

CHARISMA CLASSICS: I Was Scared. I Didn't Go. (November 1983)

In March 1975 I received an impassioned plea from ad hoc committee of missionaries in South Vietnam. The letter was written and signed by a Christian and Missional Alliance missionary representing a large number of missionaries from many denominations.

It said, in essence, "The communists have started their final push, and it is no obvious we are going to have to leave. The sad part is, all we've worked for and accomplished so far will be destroyed when we pull out. The communists will burn the Bibles we leave behind; they will turn the church building into communist meeting halls; they will take over our hospitals; they will disband the churches and kill the pastors. There is nothing we can leave behind which will have a lasting effect.

"As we prayed together and searched the Scripture, we have discovered Jesus faced a similar situation when He left earth to return to heaven. He did not leave anything behind. No church buildings, no Bibles, no trained pastors. All He left was His Holy Spirit.

"We are writing to ask if you are willing to come to Vietnam and impart to use the same gift Jesus imparted to His disciples, that we might in turn give this gift to those we are going to have to leave behind."

There was more, but that was the literal essence of the letter.

I didn't know how to respond.

Our church was small at the time and did not have the money to send me. The publishing company I worked for was on the skids and had no money. Even if I had been able to come up with the money, there was another factor looming over me. I was afraid to go. This was a time when tens of thousands of people were fleeing Vietnam. It didn't make sense for me to go there. And possibly die there.

I knew of three missionaries who had been killed in Vietnam. Just the year before I had met the young widow of a Bible translator who had been gunned by the communist Vietcong. I had heard reports of others having been captured and tortured by the communists.

I waited another week, but the conclusion was inevitable. I knew I had no choice but to go. I could charge my ticket on my credit card. if I didn't come back, someone else could pay the bill.

On Easter Sunday I cabled the mission group in DaNang, accepting their invitation and asking for directions. Tuesday morning I picked up the paper. DaNang had fallen. The nation was in chaos. My cable had been too late. Within three weeks it was all over.

Since then, I spoke with several people who were part of the group who issued the invitation. All of them tried to absolve me of guilt by saying their letter was sent too late. They, too, had put off asking. The prospect of changing their theology, requesting an experience they didn't even believe in (the baptism in the Holy Spirit), was a tough decision, even in the face of death. But eventually they were forced to drop their traditions, cling to truth and ask God to give them the only thing Jesus gave His disciples—the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That episode in my life drove me into a period of deep introspection. Out of it came several positive things. One was

a determination to define my purpose in life. I needed to know exactly *why* God put me on earth. I suspected my fear had come out of confusion of purpose rather than the mere desire for self-preservation. But I would never know that until I had some kind of definition of purpose.

In good editorial fashion I decided to boil that purpose down to one sentence.

It was simple: to impart the Holy Spirit to the generation in which I live.

Having determined that (and I am not so cocky as to believe purposes do not change, so I keep going back about every six months to see if the cloud has moved), I finally understood the motive behind those men mentioned in Revelation 12:11: "They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they loved not their lives unto the death," (MEV).

Once you know who you are and why you're here, there's no need to be afraid. I determined, back then, not to make safety, comfort or money a standard on which I made decisions for the Lord. If God wanted me to go someplace no one else would go, I would accept. That decision has cost me dearly across the years. It has also allowed me to be in the midst of some of the most exciting events since Pentecost. All God requires of us is faithfulness. Our times are in His hands.

Jamie Buckingham wrote 153 columns for Charisma over 13 years, first known as "Dry Bones" but later as its most recognized "Last Word." His singular voice was animated by a heart for Jesus baptized in the power of the Holy Spirit in 1967 at a Full Gospel Businessmen's convention. Buckingham provided a steadying force during the scandals of the 1980s, penning the seminal article on the PTL scandal, "God Is Shaking His Church" in May 1986.