

Flaky Ideas

By Jamie Buckingham

I like to consider myself an intellectual. By that I mean flaky ideas don't appeal to me. Across the years I have dealt with hundreds of people who have approached me with kooky concepts.

One fellow said God had told him to prepare for a tidal wave that was going to sweep across Florida. He was going to build an ark big enough to hold all the charismatic leaders in Florida and their wives. (Sorry, no room for any fundamentalists.) Cost: \$1 million. A contribution of \$10,000 would reserve a seat for the leader and his wife—and would pay for the building of the ark. I figured for something less than \$10,000 I could buy a bus ticket to Georgia. Besides, even heaven seemed more desirable than being locked up with 100 charismatic preachers for 40 days and 40 nights.

Another fellow wanted me to help him build a "prayer tower" in the exact geographical center of the United States—which would be in a wheat field in western Kansas. The tower would be the tallest building in the world. I had just finished reading in Genesis about another group who wanted to build a tower, and decided I shouldn't get involved.

Not too far from where I live on the east coast of Florida, a group of people formed the Celestial Cemetery, Inc. Their plan was to bury people in space. For \$5,000 you could have your ashes put in a gold capsule, sent aloft on a NASA rocket and put into orbit around the earth. That way you would be first in line when Jesus returned and the dead in Christ joined Him in the air. Aside from the fact that NASA's record getting the living—much less the dead—into space is not too good right now, the state of Florida squashed the whole deal. It seems you need a certified survey and 15 acres of dedicated property before you can register as a cemetery. Thank God for red tape.

On the other hand, some flaky ideas have turned out to be "of God."

Three years ago Jim Ammerman, a retired U.S. Army chaplain, said God had told him to form an endorsing agency to place Spirit-filled chaplains in the U.S. military. Just as the Methodists, the Catholics and the Jews have chaplains, these chaplains would represent the millions of independent charismatic churches around the nation. I listened to Jim and his dream. It wasn't kooky—just impossible. I knew something about the Pentagon mentality of the Chaplains' Board. Besides, I didn't see any way to get all the independent charismatic churches together to sponsor such an agency.

But in May last year I was on the platform at the National Leadership Conference at Ridgecrest, North Carolina. In a special ceremony one night Ammerman presented four splendid young Army chaplains to the 2,000 present. They represented the 13 chaplains now on active duty in all three branches of the military—endorsed by Ammerman's organization called the Full Gospel Chaplaincy. Another 13 are ready



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for appointment. They represent 1.5 million independent charismatics who have signed up as their endorsing agency.

As these tough, seminary-trained young men came forward in their dress greens I had to blink to hold back the tears. One was a green beret. Another a paratrooper. As they knelt, Bibles in hand, so those of us on the platform could lay hands on them, I realized all dreams aren't necessarily kooky.

What's flaky and what's of God? And how can you tell the difference? I doubt if I would have given money to support an army that was going to take a city by marching around it seven times. Yet....

Recently I was with Bernie May, U.S. director of Wycliffe Bible Translators. Bernie

showed me a letter he had received from a fellow in North Carolina who works in a paint and body shop. He said God had told him to write the text of John 3:16 on T-shirts—in every known written language in the world. He enclosed a couple of T-shirts, one inscribed in English, the other in Hebrew.

The man had written Wycliffe since they are in the business of translating the Bible into all the Bibleless languages of the world. He wanted Bernie to send him the translations of John 3:16 in all those languages so he could get to work printing them on T-shirts. All he needed were the languages—and money.

Bernie and I tried to imagine a family of Aguaruna tribespeople in the Amazon jungle of Peru coming out of their hut one morning all wearing T-shirts. On the front would be written: "Apajuik ashi aentstin senchi adejatu asa...."

We both began to laugh.

But after a while Bernie asked, "What if God really told this fellow to do this?"

He asked one of the folks in his office to do some research and come up with at least 10 John 3:16s in different languages. A few days later the researcher, who had once helped translate the Cakchiquel language in Guatemala, came by his office with the translations. "I'd be interested in a Central Cakchiquel T-shirt," he said. "I wear a large."

Several years ago I visited the Gahuku tribe in the jungle of Papua New Guinea. A bunch of them were wearing T-shirts—who knows where they got them. They were all inscribed, but not with Scripture. These read "Coors Beer" and "Let's Smoke Pot."

I tried to imagine what it would be like to see these same aborigines outfitted in shirts that said, "Ogmasi neneqmo numotoq namatoq vegeñaq...." The more I thought about it the more I wondered, "Well, why not?"

I kept remembering what God said about "despise not the day of small things." So I sent the man \$100. That seems a better investment than reserving a seat on an air-conditioned ark. ■