THE LAST WORD...

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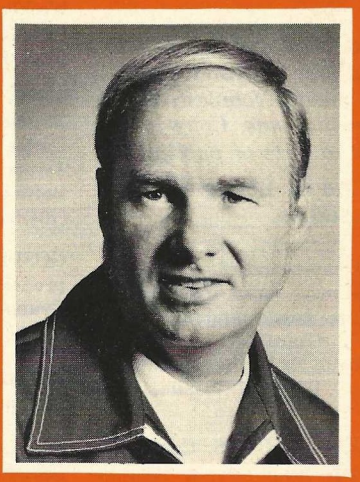

LAST WEEK, ON A PLANE to Chicago, I finally got around to reading my mail. In the stack of letters was a note from an outstanding young attorney from North Carolina. Written in scrawled longhand on yellow legal pad paper (naturally), the letter shared some of the joys and challenges my friend had found in his new walk with Jesus Christ.

His letter was personal, relating new insights and new problems, and was signed simply, "Love, Nard."

I was half embarrassed and half amused. "Why, that's the way a ten-year-old boy would sign a letter—'love,'" I thought.

Immediately the Holy Spirit spoke to me. "Have you forgotten, you sophisticated stuffed shirt, that only ten-year-old boys (and girls) can enter the Kingdom of Heaven?"

I had forgotten. And as I sat in my seat, looking at the way that grown man had signed his letter to me, I felt tears gathering in my eyes.

Now that's something else adult men aren't supposed to do — cry. It's a sign of weakness. Or even worse, a sign of being childlike. We men. We don't cry. We don't say "I love you." We relegate things like gentleness, tenderness and affection to the women. And we bloat ourselves up so big that we can't squeeze through the gates into the Kingdom.

What's wrong with us adults, especially we men, that we can't say, "I love you" to one another?

On the way home the next day I began to realize that I was indeed something of a stuffed shirt. Most of my letters are signed "Sincerely." Or, if I want to show affection I use a warm, personal term like "Yours truly." When I desire to appear especially pious I write, "In The Master's Service."

Anything to keep from sounding childlike.

I believe God intends for Christians, especially Christian men, to peel off their masks and start saying, "I love you" to other people. In the early church the Gospel was not *taught* as much as it was *caught*. And the prime method of pitching and catching was through "demonstrations of power" (I Cor. 2:4), and "behold, how they love one another." (Col. 1:4).

Hollywood script writers have cheapened love until many Christians are embarrassed to say, "I love you." Legal religionists, on the other hand, have made us so fearful of the flesh that other Christians are terrified when they see folks embracing. J. B. Phillips, the English scholar, was of this reserved school; and when he translated I Peter 5:14, he hedged away from the original language.

"Give one another a handshake . . ." says Phillips; while Paul actually wrote, "Salute one another in a kiss of love."

Now I am not suggesting a new cult known as the "Holy Kissers." (We've got enough oddballs bouncing around as it is). I am saying, however, that I need to be loved. And it's not sufficient for some pious Believer to give me a cold-fish handshake and say, "I love the Christ in you." I need someone to love the sinner in me. I need to be loved by someone else the way Jesus loves me — just as I am. And I contend that Christians should not be ashamed to embrace one another in great big bear hugs, greet one another with a kiss, and sign their letters "love."

This should start in the home. There is something special about a daddy putting his arms around his son or daughter and hugging them. My wife and I hug and kiss our children, both boys and girls (and we have three teenagers) to manifest our love. Children denied this kind of love often seek it in counterfeits later in life.

Last week I picked up the phone and called a retired businessman in the community who writes a Christian column in the local paper. Although I had never met him, I appreciated his writing. "I just wanted to tell you I love you," I said.

There was a long period of silence. Then, with great emotion he said, "That's the first time a grown man has ever said those words to me, but God knows how I've longed to hear them."

In writing to the Corinthian church Paul urges the Believers to display

the supernatural gifts of the Spirit in their ministry. But, he warns them that if they do not minister in love, they will wreak havoc in the church. Love is not a gift, Paul says, rather it is the way in which the gifts are to operate. Charismatics, in particular, need to remember that nestled in between I Corinthians 12 and 14, is the greatest treatise on love ever written.

On our last night of a trip behind the Iron Curtain my Dutch companion and I slept on the floor of a little Baptist church near the Russian border. The pastor, although very poor, insisted we eat breakfast with him and his family before we left the next morning.

Never have I felt such love flow from one man as I did from that courageous pastor. Even though I could not speak his language, we were brothers.

Following breakfast, the pastor excused himself and disappeared down a cellar stairwell. My companion turned to me. "Ever since the Russian conquest of his nation he has hidden away some very special drink. Now he wants to share it with you."

Moments later the pastor reappeared, carrying two dusty, six-ounce bottles of *Coca Cola.*

I was deeply touched and tried to object. Surely he was not going to waste his precious *Coke* on an American. My Dutch friend silenced me. "It is the finest thing he has to offer. Next week he may be in prison for preaching the Gospel. He wants to give this, now, because he loves you."

I drank it slowly, like sacramental wine.

Before we left to drive back toward the border, the pastor embraced me. We kissed, first on the right cheek and then on the left. My lips tasted the salt of his tears, and in that moment, as we held each other tightly, I felt our hearts beating as one. Our love needed no interpretation of words.

I often remember that early morning love scene as I ponder my reluctance to express any deep feelings to others. I think from now on I'm going to have to sign my letters, "Love, Jamie." At least it's a start. ◆◆