

BUCKINGHAM REPORT

AN IN-DEPTH CRITIQUE BY AMERICA'S FOREMOST
CHRISTIAN ANALYZER OF THE ISSUES, PEOPLE &
EVENTS AFFECTING TODAY'S SPIRIT-LED LEADERS

WHEN YOU HAVE TO FIRE A STAFF MEMBER

Few staff situations are as tough as those which demand a pastor to fire a staff member. Regardless of the reasons behind the layoff, the pastor needs to remember that a church is not a business. Pink slips in a Friday pay envelope do not please God. When it is necessary to fire a person—regardless of the reason—the pastor needs to remember that he is a minister first and a boss second. That means any firing should be done in a way that pleases God.

It's a one-two punch when a staff member gets laid off—one for the employee and one for his or her family. If the family's self-esteem and fortunes are tied to the employee's career, his or her pain and weakness become theirs, too. Especially is this true in the ministry when a firing may include the possibility of disqualifying a man from ever again serving in his chosen profession. Computer programmers are always able to find another job. An associate pastor or a youth director may be knocked out of public ministry forever.

Easing the Pain

Pastors can blunt some of the pain beforehand by providing the staff member with enough information to prepare him and his family for the worst. If big staff changes are in store, if the slot the man is filling is no longer necessary, if a pastor is getting ready to leave and the new pastor is bringing in his entire church staff, if a man is simply not doing his job and needs to be replaced, or if there are moral problems which keep appearing and the staff member is unable (or unwilling) to correct them, then enough forewarning should be given to allow the individual time to prepare for the final blow. When a layoff is imminent, the specific reason for the action should be explained. If the situation permits, the pastor should do all in his power to soften the blow by allowing time and money for the person to get resettled and by using his influence to help the person find new work or ministry.

When the pastor of a large church recently fired his music and worship director, he gave him six months notice. He made contacts around the nation in behalf of the man, stating his strong points and explaining he was being laid off simply because the church felt it was time to take a new direction in worship. When the staff member—basically because of laziness and disbelief that the pastor was serious about the layoff—had not found work by the final deadline, the pastor executed the firing but gave him an additional four months salary and benefits.

None of these steps can erase the pain of a layoff. But if the pastor has been

fair and honest, the employee and his family may regret—while not resenting—the action.

THE CHECK IS IN THE MAIL

Ed Caldwell, editor of my sister publication, **MINISTRIES** magazine, used to work for a collection agency. His task was to go out and collect money from those who had bought on credit but had never paid. At the top of his list of deadbeats, he said, were the preachers.

When I asked Ed if his opinion of preachers as deadbeats had changed, he shook his head and said, "Not much." He went ahead to point out the large number of Christian leaders who had ordered an expensive book published by **MINISTRIES**, titled **Solving the Ministry's Toughest Problems**, but had failed to pay. When expensive follow-up letters were sent, many of the preachers responded indignantly.

The same kind of thing happened last year at the National Leadership Conference at Ridgecrest, North Carolina. Morris Sheats received the offering one night and asked those present to pledge—"as the Lord led"—to keep the NLC solvent. When the voluntary pledge cards were totaled, they came to \$30,000. After a year, only \$15,000 of that has been paid.

The steering committee for the upcoming New Orleans conferences is experiencing some of the same problems. Money pledged by steering committee members has not come in, and of the \$100,000 pledged at a banquet in New Orleans, only a bit more than half has materialized.

Winning Thousands but Alienating Millions

Last year a friend of mine who serves on the board of a local bank handed me a xerox copy of a memo that had been handed out at the board meeting. It showed a \$1,500 loan, made to an ordained minister I know, which the bank was writing off as "impossible to collect." The minister had skipped town. (He has since returned, now that the bank is no longer on his tail, and has opened another church.) I asked my friend the board's reaction. He said it was a sort of "sneering." "Why do we keep loaning money to Christians?" one local executive asked the loan officer. "Everyone knows they're all dishonest."

That's tough, coming from a non-Christian businessman. I was tempted to pay the man's bill for him simply for the cause of Christ. But the damage had already been done.

It's not just individuals. Churches and even large ministries (especially large ministries) are notorious for not paying bills. I sat down at a prayer breakfast recently with the comptroller of one of the nation's largest satellite communication firms. He asked me about a particular national television ministry. After we chatted awhile he said, "I hate to tell you this since you're so positive about this ministry, but they owe us millions of dollars and are more than a year behind on their payments." He went ahead to say that when this particular ministry's name comes up at the corporate board meeting, the board members just sneer. And some of them laugh. "It's the non-Christians on our board who sneer the loudest," he said. "They say, 'Christians can raise money for everything else. Why can't they raise money to pay their bills, like we heathen do?'"

I was caught with egg on my face. I had been sitting there defending my brothers in the ministry for all the good they are doing, and suddenly I was face to face with something I didn't want to hear. All I could do was sit there and blush.

