

# THE LAST WORD ON Jamie

Shout it from the housetops, it's risky living in Melbourne, but that's not the end of youngblood Jamie Buckingham. This son of destiny, who's tramped for the Lord around the globe, still believes that nothing is impossible and that God can do it again.



photo by Donna Clark

It is a hot and muggy Florida afternoon and the wind blows lightly through the tops of pine trees surrounding the two-story, white columned, Georgian-styled brick house. A rutted dirt road accentuated with potholes from recent heavy rains leads to the house, partially obscured from the main road in a secluded, rural section of Brevard County, Florida.

A slightly-overweight, balding man of medium build gives instructions to a precocious nine-year-old boy driving a small garden tractor. He is dressed in a blue jogging suit, trimmed in wide white stripes.

The man is one of the world's best-known Christian authors today. In less than ten years, his twenty-seven books have sold 12 million to 13 million copies. In some places, his name is a household word. This day, he looks like any typical suburbanite spending Saturday afternoon working in his yard.

But this man — Jamie Buckingham — is no ordinary suburbanite. A multi-talented, complex man (who turned 46 in March), Buckingham is widely known as a best-selling author, a sought after speaker in the charismatic renewal, a world traveler and a preacher of the gospel.

It is generally acknowledged that only a handful of authors in Christian circles write with the wit, wisdom and command

**BY ROBERT PAUL LAMB**

of the language of Jamie Buckingham. As a Christian satirist, he probably has few equals. As the advertising blurb on his newest book says: "Mixing precision with wit, he exposes our fears and foibles, levels our elevated self-images, brings smiles to our faces, and prepares us for the reconstructing power of the Holy Spirit."

He is an intense man whose blue eyes blink rapidly when he talks, yet Buckingham is utterly comfortable to be with. He was like that when we were introduced six years ago by a mutual friend. He is like that today as my wife, our son and I visit in his Melbourne home. He's the kind who never seems to meet a stranger.

Buckingham's relaxed style prevails in the Buckingham household although the unlisted telephone rings frequently and visitors are steady. A look at the guest book in the foyer reveals the well known and the obscure have slept here.

The Buckinghams — Jamie, his wife, Jackie and their five children — have lived in the mansion-like house (formerly owned by a bank executive) for over a year, moving from a smaller residence in a Melbourne subdivision. "The first six months in the new house, we entertained houseguests almost every night," recalls Jackie, a trim, bespectacled blonde who began dating her future husband while they were students at Vero Beach (Fla.) High School.

"We aren't entertainers," she says, "we just accept people as family and treat them as such. After all, we're one in the Spirit in the family of God."

By anybody's yardstick, Buckingham is an indisputable success with his books. Yet from a financial standpoint, he disavows any consuming interest in the almighty dollar.

"We have not allowed ourselves any outward show of extravagance but this house," he says matter of factly, "and this house is for ministry. In fact, the only way we could justify buying a house this big (five bedrooms, five baths, a guest cottage and a kidney-shaped swimming pool) was to consider it for a ministry."

A bronze marker set in a brick pillar alongside the driveway announces the name of the property as "Hebron."

"When Joshua established the new Israel, he set up some cities of refuge and Hebron was one," he explains. "They were cities where people who had been hurt or wounded could find safety and refuge. We've been kicked

pretty hard — even wounded at times — we wanted to establish a place where people would come. In time, we have envisioned building a number of small guest cottages around here by taking the profits we make from the books." He stops momentarily. "I have trouble talking about it now without crying."

The Buckingham five are all bright, good-looking kids with varying shades of blonde hair. Bruce, 23, graduated this year from Oral Roberts University and worked in an election campaign

A friend of his told him once that preaching is for proclamation and discipleship is for application. "As such I'm discipling my kids, and the only way I know to do that is to let them see me like I really am — diseased parts and all."

Then with a smile, he adds, "but as the children have grown up they've picked up on this honesty and openness and they've outgrown me in many ways. They've seen me hold back like with my weight. They've said 'Come on, man of God, what's this?' pointing

## "Red Tag" Mysteries Solved

In the opening chapter of his best-selling biography of Kathryn Kuhlman, Jamie Buckingham wrote about "red tag" mysteries that surrounded the death of the most famous woman evangelist of our day. Now almost two years later, he says many of those mysteries have been resolved in his mind.

