

Please Close Your Heads

Well, it finally happened. I was on the platform during the early service one Sunday morning. Although we had a guest preacher, I was directing the service. Our church soloist was singing from the piano. It was powerful, moving: "I will pour water on him that is thirsty..."

As he finished, I turned to the guest preacher. "I'm going to lead in prayer before you preach," I whispered.

He nodded. I picked up the wireless microphone and walked to the pulpit just as the music finished.

"Please bow your heads and close your eyes," I said. The soloist caught the mood and continued to play softly. I talked for a moment about the water of the Holy Spirit. I asked the people to let Him come into their lives.

Some of the people slipped to their knees. I closed by asking them to receive the seed of the Word that the preacher was about to sow into their lives.

It was good stuff. Even I was amazed at how good God can do it when I get out of the way.

After the service the guest preacher commented: "That was great. I wish you could repeat it just the same way at the second service."

I swelled a little. It was a good word. I nodded. If a thing

is good for one group, why not for all?

In the second service, before a much larger crowd, the soloist sang the same song. But something was different. The people did not respond as the first group had.

Still, my course was set. Once again I picked up the microphone and stepped to the pulpit. With solemn drama I called the people to prayer.

My own eyes were closed, my head bowed. I waited, piously, through the dramatic pause. Instead of the expected silence, however, I heard laughter. It started in the side section and rippled across the congregation.

I stood there, puffed-up and dumb, wondering what was happening. The people were laughing so hard they were crying. Then, in that horrifying way a person knows, I knew. They were laughing at me. Was it my zipper?

Only then did I recall what I had just said. It ran through my thoughts like a tape replay: Please bow your eyes and close your heads.

I love it when it happens to other stuffed shirts. Now it was my turn.

Memories raced wildly across my mind. I remembered the time I came to the platform to officiate in a formal wedding. I had just come out of the bathroom and didn't realize until I was in front of all those people that stuck to my shoe and trailing behind was an eight-foot stream of toilet paper.

I remembered the time I looked down in the middle of my sermon and saw my pants were unzipped—and my shirttail was sticking out like a flag. I remembered the time I put my hand on a casket at the front of the church and the flimsy stand it was sitting on gave way.

I remembered all these instances and realized, “I’ve been here before.”

I knew if I tried to correct my mistake it would get worse. But what do you do? The one thing I didn’t want to do was laugh. I wanted to be like Elijah and suddenly disappear in a whirlwind, never to be seen again.

But the more I thought about what had just happened, the funnier it seemed. I began to giggle. The congregation howled. They were now laughing so hard people were holding their stomachs.

Gradually I realized what had happened. What God had done in the early service I had tried to duplicate in my own strength. God figured since I was going to take the credit, He might as well let me do it my way. My way, always, is to stick my foot in my mouth.

When you want the people to notice you, God usually says, “Be My guest!” But what they remember is often something you wish they’d forget.

I twice tried to salvage the moment, but it was too far gone. The best I could do was walk over to the preacher and say, “You’re on.”

The preacher did his best that morning, but he would have been far more effective had he just said the benediction. The sermon had already been preached by the dumbbell who tried to upstage God.

Stephen Strang, who normally writes in this space, is taking a sabbatical from writing for a few months. Meanwhile, we are happy to reacquaint our readers with the extraordinary writing talent of Jamie Buckingham (1932-1992), who wrote a column for Charisma from 1979 until his death.