

The Last Word

by

Jamie Buckingham

In my more honest moments I cannot help but question why we do not see more "signs and wonders" in our Christian walk. It is true that accompanying the new move of the Holy Spirit, there are miracles, healings and dramatic answers to prayer. But when I sit back and reflect on the way things really are, I am forced to admit we still fall far short of the standard set by the New Testament church in the Book of Acts. Then it seems there were miracles every day. Nothing was impossible - from the healing of mental illness to the raising of the dead. We see almost none of this. Why?

Last year during a windstorm one of the big Australian pines behind our house toppled to the ground. It took three of us working two days to cut it up and haul it away. When I asked a tree expert what had caused the tree to fall he said simply, "It outgrew its root system." In other words, it was too tall for its foundation. When the wind came, over it went.

It seems one of the weaknesses among those desiring to move up to "normal" Christianity - where signs and wonders are a daily occurrence - is the tendency to climb higher before our foundation has been secured.

Jesus said on Judgment Day there will be some to step forward with a long list of accomplishments, including healing the sick and casting out demons. Yet their work will not be acceptable because they only *heard* His Commandments, they did not practice them personally.

That's heavy teaching. To explain it, Jesus talked about the necessity of putting down a foundation before building a house. Otherwise the first spring rain will wash you away.

The rock foundation is discipleship. Jesus said His disciples would one day see signs

and wonders accompanying their ministry. But the wise man needs to stop and reflect: those words were not given to the multitudes, only to a few - and then as a graduation address three years after intensive training in discipleship.

I believe the reason we're not seeing more signs and wonders is we don't have more disciples. We seem to be spawning a generation of people who don't have time to wait on the Lord. People who don't have time to live disciplined lives, pressured always by the need to "get something done for God." All want to see miracles - few are willing to pay the price for them.

In Jesus' brand of discipleship there are prerequisites for maturity. Before healing the sick there is a necessity of being committed to the Great Physician. There is a need for daily repentance. For forgiveness of all who have wronged us. Homes are to be in divine order. Each of us is to be submitted to a local body. The disciplines of giving, fasting, and praying must be established in our personal lives. Only then can we move on to signs and wonders.

One of my favourite stories has to do with a mother bird who built a beautiful nest high in a tree. Only the nest had no bottom. When questioned about it, the mother said, "Oh, I just love to lay eggs but I hate the responsibility of having to raise babies."

Most of us have been caught in the "Soul-winners-syndrome." Jesus, however, never commanded His followers to win souls. Rather, He told them to go out and make disciples.

Making disciples means sticking with a person long after he has entered the Kingdom - riding herd over him, much as a cowboy watches the dogies - the motherless calves -

or as a shepherd watches the lambs. It means seeing people through. It means sticking with a person for years, if necessary, until he comes into full maturity. It means seeing the potential of a Simon Peter when, even after three years of intense training, he lets you down.

We brag about winning thousands. Jesus was satisfied with eleven.

I remember talking with a Christian professor on the campus of a large university in Brno, Czechoslovakia. "Our small group has set a goal for those who will come into the Kingdom next year," he said.

I vividly remembered the goals my own denomination had set in the States. A million more in Fifty-Four. Thirty thousand new churches next year. "What's your goal?" I asked.

"Three!" he said with determination. "We are claiming three Communists for Jesus next year." Then he added with excitement, "And one of them has already accepted Christ. Unfortunately, he was immediately imprisoned, but we're still nourishing him along in the Lord."

Christianity is more than obstetrics. It is paediatrics, public health, internal medicine, diagnostic care, surgery, and finally geriatrics. In short, it is a life of discipleship. Years after Jesus returned to heaven, His followers were still known as His disciples. You never outgrow it.

Shortly after graduating from the seminary I was called as the associate pastor in a large southern church. My task was to serve the senior pastor who had been there almost twenty years and was ready to retire. Shortly after I arrived the senior pastor had a serious heart attack. The deacons waited until he was well enough to come back to work - and then fired him. Just a year before he was eligible to retire.

The shock of seeing church leaders treat their shepherd in such an inhuman way made a lasting scar on my spirit. Even more vivid, however, was sitting with the old pastor as he cleared out his desk, packing things away in a suitcase in preparation for moving into a small apartment and trying to find a job.

"If I had it to do all over again," he said sadly, reflecting on his more than forty years in the ministry, "I would not concentrate on the masses. I would spend my life with ten men, teaching them to be like Jesus. These men who fired me are all active soul-winners. I trained them to be that way. But I failed to instill in them the character of the Master. And now I am paying the price."

My prayer for the Body of Christ is not that there should be more miracles ministries. Rather, I would hear the commendation of the Master for our maturity in discipleship.

© Jamie Buckingham
Reprinted from The Last Word.