



"No one builds bridges for himself. Bridges are for those who follow after."

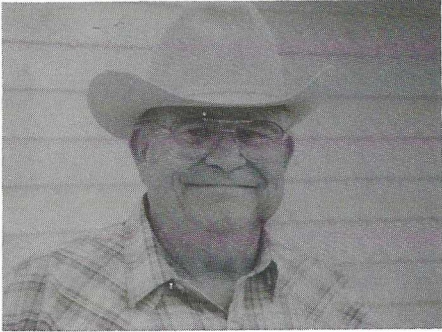
Jamie Buckingham

BRIDGES

Religion builds walls. The spirit of Jesus builds bridges — bridges to get people from the bottom of hell to the arms of the savior.

I have always admired those folks, who by the way they lived their lives, became bridges for feet to travel over to reach Jesus.

This summer I stood on a bridge in the mountains of North Carolina with a great bridge builder, Mickey Evans.



Mickey is the "Jesus-loving-cowboy" that inspired the song "Broke But Not Quite Broken." For years he has poured his life into broken-down addicts at Dunklin Camp in

southern Florida. Mickey and his wife invited Linda and I to visit with them while they were vacationing at Jamie Buckingham's summer place in Hendersonville.

Jamie was a noted author. Among the many books he authored was the best seller, *Run Baby Run*, life story of Nicky Cruz; however, I enjoyed most his monthly column in *Charisma* magazine, "The Last Word." A few years ago Jamie went home to be with the Lord; his final "Last Word" was about bridge builders.

In the article he shared his love for those who built "bridges between people who didn't want to come together." I suppose it was this special place in his heart for bridge builders that compelled him, just before his death, to build a real bridge — one of timber and nails that would span the mighty rushing waters of Brushy Branch. When the structure was finished, his wife Jackie joined him with a bag of roasted peanuts. Together they sat on the new bridge, eating the peanuts and throwing the shells into the flowing stream, a time honored tradition of all great bridge builders.

I longed to visit the sight, for somehow I knew it was symbolic of the way Jamie lived.

I told Mickey about the bridge, and we hiked our way through the dense rhododendron to the sight. What we discovered made us chuckle, for Jamie's mighty engineering



feat turned out to be a small foot-bridge 16 feet long, 3 feet wide and 4 feet above ankle-deep water. Yet, while we laughed at Jamie's exaggeration, typical of most writers (me included), we solemnly knew we were approaching holy ground. We sat down on the bridge, dangled our feet over the side, opened a bag of

peanuts, and reverently dropped the hulls into the stream .

Soon I noticed there were more than peanut hulls dropping into the water. Mickey's eyes were flooding with tears.

"You know Ken," Mickey started, slipping off his cowboy hat, "Jamie knew when he built this bridge he would soon be going home. This is his *last word* for those who are willing to listen. Can't you hear it? God is calling men today to be bridge-builders — to get past religion and get into relationship with the Father; to sink our pilings in deep through prayer and build bridges that will last."

We both began to thank God for those saints like Jamie that had been bridges for us.

I thought of Larry Thomas, an associate that I worked with during my first eight years in ministry at Youth Unlimited. Just before camp this summer I learned that Larry died suddenly of a heart attack after a bike ride with Jonathan, his 10 year old son, and Tabitha, his 13 year old daughter. Although Larry was younger than me, his bridge building days had abruptly ended. Yet, I along with many others are further along in the kingdom

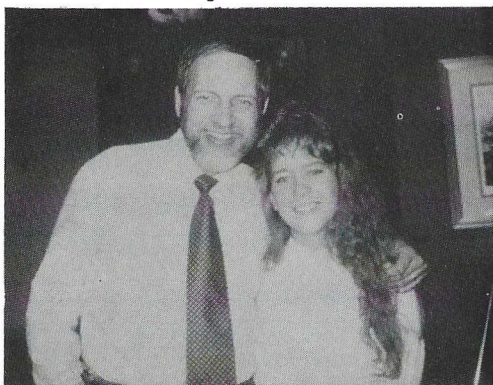
simply because Larry had laid down his life as a bridge for us. Through the way he lived, he taught us that, "There's no problem too big that Jesus can't handle."

Larry taught me that Jesus can handle the difficult problems of youth. Teenagers like Angie Lowe. Her testimony will be a bridge of truth and encouragement to me forever.

I ran into Angie soon after Beach Blast '94, a yearly youth retreat John Hobbs and I do at Ft. Caswell. As the story was told to me, Angie had only been saved several months and was a little nervous about this, her first retreat. Her fears were confirmed when they drove in the gate of the Baptist retreat center, for there was a big sign that said: ABSOLUTELY NO ALCOHOL OR TOBACCO ON THE PREMISES.

Alcohol was no problem for Angie, but having been a chain smoker since she was 13, she couldn't live without her cigarettes. She went to April Sawyer, her counselor, and explained her dilemma. That's when April became not a wall but a bridge to troubled Angie.

"It's okay Angie. If you really need a cigarette, come to me and I'll go with you so you won't have to be alone," she said, pointing to some sand dunes **where they could hide and sneak a smoke.**



The result was that by the end of the weekend Angie was growing sick of the cigarettes and was soon thereafter totally set free of her bondage to tobacco.

I got so excited I shouted out loud and asked Angie for her permission to retell the story. She was shocked. "Are you kidding?" I asked. "That's the most incredible example of the difference between religion and Jesus that I've ever heard. You see, the spirit of religion would have said, 'Well, if you can't do without your cancer sticks, then I'll just put you on a bus and

send you home'; but April became a bridge to Jesus. It was Calvary love, always reaching to our lowest places, that said, 'Angie, it's okay. You didn't know the rules when you came. If you have to smoke, I won't condemn you. I'll stand with you. You won't be alone.' "

Thank God April didn't try to fix Angie. She left that to Jesus. That made me think about pastor Charles Brown at Covenant Bible Church in Lincolnnton whose words of experience are mighty bridges to freedom:

Recently I came to the grand conclusion about life that "I can't fix it." I can't fix my life, and I can't fix yours. I can be available to you, counsel you, encourage you, even comfort you, but I cannot fix it for people to whom I minister... but when I maintain my undistracted devotion to Jesus, He can fix it. And He does. When my focus is right, life is right.

As the peanut hulls and tears continued to flow down Brushy Branch, Mickey and I thanked God for Jamie's bridge, and all those who have been a bridge of Calvary love, a love that selflessly lays down its life..."for those who follow after."



"Encouraging Faith" is now available on Compact Disk.

It sounds great! The price is \$15 plus \$1 for shipping.

