

# Breakthrough in Unity

Jamie Buckingham



## A Special Report on the Tulsa Charismatic Leaders Conference

Take thirty-five strong-willed men, each with a nationally recognized charismatic ministry, each from a different section of America and different denominational backgrounds, lock them together in a room for a week and tell them to settle their differences. Then stand back and see what happens.

This is what *Bill Sanders* and the "eldership" of Tulsa, Oklahoma, dared to do this past April. The first such charismatic leaders conference had been called in Seattle in 1971 (a second Seattle conference was held this June). This year, Tulsa decided to sponsor a conference, hosted by former Southern Baptist pastor Sanders and other area leaders.

More than fifty men had been invited. Some could not come and others ignored the invitation. Since I did not attend the first Seattle meeting, I arrived in Tulsa as a skeptic, full of grave reservations.

I remembered that Dr. Henry P. Van Dusen, former president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, once called the charismatic revival a "third, mighty arm of Christendom," standing boldly alongside the Catholic and Protestant arms. I shuddered, however, to think that one day, charismatic leaders of the world might unite and form another denomination. Fearing this, I came to Tulsa with my defenses bristling, determined to fight, single-handedly if necessary, the possibility of the "movement" institutionalizing.

Yet, I knew in my heart the greatest need of the Body of Christ across Amer-

ica was unity. Was it possible to have unity without uniting? I was anxious to find out.

The schedule called for the men to spend the days cloistered in the conference room at Long's Holiday Motel in Claremore. In the evenings we paired off and spoke in meetings held in Tulsa and surrounding communities.

**Debate:** But it was the daytime sessions that produced the excitement. From the outset it was evident the forming of a new denomination was the least of our worries. In fact, we could seemingly agree on nothing other than the veracity of the Bible and the Lordship of Christ. I sensed that the problems in the conference room were simply a reflection of the problems faced all over the world by the Body of Christ—lack of unity.

At times, as the men at opposite doctrinal poles squared off in theological debate, I had haunting memories of the gingham dog and the calico cat who side by side on the table sat. One night, you remember, they fought until there wasn't anything left. Church groups have done this for years, but were we charismatics to be subject to the same fate?

We did agree that *Brick Bradford*, United Presbyterian minister and former attorney, should preside. Somehow we sensed it would take a lawyer to keep us in order.

Then someone asked if the men could at least define the "local church." Immediately there were more questions than answers. "Does it have to own property to be a church? Can it be a local church if separated from all other churches or ecclesiastical bodies? Must it have elders? Must it be recognized by the government? How often must it meet to qualify as a church? What is the minimum number of members? Must it have members at all?"

As the outside temperature soared to a record 103° in Tulsa, the inside debate grew even hotter. We could settle on no definition. *Charles Simpson*, Southern Baptist pastor now with the Holy Spirit Teaching Mission in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, summed up our frustrations. "Where do we go from here? No one has been this way before. We've got something we don't know what to call. We always want to define, yet when we define we are immediately either inside or outside our definition."

I was reminded of the problem we currently faced in our own church in Florida. What should we call ourselves? If we put a sign in front of our building that said "Church," we identified the Body of Christ with the building. If we hung out a sign that said, "The Body of Christ meets here," it made it sound like all other churches were outside the Body. The problem was still unresolved.

As the hectic first day drew to a close, the venerable *Dr. Ray Charles Jarman*, fifty years a liberal preacher before accepting Christ as his Savior, shook his head in despair over our inability to get

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*Jamie Buckingham is a regular contributor to Logos Journal. A widely known author and charismatic teacher, he lives in Melbourne, Florida, where he also pastors a New Testament type church. He and his wife, Jackie, have five children.*



together. "All I know is that Jesus died for me. Whenever I am among God's people, in a monastery or with the Jesus People on the street, I see the *ecclesia*—and I am 'in church.'" It was the best word of the day.

**Heterogeneous Shepherds:** Additional differences became evident the second day. On one side of the room was *David du Plessis*, known as "Mr. Pentecost," who maintained demons cannot possess Spirit-baptized believers. Across the circle sat *Derek Prince* and *Don Basham* from the Holy Spirit Teaching Mission, who strongly contend that many Spirit-baptized Christians are plagued by demons. In one chair sat *Fr. Bob Arrowsmith*, Roman Catholic priest and theologian who three months before had gotten married. Across from him was a Dominican priest, *Fr. Francis McNutt*—a celibate. Then there was *Bill Britton*, controversial teacher from Springfield, Missouri, who said his ministry was to call people out of the institutional church. And sitting next to him was *Larry Christenson*, Lutheran pastor from California who is urging people to stay in.

The debate moved into the area of tongues. Although a few present held to the old-line Pentecostal doctrine that tongues is "the" evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, most of the men felt that while all Spirit-filled believers could (or should or would) speak in tongues, the experience did not necessarily come with the baptism.

At the end of the second day of disagreements I left the room, my mind reeling. I had an early dinner with *Arnold Bittlinger*, German Lutheran scholar, and my friend *John Poole*, from Philadelphia. John reminded us that the Renaissance theologians spent weeks debating such subjects as how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. We chuckled. The tensions were easing as we got to know one another better.

