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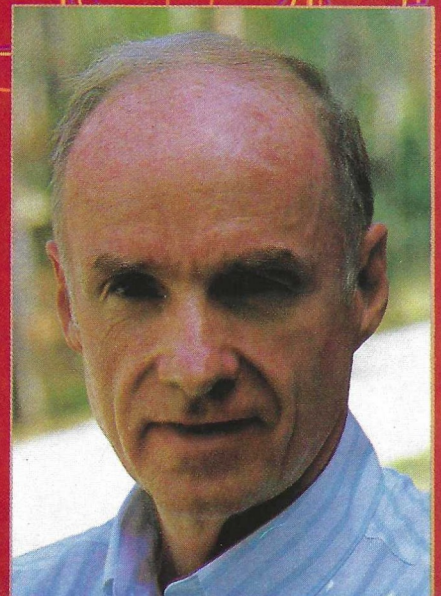
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# God Is Shaking His CHURCH

**A Hard-Hitting,  
Yet Loving Analysis  
by Jamie Buckingham**





# God Is Shaking His CHURCH

*He is saying something to us through the PTL scandal.  
The question is: How will we respond?*

**By Jamie Buckingham**

I shuddered as I stood beside my desk, listening to Jim Bakker's voice come out of my telephone answering machine. "Jamie, this is Jim Bakker. I need you."

It was March 21. Along with others in America, I had gotten the news the day before. Bakker had resigned as president of the PTL television network, given up his ordination as an Assemblies of God minister and admitted to sexual immorality. Jerry Falwell, one of the nation's most outspoken fundamentalists, had taken charge of one of America's largest charismatic ministries.

Now Bakker had called, asking me to fly to where he was in exile in Palm

Springs, California.

"Why?" I asked when I returned his call.

"I need someone who will speak God's Word to me," he replied.

I did not want to get involved. We had a major leadership shakeup brewing in the church I pastor in Florida. In fact, in churches and ministries all over the kingdom there were rumblings—the spiritual equivalent of those measured by the geologists prior to the eruption of Mt. St. Helens a few years ago. But I had no choice. Four hours later I was on a plane headed to California to spend three days with a man who had called out for help.

I did not know, at the time, the terrible

revelations that would come out about PTL in the next few weeks. The scandal was not limited to a single sexual encounter seven years ago in a Clearwater Beach, Florida, hotel room with a young church secretary. Nearly every day there were articles in the newspaper revealing a new aspect.

All through the month of April, I talked to scores of Christian leaders around the nation. Each one had a different perspective. I had a long conversation with Frances Swaggart and later with her husband Jimmy Swaggart—a man I deeply respect although I radically disagree with his lifestyle and his slashing attacks on nearly everything. But we understand



each other. I called him a snapping turtle and he reminded me I snap also. The difference is Swaggart is a hard-shell turtle and I'm the soft-shell variety.

I visited PTL and spent several hours with Richard Dortch, who had been Bakker's second-in-command and who served as Bakker's successor for five weeks until he too was asked to resign. Dortch is a gracious man of God who told me things as he saw them.

I talked to pastors and Christian leaders. Each one had a different slant. I spent time on the phone with Falwell's top assistant, Mark DeMoss, who inherited from his father, the late Art DeMoss, unflinching integrity and a high standard of excellence and ethics.

The plot thickened. Despite the fact I found no hard evidence to support a "Swaggart takeover" of PTL (as some had charged), there were huge discrepancies in the stories told me by Jim Bakker, Richard Dortch and Jerry Falwell's people. I learned, for instance, that Bakker did *not* approach Falwell asking him to take over PTL as had been reported; that was initiated by Falwell who told Bakker he had no other choice.

Also, Bakker insisted Falwell told him, in front of Dortch and Mark DeMoss, that he would give PTL back to Bakker after the smoke cleared. Dortch, DeMoss, and finally Falwell all said this was not so.

Whom could I believe? Many of the stories contradicted each other. This was sure: God was using the press to expose things God's people had tried to hide—things that were wrong. The wind which was blowing through Charlotte, however, would also blow through Baton Rouge, Lynchburg, Virginia Beach, Tulsa, Ft. Worth, Garden Grove, and would eventually shake every church in the nation—just as it was shaking my church in Melbourne, Florida.

