt ‘something beautiful’ was taking place on American college campuses where students were ‘spontaneously’ forming small cells, often baptizing and taking the Lord’s supper.¹¹¹ Gordon Walker shared the idealization of ‘pure Christianity’,¹¹² and he relocated to Mansfield, Ohio, where he established Grace Haven Farm, a Christian

107. Peter Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox. A Journey to the Ancient Christian Faith* (Ben Lomond, California, , 1992), p.15.

108. *Ibid.*, p.16.

109. *Ibid.*, p.18.

110. *Ibid.*, p.20.

111. Gillquist, *Love is now*, p.113.

112. Ronald M. Enroth, Edward E. Ericson and C. Breckinridge Peters, *The Story of the Jesus People. A Factual Survey* (Exeter, 1972), p.137.

commune recruiting 'ex-addicts, depressed preachers, reformed revolutionaries, and deserters of the Crusade's army.'¹¹³

Ballews had tried to establish a 'New Testament church' in Atlanta, Georgia, but had had far less success than his 'musketeers' in Mansfield and Memphis. He therefore moved to the Santa Barbara area in order to be part of what was once Campus Crusade's work at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB).¹¹⁴

During 1969, once again several of the 'come outers' were gathered at Lake Arrowhead. One of the ex-leaders of Campus Crusade, Ray Nethery, knew Gene Edwards, who, just like themselves, voiced a restoration of 'New Testament Church life'. Edwards was invited to Lake Arrowhead in order to preach to the 'come-outers' gathered there. One of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) student leaders, Lance Thollander, was present and invited Edwards to a weekend conference, where the latter was spontaneously asked to preach at one of the meetings.¹¹⁵ Edwards' message was taped, duplicated and spread far and wide.

Several college students from Isla Vista soon contacted Edwards in order for him to undertake a position of leadership with them. This was the beginning of what became a church fellowship, which was to last for some ten years. People from Eugene, Oregon; Mansfield, Memphis; and Atlanta, Georgia chose to move to Isla Vista in order to be part of the group. Jon Braun and Richard Ballew arrived as early as 1970. After about a year it came to a schism between Braun/Ballew and Edwards, and more than fifty percent of the 220 believers within the group disappeared. According to Braun, the schism was attributed to his and Ballew's refusal to endorse Edwards' alleged modalism:

Further, his doctrine of Christ was clearly a form of extreme monophysitism, i.e., he taught that in the incarnation the humanity and deity we[re] co-mingled, each losing its distinctiveness: There

113. *Ibid.*, p.141.

114. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox*, p.22.

115. Chuck Snekvik, letter to the author, dated 08.03.1996.

were other problems as well, particularly with regard to salvation.¹¹⁶

Edwards, naturally, has another version and presents a caricature of Braun's 'grace message' which purportedly produced 'swearing, cursing, drunkenness and immorality.'¹¹⁷ The problems emerged, according to Edwards, twelve months after he had chosen to stay away from the church for one entire year:

as more and more of these Christians arrived, there was a definite shift in attitude. Some of them were highly gifted and nationally known leaders. Many were very strong willed. All were hurt. And in it all was still that divisive nature, that bent toward controversy, that boast in past dare-doings ... and, still, under the surface—a predilection to violence, moral license, and, in some, an incredibly vulgar language.¹¹⁸

Gillquist claims that Edwards probably exaggerates his own importance in the Santa Barbara area as far as the establishing of 'New Testament church life' is concerned. Edwards was just one among many who welcomed 'the church'. As the circle around Braun found that firstly Watchman Nee and Witness Lee 'departed from Biblical Christianity' both in their Christology and anthropology;¹¹⁹ and that secondly Edwards 'shared many of the same theological errors of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee,'¹²⁰ many broke away from him.

Gillquist even claims that it was because of Nee, Lee and Edwards' distorted theology that they themselves were drawn towards studying 'the original documents of the early Christian writers.'¹²¹ Further research would unveil that the Orthodox Church allegedly represented

116. Jon Braun, letter to the author, dated 25.02.1997.

117. Edwards, *Our mission*, pp.xiv-xv.

118. *Ibid.*

119. Gillquist in a letter to the author, dated 07.01.1997 lists Nee's beliefs in the co-mingling of the two natures of Christ; the co-mingling of the Holy Spirit with that of the Christian; and the 'crushing of the soul'. Also cf. Jon Braun's unpublished manuscript 'Wounded on Watchman's Knee.'

120. *Ibid.*

121. Gillquist, letter to the author, dated 07.01.1997.

the historical unbroken line of succession from the first apostles of Christ until today. Without delving into further details here, it is sufficient to reveal that the circle surrounding Braun and Gillquist was received into the Orthodox Church in 1987.¹²²

Around 1981-82 Edwards closed down the Isla Vista church, and relocated, for a brief period, to Quebec and then to Portland (Maine). His most loyal adherents moved with him, but most of the others had reached their 30's and were unwilling to follow blindly. Edwards has since relocated to Jacksonville, Florida, where he trains handpicked individuals in order to become church planters.

Edwards has written some thirty books. Several of these are, perhaps unusually, novels, of which *A Tale of Three Kings* (1981), based on the life of King David, and *The Divine Romance* (1984), a life of Christ told from the angels' perspective, would be among the most well-known ones. Due to his use of this popular genre, his devotional writings are cherished by Christians from a variety of church contexts. His ecclesiological books, however, are usually read only by his select followers, who most often meet in house churches.¹²³

Concluding remarks

Edwards has sought to find the reality of 'church life'. His idealism has again and again encountered the reality of humanity's ability to divide over the 'holiest' of issues. In his attempt to find the true church and the reality of Christian experience, he has made the circle smaller and smaller. It seems that Jesus has made the circle very large and invites all who love him to enter in freely. Perhaps he is focused on drawing to himself whosoever will, regardless of the structure or lack of it surrounding their lives. The reality may be that it is not about the outward package after all, but about the loyalty of the heart to him.

122. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox*, pp.165-77.

123. For a list of churches in various countries associated with Edwards, see <http://www.gneedwards.com/churches.htm> [accessed May 2006].