

Real Power Runs Deep

by Jamie Buckingham

Several years ago my family and I spent some time with friends in Washington state. One afternoon they took me through one of those big dams on the Columbia River where so much of the electric power for the Northwest is produced.

I had heard of such things as turbines, power plants and generators. But for some reason I had always thought the power from those big dams was provided by the water that rolled over the spillway. It never occurred to me—a flatlander from Florida—that the real power came not from the froth that splattered over the top of the dam but from machines hidden far below the surface.

We took an elevator deep into the innards of the dam and found ourselves in the middle of more power than I had ever dreamed possible. It wasn't noisy or spectacular. The power seemed to be contained in a deep hummm that vibrated into the marrow of my bones.

Deep in the floor of the dam were the mighty turbines. That afternoon only five of the nine were in operation. But that was enough to provide power for half the state of Washington and part of Oregon.

Hundreds of feet above us, the huge lake pushed against the propellers of the machines. The pressure of that water turned the turbines to generate hundreds of thousands of kilowatt hours of electricity.

We took the elevator back to the top of the dam and watched the water from the spillway splash in a spectacular waterfall. It, too, was part of the process. When the pressure on the dam became too great, caused by high water in the lake, the spillways would be opened. If the water in the lake was low,

there was no waterfall over the dam.

But it was those silent, hidden turbines that produced the power—even though there was no outer display of their might.

It is so easy to get enchanted by the spectacular—the outer manifestations. I thank God for continued Pentecost: tongues, prophecies, healings and miracles. These were normal in the New Testament church; they should be present in the church of today. But I am convinced we must never confuse spillway Christianity with the power of the Holy Spirit.

The water over the dam plays a vital purpose. It is something of a release for the rising tide of spirituality. In fact, if the lake is low, there will be no outward signs. If the lake is high, you can expect an overflow whenever the body gets together.

I pray our lakes will remain high. But I hope we will never equate the power of the Holy Spirit with outward signs. Regardless of whether a church displays the spectacular, the Holy Spirit is still turning the turbines. Unless, that is, the lake has gone dry.

However, it is possible for a church—or an individual Christian—never to have any display of the spectacular and still be used by God to accomplish great things.

In other words, it is possible to have your water level far below the spillway crest and yet have your turbines still turn. Some of my finest sermons were preached when my lake was at its lowest level. In fact, there have been times when I have felt completely drained, only to find when I laid my hand on some sick person he was instantly healed.

The absence of outward signs does not mean God is not generating power through your life. It simply means your lake is probably low. The power that runs the kingdom is not limited to the overflow. Indeed, most of that is not power at

all but merely evidence of a high level of enthusiasm.

It is possible to have a huge spillway display and produce no power whatsoever—because your turbines are clogged with debris. The power that runs the kingdom is found in the dynamos of men's hearts as they love, serve, give to and pray for one another.

Granted, God loves our praise. He loves our enthusiasm. He loves it when we clap our hands and shout for joy. He goes so far as to say He abides in the praises of His people.

But God judges us on character, not charisma.

I thank God for spillway Christians—those who make a big splash. But those who provide the real power are often hidden, seldom noticed. On such does the kingdom of God depend.

Jamie Buckingham (1932-1992), a pastor and author, wrote a column for Charisma that was published from March 1979 to August 1993.