I was reminded of the word God had given me earlier that He had loosed the press on the church as He had loosed the locusts on Israel. In other words, we couldn't blame the media for what was happening. It was God's instrument to strip the fields. "You can't cure disobedience with insecticide," Bob Mumford once said. The locusts will leave only when God's people repent, become accountable and start living like Jesus.

As the days passed, I began suffering from information overload. Everyone I talked to had some vested interest. No one, to my knowledge, had told me the whole truth, although most gave me as

much as they felt they could safely reveal. God alone could be trusted.

It became apparent that it was not what Bakker, Falwell, or Swaggart said that mattered. The question was: What is God saying and what is God doing?

**T**here are certain times in history when "God comes down." Charismatics like to think of Pentecost as one of those times, when the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit blew upon the church and filled it with power. But we need to remember the Holy Spirit is not only *pneuma*, which is the New Testament concept of a gentle, lifting spirit, He is also *ruach*, which is the Old Testament word for a roaring, seemingly destructive wind. Evangelicals and fundamentalists, while denying the miraculous power of the *pneuma*, understand the purpose of the *ruach*. Maybe that is one of the reasons God has allowed the chief fundamentalist, Jerry Falwell, to enter the charismatic camp—to execute justice.

Chapter 11 of Genesis records one of the times God came down and blew his *ruach* on His people. There we find the story of a group of people who, in the name of God, decided to build a city—complete with a tower—which would glorify self.

The story of how God dealt with that city, and those people, does more than explain the multiplicity of languages on earth—it is included in the Bible to warn us of certain pitfalls inherent in an exaggerated sense of human power.

The plan set forth by those ancient people spelled arrogant rebellion against the supremacy of God and a deliberate attempt at idolatry. Idolatry occurs when man's will to power and aspirations to control turn into absolutes and become goals in themselves rather than means toward higher goals.

In this case, humans conspired to enter into rivalry with God. God was called "The Name." They said, "Let US make a name for ourselves." They conspired to take away the Name from Him. The result: God came down, for He will not share His glory.

Today's generation is characterized by countless Christian leaders who have named their ministries after themselves. There is nothing wrong with name identification. The problem lies in the superstar syndrome many attach to themselves. When I asked the head of one of the nation's largest ministries to whom he submitted, he quickly said: "To God."

Recent events, however, prove that is

no longer an adequate answer. It is not enough to submit to God. You must also submit to God's people. Jerry Falwell was right when he said if a minister takes money from the public, he needs to be accountable to the public. Not only that, he needs to be accountable to a local church and to local elders. It is time to lift up standards of ethics, fiscal accountability, behavior and lifestyle.

It's hard, when you are big, rich and powerful—to humble yourself. Many of us suspected that God would, sooner or later, have to deal with PTL. The program had become an hour-long real estate commercial—a charismatic version of Romper Room. It was an embarrassment to serious Christians.

On the other hand, programs such as those hosted by John Ankerburg and Jerry Falwell deny the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit. In the end, neither will survive.

In ancient Babel the people worshipped their creativity—a creativity which was breathed into them as part of the image of God. But they forgot God had given them limits—and intended for them to operate inside limitations.

Across the years I have sensed this spirit of "We can do it without God" taking control of many of the major ministries of America. To be sure, no one would dare say that on the air (the funds would immediately dry up), but off camera and in the top executive offices it is rampant.

I shudder when I hear certain televangelists say, as one frequently says, "This ministry has been commissioned by God to usher in the return of Jesus Christ." One of America's best-known televangelists recently sent out a card saying God had told him his ministry alone was blessed by God—because he was pure.

I shudder at the personal arrogance and lack of accountability among leaders—which is one of the major causes of faulty lifestyle and lavish spending. I know of only one man, among the heads of America's largest ministries, who submits his personal life to peers who are not in his employ or enamored with his position. I believe God is calling leaders, not just the televangelists, but all pastors and lay leaders, to be personally accountable to peers. The temptations are too great to grow prideful or to become deceived. Today's shaking is forcing leaders to turn to one another.

I shudder at the fund-raising techniques used by most major ministries of



America. Most of the direct mail letters sent out play fast and loose with truth. How can God bless a computer-generated letter, signed by an automatic pen, telling the recipient that the leader is praying for him at that very moment? How can God bless a televangelist who goes on the air and tells people he has used up all his money and desperately needs more contributions—while he and all his family are driving \$50,000 automobiles and living in very expensive houses?

I believe there are legitimate, Jesus-like ways, to raise money. But until the leaders of these ministries are determined to use those methods instead of the methods of the world system, the forceful *ruach* of God will continue to blow on the entire church.

