

Regarding my 10 years under Gene Edwards

By Kevin Knox, June 22, 2008

In a small group meeting in my church, I mentioned that I had spent 10 years in a "cult." I then had to apologize for not having mentioned it before, and explain that this is not a fact one usually "leads" with when meeting new brothers and sisters.

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About 2 months ago, I promised a sister in the Lord that I would republish a statement I made about 6 years ago regarding the leader of this little group.

Those two events finally pushed me over the edge to get off my duff and pull this little story back from the archives and publish it again here.

This article was written in specific answer to some question. I believe the question was something like, "Would you recommend I join Gene Edwards' church?" It's not tremendously detailed, but it covers the broad outlines of what happened. If you'd like a little more detail, you can look at this series of posts.

<http://familyhoodchurch.blogspot.com/search/label/Gene%20Edwards>

Leaving Gene Edwards

By the time I started college, I had decided to spend my life as an itinerant minister of the gospel. The two things I knew were that no minister of the gospel should earn a salary, and that I didn't want to take over anyone's church. Instead, I would move from church to church, helping as I could, when I could.

Yes, I was full of the arrogance and idealism of youth, but I also

knew something of my ignorance. I knew that it would be decades before I could be of use to any church, and that I needed someone to teach me. I began looking for an old man to train me in what it meant to be a worker in the church.

My quest for a new type of church led me to Gene Edwards' books. I loved every word, and practically memorized every one. I had found the man who could teach me what the church should be. Amy and I married with the understanding that as soon as possible, we would move to be a part of one of Gene's churches. I had written Gene some time earlier to request permission to move to his church in Portland, Maine. Gene had recommended that I wait, and move to a church that he planned to plant in Atlanta. I could not have been more excited. Gene always wrote about how important it was to be in a church from the beginning. This would be my chance.

Gene wanted us to avoid Portland. It turns out that Portland was in its death throes. Gene explained to us that half of that church was experiencing church life for the first time, but that the other half had been a part of his earlier experiment in California. The older members seemed to be tearing the church apart due to secret bitterness against Gene. It should have been a clue to me, but I was too excited that the Lord had answered my prayers for a mentor. We didn't expect to find a "perfect church" in Atlanta, but we sure did expect an exciting ride.

We could not have been happier those first few years. We fell in love with our new brothers and sisters, and practically wore out each other's living rooms. We spent hours together eating, singing, and dreaming. Life in the church was everything I'd ever imagined. We described the church as a piece of heaven come to earth, and we meant every word. We fought more than we could tell, and hurt each other too frequently, but we loved each other, and were loved just as much.

In the end, we left Gene and his church, and we would never go back. We still love the memories and maintain relationships with people who accept our departure, but Gene's church was not heaven after all. In retrospect, the church in Atlanta looked suspiciously like a frat house, commune, or any other group of college kids thrown together by any fate. It was fun, but I suspect the excitement was just youth.

I believe the problem in Atlanta, and in all Gene's churches, lies in the vision of the worker.

Gene started a 40-year countdown on his ministry in 1987. In 2027 he wanted us to look back on his ministry, after he was long gone, to honestly evaluate whether his time had been well spent on this earth. He told us that there would be no way to honestly judge his work until it had survived forty years worth of crises. I half agree with him. There is no way to judge a man's work a success without seeing it survive forty years. I believe, though, that we can and must judge his work a failure today.

Gene Edwards proposes two standards by which a worker in God's kingdom should be judged. The first is by his ethical standard, and the second is by the health of his churches. I believe Gene's work fails both standards. To be fair, Gene believes that he is doing exceptionally well in both areas, and that he is doing so against incredible odds. His followers agree with him, and will defend his record without reserve.

Gene teaches that the foundation of a worker's ethics should be that the worker would consciously lose whenever one of his churches is in crisis. I believe that this standard is false. Moreover, I watched Gene neglect even to try to meet it. **What I saw him do under pressure was the exact opposite of what he preached. In situation after situation he manipulated the church from the outside, and micromanaged the outcome of crisis after crisis.**

He chose a spy or two in each church (sometimes overtly and sometime covertly) and used that person to pull the strings of our lives. At first, we were amazed at how much he knew about what was going on in the church. Within a year or two though, we had figured out what was happening. By the third or fourth year his ways were old news.

Gene's churches never had true, independent elders while I was there. Instead, we had "contacts". The brother or (more often) sister who reported our actions to Gene and brought instructions from him had an aura of prestige, but no real authority. Gene changed contacts pretty frequently, such that they could never grow into de-facto leaders. Instead, all the brothers ran the church together via "brothers' meetings". Gene told us that this method was not biblical, but that it was necessary to keep the egos of 20th century Americans in check.

Gene teaches that elders will spring up organically within the church. He also claims that those elders are his head covering. In my brief tenures as contact/elder, and in my observation of others in that role, I never knew anyone to exert headship over Gene at any level except once. That once, Gene declared that brother a mortal enemy, shunned him for the next seven years, and never allowed that brother into any position of responsibility again. I believe that this action is a natural outflow of Gene's theology, and I'm sure that he would defend it as safest for the church.

