

By Jamie Buckingham

Thank God for Extremists!

■ If the Charismatic movement hasn't done anything else, it has at least re-instituted the office of the extremist in the kingdom.

There is a difference between an extremist and a fanatic. A fanatic is someone who has lost his way and re-doubled his effort. He makes up for his spiritual emptiness with noise and activity. He is as dangerous as he is rude and insensitive. Get close to one and, like the drowning man in the lake, he's liable to pull you under with him.

Extremists, though, are a different breed. He is full of life and knows where he is going. The problem comes when he gets so far out in front of everyone else that we lose sight of him—or he gets eaten by a bear. Even so, he is alive and kicking (even though his foot may sometimes be in your ribs—or his mouth), and that's a whole lot better than being stone cold dead in the market like a lot of cultural Christians.

I'm not afraid of extremists. Like Vance Havner, I'd much rather try to restrain one than resurrect a corpse.

A friend and his wife recently returned from a harrowing vacation in Canada. On a lonely road high in the mountains they parked their car and started to climb down a steep hill toward a small stream, far below, where they intended to eat their picnic lunch.

Half way down the steep, rocky hill the wife slipped. Screaming in terror, she fell headlong over a cliff and landed at the bottom of the ravine. When the frantic husband reached her she was lying face down in the stream, seemingly lifeless. The water around her was slowly turning pink from a nasty cut on her head.

The husband was panic-stricken. Pulling her from the icy water he laid her body on the bank and began applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. There was no response as he blew into her mouth time and time again.

He pumped her chest. Then he blew some more. More pumping. More blowing. No response.

Finally, in desperation, he cried out to God. Loudly. Then he bent over, put his mouth against hers, and blew again.

She came alive. And bit off the end of his tongue when her jaws snapped shut.

Last week, when I heard him testify of the miracle, he was the happiest man I'd ever heard. Even if he did talk with a decided lisp.

Life, even if it kicks and bites, is better than no life at all. I love the extremist.

Every genuine Christian movement in history has begun with extremism. When a clock pendulum has hung motionless for a long time, it takes a big push to get it started. A little nudge won't do it. Even if the pendulum is only supposed to move in a four-inch arc, it will take a twelve-inch push to get it started.

The problem arises when some fanatic comes along and thinks he has to keep pushing the pendulum. These pushers (often disciples of the original extremist who got the pendulum

swinging in the beginning) seem to think if big arcs are good, bigger arcs are better. They are unable to realize the clock needs to tick at its own pace, not in syncopation with their own hyperactivity.

Equally bad is the frightened person who sees a corpse come to life, and panics—desperately trying to shove it back under the ground. Such pendulum-stoppers use stereotyped phrases like, "Remember Aunt Emma who spoke in tongues and wound up in the insane asylum"...or..."The next thing those cell groups will do is swap wives."

I personally believe the Holy Spirit is responsible for some of the extreme movements today. Granted, it seems the old clock is about to jump off the mantle rather than keeping time as it should. But if the rest of us can hold steady while the pendulum finds its arc, we'll be back in motion again.

God always chooses the extremists to get us going, however.

Those early disciples were extremists. So was Luther. And John Hus. And Latimer and Ridley. When John Knox began talking about covenant relationship it led to a civil war. And what about St. Francis who took off his clothes.

I keep thinking about those 31 Anglican bishops last summer. Led by the archbishop of Capetown, they danced around the high altar following holy communion in Canterbury Cathedral. It all started when one of them gave a prophecy that some in the cathedral that evening would be martyred for their faith. They got so excited they danced. That sounds pretty extreme to me.

So we've spawned our extremists. Remember those deliverance services when everyone was handed a whoopee bag and told to vomit up their demons on the count of three. And all that "falling under the power" with some evangelists even keeping a body count as to how many went down in his (her) meetings. Now it's discipleship. And all this talk about community. Yet someone has to set the pendulum in motion.

The kingdom clock, it seems, has been resting at five minutes after nine o'clock in the morning ever since 1960. How easy it is to taste life and then settle back in comfort—forgetting the spring needs to be wound on a daily basis. So every year or so a new extremist appears on the horizon shouting, "Follow me, boys!" Fortunately, he's usually moving so fast very few of us can keep up. But the thundering herd around us forces us up, and before we know it, we're back in motion.

Thank God for extremists. Every movement needs one.

But that's all, thank you. Just one! ■

Jamie Buckingham is editor-at-large for *Charisma* and author of 36 books.

Editor's Note: This is the first column written by Jamie Buckingham for Charisma in our March 1979 issue. Not only is it his first, but we believe one of his best columns, so we decided to reprint it in this special anniversary issue.