In March, more than 600 Christian leaders—most affiliated with evangelical denominations, colleges and parachurch ministries, met in Kansas City to search “for a more excellent way” to be ethical fund-raisers. They talked about Oral Roberts’ fund raising methods, among others. (See news article on page 55 of this issue.)

The conference closed with John F. Walvoord, the revered Chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary (an avowed anti-Pentecostal school) praying for Oral Roberts, asking God to “bring him into repentance if he is wrong.” Not long afterward, Oral was in his prayer tower, calling on Jimmy Swaggart to repent. Swaggart, down in Baton Rouge, was demanding Jim Bakker and Richard Dortch repent. Maybe, with all these calls for repentance, some leader will look into his own heart and pick up the cry of the publican in the temple: “God be merciful to ME, the sinner.”

**T**he citizens of Babel achieved their sense of power from their advanced technology. They had invented bricks and mortar. Now, they bragged, it is not only God who can make stone—so can we. Technology became their idol and they worshipped it.

In December 1985, I attended a party at Cape Kennedy the night before the spaceship Columbia was scheduled to lift off. At the close of the evening the hostess asked me to pray. As I walked to the microphone the director at NASA called out, in a joking way, “Preacher, you pray for the weather. NASA has everything else under control.”

That flight was scrubbed an unprecedented seven times before finally lifting off. The next flight—three weeks later—was the shuttle Challenger. It blew

up 72 seconds after lift-off, killing all seven on board. Of course, NASA did not have everything else under control.

Over the 15 years I have been intimately associated with America’s televangelists and their ministries, I have often caught some of that same pride in technology, in self-accountability, in fund-raising ability—a pride which borders on arrogance.

For example, a professional fund-raiser who has become wealthy writing appeal letters for dozens of ministries was boasting at a gathering of evangelicals recently that raising money was just a matter of demographics. It is like the insurance actuarial tables, he said. Insurance companies know how many people will die this year—they just don’t know who.

Likewise, fund-raisers know that by sending certain appeals to certain demographic groups, they will get a certain amount of income. This fund-raiser sneered at some of his own ministry clients who believe it is a miracle when money comes in from donors—likening it to believing it is a miracle when the sun comes up every morning.

I remember the day the number two man at one of the nation’s largest TV ministries resigned and came to me, weeping. He could no longer stomach the hypocrisy and blasphemy going on in the raising of money. Twice a month, he said, they would sit in the office of the televangelist, laughing about the next scheme to raise money. The last case was a direct mail campaign using certified letters saying that while the televangelist was praying specifically for Sister (name of recipient), God had spoken telling him to write her this “personal” letter saying if she gave \$25, \$50, \$100, \$1000 (depending on past giving records), God would grant her special favor.

That is nothing more than a Pentecostal updating of the Dark Ages’ practice of selling indulgences. God wiped that out with a mighty shaking in the Protestant Reformation. At the same time, somewhat like He had at the Tower of Babel, God confused the languages (and doctrines) so that even today Christians have trouble communicating.

Now that shaking is taking place again. It was precipitated by the sex scandal at PTL, but that was merely the fuse God used to detonate His bomb. This time, since it involves highly visible ministries, and since we live in an age of instant communication, the move of God is being revealed no later than the six o’clock news, rather than taking two



generations for people to comprehend.

God did not separate the citizens of Babel to punish them, but to give them back their humanity. The problem began when they said, "Let us build a city." God has never blessed the city concept. He calls for a distribution of the population. But people continue to concentrate in large ministries, join denominations, identify themselves with one teacher—all for the purpose of speaking the same language.

It is the problem of exclusivity. In his April fund-raising letter, Jimmy Swaggart writes, "We are the only ministry that is engaged in world evangelization." Swaggart has been greatly used by God in world evangelization, but is his the "only ministry"? What about Youth With a Mission, Campus Crusade for Christ, the Southern Baptist Convention and scores of others who do not bombard us with expensive appeals for money.

My book, *Jesus World*, pointed out the dangers inherent in large ministries. The book was unpopular, for it called leaders to return to the simple methods and lifestyle of Jesus, submitting one to another rather than living as kings and dictators. Few, perhaps none except Roman Catholic evangelist John Bertolucci, are willing to live the lifestyle practiced by David Mainse of Toronto's *100 Huntley Street*. Mainse has chosen to live in a downtown apartment so he can be near the people to whom he ministers. On occasion he still rides his bicycle to work so he can witness to people along the sidewalk. God give us more men like that—and fewer who live like kings, drawing huge salaries and working from unlimited expense accounts, while proclaiming they have "just spent their last penny for missions and need more money."