The job of the brothers was to implement Gene's plans. Gene does not like to manage details, and it was the job of the brothers to flesh out his plans and make them happen. Gene alone set the spiritual agenda of the church, and any deviation from that plan was sure to anger him. I know that this is a far cry from the version of the church that Gene preaches, but it is what I watched for ten years.

I was eventually forced to the opinion that Gene ministers in a fundamentally dishonest way. He told us that he was the most honest man we would ever meet, and for years I took his claim at face value. With stunning regularity, though, he put my trust to the test with actions that seemed to give lie to his words. I made excuses for him again and again, and struggled to understand each of his actions in the light of his conflicting claims. For years I found ways to believe him, but it was an exhausting way to follow the Lord.

The house of cards fell for me over the course of a dismal year in which I watched him tear apart the church in St. Cloud. He bragged about his boldness and ethics, then explained to us how thankful they should be that he been so spiritual in their dismemberment. There was no excuse for the things I watched him do that year. Finally, I had been forced to look at his actions, rather than at his words. Looking back over the previous years, I saw everything he'd said and done, and everything I'd chosen to believe, in a new and heartbreaking light. Gene's years of explanations and excuses were all torn away, and the reality of everything I'd supported came crashing home.

I had watched Gene plant a handful of churches, and I had watched each of those churches die, sometimes more than once. I had listened to Gene explain how in each of those cases, it was the church's fault. They had ignored his warnings, and failed to do what he lovingly suggested they needed to do to thrive. Looking back, his excuses were the same in every case, going all the way back to Portland. I cannot know what happened there, but I sure recognize the excuses.

I knew several of the churches that grew and died under Gene's ministry. I watched them weep as Gene dealt with perceived enemies in their ranks, and listened as they begged to know why Gene was being so cruel to them. My loyalty lay more with Gene

than with my own eyes, though, so I allowed those saints to believe that they were bringing all this pain down on themselves. I was wrong. I should have known enough even then to conclude that Gene was lying to these people, but I was too indoctrinated to see the truth.

Whether you agree with my assessment or not, nothing can excuse Gene's track record. The second standard to which Gene holds the worker is the health of the churches he plants, and there are no survivors. (Several crawled back from the grave and he called them resurrected, but I would call them zombified. I lived through one such rebirth, and the second church was only half-alive while he was not there to breathe life into it.)

Gene blames all that death on the brothers and sisters who gave their lives to those churches, and to him. I would listen as Gene praised brothers and sisters to the highest heaven. A year later I would listen again as he claimed to have known all along that these same brothers and sisters were troublemakers. I watched it happen in every church, and to saints whom I know had done nothing wrong.

I was forced to realize that the problem was with Gene, and had no option but to leave him. Leaving him, though, opened another can of worms. I had to decide whether Gene's theology was right or wrong. Should I leave just him, or his theology too? Should I keep trying to practice what he preached, or had we been pursuing the wrong goals for those ten years?

There are brilliancies in Gene's theology, and he is a wonderful speaker. His standard for church ethics is quite elegant (if the world believes it is wrong, it's wrong, else wise it's probably just someone hunting brownie points with God). His teaching of the Lord's Supper is truly beautiful (it should be a high celebration and a joyful feast, rather than an introspective wake). He also preaches

that salvation is not the prime force behind history (the relationship between the Father and the Son is the central motivator for all of redemption).

Still, the core of anyone's theology is a hard thing to nail down, and I was most concerned with **Gene's theology of the church**. **Gene preaches that each church should be autonomous, but his actions belie his words. Practically speaking, Gene's several churches share one leader. *The church planter makes every significant spiritual decision for the church.* Gene taught us that the wisdom to handle the weightier matters would grow up in the church, but it never did. *Gene handled all the weighty matters himself, or through his trained men, and we in the church were simply required to keep our mouths shut.***

The two defining characteristics of Gene's churches are both direct fruits of his theology. The first is their church planters, with their ultimate authority. The second is their brothers' meetings, with their displacement of eldership. Inevitably, the churches became men's clubs.

This atmosphere has had some painful outcomes. Gene told us, during the conference in which he planted our church, that the church and the family are natural enemies, and that neither can flourish, except at the expense of the other. When asked to clarify that statement, he told us that the family must not be allowed to steal from the church. Over the next 10 years, I watched, applauded, and participated as time and again our church stole from its families. There is nothing that I regret more than the pain our church caused families, and I believe that most people who have been mothers and fathers within Gene's churches would agree.

In the end, Amy and I left Gene's movement for a number of reasons, but mostly we left because of Gene. We had our share of

troubles with the saints, but those could usually be worked out. We fled that man's ministry. We adored those first few years in the church, and there are a hundred things to remember fondly, but leaving Gene Edwards is the best decision we ever made. Whether you chose to follow Gene Edwards, or to move on without him, may the Lord bless you, and the body of which you are a part.