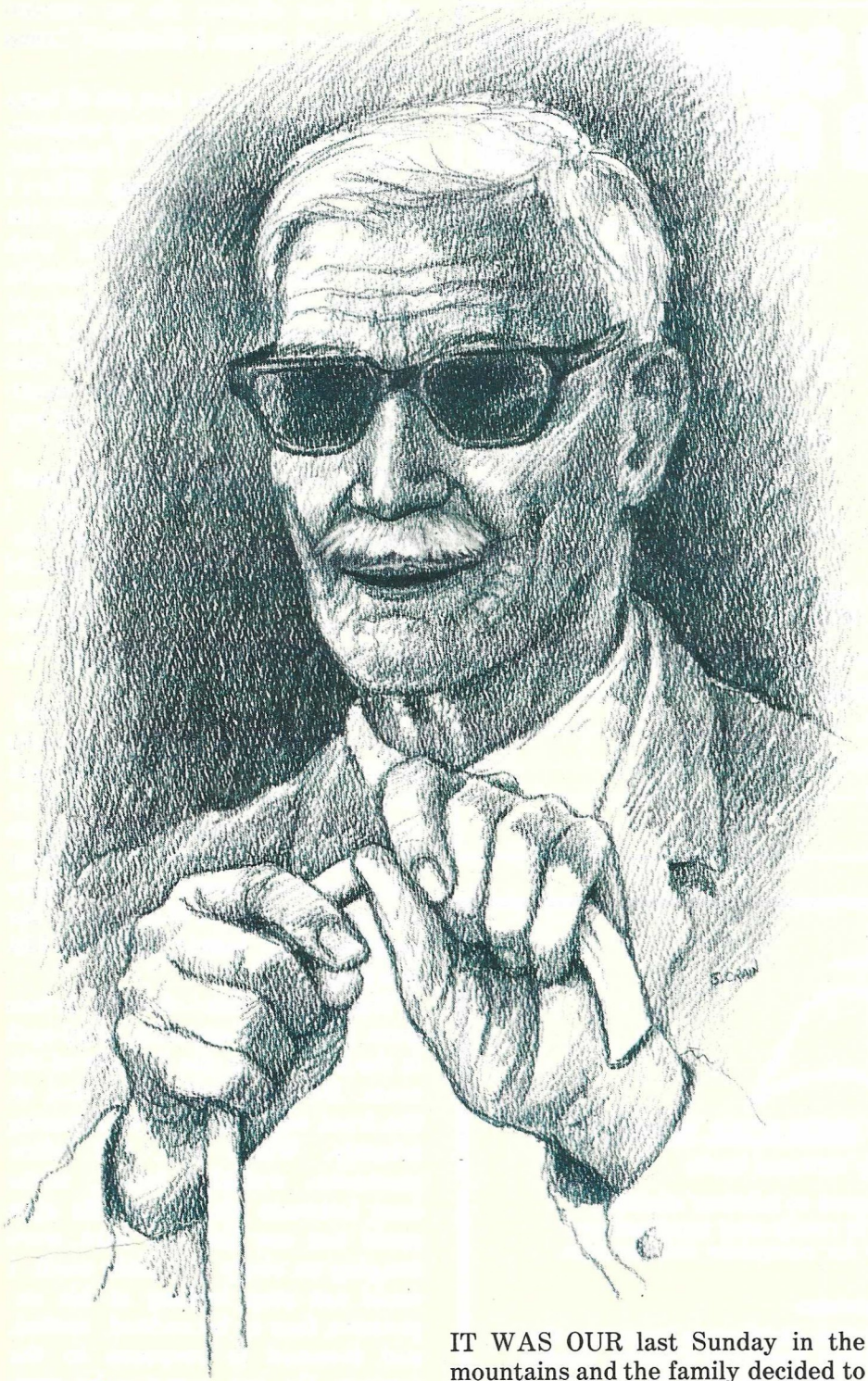

the last word

Jamie Buckingham

IT WAS OUR last Sunday in the mountains and the family decided to go to church. I say the family decided. Actually Jackie and I decided for them, and the children reluctantly agreed. They much preferred to have "church" on the front porch as we had the Sunday before.

We arrived late, as usual, and came in the back way. After getting lost and wandering through some musty halls (churches always assume visitors automatically know where to go), I finally swallowed my pride and asked directions. A little girl took us in tow—all six of us—led us up a flight of stairs and pointed to a door that opened onto a side balcony.

We walked in and were face to face with six hundred people—all staring at us. The kids panicked and tried to back out, but a friendly usher pulled us in and escorted us to the only vacant seats in the balcony. I wondered at the time why a block of six seats were empty when all the others were filled. I learned *why* the moment we sat down.

"What kind of church is this?" 14-year old Tim asked. "A listening church?"

So that's the reason those seats were vacant. They were in a blind spot. We couldn't see the platform, the minister, even the choir. All we could do was listen. I whispered down the row of kids, seated between me and their mother. "Can you see?" All heads were shaking, all faces unhappy. I knew what they were thinking. We should have stayed on the porch at home.

At least we can sing, I thought. That was a mistake also. Following John Wesley's rules printed in the front of the hymn book, I sang "lustily" when the first hymn was announced. Half way through the first stanza I noticed the couple in front of me were nudging each other

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with their elbows. As we started the second stanza I distinctly heard them giggling.

Nothing takes the lust out of lusty singing as much as having someone giggle at you. Red-faced, I faded out and sort of hummed along. When I did I realized that even though the congregation was standing with hymn books open and mouths moving, nobody was singing—at least not much. I soon realized this was indeed a "listening church" and joined the gang, moving my mouth and making growling, off-key noises.

The couple in front of me relaxed. The threat had disappeared. I looked down the row at the kids. They had been right. We should have stayed on the porch. At least there we could sing to our hearts delight and disturb no one but the chipmunks.

After several responsive readings—more open books, moving mouths and growls—we finally got to the sermon. This consisted of an unseen voice coming up out of an unknown space over the balcony rail. I had to simply assume there was someone down there doing the speaking. It looked like a lost morning.

Then I saw him—directly across from me in the opposite blind-spot in the balcony on the far side of the room. He was leaning forward on the front edge of his pew, listening intently. White hair, full white mustache, wrinkled hands, white cane between his knees. His eyes could not see but his ears were hanging on every sermonic word. I could not stop looking at his expressive face as he nodded, smiled, and frowned in response to the sermon. On one occasion he even raised his hand in a grand gesture of approval. I watched, fascinated, as the message of the morning came alive in the expressive face of an old blind man. Far more effective than seeing the source of the sermon, I was seeing the result.

I left the service strengthened, helped, uplifted. Maybe that's what going to church is all about, anyway—seeing in one another the result of truth proclaimed. ∝