Fiscal Irresponsibility Equals Dishonesty

What causes Christian leaders to be so irresponsible in paying bills? Is it the idea that God's men receive and don't give? Maybe we're waiting for God to pay our bills for us? Maybe we think the world will write off our debt as a gift to God? Or perhaps we feel no one would dare dun a man of God? The men I talk to who have pledged but never paid tell me they simply got busy with the work of God and forgot to pay, which is like excusing adultery by saying you forgot you were married.

A powerful but disturbing letter from my friend Michael Clifford of Victory Communications in Scottsdale, Arizona, hits this issue head on. Michael, who has put together one of the world's most successful satellite telecommunications seminars, has been stung by national evangelists who don't pay. He writes:

"Time and time again Christian organizations order services or goods to help further their cause and are remiss about paying their bills. Having done business in the secular world my entire life, and currently doing so, I am absolutely amazed at what a cancerous situation this is among Christian organizations.

"It has been my experience that the few credible religious organizations interpret faith with the following scenario:

'...We need one million dollars to do this project...we hope to raise 15 million dollars from this event...we can comfortably put the one million dollars needed to pay for the event in a trust account and furnish this information as security to all of our vendors involved...now let's pray and ask God to bring in the funds above and beyond the one million dollars we have committed in the trust account...let's exercise our faith....'

"Unfortunately," Michael continues, "the usual scenario goes something like this:

'...We really need to do this great idea...it's going to cost a million dollars to do, but we're going to raise 15 million dollars doing it...let's sign all the contracts and go for it...let's pray and ask God to bring in the funds to pay for it as well as the extra money....'

"In almost every case the second scenario ends up in some sort of disaster with a well-meaning vendor getting burned. The heart-wrenching part of these stories is the number of non-Christian businessmen, and in fact entire corporations, that are systematically alienated and turned off to Jesus because of the way the Body does business."

Michael says the only answer, apart from keeping our word (which doesn't seem to be working), is federal regulation. He predicts this will come soon as the federal government steps in to structure contractual arrangements between non-profit organizations and for-profit organizations to guarantee payment. And when it happens (this is Jamie's prediction) a number of Christians will protest government interference in church affairs.

There's no difference, really, in a preacher who orders a color television on credit and doesn't pay, and a nationwide ministry which contracts for a million-dollar televangelism program and reneges on payment "because the offerings didn't come in." Both are deadbeats.

Leaders need to remind their flocks of the importance of paying their bills—for the sake of Christ. More importantly, we need to check our own "bills owed" file and get up to date. Immediately.

THREE CONFERENCES YOU NEED TO ATTEND

New Orleans Leaders' Conference

Plans are now finalized for the New Orleans Leaders' Conference to be held in the Superdome October 8-11, 1986. According to conference director Vinson Synan, the major speakers have all accepted and reservations are pouring in, with more than 12,000 expected.

Evening speakers are Paul Yonggi Cho, Episcopal leader Everett (Terry) Fullam, Catholic renewal leader Fr. Tom Forrest, and Oral Roberts. Though the conference closes with a general session on Saturday morning, John Wimber will join Yonggi Cho for an open rally Saturday evening in the Superdome.

Numerous workshops will be held each afternoon, featuring a special workshop by Wimber on "power evangelism." The morning sessions will be devoted to meetings by denominational groups—including a large session for non-denominational leaders which Charles Green and I are co-hosting. This will feature messages by leaders from divergent groups such as the "faith" camp, the "discipleship" groups, and others. Call 1-800-348-2227 for full information.

Charismatic Bible Ministries

Held on the campus of Oral Roberts University June 23-25, this conference will be hosted by Oral Roberts and the 27 founding trustees who represent nearly all the streams of independent charismatic ministry as well as all the major Pentecostal denominations. For information write P. O. Box 2187, Tulsa, OK 74171.

National Leadership Conference

There is still time to register for this conference to be held May 19-22 on the beautiful retreat grounds at Ridgecrest, North Carolina. About 2,500 pastors and wives are expected. Oral Roberts, Ern Baxter and Morris Sheats are principal speakers, along with 30 major seminar speakers. I am president of the NLC this year. This will be our finest conference yet, with some very meaty issues handled in the seminars. You need to call (no time to write) Jim Jackson in Montreat, NC, (704) 669-6900.

FAIREST OF THEM ALL

As you know, I write a regular column for **Charisma** magazine called Last Word. It is an "everyman" column, shifting from subject to subject each month. On most occasions my editor gives me free rein to write about any subject I choose. However, as the magazine grows larger, there is an editorial tendency to become more and more concerned about the readers' feelings. I am sensitive to this, but on occasion there are charismatic balloons which begin to ascend that need puncturing—not out of meanness or self-righteousness, but just for the fun of it.

My latest column was one of those that got sent back to the barn. "Why don't you just put it in your **Buckingham Report**," editor/publisher Steve Strang said. "That way, you—not **Charisma**—can lose subscribers." (Yes, unfortunately, a number of people cancel their subscriptions because of stuff I write.) So one of the advantages of subscribing to the **Buckingham Report** is you get to read what **Charisma** won't print. And I dare you to cancel.

