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Last June R. Paul Caudill wrote a moving story of an invitation given at the fireside during a summer camp. This brought back memories of another fire, another decision . . .

ONE WHO DIDN'T ANSWER THE INVITATION

James W. Buckingham

THE TIME WAS LATE August, 1953. The place was a youth camp on an island in the middle of a lake in upper New York state. I was an arrogant college student, and this was the summer between my junior and senior years.

I had just completed a successful summer training session with the ROTC at Ft. Lee, Virginia, and had been voted the outstanding military cadet in our regiment.

My life was beginning to take shape. I was the new vice-president of the student body on our Baptist college campus. I was president of the BSU, president of my fraternity, and a member of most of the honorary organizations on campus. I was active in church work, but primarily to keep my "image" alive.

This week at a Christian youth camp just didn't seem to fit into my schedule, but on the insistence of my parents I had agreed to attend.

All the week long I had been disturbed. I was a square peg in a round hole. I was the one who sneaked off from the group to take a drag on a cigarette. I was the one who tried to make conversation by telling off-color stories. Something was wrong.

Then came the final night—and the campfire service. After the service in the auditorium the entire group made their way down to the point of the island where the grass sloped gently into the splashing water of the cold, deep mountain lake. A roaring campfire had been built near the water's edge and the people were sitting on the grassy slope above the fire.

Sheepishly, I took my place at the rear of the group. I lay on my back with my hands folded under my head and stared into nothingness. I heard very little of what was being said.

I do remember that the speaker challenged the young people to deny themselves and follow Christ. These were strange words, for I had always felt that I could follow Christ without making any kind of self denial.

Then he gave the invitation. He invited those who would accept Christ as their personal Saviour to step forward. I noticed several getting to their feet and taking their place around the campfire. "Not me", I said, "I did this when I was thirteen."

Next he enlarged the invitation to those who would be willing to renew their vows to the Lord and dedicate their lives to him as followers of his way. Again the response was instantaneous.

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All around me I saw young people getting to their feet and coming forward to stand around the campfire. Pride he me back.

Again the invitation was given. This time to those who would be willing to commit their lives to full-time church related service. I looked around me. I was the only one left. All the others had gotten up and taken their place around the campfire. I was afraid to go. I was afraid I would make a fool of myself.

How did I know what God wanted me to do? But for the first time I had to think seriously.

I was all by myself in the shadows. The speaker was talking softly to the large group standing around the fire. I lay motionless on my back, hands still clasped under my head.

Suddenly I noticed something. From the huge roaring campfire I saw the sparks dance high into the sky as a log broke in two. How brightly they burned—for a moment! Then they were gone.

And God said to me, "That's you, Jamie. You'll burn brightly for awhile. Maybe even for a lifetime, but after that you'll die out and become dead cinders or floating ash."

And I thought of all my plans for the future. My alternate careers which I had chosen for myself. A career as a military officer—a career in politics—a career in education or business. But these were my plans. And when it was all over, what would be left? Nothing but cinders and ashes.

And then, for the first time that evening, I shifted my gaze from the campfire with its rising sparks, and looked deep into the heavens above. There, billions of miles above me, I saw God's stars—shining, twinkling in constant brightness.

And from someplace in my childhood a verse of Scripture danced before my mind. "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever."

And I knew what I wanted. I gave up. I surrendered. And I said, "Lord, I didn't answer the invitation, but I am now. I give you back all my plans—my flashes in the pan—and ask that you will make me one of your shining stars."

I looked back toward the campfire. It had almost burned out. The group had walked silently down the hill and back to their cabins. I had been left alone in the shadows.

I was the one who didn't answer the invitation. But God's stars overhead convinced me that really, for the first time in my life, I had answered his invitation.