"I know we left the story with big question marks over the ministries of Oral Roberts and Tink Wilkerson (a Tulsa auto dealer and regent at ORU)," he says candidly. "I am convinced that both men were acting out of the best interests of Kathryn Kuhlman and the generous dictates of their hearts."

However, Buckingham acknowledges that mistakes were made. "One of the mistakes was not saying anything," he points out. "Oral Roberts just wouldn't grant interviews

to anybody. He wouldn't talk. But Oral Roberts wasn't involved as much as Tink Wilkerson.

Wilkerson, who the book says "moved mysteriously into her life eight months before" her death, became the chief beneficiary of a new will made out for Kathryn Kuhlman by Tink's attorney while she lay critically ill. The will left the bulk of her two million dollar estate to Wilkerson and his wife.

Yet Buckingham says, "I am now convinced that his (Wilkerson) basic desire was to help Kathryn Kuhlman. I think he was star-struck like many people were around Kathryn, but I don't think he was there to get her money or to change her life or to direct it. I think he looked at the people around her and saw they were not as capable of handling her best interest as he was. I think Kathryn Kuhlman probably felt the same way."

this summer. He may go to law school later. Robin, 21, was married in July and will return to ORU for her senior year. Bonnie, 19, is a junior at ORU. Muscular and athletic Tim, 17 is a high school senior while Sandy (whom he describes as "15 going on 22") enters the tenth grade.

Buckingham says his family has played a vital part in his success. "They've kept me honest. First, because they grated on me in areas of guilt. When I was wrong, I knew I was sinning against them. And I've had to work hard to support them. That has created spiritual muscles in me. I've had to discipline myself to get up early and get to the typewriter."

to my spare tire, 'We thought you were going to be out jogging'."

The candor (or "transparency" as he calls it) obviously makes for lively dinner conversation around the house. Buckingham recalls, "Just the other day at the dinner table, my 15-year-old let it all hang out about some sexual problem she was having. I thought to myself, 'Gee whiz, I would have never talked to my daddy like that, especially not in front of my mother.' I think there were even some visitors at the table. But in reflection I don't want them to grow up like I did where they could not talk to their parents about personal things."

Jamie's openness which has inspired

his kids to be more open, and is now a part of his make-up, wasn't easy in coming. In *Risky Living: Keys to Inner Healing*, He tells of his own faltering attempts to make God the Lord of the subconscious and in the process to become open, transparent, honest and trusting. Friends who know him best today say he is characterized by his openness and his "all-too-honest" approach.

This includes a rare gift to be able to see both sides of various issues. The best case in point is the discipleship controversy. He played the role of peacemaker three years ago when the dispute went public. He takes a middle-of-the-road attitude, applauding the men of discipleship who "Have been willing to set the pendulum in motion," while decrying the extremes he sees.

Another aspect of Buckingham's personality is his tendency to "sound off" on an issue before he has heard all the facts. Several years ago, for example, he criticized the marketing of David Wikerson's *Vision* in an issue of *The Trumpet*, his church newsletter. A quick issue later, he reversed himself and apologized for his remarks.

Buckingham also seems to have an opinion about everything. He is well-read, seems to know everyone, and gets news through the grapevine before anyone else. The great and not-so-great seek his advice daily.

For example, Ruth Carter Stapleton recently cancelled at the last minute her appearance to be at a Messianic Jewish rally on Long Island in a much publicized news conference when Jewish leaders put pressure on her. Mike Evans, who was in charge of the rally, called Buckingham and asked him what to do because radicals had threatened to disrupt the meeting. Evans later asked Buckingham to take Stapleton's place at the meeting called "Shekinah '78." Sure enough, radical Jews stormed the platform and grabbed the mike.

It was Buckingham's stabling influence that kept the Messianic Jews from calling the cops who were standing by. Finally, frustrated that they couldn't evoke a retaliatory response from the audience, the radicals left the stage, but only after issuing a string of the grossest sort of verbal obscenities for 10 minutes.

Only someone like Buckingham could take the podium after an experience like that and minister under the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Buckingham is an uncommon man

who marches to the sound of a different drummer. Today after I interviewed him for a couple of hours, we ate a delicious meatloaf dinner laced with wheat germ (the Buckingham's have recently begun eating more natural foods). Then, he excused himself to work several hours in the yard, something he says he really enjoys.

