

the last word

Jamie Buckingham



THE AVERAGE MAN lives behind a mask. His smiles, his laughter, his piousness, his confidence are all part of the roll he is playing. Seldom, if ever, does he let anyone know who he really is. Only in times of pain, fear, or perhaps when he is drinking does his mask come down and we see him as he really is.

For 35 years I was involved in mask-wearing. Dissatisfied with myself, I was continually imitating someone who seemed successful (never dreaming that he, too, was probably wearing a mask). As a minister, if I heard of some program or activity that was "working" in some other church, I could hardly wait to get it started in mine. I tried to sound like Billy Graham when I preached, like Bev Shea when I sang, and like Cliff Barrows when I "made announcements." I wanted to be all things to all men that I might be thought winsome.

Always, though, I kept my mask up. I dreaded the thought that one day

someone might peek behind it, see the real me, and reject me as a person.

In fact, one of my recurring nightmares regarding my church was that one Sunday morning some stranger would walk into our million dollar sanctuary, come to the front, turn around and shout, "FRAUD!" And I knew I had no answer.

One of the greatest releases that accompanied my baptism in the Holy Spirit six years ago was the release from having to be some one else. With the Holy Spirit alive in me, I could now afford to be me.

Once afraid of growing bald, I had considered a hair-piece (wig, that is). Now came a new freedom to grow bald to the glory of God. Once afraid that I would not be thought of as a "profound" minister, I had memorized the sermons of several successful men of the cloth. Now came a new freedom to say what God wanted me to say, regardless of how simple it sounded.

God wants his people to be honest and open-faced. A middle-aged min-

ister stopped by the house the other day. His face was gray from fatigue and his hands twitched nervously as he talked.

"Even after 20 years in the ministry I still have times of doubt and depression," he said. "Not only that, but I constantly have to battle lust and greed. I am afraid to expose my true feelings to my congregation. They look up to me. If they knew I was like them they would demand a new minister in the pulpit."

I was unable to offer him the sympathetic shoulder he wanted.

"Friend, has it ever occurred to you that what your congregation wants most of all is an honest man in the pulpit. The reason you have to turn to someone outside your parish is you are afraid that your own church members won't love you unless you wear your mask. I believe they would love you *more* if you stopped trying to act pious and started admitting you are a man like them. Why not search for

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holiness together?"

He was unable to receive what I had to say and departed, shaking his head. "You just don't know my people," he said sadly. "They want a perfect man in their pulpit."

I am convinced that the Holy Spirit works best through transparent persons. In fact, the only way the world can actually see Jesus Christ within us is when we rip off all the masks of hypocrisy, all the veneer of pride, and expose ourselves for what we are. Then, and only then, can the living Christ really be seen in us. Until then all we present is an image—and a badly distorted one at that.

A lot of church members are walking around wearing Jesus masks. I believe they are the ones who say, "Lord, Lord," but never really know who he is. Those who *really* look like Jesus are the ones doing the things he commanded them.

I have learned the freedom and joy of confessing my failures, my weaknesses and my flaws. This does not

mean I am proud of my sins. I'm ashamed of them. But I have learned that true freedom comes only when I am honest enough to admit my sins, publicly if necessary, so those who are looking to me for help can see beyond my frailties to the greatness of God.

Our neighbor told my wife that it wasn't until her husband came home one evening and admitted to her and the children that he was a fake, that they began to find happiness in their marriage. I am sure my wife nodded and said, "The same is true in our home."

It's interesting. My wife and children knew I was a big phony for years. But they couldn't help me, nor could I receive their love and correction until I first admitted I needed help.

The best way to disarm an accuser is to confess ahead of time. I mean, how can you argue with a man who says he is wrong?

Men like this no longer have to wear masks. They are free.