

Phony Christians

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Aside from disobeying and failing God, the one thing I fear most is becoming phony.

Our American world, in particular, has spawned far too many phony Christians. They are easy to spot, especially when it comes to money.

It's hard to tell, any more, what a man means when he says: "Pray for me. I have a financial need."

Does he really want my prayers? Or my money?

As the overseer of a flock I struggle with this all the time. I am convinced God does not want church leaders begging for money. Nor does he want us to write letters to our "mailing lists" asking widows, struggling young couples, and naive young Christians to "pray that God will meet our financial needs by next Tuesday." That is nothing more than manipulative begging.

Especially if you enclose an offering envelope.

I can't do much about the garbage which comes through the TV tube in the name of Jesus, nor have I been very ef-



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fective in stemming the tide of mail which comes from Bible-waving, Mercedes-driving beggars. But I can make certain that the leadership in our local body does not manipulate.

The danger, however, is not so much that our people might misunderstand the genuine Christian's requests for prayer. The real danger is that we, in our effort to keep the ministry pure, might stop asking our friends to pray for us.

Some of my "faith friends" love to talk about George Mueller, who supposedly made his requests known only to God. Mueller, though, never hesitated in letting everyone know exactly what his needs were. But that's different from today's phony Christian who says he wants to get you on his mailing list so he can "pray for you" (when what he actually wants is your money).

Although I know it is God who answers our prayers, I also know that money does not float down from heaven like manna. It is given by people who have received information about specific needs.

The danger lies in taking the short-cut: bypassing God and going directly to the people. The moment I do that I am looking to people as my source, rather than God.

My friend, the late George Sowerby, pastored a small Charismatic church in Ft. Pierce, Florida. The last years of his life George lived entirely "by faith." He accepted no salary from his church. He simply trusted God to speak to the right people who in turn would meet his particular needs.

On occasion George would drive up the coast to ask me to join with him in prayer concerning some critical financial need. George never had a hidden agenda. When he asked for prayer—that's ALL he wanted. In these cases he always prefaced his request by saying, "If I share my need with you it disqualifies you from meeting that need. ALL you are allowed to do is pray with me. You cannot give to me."

I respected George's commitment to this way of life. It was so different from the phony Christians who fill the airwaves and postal system with their veiled solicitations for money in the form of prayer requests. But I always felt frustrated. What if the Lord wanted ME to be an answer to George's needs? My hands were tied and I could not give—even if God told me to.

No, there is a better way. I prefer the way of my friends with Wycliffe Bible Translators. They use a slogan: "Full information. No solicitation." Or, as one of my wise old seminary professors used to say: "Trust God and tell the people."

Those of us in public ministry—in fact, every Christian—need the prayers of other Christians. And we need to be free enough to say "pray for us," and mean nothing more. We want to live pure in a dirty world. We want our motives to be noble. I hope I never deteriorate to the place where I start to bilk rather than trust.

I think about this each quarter when I write a "thank you" letter which is included in the financial statements mailed to those who contribute through our church in Florida. How easy it would be to use double-talk. How easy it would be to say "thank you" while thinking: "If I thank my friend for giving, he will give more."

How close I am each quarter to manipulating: using the gimmicks perfected by the mail-order and TV preachers.

Yet, as in requesting prayer for genuine needs, if I fail to say "thank you" for fear people will misunderstand, then we all lose.

It's easy to lock in on the high profile phonies—and grow cynical. But in our judgment we must never forget the countless numbers of sweet, simple Christians who have not bowed their knee to Baal, who have no hidden agenda, no ulterior motives, who mean what they say when they ask, "Pray for me." These are the ones whose yea is yea. God, give us more. >