In the long run, he will probably spend more time working in the yard with my nine-year-old son, than with me, and I came specifically to interview him. But that's just Buckingham.

Writing is a career that Buckingham, more or less, backed into. After graduation from Mercer University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he became pastor of a large Baptist church in Greenwood, S.C. in 1958. Eight years later, he was forced to resign. He came to Melbourne as a pastor of Harbor City Baptist Church.

But once again, he admits, "I was trying to do God's work without God's power." After three years, some of his problems from South Carolina arrived in Florida. Disenchanted with the ministry, he resigned.

"I was in terrible despair," he remembers somewhat painfully, "I didn't know where to go or what to do."

During that summer of 1967, Buckingham's bush "burned", as he describes it, similar to Moses hearing the call of God from another burning bush. He saw a story in *Guideposts* magazine announcing a writer's conference and saying "submit your manuscript." Buckingham did and was invited to the conference. That week, he was asked to write the story of Nicky Cruz, a young Puerto Rican, who was one of the leading characters in the best-seller, *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

Although he felt he knew nothing of writing a book, Buckingham signed a contract and proceeded. When he sat down at the typewriter, "everything came natural," he says. "My training in homiletics, how to outline a sermon. For over eleven years I had prepared my sermons by spending ten hours in study and ten hours writing out the sermon. All that preparation just dropped into place in the writing of Nicky Cruz's life. From the moment I got into *Run Baby Run*, I knew I was going to do this for life."

One might expect a white Southern Baptist preacher who had hardly ever been across the Mason-Dixon line to be repulsed by the ruthless world of a

Puerto Rican gang leader in Brooklyn. Not Buckingham. "I enjoyed it," he says with obvious pleasure. "I went to New York and wandered around the places where he had been — at night, in the rain. I got scared to death and vomited a couple of times when I couldn't stand the smell, but I came back with all that stuff in me. It was fun to become a different person for a while and live their life."

Since that time, Buckingham has worked with a number of different kinds of people — a Jew, Arthur Katz; a black, Aaron Johnson; an elderly woman, Corrie ten Boom; a faith healer, Kathryn Kuhlman. None of the people had a background anything like Buckingham's. They were all incredibly different.

From the start, Buckingham never looked at books as a way of earning a living. "I never thought about any financial rewards in writing when I started," he says. "In fact, right after doing Nicky's book, I signed on with Kathryn Kuhlman getting \$2,000 for a book I thought would take about two months. It eventually took six." The book sold 400,000 copies at five dollars each. He laughs about it now.

He says success hasn't changed him or his family. "We still live on the same budget scale we were living on ten years ago. We're just not pinching pennies like we had to then. But we're still driving a car with 109,000 miles on it," he says referring to a blue Chevrolet station wagon.

He admits that he would feel terribly guilty about the money from the books unless he could turn it into something for the body of Christ. "What we've been given by God is not to be used for ourselves. It's to be used for the Kingdom. It's to be used for others. In the process, God will bless us. He will let some of it rub off on us as it goes past. I know enough about prosperity to know the only secret to being prosperous is to give everything away that you get."

Not many writers want to immolate Buckingham's work pace. He has seven book projects currently underway.

In addition, Buckingham does a lot of other extra writing — a regular column for *Logos Journal*, plus major articles for the *Journal*. He also writes a weekly newspaper column for the Vero Beach paper. Both of his columns have received several journalism awards for excellence.

He spends an average of four hours



photo by Donna Clark

a day at the typewriter when home. "But when I'm working on a book (which he does mostly in seclusion), I can go 16 or 18 hours a day for two or three weeks until I'm finished," he says.

The night I visited, Buckingham was in his cluttered writing study working until the wee hours of the morning. Next day, he was up bright and early dressed in an open neck leisure suit to preach in church.

In addition to writing, Buckingham also travels thousands of miles each year as a much-in-demand speaker in the charismatic renewal and serves as the presiding elder of an active New Testament church, The Tabernacle.

His name constantly appears in a wide range of meetings and conferences, both in the charismatic renewal and in mainline denominational churches.

He says he is more a "storyteller" than a preacher, and he presents an interesting picture when he is before a crowd. Sometimes he dances from one foot to another when making a point. He frequently pokes his hand in and out of his pocket. His neck blushes and his head weaves from side to side. His humor is at times side-splitting, he pokes fun at himself more than anyone else.

