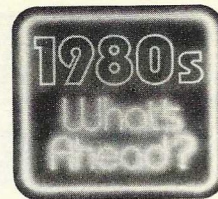


LORD,

HELP US TO MATURE



As the charismatic movement faces a new decade, God is calling His people to stop "laying again the same foundation" and press on to spiritual maturity.

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

In October, *U.S. News and World Report* came out with a 32-page special section on the challenge of the '80s. They told us to expect higher prices, larger cities, more computers and even predicted an increase of spiritual hunger. People, they said, would turn to "small prayer meetings, such as charismatic groups."

Interesting. But, so what?

What if I had prophetic insight into the future? What if I was privy to information reserved for prophets and wrote it in this article? Would it change anything? Would it change anyone?

I think not.

So, what should I write when a magazine editor asks me to look into what's ahead? Especially what do I write when I remember Jesus' sharp retort to his disciples who also wanted to know the future: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. . . ." (Acts 1:7 NIV).

For weeks I struggled with what to write. I spent an entire hour sitting in front of my typewriter hoping some kind of insight would come. Stymied, and frustrated, I left my typewriter and began straightening up my study — a favorite diversion when inspiration is absent.

One of the reasons my floor is filled with papers is that my shelves are filled with books. I have read many of them. Perused most of them. But very few are worth reading again. That afternoon, with a blank piece of paper protruding from my typewriter, I decided to clear my shelves and give away a lot of books.

It was an interesting experience. As

I made my selections as to which to keep and which to discard, I began to get some insight into the '80s.

Most of the books I took off the shelves were the "lightweights." Testimony books. The same was true of the "miracle books" those healing, answered-prayer experiences. Likewise all speculative books, especially those on the doctrine of last things, were dropped in the cardboard box. I gave away even some of my own books. They were good only for one reading.

The books I kept were the ones with meat between their covers. Bible commentaries and reference books. Teaching books. A few testimony books. And some of the better-written devotional books.

I reached the unhappy conclusion that there are very few worthwhile Christian books being published today. Most are like *Sears, Roebuck's Catalogue* — good for six months and then to be discarded.

The sorting finished, I returned to my writing with a fresh insight into what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Not what God is going to do (that is His business, not ours) but what He wants us to do. And to be. I remembered Peter's epilogue after he described the awful events of the last days: "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (II Peter 3:11 NIV).

It's not what happens that is important. It is who we become that takes first priority.

One of the books I left on my shelf was George Orwell's *1984*. (It is standing beside Orwell's other prophetic work, *Animal Farm*). Orwell, you

remember, was the secular prophet who warned us of the dangers of gradual surrender of individual rights to a totalitarian system. It was he who invented the phrase "big brother is watching" to illustrate the devastating and anesthetizing affect of capitulation to a system — political or religious — which takes over the will, castrates individualism, strangles creativity and tries to get all the sheep facing the same doctrinal and behavioral direction. Real death, according to Orwell (and I agree) does not come from being eaten by the wolves of society, but by marching in lock step towards a deliberately withheld goal under the powerful control of some system (or systematizer).

This, then, is what I feel God is saying to those of us in the charismatic movement as we enter the '80s.

If life is to remain in the church, if there is any hope against the powerful forces which would form us once again into dead structures and unyielding wineskins, it will come as we defend the right of each man to hear from God as an individual. In other words, there must always be a place at the banqueting table for the man who chooses not to eat tomatoes.

For two score years leaders in the charismatic renewal have been pumping into people the true but dangerous dogma that the new wine of the Holy Spirit is given not just for gifts' sake (tongues, healings, etc.) but that we might all become ministers. Now, if the new wineskins are not provided — structures where all these Spirit-filled people can be fulfilled in ministry, we are in for tough times. The stronger ones will leave the local

body and drift off into para-church ministries. The rest will stay, ferment in the old wineskin, and cause a mighty explosion.

The local church is God's highest plan for this world. But the latter rain is falling. The old grape arbors are filled with fruit. It is time for new wineskins.

This is not to rule out the necessity of submission to authority. Indeed, it makes it even more needful — especially on the local level. But submission which negates the will and quenches creativity until all the sheep wear the same expressions and march to the same drum beat, does not lead the flock to green pastures — but to the butchering pen. Submission should accent and encourage individual creativity. Not stifle it.

Recently I met with a group of pastors in central Indiana who are struggling with the same questions which face all who take the Gospel seriously. They have come through the excitement of experiencing liberty in the Holy Spirit. Now they are asking, "What's next? Is it to build old structures anew, which will surely entrap the next generation as firmly as the old ones bound us? Or is it to allow God to form a new wineskin, flexible, yielding, capable of containing even the strongest fermentation?"

