

the last word

Jamie Buckingham

IT WOULD SEEM, after years of walking in the Spirit, that I would no longer criticize my brethren who are struggling the same as I.

Not so. Despite all my vows to love the brethren and not bring division to the body of Christ, I continue to dish out harsh and often unjust criticism of others.

Just recently I wrote an article for our church paper in which I soundly castigated one of the well known charismatic leaders—by name—because his methods differed from mine.

After the article appeared my fellow elders (to whom I am submitted) kindly, but firmly, told me I had been unfair. They were right. I had, inadvertently, again sowed discord among the brethren and thus fallen into the category of being an abomination unto the Lord. (Proverbs 6:16-19 is very clear on this matter.) Therefore in the next issue of our little paper I had to make a public apology, trying to dig up some of the tares I had sown.

Interestingly, however, several people who read my apology wrote saying they thought my original criticism was just and fair. Several pointed out that Jesus told us to warn the sheep about false prophets. One editor said that to refrain from criticizing the brethren would torpedo his entire editorial policy. (He reminded me of the woman in a former church who said God had called her to be a thorn in the flesh.)

Suddenly the question was upon me. Should I, at the risk of dividing the Kingdom, point out false teachers? Or should I simply teach truth and let the Holy Spirit divide the wheat from the chaff? It seemed I could argue the point equally well from either side.

Sometime in the past I wrote a note to myself in the front of my



Bible. It said, "Jamie: You cannot defend the Holy Spirit and reveal him at the same time." I sat for a long time looking at that and concluded I was not called to be a "defender of the faith"—just a witness unto him.

It seems I do have an obligation to point out false prophets. (Albeit I have met very few such wolves in sheep's fur.) Also, I am obligated to judge public prophecy. (Speaking the truth in love, of course.)

But while I may be commanded to oppose false teaching, I have no right to criticize someone's *methods*. That is between him (or her) and God. Yet it is at this point I am the most critical. I cannot stand people who sensationalize the Gospel. I am nauseated by those who publish magazines and put their own picture on every page. I dislike pushy women, screaming preachers, people who shake and jerk,

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hucksters who mix preaching the Gospel with selling refrigerators, on and on, ad nauseam. In short, I am critical of everyone who doesn't do things just like I do them.

However, it's right here I'm painfully learning to keep my mouth shut. Just the time I start to criticize, it seems, I find where God has used one of these outlandish people with their garish methods to win an entire city to Jesus. Or, I discover with deep shame that the one I've just finished ripping apart loves the Lord more than I.

Last year I attended a three-day retreat at the Methodist Youth Camp near Leesburg, Florida. I was distressed and annoyed the entire weekend. Methodists, it seemed, just weren't very spiritual. Their doctrine was sound but their methods were "worldly"—and I was deeply critical of them.

Still fuming in my spirit, I rose early the last morning. Tiptoeing out of my cabin in the gray of the dawn, I wandered down a wooded path to a secluded spot beside the lake. There, under giant overhang-

ing oaks, I found a seat on a cypress stump in a spot designated as the "chapel in the woods." Chin in hands, I sat brooding.

As the sky turned from gray to rose and the first rays of the sun reflected off the rippling waters, I became aware of a solitary life-sized cross which had been erected near the water's edge. At least the Methodists still held to the "form" of Christianity, I conceded.

For a long time I sat, looking. The only sounds were the noises of nature—the twittering birds, the lapping water, the swish-swish of the limbs of the trees. I couldn't get my eyes off that cross, silhouetted against the rising sun. What would it be like to touch it? To place my arms against the outstretched beams? No one was up yet. If I was ever going to do an odd thing like that, now was the time.

I don't know how long I stood there, arms outstretched, hands pressed against those rough, splintering beams. Gradually, though, I began to tire. My shoulders ached and my arms were weary. But I would not take them down. I wanted to stay on forever, where my Lord had hung.

I felt my arms falling and reached for the top of the crossbeams to hold on. Each second seemed meaningful. But as I gripped the tops of the crossbars, I noticed something strange. The texture of the wood was different. On the sides it was rough, rugged. On top it was smooth.

Painfully, I realized what it meant. I was not the first to put myself against that cross. Countless others—those Methodists whom I had called "worldly"—had been there before me. It was their tired hands which had worn the wood smooth.

I returned to camp, chastened. I still feel the blood of shame rising in my face when I think back on those critical remarks I made about my brothers in the Lord. It's mighty painful, but I am gradually learning there is a place in the body of Christ for all—even those who are different than me.

OUR GREATEST PREDICAMENT THE KINGDOM OF SELF

Today, behaviorism is the watchword. Encounter groups, transcendental meditation, sensitivity training—man consumed by the desire to study himself without coming to grips with his voracious ego.

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topographical detail for the

reader to delineate his own little kingdom. Then he tells how to make

the dramatic spiritual breakthrough

which is a viable alternative to that

suffocating world of self-love—a kingdom

of peace and purpose: The Kingdom of God.

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