


The Making of a King

By



The other afternoon it came into focus at the local Burger King. My wife Jackie and I had offered to take our eight grandchildren (ages 1-7) out for hamburgers. Three sets of parents came along. We wound up taking over the entire north end of the fast food restaurant.

Going back for more ketchup, I spotted one of our church members, a young divorcee sitting forlornly at a table watching her two small children squash their burgers into unrecognizable mush. I stopped to chat.

"I can't believe it," she said. "I saw you over there and I said, 'Gosh, does Jamie Buckingham really eat at Burger King?'"

"Where did she think we ate?" Jackie asked when I recounted the conversation in the car on the way home.

"She didn't say, but I think she believes we have our meals catered at our mansion in the suburbs—or perhaps prepared by a live-in cook."

Jackie grew quiet. We both understand the problem of image.

We're not the only ones, of course.

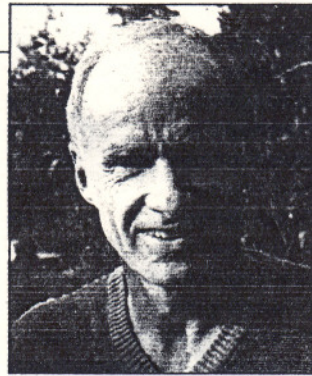
When one of Jimmy Swaggart's associates called recently to talk about something I had written, he made a point of saying the evangelist ate at fast food restaurants. I remembered the girl at Burger King. Somehow I had assumed Jimmy must have his meals catered at a "mansion," or perhaps prepared by a live-in cook.

Part of the problem is image. We see these people on TV and imagine they live like kings. Some of them do. But there's more to it than that. The real problem is not that some live lavishly. The problem is we want them to.

When, on ABC's "Nightline," Tammy Faye Bakker said, "Goodness, I don't know how much money we made!" a lot of people giggled with her.

We like our television queens to be lavish—and cute.

Jessica Hahn told Phil Donahue she flew to Florida and got into bed with Jim Bakker, whom she had never met before, because she was enamored by his "divine persona."



Jamie Buckingham is senior pastor of The Tabernacle Church in Melbourne, Florida. His latest book is titled *Let's Talk About Life*.

It's a fan mystique. "Ooooh, there he is! I saw him on 'The 700 Club.' I wonder if that's really his wife with him. (Giggle, giggle.)"

"A PTL without Jim and Tammy would be like Disney World without Mickey and Minnie Mouse," a PTL supporter wept.

Is that what we mean by ministerial royalty?

PTL fans knew of Tammy's gowns, shoes and diamonds. They knew of Jim's cars and houses. Yet they kept giving, living through them the lifestyles commoners can only dream about. Why, then, is everyone acting so righteous now?

Some years ago I decided the pastors should not occupy thrones on the platform in our church. They should sit among the commoners. But it was the commoners who objected. They wanted their "clergy" to be different, a step above. One suggested I put on a ministerial collar. Me! The person making the suggestion was disturbed by my "familiarity." He wanted me to be like Japan's Emperor Hirohito, who is known as *Ohoribata* (the honorable personage across the moat).

I also knew if he ever discovered who I really was, he would be the first to pick up a stone.

Why do we insist on trying to elevate our pastors, TV evangelists and musicians to the level of royalty? The tiny Dalai Lama, installed as god-king of

Tibet at the age of 4, used to stand on the roof of his palace and wistfully gaze through a telescope at the other little boys playing in the streets of Lhasa. Very few religious celebrities enjoy public recognition. Like us, they long for privacy, for friends, for the right to be natural. But we won't let them. We need our kings.

Years ago I visited a black Pentecostal church in Brooklyn. Although the people arrived by bus, the pastor parked his Cadillac by the front door. That Sunday they took up an offering to buy the pastor's wife a new full-length mink coat. The one she was wearing, the head deacon apologized to the congregation—gesturing to the queenly woman on the platform—was two years old and frayed around the hem. "We don't want our pastor's wife dressing like that, do we?" he hollered. Hundreds came forward to place their money on the altar.

Through her they lived their dream.

So with Jim and Tammy. Although playing the role of royalty, they were actually our subjects—hostages to the dreams we wished them to enact. Now we condemn them because they didn't know how to handle the riches we poured on them.

Now PTL is bankrupt and another king, one who refers to himself in the third person as Julius Caesar did, sits on the throne. The cycle goes on.

What can we do to stop it?

We can start by giving only where it will be used correctly. Then let's drop all titles: i.e. "First Lady," "Reverend," even the title "Brother." Allow your pastor the right to talk, dress and live like everyone else. And let's equalize salaries! One pastor told me, "The only reason I live this lifestyle is because my board insists on it."

The cynic says, "Yeah, sure!" But the pastor is right. It's forced on him by people who want a king, and the weight of the crown is killing him. I'm not starting a "keep-the-pastor-poor" campaign. I'm simply saying, stop making him someone he's not.

We don't need ministerial royalty in the church. We have one king, King Jesus, and He has made us all royal. ■