The purpose of the tower in Babel was to monitor the people, to make certain all remained loyal to one ideology and one exclusive doctrine. Men are constantly saying, "I alone am doing God's will." The problem: when they say that they mean, "All the rest of you are out of God's will." Yet Paul warns us not to "take pride in one man over against another. For who makes you different from anyone else?" (I Cor. 4:6b-7a).

We must be careful in judging. Oral Roberts, in standing up for Jim Bakker, made a point of saying he was going to forgive him, because he (Oral) wanted to be forgiven also. That is the essence of what Jesus said in Matthew 7:1: The spirit by which we judge others will be used by those who judge us.

Now, once again, God has come down

and is walking among us. He is not pleased that we have tried to satisfy *our* individual obligations to minister by giving to large ministries. We give to Jerry Falwell to build a home for unwed mothers, to PTL for a home for handicapped children, to Jimmy Swaggart so he may support Assemblies of God missionaries, to CBN's Operation Blessing to feed the hungry. All are worthy ministries. But God wants each of us involved. We should be taking these people into our

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homes, we should be evangelizing—not hiring a televangelist to do it for us. God is forcing us back into our local churches, the only place where real ministry—personal ministry—can take place.

The day I sat down to write this article, I received a phone call from a spokesman in Jerry Falwell's camp. "Expect another major scandal to break in two weeks," he warned me. The implication was it had to do with both sexual charges and financial charges.

It didn't take two weeks. Someone on the new PTL board allegedly leaked the information to the press. It began with salaries—huge, exorbitant salaries. The Bakkers alone drew \$1.6 million last year in salaries and bonuses. Falwell, who knew ahead of time this was about to break, expressed shock to the public and pledged to set things right at PTL.

Falwell again emerged as the hero. His salary, he said, was just \$100,000. But he said nothing of the fringe benefits—huge ones which all the televangelists enjoy but the Bakkers were too naive to hide.

Nevertheless, the damage was done. More cracks were appearing in the base of the tower. In April, the Bakker's 17-year-old daughter, Tammy Sue, ran off and got married—without her parent's knowledge or consent. How much more scandal—and heartbreak—could one couple take?

Then the final blow. Bakker, in a desperate attempt, asked to be reinstated. Instead, the Falwell board—stretched to the limit by all the things they had learned—cut off his huge salary. They then fired Bakker's personal as-

sistant at PTL and accepted Richard Dortch's resignation.

That beautiful city, built on sand like ancient Babel, was about to collapse. Many wondered if PTL—including Heritage USA—could survive. Indeed many, including myself, were asking: Should it survive?

What happened at Logos International, when the nation's largest charismatic publishing company went belly-up in 1981, is indication that no institution is sacred. It could happen again—only on a much larger basis. After all, God did quite well before television came along.

"I raise up enemies to bring things down," God said, "then I deal with the enemies." In short: God is purifying His church.

My assessment: Despite the shaking, these are the greatest days in the history of the church. Never, in time, have God's people attracted so much attention. For weeks on end every daily newspaper and every national news magazine has carried stories on the actions of God's people. News people are not only visiting the nation's churches—they are being assigned to visit them by their editors.

Despite the sadness that surrounds sin—and the even greater sadness that comes when good men expose each other in front of unbelievers—people are watching. Hidden things are coming to light and that will bring healing.

Television has been the greatest means of spreading the Gospel since the invention of the printing press. But with great opportunity comes great accountability. This is a time of accounting. God is checking the books. Those who love to appear in public are being judged in public. Once again, it seems, God has entered the temple to overturn the tables of the moneychangers. His breath is blowing across His kingdom, cleansing and purifying. The end result will be as always: to form a people in the image of His Son and to bring glory to Himself.

All this is happening for one reason: to reveal the sovereignty of God. He is, after all, "a consuming fire...removing what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain" (Hebrews 12:27).

"God is lancing a boil," Oral Roberts told me. Then he said, "Don't try to stop it. Let it seethe." That is wisdom, for after the impurities are gone, health shall appear. ■

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**Jamie Buckingham** is editor-at-large for Charisma. He has written 37 books and won several major journalism awards.