

DRY BONES

On Being Sent Away From The Table

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM



Norman Vincent Peale tells the story of the time he decided to shock his mom by coming home from school one afternoon, parking his bike in the driveway, and saying, "damn it!" loud enough for her to know he was now a man.

He says what she did to him shocked him a lot more than he shocked her.

I grew up in a home like that. Bad language, of any kind, evoked instant punishment.

One night at the supper table I decided to impress the family with my machismo. I described a football injury suffered that afternoon at practice as hurting "like the devil." My dad reminded me that any reference to the devil was profane and sent me away from the table.

It was great vocabulary training, for it forced me — if I was going to eat with the family — to learn to be expressive without being vulgar.

Now it's not my dad who sends me from the table, it's editors and publishers (and a few vocal readers.)

My first reaction to those who criticize my selection of words is usually bland. "I understand, Mr. Editor. The pharisees rejected Jesus also."

It's not until later that I become cynical.

However, it is sad that many evangelical Christians don't appreciate humor — especially the kind that pokes holes in pompous balloons.

Yet, while stiffness and stuffiness may be the problem of others, that does not excuse me from running my own self-inventory.

Why, for instance, do I sometimes insist on wearing tennis shoes to church?

Why do I love to play the role of the iconoclast?

Why, in the case of my column in the May issue of *Charisma*, did I use that word which offended so many — the one having to do with fungus in the furcula?

In answer to the last question I've reached several conclusions.

(1) I used it to shock complacent readers. That's legitimate.

(2) I used it to draw attention to myself, to let people know I am a macho man. That's illegitimate.

(3) I used it to be funny. That's legitimate as long as the humor is a communicative technique.

It's unacceptable if I use humor because I am a basically insecure person who needs the acceptance of people's laughter.

Preachers are notorious for this. They often inject little "funnies" into their sermons. They'll make a point and then say, "HELLO! Anyone there?"

micks he used to awaken his congregation (and draw attention to himself).

Although he was preaching against "worldliness" — and especially against folks like me who use crude language now and then — all I could see was his Hollywood coiffure, his expensive suit, and a diamond ring which would impress even God.

Yet, despite his offensiveness to me — as I sat there in blue jeans and tennis shoes — he was doctrinally sound and communicated well with his audience. I was forced back to the words of St. Paul: "Who are you to judge another man's servant?"

If I argue that the Holy Spirit occasionally directs me to use a shock

"If we are going to be ourselves, we must be prepared to offend others — and not become angry, cynical or feel rejected when it happens."

This brings titters of laughter.

Or, after a rousing plea for more humility the preacher will ruin the whole thing by shouting, "AMEN? I said 'AMEN?'" And keep it up until everyone is shouting "AMEN!"

A famous Southern preacher used to wear red socks, sequined trousers and flashing checkered sport coat into the pulpit, then begin his message by praying, "Oh God, hide me behind the cross."

Even if God could have squeezed that fat fellow behind the cross, he still would have glowed like a neon sign.

Recently I sat on the platform behind a well-known charismatic preacher. I counted 16 different gim-

word, must I not allow him the right to wear a huge diamond?

The point is this. If we are going to be ourselves, we must be prepared to offend others — and not become angry, cynical or feel rejected when it happens.

In the front of my Bible I have several notes penned to myself. One of them says, "Jamie, don't let the world (or the church) mold you into its image."

I intend to hold to that. But doing so means I run the risk, on occasion, of having my readers — or my editors — send me away from the table.

I don't mind, as long as you don't object to me giggling out there in the kitchen. ☞