They knew the new wine was about to explode their old concepts. But the idea of new wineskins was equally frightening. It is time for a new Pentecost — a baptism of fire which will burn down the old thought patterns and clear the way for dancing men coming up the hill from the house of Obed-edom. They are carrying an ark to be placed, not in the old Gibeon tabernacle even though priests still make sacrifice there, but in a flimsy tent of skins atop a modern day Mt. Zion.

But there is yet another question which I asked the men in central Indiana. "What is to be the basis of fellowship in the new wineskin?"

Is fellowship based on doctrine? Is there room in our new structure for the man who thinks as an individual? What about the man who prays to Mary — in the elders' meeting? Or holds to a different form of baptism? Or comes to church barefooted, wrapped in skins and munching on locusts? Is our fellowship to be based on doctrinal or behavioral purity? If so, then who is the interpreter of the absolutes?

Or, is real fellowship to be based on tradition? If so, then how can any of

us, like Paul born out-of-season, find a place with those who trace their heritage to Peter in Rome or John the Baptist at the Jordan?

The conclusion we reached — or at least the one I reached since I was teaching that day — was that God was forming a body where Jesus Christ alone is the point of fellowship, and where the Holy Spirit is the disciplinarian. His family is not based on whether one believes in the sacraments, speaks in tongues, came over on some spiritual Mayflower or eats tomatoes. But on one statement alone; Jesus Christ is Lord.

Recently I discovered that a group of charismatic leaders had joined forces with a number of militant rightists and drawn up a political manifesto to judge elected officials — on their voting records — as to their spirituality. That is moving us far closer to Orwell's *1984* than I want to get. Only in this case, Big Brother is us. Moral Majority may sound great on paper — especially when you consider the decadence of society — but I have studied the Gospels for a number of years and never found Jesus leading a crusade against the Romans, or even urging his followers to vote as a block. It seems He was more interested in imparting His Holy Spirit in the hearts of His followers, and allowing Him to dictate their behavior, than setting up written standards.

Anyone who says the primary message of God to the church is "Get them saved, baptized and registered to vote," has either completely misunderstood the mission of the church or has found a quick way to raise money and is taking advantage of it.

It's all a bit terrifying, especially when a lot of Christians have honest doubts about the primary place of America in God's concept of history. The Kingdom cannot be limited to political, economic or geographical boundaries. It's nice to have freedom of religion. But in all honesty, the Gospel thrives best when the blood of martyrs runs red in the streets. I keep wondering if we're wasting time and effort trying to salvage democracy, rather than imparting the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men and forgetting about the political systems.

The question, then, the charismatic renewal needs to ask as it enters the '80s, is: "Are we going on with God or are we going to play the same old games of spiritual infancy? Political activism? Drawing up creeds? Building

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bigger buildings? Equating spiritual success with largeness and material aesthetics?"

This is the same question which faced the local church after the excitement of Pentecost. At that time they dared to break from the structural bondage of dead legalism and exercise their uniqueness — hearing the Holy Spirit in a beautiful balance of individuality and as a submitted community.

Now, at the hinge point of the charismatic renewal, the Spirit is saying to the church — "Grow up or retard."

Hebrews 6 is the strong message to the church today. "Stop circling the same mountain. Having laid the foundation, let us go on to perfection, not laying again . . ." The great danger is not that we'll backslide into sin, but that we might choose to pick up the old wineskins and stifle the creativity

the Holy Spirit yearns to pour out upon the church. What could be worse than to raise up another generation bound in chains of a tradition of our own making — a charismatic tradition?

God is saying, to those of us in the charismatic movement, to prepare our children (spiritual and physical) for their own Pentecost, trusting them to hear His voice even as we have heard it. It is time to teach them not only how to submit to God and to spiritual peers, but how and when to disobey. For we live in a generation which will soon turn hostile. There will be times in the near future, not only before the tribunals of Rome but before religious Sanhedrins, when our children need to now how to say — under the power and direction of the Holy Spirit — "we must obey God rather than man."

That cannot be written into a creed Nor taught in a seminary. Nor even

learned as a disciple of godly men. It comes only as one is empowered by the Holy Spirit and set free to walk with God in desolate places.

A young minister wrote last year saying he wanted to develop a theology now so that 30 years hence he would not have to revise it. I wrote him back and told him he was already in deep trouble. Any man, any group, not constantly receiving new revelation and regularly revising his concepts of God is already imprisoned by chains of legalism and tradition. The man who draws up a creed will eventually have to make a determination as to whom he is required to stone: Jesus or John the Baptist.