There are few places on the world map where he has not traveled. Yet Melbourne, Florida, is still the most beautiful city on earth as far as Buckingham is concerned. "That's because I'm not attracted to things I'm attracted to people. The people here are the thing that makes the differ-

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ence. There is love and trust here. There's a family here — my own family and the extended family of the church."

It is the church at Melbourne that is the most important to him. He could lay down the writing and traveling, he says, but not the church.

"If I cut myself off from this church, my writing would dry up and I'd have nothing to say in my traveling ministry."

The church began as a Baptist congregation seeking new forms in 1967. After Buckingham received the baptism with the Holy Spirit, he brought the news back and others began to receive. In short order, the church found the new forms it was seeking through the Holy Spirit. Membership roles were eliminated. In 1970 the church was booted out of the Brevard Baptist Association after it eliminated membership and dropped the word Baptist from its name.

Today the Tabernacle Church (or "Tab" as local folks call it) is located in a low, lean, one-story masonry building on Ferndale Drive in Melbourne. The building's appearance is hardly a lure for prospective visitors. The building is so nondescript, some call it the "sheepshed." Inside, the concrete floor which slants down toward the podium is uncovered and bare except for the rostrum. Chairs are metal. The handclapping, lusty singing and open worship are fairly typical of most good charismatic services. Everybody seems to be happy. Colorful banners decorate the building proclaiming — "His Banner Over Me Is Love" and "I Love You

## Write, Jamie, Write

Although most of his books have sold exceedingly well, author Jamie Buckingham does not rate a book successful just in terms of numbers. "A successful book to me is one that changes lives and brings people into a closer relationship with God," he says. "Numbers don't really count that much in the Kingdom."

Here then is Buckingham's view of his most successful books:

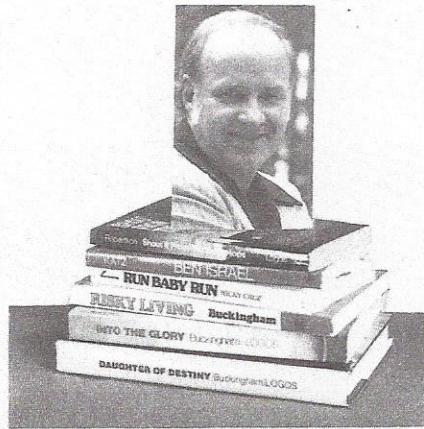
*Run Baby Run* sold more copies — seven million to date.

*Risky Living* is his favorite. Almost everyone who reads it is touched.

*Tramp for the Lord* and *Shout It from the Housetops* have been influential among vast audiences.

*Daughter of Destiny* was the most difficult to write.

*Into the Glory*, though it did not sell very well overall, was perhaps the one to change the most lives. Written to a



specialized audience, many responded heeding the call to the mission field.

*The Last Word* is the newest, probably the funniest.

*Coping With Criticism* is typical of the Buckingham books to come. It will be available in January 1979. Similar to *Risky Living*, it is, as Buckingham says, "about putting the gospel into practical application." ↩

With The Love Of The Lord."

A usual Sunday morning service will have more than a thousand people in attendance. Many will be visitors. The building can hold 1,200. The crowd

will include young kids in shorts and sneakers, older women in long dresses, bearded young men and bald older men. No one group seems to predominate.

The structure of the church's government has shifted over the years. It began with Buckingham as pastor. Later it was governed by three elders, expanding to five. The church now has nine elders. One is an ex-fire chief; several are Bible scholars. "It just goes to show you things are different in the Kingdom," says Buckingham.

His time-consuming duties as a working writer, traveling lecturer and presiding elder require Buckingham keep a low profile at the Tab. Yet he is clearly the spiritual overseer of the church. "That's not because I wanted it," he admits, "but because God gave it to me."

The church service I attend ends and many of the visitors push forward to meet Buckingham. That's understandable. This is a man who attracts people. He is a rare breed, a thoroughly unique individual. That's Jamie Buckingham.

His kind does not pass our way often. ↩

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*Author/preacher Robert Paul Lamb has been writing since the age of 15. He has authored more than nine books most notably with Christian personalities like Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart and C. S. Lovett.*