Each year about this time I receive a letter asking me to nominate my choice for the **Christian Woman of the Year**. Last year's letter contained a nomination ballot

saying my vote "along with key evangelical leaders will help the executive committee determine the will of God."

The committee itself is impressive: Carolyn Evans, wife of evangelist Mike Evans; Mary Crowley, millionaire Dallas businesswoman; Anne Murchison, wife of the former owner of the Dallas Cowboys; Dede Robertson, wife of televangelist Pat Robertson; Cory SerVaas, publisher of the **Saturday Evening Post**; and Karen Davis, wife of a Texas millionaire.

Last year's letter asked me to vote for one of seven women on the ballot. This would help the committee "honor a woman in 1985 who has given outstanding service in the ministry and who has led an exemplary Christian life."

The ballot listed the ladies-in-waiting—a virtual "Who's Who in the Kingdom": Beverly LaHaye, Dee Jepsen, Frances Swaggart, Anne Gimenez, Evelyn Roberts, Vonette Bright, Marilyn Hickey.

Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all? Who was I, a mere man, to make a selection from this lineup? I knew them all. Unlike most lists of the rich and famous, I didn't know a single disqualifying thing about any of them. All were worthy of honor.

The year before, the committee had selected Mrs. Billy Graham as first lady in the kingdom. But who was to wear the crown this year? Is Marilyn Hickey more worthy of honor than Bill Bright's wife? Maybe I should vote for Anne Gimenez—after all she has to live with John. But then look how long Evelyn has put up with Oral.

I considered nominating my wife, Jackie. If anyone in the world is worthy of honor, it's she. But to list her would mean I would be classifying myself with all those other biggies in the kingdom. I wasn't sure how I could get away with that. Maybe if I mailed my ballot from Boston....

Then there was another factor. Would my nomination really count? What if this is just a political play? You know, someone's little scheme to get "in" with the "shakers and movers." The way to be honored, you know, is to pass out honors. That's the reason people give expensive gifts to kings, in hopes the king will honor them in return. Could it be...?

I shook the thought from my head. Surely not! After all, the letter did say the committee would prayerfully consider each nomination.

I leaned back in my chair and imagined what it would be like. I pictured this wonderful committee, sitting around Carolyn Evans' breakfast table in Fort Worth. They had spent most of the morning in prayer. Mary Crowley had flown in the night before in her custom-designed DC-9 to be there for the opening of the ballots. Dr. SerVaas opens the meeting with a little devotional about the value of eating high fiber food to keep the lower bowel free of cancer-causing debris. She then passes out samples of L-lysene. Anne Murchison leads in prayer, asking God to give wisdom to the committee and to take the Cowboys all the way to the Super Bowl.

There is a gentle knock at the kitchen door. Mike Evans arrives. Carolyn takes a key from her pocketbook and unlocks the handcuff which fastens the mailbag to her husband's left wrist. Mike empties the ballots on the table. They are just as my invitation letter stated: "...more than 300 ballots submitted by the most influential evangelical leaders of America."

Carolyn divides the letters into equal stacks. The six ladies begin their solemn task: opening envelopes, calling out names, marking them down. Two votes for Marilyn. Three votes for Beverly. Five votes for Evelyn—all in an ORU envelope.

Then one of the committee members, let's say Dede Robertson, comes to my envelope. I can see her lips moving in silent prayer as she slips the letter opener under

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the flap. She's praying in the Spirit, asking God to speak to her through the enclosed ballot.

"One write-in vote for Jackie Buckingham," she states, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice.

The other committee members look up, eyes round, lips quivering. Dede is holding the ballot out for everyone to see. Her hands are trembling. Tears are running down the faces of two of the ladies. "How could we have missed her in the original nominations?"

"Oh God, forgive us," another prays.

"I don't think we need go any farther," the chairperson says in a shaking voice. The rest agree....

No, I say to myself. It won't work. Even if they nominated Jackie, how could she accept? It would be like the fellow in the church who won the annual humble contest. They gave him a humble button at a special banquet—then took it away because he put it on.

In the end I wound up nominating my mother.

Two weeks later I received a notice from the committee: "Please submit a serious ballot." I wrote back saying I was serious. I doubted that any of those on the formal ballot lived in a retirement home without even the luxury of a TV set so that the money left over from her social security check could be given to missions.

A month later I received a mailgram. Beverly LaHaye had been named Christian Woman of the Year for 1985. The president and 75 senators and congressmen sent wires of congratulations. I spent the afternoon taking my mother for a drive and thinking of something Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all the others."

NOTE: A mailgram just arrived stating that this year's Christian Woman of the Year is Dede (Mrs. Pat) Robertson. Congratulations, Dede! I probably would have voted for you, but the committee, for some reason, didn't send me a ballot.



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