

Anatomy of a Decision

By Jamie Buckingham

Although the offer to write THE book on the PTL scandal had not been nailed down, it was there just the same.

In May the agents started calling. The dollars the publishers were willing to pay to get the inside story—if it had the right byline on it—were incredible.

The big money would come for the book and possibly a movie. During negotiations as much as \$3 million in advance was proposed. My share could be as much as 40 percent. (Jerry Falwell had set the precedent when he received \$1 million in advance for his biography.)

I started spending the money—in my mind.

Our church has just taken over a faltering home for unwanted boys. We desperately need money to purchase a ranch.

I am deeply committed to the task of Bible translation. Half the money, I dreamed, would be given to translate the Word for Bibleless people.

For years I've wanted an inside baptistry in our church, but we've never had the money to install one.

I would love to set up some kind of savings account for my grandchildren...My wife needs a new car...The air conditioning on my pickup truck is broken...so is our dishwasher....

Yet inside, something was wrong. Was it right, before God, to make money off someone else's sin?

Would my collaboration on a book project be viewed as an endorsement of someone else's life-style?

Was I willing, for the sake of money, to follow the rich and famous with a broom and shovel?

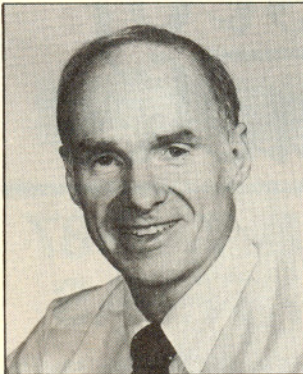
More important, was I in danger of prostituting—selling my gift for money?

I had watched, with growing disgust, the public spectacle on TV. Why? Why do all these people want to come before the unbelieving public and say all these horrible things about one another, even if they are said with a smile and caught in the pious phrases of Zion? Do they do it to glorify God? To feed the sheep? To build the kingdom? To save the lost?

Then I looked at myself—and saw that I was in the same boat with all the rest of the publicity seekers. Only I was not considering my face on "Nightline" or "Face the Nation"—I was considering my name on a book that would sell a million copies at \$17.95 at a 15 percent royalty of which I might get half.

As a writer I had never worked as a prostitute, only as a lover. Both prostitute and lover offer the same product, but one does it for what he can get, the other does it for what he can give.

The first week of June I was to be in Israel for six days of research. I plan to go back to Israel in October to videotape a series of teachings on the miracles and parables of Jesus—filmed on the actual locations where they took place. (A tour group is going to accompany me, traveling from site to site as my audience.) Chuck Colson's organization, Prison



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Fellowship, is going to distribute the videos in the prisons of America. The purpose of my June trip was to visit all 30 sites—from Jerusalem to Galilee—where we would later set up our cameras.

My wife and friends wisely counseled me to put my decision about the book on hold until I returned from Israel.

The day before I left for Israel I was in a church staff meeting. As we served Holy Communion one of our staff pastors read from Jesus' words in John 5:30: "...I seek not to please myself but him who sent me."

How does one please God?

All the way to Israel I struggled with the entire process of making decisions. What, I asked

myself, are the major factors in decision making in our Western culture? Our lives are filled with decisions: What job do I take? Where shall I live? Should I buy or build? Where should I send my children to school? What about retirement? The criterion for each decision is always one thing: money.

Is that wrong? Are we not supposed to be good stewards? Is money evil, or just the love of money?

Then I was in Israel, walking the land, climbing the mountains. I stood where Abraham told Lot, "You take the green pastures of the Jordan Valley. I'll take the desert."

I stood in Wadi Kelt, where the ravens fed Elijah.

I contemplated Jesus' words to the rich young ruler about selling all.

I could not find a single Bible hero who made decisions based primarily on money. Those who did went down in infamy: Balaam, the rich young ruler, Judas, Ananias and Sapphira. I struggled with my own decision.

Would I write this book, I asked myself, if I only got a fair return, not a fortune?

Maybe I should put out a fleece as Gideon did. But fleeces are for cowards. Jesus told Peter His church would be built on those who received knowledge by revelation. It's OK to be directed by circumstances, but far better to hear God in your heart and act on it. Then, when you sleep, you sleep with a clear conscience.

I returned home Saturday night. Sunday morning I announced to my people that, while I may write about this, I cannot write primarily for money and cannot write someone else's book. They greeted my decision with sustained applause.

Battling jet lag I went home at noon and went straight to bed. My oldest son, Bruce, who lives next door, came into the bedroom. "I'm proud of you, Dad. I know some of that money would have trickled down to us kids. But I learned something from you today—obeying God is more important than making money."

He squeezed my shoulder and gently closed the door. I closed my eyes and thought: "That million dollars could not purchase what you just gave me, my son." I drifted off to sleep with a clear conscience. ■