

The Return of the Heresy Hunters

By Jamie Buckingham

Just when I had begun to believe it was safe to think out loud again, the heresy hunters returned.

I had hoped, once the controversial *The Seduction of Christianity* had slunk back into the murky depths where all back-listed books go to die, that the flurry of heresy-hunting would subside.

Not so! It's not safe to go back into the water. The sharks have once again raised their ugly fins. Jaws has returned—and has brought his vicious brothers with him.

In November, *Moody Monthly*, the flagship magazine of fundamentalist Christians, ran an article subtitled: "An Update on Trends in Heretical and Cultic Religious Movements." The article listed all the old standby bad boys—Mormons, Moonies, Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses. This time, though, they added a new heretic: the United Pentecostal Church.

The United Pentecostal Church?

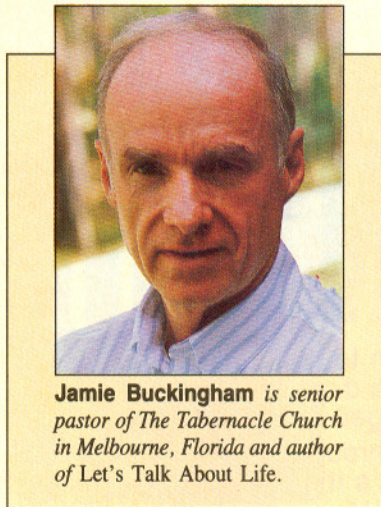
"In an effort to appear Christian," *Moody Monthly* says, "sects such as...the United Pentecostal Church (...which deny the Trinity) hide behind their claim to be 'born again Christians.'"

Branding the UPC as "heretics," the magazine says, "Probably the third largest pseudo-Christian sect in the world is the United Pentecostal Church, the largest group that teaches the 'oneness' heresy. Better known as the 'Jesus only' doctrine, it claims that Jesus is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

My UPC friends, who disdain the term "Jesus only," tell me they really do believe in the Trinity. They just don't believe like the folks in Chicago.

Since I don't understand the Trinity myself, I asked five different theologians to explain it to me. Each gave me a different explanation. That means we're all heretics. At least everyone but me.

The first heresy hunters were members of the ancient tribe of Manasseh called Gileadites. There had been a long-standing feud between them and the Ephraimites in northern Israel. Determined to protect themselves from infiltrators, the Gileadites set up a check



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point at the fords of the Jordan. They challenged anyone trying to cross the river to say the password: "shibboleth." Try as they could, the Ephraimites simply couldn't pronounce the word. It always came out "sibboleth." When that happened, the renegade Gileadites would cut off their heads.

Over the centuries the church has maintained its shibboleths. Ironically, the UPC is one of the most notorious when it comes to double-checking doctrinal credentials.

Last month a visitor in our church accosted me after a morning service, demanding to know if I baptized "only in the name of Jesus, according to Acts 19:5."

I told him the last person I baptized had been in the ocean and I had done it in the name of Jesus only. He hugged me, called me "brother", and left. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I had intended to say "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" as found in Matthew 28:19, but had been knocked over by a huge wave just as I lowered the man into the water. The best I could do was scream "Jesus!"

I guess that makes me "Jesus only."

Today's heresy hunters still use shibboleths. Fundamentalists, spotting an approaching political candidate, shout, "Say, 'prayer in public schools.'" If you stammer even the slightest, off comes your head. At least one presidential

candidate, George Bush, has hired a Pentecostal preacher to coach him on how to pronounce evangelical words so he won't slip up and say "sibboleth" as he courts the pastors of large churches.

Lately Southern Baptists have been chopping heads. Home missionaries have been told if they speak in tongues they may lose their jobs. At least one seminary president has resigned because he couldn't pronounce "inerrancy." Every time he was challenged it came out "inspiration." When I was growing up all you had to believe about the Bible, in order to be a good Baptist, was that it was inspired. Recently, however, the Gileadites got themselves elected to the Sanhedrin. Now heresy-hunting is back in vogue.

Last fall a "white paper" was circulated by an Assemblies of God evangelist. It called Bishop Earl Paulk of Chapel Hill Harvester Church in Atlanta a heretic. The Bishop, who is without a doubt today's most comprehensive writer and speaker on a doctrine called "kingdom now," is being chased by the Gileadites because he can't pronounce "eschatology." It's ludicrous for the bishop to be called a heretic on the basis of false end times theology. I've read all his books on end times and challenge anyone to figure out exactly what he believes.

When I think of the bishop's theology I recall columnist George Will's story of a British member of Parliament, who, coming down off the podium after delivering a comprehensive speech, asked Prime Minister Balfour, "How did I do, Arthur?"

"Splendidly, Henry, splendidly."

"Did you understand me, Arthur?"

"Not a word, Henry, not a word."

It's been a long time since the days of Huss, Wycliffe and Joan of Arc, and even though I don't understand "kingdom now" theology, the bishop gives class to today's sorry lot of accused heretics. If I were going to the stake I'd be honored to be tied up with him.

But if you ask me to say "shibboleth," stand back. Every time I try, I spit. ■