

Chiseled in Crumbling Concrete

By Jamie Buckingham

■ The idea of taking spiritual inventory for the purpose of considering what part of our religious life needs to be changed—or discarded—is distasteful to most Christians. And heretical to others. We like to believe there are some things so sacred they should never be touched, questioned or changed.

As a believer, however, I must constantly question, examine and re-evaluate my doctrine. To do otherwise will style me as a dried wineskin. I will then be forced to reject anything new or different for fear it will cause me to change my lifestyle.

Actually, I believe very little of what I believed 20 years ago. Oh, I still believe in the “essentials”—the divinity of Christ, the sovereignty of God, the inspiration of the Bible, the virgin birth, etc. Yet even my concepts of these have changed across the years.

I remember the time some years ago, as our family was emerging from its Baptist cocoon, that we ventured to serve communion at our dinner table. I asked my daughter Robin, then about 14, to pray before we took the elements. Her little prayer was devastating.

“Thank you, Jesus, for Your blood we’re about to drink.”

I tried not to show my dismay as I corrected her. “Honey, that’s a sweet prayer, but we’re not drinking Jesus’ blood. This juice is merely a symbol of His blood.”

“But, Daddy,” she said innocently, “that’s not what the Bible says. Jesus says, ‘This is my blood.’”

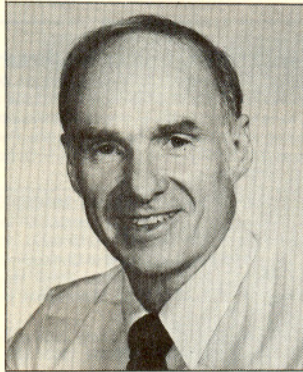
As a Bible-believer I was trapped in my own web. This incident was the beginning of a period of spiritual growth which moved me from symbolist to sacramentalist. I find myself now standing with the Lutherans, proclaiming the “real presence” of Jesus in the elements. And who knows where I’ll go from here?

Yesterday, sorting through some papers in the bottom drawer of my desk, I discovered an old article I had clipped from *Reader’s Digest* 11 years ago. The print was fading and it was yellowed around the edges. The author was the renowned international architect, Peter Blake. Why, I wondered, had I clipped this particular article all those years ago and dropped it into my desk drawer? I picked it up and read the first paragraph.

“There exists a great temptation, in the life of an artist or scientist or modern architect like myself, to commit oneself to a dogma in one’s youth and then to build one’s entire work on that foundation. Unhappily for me and some of my friends, the premises upon which we have almost literally built our world are crumbling.”

Then I remembered why I had clipped the article. Blake was not talking just about architecture. He was talking about life. My life. He was talking about my relationship with God. I read on.

“We have begun to discover that almost nothing that we



Jamie Buckingham is an award-winning columnist and editor-at-large of *Charisma*.

were taught by our betters in or out of the architecture schools of the mid-century has stood the test of time. Nothing—or almost nothing—turns out to have been entirely true” (*Reader’s Digest*, May 1975, p. 163).

I let my mind drift back to that opening day on the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Ft. Worth, Texas. Fresh from college with a degree in English literature, I was eager to get started on my theological training.

Wandering about the campus, I discovered, chiseled on the cornerstone on the library, a portion of Scripture which was the heraldic insignia of the seminary: “As ye go, preach... (Matt. 10:7).”

The verse, however, like everything else I had been taught, was incomplete. Preach what? Where there should have been a practical application there was only an ellipsis—three dots signifying there was more, but that it wasn’t important.

The founding fathers of that great theological seminary (and I still believe it is the finest in the world) were walking as best they could in the light they had. Their mistake came, perhaps, when they determined to chisel their theology—with all its incompleteness—in stone. As a result, a lot of us in that mid-century generation did as Peter Blake: We committed ourselves to a dogma in our youth which later turned out to be not entirely true.

I am not angry at my theological forefathers, just a bit sad. No one ever explained the rest of that verse. “As ye go, preach, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give” (Matt. 10:7,8).

Instead of explaining, they explained it away.

Unquestioned dogmas and creeds are poison to life in Christ. A well-known and much-respected Pentecostal teacher once stated, with more seriousness than his audience appreciated, “The old-time Pentecostals saw miracles, while this new breed just talks about them. In fact, as long as they were illiterate they were filled with supernatural power. Then they learned to write, and the first thing they wrote was a creed. In so doing they quenched the Holy Spirit.”

I am not defending ignorance. Nor illiteracy. I am simply pointing out that creeds, like those tiny shoes worn by Japanese women, deform and sometimes kill. Growth and accompanying change must be part of our walk with Christ.

Kathryn Kuhlman once told me, “I’ve found something that works and I’ll never change.”

But she did change. She died.

Is there nothing unchangeable? Oh yes! God! But to become like Him means even our sacred things must be laid on the altar. For I suspect that when we get to heaven we’ll discover our doctrine was, after all, quite different from God’s doctrine. ■