

A Different Drumbeat

By Jamie Buckingham

Is Jimmy Swaggart starting a denomination? Is it possible that 20 years from now there will be a sizable group of churches known as Swaggartans? Such as Lutherans. Or Wesleysans.

Although Swaggart insists he is not starting a denomination, his World Evangelism Fellowship is receiving applications from churches that want to align with the organization. Swaggart is also issuing both ordination and licensing certificates to ministers—often the first step in forming a denomination.

This is ironic. Since his problems with the Assemblies of God, Swaggart has appeared to be anti-denominational. In the June issue of his magazine, *The Evangelist*, Swaggart writes: "We believe God uses men...He does not use denominations, structures, committees, boards, or any such entity."

Swaggart is probably right when he says the future move of God will "little involve any denominational effort." Like others who have been wounded through a soured denominational relationship, Swaggart is now reaching for the New Testament ideal. But in his hurt he has failed to distinguish between denominations and denominationalism. Denominations are there to serve; denominationalism demands service.

Foursquare church leader Roy Hicks Jr., one of this generation's true statesmen/prophets, recently issued a pointed warning to leaders in the '90s. Ironically, his prophecy, which seems directed toward individuals, also applies to denominations—including his own. "Mark my words: The pastor who follows the current charismatic role model of successful ministry, combining the skills of showmanship and the tactics of domination, will have a limited audience in the '90s...I'm convinced the Lord, in the next decade, will 'undo' the kingdoms that men are building in His name.

"Second-generation leaders, even the sons of famous fathers, will not be given the same place in the hearts of the people that their forerunners were given. The tactics their fathers used will not generate



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the funds necessary to keep the 'kingdoms' financially solvent."

Hicks says the "exceptions" will be the leaders who discover that biblical authority is genuine only when the leader "serves" rather than dominates.

Apply that to today's denomination. Denominations have one valid reason to exist: to serve the local church. However, when the hierarchy demands that the churches serve the structure, the system becomes pharisaical.

Nevertheless, we have a need for corporate structure. No family, organization, church or fellowship of churches can operate without structure of some kind. Therefore, Swaggart's sweeping generalization that God does not use "denominations, structures, committees, boards, or any such entity" can be seen as his reaction to his own problems with the Assemblies of God.

I am not anti-denominational, but American denominationalism has peaked. Take Southern Baptists. The world's largest non-Catholic denomination is ripping itself to shreds over doctrinal disputes. The same is true among Presbyterians, Episcopalians and now the Pentecostals. Evangelism is no longer primary. Doctrinal hair-splitting, and the inquisition that always follows, is sounding the death knell.

Organizations such as the Assemblies of God did not begin as denominations. They began as loose-knit structures to give churches and/or pastors a frame-

work to cooperate. But they drafted doctrinal statements to ensure purity. Then they elected officials to enforce the creed. Before long they had a denomination.

Eventually it's these pharisaical traditions, not the original creed, that become the binding force.

I remember preaching in a small Baptist Bible Fellowship church shortly after I received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Naive, I thought Bible and Baptist were synonymous. It was my first lesson on the power of tradition.

I was eager to tell this little mountain church about my new biblical discovery of a God who heals sick bodies. Two church officials were sitting on the front row, Bibles open in their laps. When I got to James 5:14-16, the two men glanced at each other and angrily closed their Bibles. For the rest of my sermon they sat and glared at me.

After the service they cornered me—immediately. "Young man, we don't believe that around here."

"But all I did was quote the Bible."

"We don't care if it is Bible—it's not Baptist."

Assemblies of God pastor Karl Strader of Carpenter's Home Church in Lakeland, Florida, has recently experienced the awesome power of denominational tradition. District officials will monitor Strader for 18 months. No charges were filed, however. When Strader asked what he would have to do to get back in good favor with the denomination, he was told to "get in step."

Strader did not violate doctrine—he violated tradition. He consorts with non-Assemblies leaders and often has them speak in his church. He emphasizes dancing in worship and believes in elders.

The investigation of Strader came when he was vulnerable because of a recent church split. His congregation's division had more to do with clashing personalities and conflict among leaders than with doctrinal differences. Yet the investigation stressed conformity.

Any leader who marches to the beat of a different drum is a threat to denominationalism. God give us more of them! ■