

LAST WORD

By Jamie Buckingham

Another Man's Servant

■ The letter from my missionary friend in South America was sincere. On his last trip to the United States he had visited Heritage USA, the PTL Club's luxurious recreational ground. He then wrote me saying he was "appalled" at the extravagance. "How," he asked, "can Christians justify spending 90 percent of their accumulated riches on themselves and almost nothing on those under the grinding heel of Communism?"

It was not the first such letter I've received. When missionaries visit the States and see our opulence, they can't help but contrast it to the poverty they've just left.

But poverty, and riches, are relative. I have two cars. I live in a two-story brick house. I can buy anything I want within reason. I've never known hunger. What should I do when confronted with the poverty of the Third World?

I'll tell you what I have done. I loan my cars to missionaries when they are home on furlough—and I buy the gas and pay the repair bills. My house stays filled with people in need of ministry. I give a large percentage of my income to support those in ministry and to feed the poor. Ten years ago Jackie and I moved out of the ghetto to our present house on 20 acres in a semi-rural setting. By today's standards we got it at a steal—including the guest cottage. But for five years both of us lived with a deep-seated guilt because we had such a nice place. That has passed. I simply see my purchase as a wise move. I no longer believe God condemns prosperity. Indeed, I think He desires it for us—as long as I use what I have for His glory.

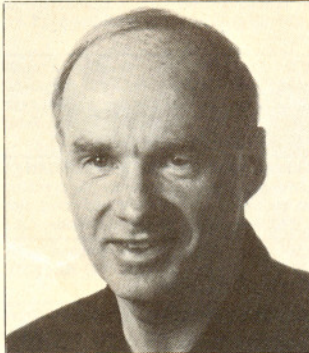
On the other hand, I, too am appalled by what is going on in some sectors of western Christendom. Extravagance grieves me. Yet, extravagance is relative to culture. Recently I helped deliver an evaporative cooler to a Christian Indian living in a dirt-floored, two-room hut in the Mexican desert. That provided him—and the 10 people in his tiny house—a degree of comfort. But in the eyes of his neighbors it was sheer extravagance.

I admire the way Senator John D. "Jay" Rockefeller IV approached his job as a volunteer in the antipoverty program in Appalachia 18 years ago. Rockefeller, one of the richest men in the world, took his bride—the daughter of millionaire Senator Charles Percy—to Emmons, West Virginia (population 200), as a Peace Corps worker.

"I took slides with me," Rockefeller said. "I gathered everyone in the community center and I showed slides of my family, my house, my car, my father, how I lived. I said, 'This is who I am, and I am here to help you. I come from a world that may be different, but you'll find me serious and caring and wanting to help.'" Those grateful people later elected him governor—then U.S. senator.

That, it seems, puts riches in the right perspective.

Recently Jim Bakker invited me back to PTL. I dreaded going—expensive automobiles, razzmatazz music, and private



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dining rooms with personal waiters. As I prayed, however, I was reminded of Paul's word in Romans 14:4 about "judging another man's servant." As a result I went with an open mind and, for the first time, was able to see how even an entertainment complex has a legitimate place in the body of Christ—despite its seeming divergence from the life style of Jesus.

You see, the life style at PTL is no more opulent to me than my life style is to the millions living in the Third World. What has God told me to do? He's told me to withhold judgment from His servants—to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving—even if I do not understand.

For instance, God did not tell me to build a splendid university as He told Oral Roberts. But I'm glad Oral obeyed and I've sent him four of my five children to educate.

I've looked but I cannot find a single biblical injunction to tear down what others are doing in the name of Jesus. My call? To use the things I control to God's glory—and allow my brothers to answer to God for the things they control.

In May I spent a week in a Catholic monastery with about 50 of the nation's Charismatic leaders. We were miles apart in doctrine. Some are classic Pentecostals. Some are liberals. Several are Catholic priests. We spent all week listening to each other.

At night, when we finished with the day's activities, we went down to the kitchen for snacks. Some drank beer—some lemonade. One afternoon I listened to a devoted Catholic scholar tell how Mary encouraged him to love and worship Jesus. The week did not change my doctrine, but it softened my spirit.

I wish some of my friends who are so critical of Catholics would take a week as I do each year—getting to know these men, listening to their hearts. Perhaps they would come away as I do, realizing God is bigger than our interpretation of the Bible, that all men who are committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ are brothers.

As I examine my past critical attitude of the life style and doctrine of others, I realize most of it has come from second-hand knowledge. Recently I sat in a minister's conference in Tulsa and heard Kenneth Copeland preach. I've never cared for Copeland's approach, but, again, I'd never heard him in person. That night I left the room a mellowed man.

Who is right? Jim Bakker who drives a luxury automobile and whose PTL ostentation seems second only to the Taj Mahal, or my missionary friend who drives a battered car over rocky Argentine roads and wears threadbare clothes? Who is right?

I suspect, when earth's last picture is painted, that those millions of blinking lights at PTL will blend right into the dusty colors painted by my missionary friends, and, somehow, the picture will come out looking just the way God intended. ■