

THE LAST WORD

No Right to Quit

By Jamie Buckingham



Novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald was known for his careful research. He was constantly filing ideas for new stories. Following his death someone found, in his personal papers, several ideas for novels he never got to write. One of these was the plot of a widely divided family—brothers and sisters who never spoke to each other—who inherited a house in which they all had to live together.

Sounds like the church.

Here we are, coming from all backgrounds, cultures, races and doctrines, thrust together in a family of believers and told to “stick it out.” Larry Tomczak once told me the definition of covenant was “abandoning the right to quit.”

Sadly, that doesn't sound like the typical church. Independent, and sometimes arrogant, we thumb our nose at anything we don't like. The list of why people drop out of the church is endless.

Don't like the pastor.

Sermons are too long. Too short. Too deep. Not deep enough.

No one ever visits me.

Someone threw a spitball at my child in Sunday school.

Doesn't quite sound like the lineup found in Hebrews 11 of those who “chose to be beaten instead of being set free, because they would not turn against God.”

It's much easier to resign, than to re-sign.

In my last book, *Where Eagles Soar*, I have a chapter on finding your place. In it I describe the old house where my brothers and I were raised—a large, wooden house in Vero Beach, Fla. I tell the story of the time my children and I returned to the old house. It was

between owners, and we were allowed to spend the night in the empty house.

Lying in bed that night I listened for the familiar night noises of childhood. But so much had changed. Gone was the sound of the flowing well in the yard, long covered over. Nor did I hear the lonely sound of the boats on the Indian River a mile away, blowing their horns for the draw bridge to open. Now a new “high rise” bridge spans the river.

Even so, it was a special night. A night of memories.

The strength of the church is not in its sameness but in its diversity of beliefs.

After the book was published I received a letter from my older brother. Strange, he wrote, how you heard one thing as a child—and I heard another. Since his room was on the west side of the house he never heard the flowing well, or the sound of boat horns. Instead, he heard the wind in the Australian pines and the sound of hoot owls in the nearby woods.

We were brothers, living in the same house with the same parents, but our memories are different. I wondered how much those different memories have influenced us across the years. He is a conservative evangelical, disciplined in Bible study, reserved in his emotions. I am free, open, and transparent to the point of embarrassment to my family and friends.

Yet I deeply respect his ap-

proach to God. He tolerates my love for the tambourine and does not deny my “charisms.” Separated in method and clinging to a different set of memories, we remain brothers. There is no way to resign from the family.

The Bible writers often described the church as the *koinonia*: “community,” or “family.” Unfortunately, we've departed from that concept. We've divided ourselves into groups of convenience, rather than covenant. We cluster on the basis of doctrine, race or culture.

But the strength of the church is not its sameness, but its diversity.

There is a need to mix sacramentalist and symbolist. Worship should be composed of the great old hymns as well as the hand-clapping choruses. Fellowship must not be based on externals—whether a man has a beer with his pizza or crosses himself when he prays—but on the fact we have the same Father.

None of us has the whole counsel of God. But we'll come a lot closer to it when we listen to the whole counsel of all the brethren.

I am praying the Holy Spirit will continue to knock holes through our denominational walls. Let us again be one family as the church was in the beginning—some Jewish, some Greek, but all followers of Christ.

He delays his return, it seems, to see if we shall live together in the house we've inherited—the church.

Some of us will never hear anything but the wind in the pine trees. Others will always listen longingly for the sound of boat horns on the distant river.

But because we're brothers, we'll live together. ☞