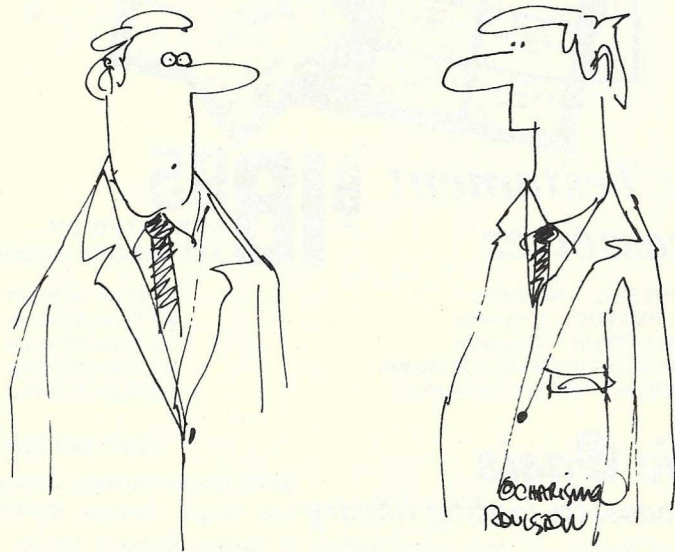
God is orderly. But never systematic. Nor logical. To be sure, He is absolute. But our interpretation of His absolutes is always relative. God defies definition. He is ever the great "I Am." He is always exploding the boundaries and demanding new wineskins.

As the church emerges from the wilderness time of learning in the '70s and heads into the land of promise in the '80s, there is a strong word coming. It is: Throw aside caution and plunge into the river — even if the water is still at flood stage — for the promised land is just ahead. Logic says wait until an east wind blows so you can walk on dry ground — as your fathers did. Faith, though, beckons with the sound of a new ram's horn. We are being called to leave behind the elaborate trappings of the Sinaitic tabernacle, loose the ark to the shoulders of untried priests, and let it go before us into battle.

Has the charismatic renewal peaked? Is it dead? Not at all. But it is changing form and substance. It is time to understand there is more to celebrate than healings, supernatural manna, supernatural water from rocks, and guidance by fire and smoke. We have a responsibility to go into the land, to put ourselves under new government, and to settle as tribes and communities in a hostile — yet promised — land.

I have a friend who is a Spirit-baptized Presbyterian pastor. He complains often of what he calls the "cha-

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I never gossip, I just exchange secrets.

rismania" of independent groups. But the church he is building has all the flavor of the 16th century Scotland. And his dependence upon the old wineskins of Calvin and Knox is just as Spirit-quenching as the roll 'em, sock 'em, slay-'em-in-the-Spirit excesses of charismania.

I believe God is calling charismatics to become a holy people, a people of character as well as charisma. But to formalize that would be to take us back into legalism — and usher in our own 1984.

Equally dangerous are the floating-free, wheeler-dealer types who submit to no one. Their arrogant spirit of rebellion is as death-dealing as the systems of legalism. The call of God is to walk in balance.

If God's people do not pay attention to the shaking the church is now receiving, then God will surely send a shaking that no one can withstand.

I do not see any lasting hope for this nation — or any nation of this world. All government systems will eventually fall. This is not pessimism. It is simply part of God's plan since Babel.

America may last another 50 years, but she will eventually be brought to her knees by some Chaldean rapist who will be loosed on us by God to shake us to repentance, and to force us to flee our templed structures and meet Him fresh and new, by the waters of Babylon. God's history never changes. Only the true church of Jesus — sans walls — shall withstand the gates of hell.

Now, as we enter the decade of the '80s, and the charismatic renewal stands at the hinge of history, we have a grand opportunity to live out our lives in new and exciting structures.

What is God saying? Learn to live in community. Dare to discipline. Submit to spiritual authority. Stand as individuals. Build the local church. Evangelize the world. Abide in His presence.

Nothing new, he's been saying it all along. But now we have the opportunity to put it all into practice in our lives and our churches. What a challenge.

In the past we have always moved from experience, to faith, to fact, to experience. One generation will have an experience with the Holy Spirit. The next generation, not having its

own experience, accepts the experience on faith. The next generation, void of experience, establishes a legalistic doctrine. History must then wait for a fourth generation to rebel against the rigidity of legalism, seek God in desperation and have a fresh personal experience.

Each man, it seems, views the world through his own troubled glasses. But I, looking into the coming decade, see nothing but God's utter control over the glorious challenges which face us. Granted, the church is facing some grave problems as it shifts gears. Will

it go forward into high gear? Or grind backwards into legalism?

Whatever, I refuse to line up with the stuffy theologian or the pessimism of Yeats. I prefer to stand with the French general, Marshall Ferdinand Foch, who looking at the sad facts during the second battle of the Marne in 1918, spoke those incredible words of courage: "*Mon centre cede, ma droite recule, situation excellente, j'attaque.*"

"My center is giving way, my right is pushed back, situation excellent, I am attacking." ➤