**A Glimmer:** As the week progressed, a strange kind of unity began to emerge. For six hours a day, we sat sharing, laughing, worshiping and drinking coffee. We found another area where we could get together: we could all praise God together. Whenever things began to get sticky, someone like evangelist *Dick Mills*

from California, or *Wayne Butchart*, Nazarene minister from Seattle, would begin to sing. Immediately we would be on our feet, hands uplifted, audibly praising the Lord. The ice was cracking.

"We're not here to organize," Simpson said, "but to recognize."

*Charles Farrah*, United Presbyterian minister and professor at ORU, summed up the new feeling. "Unity is not something we seek. It has already been given us by Jesus Christ (John 17). Unity is something we practice even though we disagree doctrinally."

*Bob Mumford*, from Ft. Lauderdale, reemphasized this, saying, "The thing that is needed among God's leaders today—needed above all else—is respect for the other man's leading."

*Derek Prince*, whose authoritarian manner has made him seem stiff and formal to many, turned out to be a warm, humorous individual. He turned to the Bible for explanation. "Whom did the Lord have more problems with? Jonah or Nineveh? When he gets the preachers (Jonah) straightened out, the people (Nineveh) will be in good shape."

*Bob Frost*, college professor from California, agreed. "We've come to Tulsa not to achieve doctrinal unity, but to gain new and better relationships with others who are moving in the same area."

Du Plessis nodded. "Some of you men have been so cured of denominationalism that you're afraid of brothers and sisters coming together to look at and listen to what God is doing. You are men called to leadership that must give spiritual direction to a nation, yet you're afraid to come together..."

Frantically, I began pulling in my defensive flags. It was the Holy Spirit speaking and the ice was broken.

**Accepting One Another:** *Ray Bringham*, founder of Inter-church team ministries, pointed out that most of us were far more concerned about how the Lord was leading someone else, than about how He was leading us. It was a needed rebuke. As the men began to accept one another as men of God, yet all men of different visions, burdens, ministries, and aspirations, we began to flow together. The ice was melting.

This acceptance, or recognition of one another as men of God, led to the com-

mon conclusion that no longer could we ever accept someone else's rumored criticism of a brother's ministry. Britton, who confessed he came up in the "grunt and groan" era of Pentecostalism, added, "Most of the lies people tell about me aren't true anyway." All of us could identify with that.

*Ralph Wilkerson*, founder and pastor of Melodyland Christian Center in Anaheim, California, one of the largest and fastest-growing congregations in the world (they're baptizing an average of 100 persons a week with 4,000 attending the Sunday evening services), declared, "We're too busy in Anaheim winning people to Jesus to get involved in arguments over doctrine. The most important thing is to get our spirits right with one another, and this can only be done through the crucified life."

Through our recognition of each other and praise of God together, we found this very thing happening in the conference. Bob Arrowsmith, bearded Roman Catholic priest, threw his arm around Larry Christenson, a very proper Lutheran pastor, and laughed. "I'm an evangelist. My bishop has assigned me to lead people to Jesus. What church they later join is immaterial."

I batted my eyes and looked again. "My word," I thought; "did I hear that Catholic priest correctly?" But I was not mistaken.

Du Plessis, once dismissed from his Pentecostal church for being too friendly with Catholics, grinned. "Even the Pentecostals are coming to life."

I sat quietly, remembering my own prejudices against both Catholics and Pentecostals. It wasn't too long ago that I firmly believed anyone not of my particular Baptist persuasion was to be looked upon with suspicion—he might be a heretic. Church unity scared me. I saw in it a dangerous kind of watered-down compromise that would turn what was left of the church into nothing more than a social club. Although the specter of a divided heaven was unthinkable, unity on earth seemed even worse because it presented the possibility we wouldn't believe enough to even get into heaven to begin with.

Yet the unity these men were talking



about, and the unity I sensed coming on this group of leaders, was not built on compromise; but rather on the Lordship of Jesus and the recognition of each other's individual ministry.

**Unity Breakthrough:** In a classic statement, Bob Mumford described David du Plessis as the creator of unity in the Body of Christ. He called him a bumblebee, flying from flower to flower, producing hybrid Christians by cross-fertilization. "He carries the pollen from the Pentecostals to the Roman Catholics, the Roman Catholics to the Lutherans, etc. And anyone knows that hybrid corn is better eating than seed corn."

"Cross pollination," Mumford declared, "must happen every season. When it is forbidden, such as when churches close their doors or ministers close their hearts, we stop bearing fruit. But *koinonia* (fellowship) is always reciprocal. Both bee and flower gain, and without it, both die. This is our task, and our life: to take some and leave some—bringing forth something to which all Christians can subscribe."

Du Plessis accepted the analogy, adding, "Nothing formulates error as fast as isolationism." Then, with tears in his eyes, he looked at each of the men present, many of whom had been forced out of their churches and denominations, and said, "I am praying desperately that we will not do anything to stop the move of God by our lack of love or harsh criticism of those who have hurt us in the past."

It was a word needed. A word well-received.

I thought back, remembering my high school Christmas eves in Vero Beach, Florida, when after our Baptist service I would slip out and attend the midnight communion service at the Episcopal church. There, once a year, many of us from all churches knelt together at the altar rail, recognizing one another as brothers in Christ and worshiping God for the gift of His Son. Then we all returned to our narrowness, afraid to think it could be any different.

Now I know things can be different. Tulsa proved that. And if unity can come among the shepherds, I know it can come among the sheep. Not by compromising, or organizing—but recognizing. □ □