

# Repeat Performance

By Jamie Buckingham

Well, it finally happened. I was on the platform during the early service that Sunday morning. Although I was not scheduled to preach, I was directing the service. Jimmy Smith, our soloist, was singing from the piano. It was powerful, moving. "I will pour water on him that is thirsty...."

As he finished I turned to the guest preacher who was seated beside me. "I'm going to minister to the people before you preach," I whispered.

He nodded. I picked up the wireless microphone and walked to the pulpit just as the music finished.

"Please bow your heads and close your eyes," I said. Jimmy caught the mood of the moment and continued to play softly. I talked for a few seconds about the water of the Holy Spirit which softens the parched earth of our lives. I asked the people to let Him come into their lives. Jimmy sang another stanza. Some of the people slipped to their knees. I closed by asking them to receive the seed of the Word which the preacher was about to sow in their lives.

After the service the guest preacher commented, "That was great. I wish you could repeat it just the same way at the second service."

I swelled a little. It was a good word. Fresh. Spontaneous. I nodded. If a thing is good for one group, why not for all?

In the second service, before a much larger crowd, Jimmy sang the same song. But something was different. The people were not responding as the first group had. But my course was set. Once again I picked up the microphone and stepped to the pulpit. With solemn drama I called the people to prayer.

My own eyes were closed. My head bowed. I waited, piously, through the dramatic pause. Instead of the expected silence, however, I heard laughter. It started in the side section where my wife and grown children were sitting. It rippled across the congregation, like dry leaves before the wind, growing louder and louder.

I stood there, puffed-up and dumb, wondering what was happening. Was something going on that was funny and I couldn't see it because my eyes were closed?

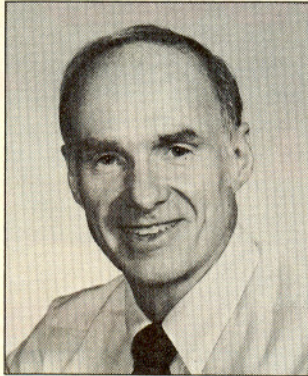
I opened my eyes and immediately squeezed them shut. The people were laughing so hard they were crying. Then, in that horrifying way a person knows, I knew. They were laughing at me. Surely it wasn't my zipper?

Only then did I recall what I had just said. It ran through my mind like a tape replay. I had said, "PLEASE BOW YOUR EYES AND CLOSE YOUR HEADS."

I always hoped it would happen to someone else so I could laugh. Now it had happened to me.

Memories, like rabbits in front of hounds, raced wildly through my mind.

I remembered the time I came to the platform to officiate in a formal wedding. I had just come out of the bathroom and



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didn't realize until I was in front of all those people that stuck to my shoe and trailing behind was an eight-foot stream of toilet paper.

I remembered the time I looked down in the middle of my sermon and saw my pants were unzipped—and my shirt tail was sticking out like a flag.

I remembered the time I put my hand on a casket at the front of the church and the flimsy stand it was sitting on gave way.

Then I remembered that Easter morning baptismal service 25 years ago. The baptistry was high above the choir loft. My plan was to baptize at the beginning of the service then rush to the platform during the hymn so I could preach. That morning I wore my new waders—

huge rubber boots which came up to my chest, held in place by suspenders. The last person I baptized was a portly woman. When I lowered her beneath the surface she displaced far more water than I anticipated. The overflow rushed into my waders—filling them to the brim. When the woman came up, the water went down—leaving me standing in 400 pounds of water-filled boots. I was rooted to the bottom of the baptistry and couldn't move. I finally had to lower my suspenders and crawl out of the boots in front of the entire Easter congregation—in my underwear.

All that ran through my mind and I realized, *I've been here before.*

I knew if I tried to correct my mistake it would get worse. But what do you do? The one thing I didn't want to do was laugh. I wanted to be like Elijah and suddenly disappear in a whirlwind, never to be seen again. But the more I thought of what had just happened the funnier it seemed. Here's a solemn, pious, stuffed-shirt, strutting to the pulpit with soft music, and with ministerial pomp intoning "PLEASE BOW YOUR EYES AND CLOSE YOUR HEAD."

I began to giggle. The congregation howled. They were now laughing so hard people were holding their stomachs.

Gradually I realized what had happened. What God had done in the early service I had tried to replicate in my own strength. God, who enjoys a good laugh, too, figured since I was going to take the credit, He would let me do it my way. And my way is to stick my foot in my mouth.

When you want the people to notice you, God usually says, "Be my guest!" But what they remember is often something you wish they'd forget.

I twice tried to salvage the moment, but it was too far gone. The best I could do was walk over to the preacher who was sitting there shaking his head, and say, "You're on."

The preacher did his best that morning, but he would have been far more effective had he just said the benediction. The sermon had already been preached by the dumbbell who tried to upstage God.

It doesn't pay to take yourself seriously when God is present. ■