



God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America

Larry Eskridge

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Winner of the 2014 *Christianity Today* Book of the Year

First Place Winner of the Religion Newswriters Association's Non-fiction Religion Book of the Year

The Jesus People movement was a unique combination of the hippie counterculture and evangelical Christianity. It first appeared in the famed "Summer of Love" of 1967, in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, and spread like wildfire in Southern California and beyond, to cities like Seattle, Atlanta, and Milwaukee. In 1971 the growing movement found its way into the national media spotlight and gained momentum, attracting a huge new following among evangelical church youth, who enthusiastically adopted the Jesus People persona as their own. Within a few years, however, the movement disappeared and was largely forgotten by everyone but those who had filled its ranks.

God's Forever Family argues that the Jesus People movement was one of the most important American religious movements of the second half of the 20th-century. Not only do such new and burgeoning evangelical groups as Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard trace back to the Jesus People, but the movement paved the way for the huge Contemporary Christian Music industry and the rise of "Praise Music" in the nation's churches. More significantly, it revolutionized evangelicals' relationship with youth and popular culture. Larry Eskridge makes the case that the Jesus People movement not only helped create a resurgent evangelicalism but must be considered one of the formative powers that shaped American youth in the late 1960s and 1970s.

God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America Details

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From Reader Review God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America for online ebook

Jared Wilson says

Superb. Meticulously researched, exhaustively reported, and deeply insightful. Also incredibly and increasingly relevant to understanding modern evangelical history. Perhaps not for the reader with a casual interest in the Jesus People Movement -- it is long and stuffed with anecdotal minutiae -- the reader with real interest will probably find no better treatment of the subject. I loved it.

Sir Michael Röhm says

Excellent look into the origins, spread, and demise of the Jesus Movement, and the effect that it had on American evangelical Christians.

Largely forgotten now, the Jesus Movement was a series of evangelistic outreaches to the 60s counterculture. These outreaches often popped up independently across the country, suggesting more at work than just human effort (hint hint), and it reached a large number of kids disillusioned with the realities of hippie life, but desirous to still positively change society.

The movement forever changed American evangelical culture, and quite possibly was partially responsible for both Carter and Reagan, as well as the 80s Moral Majority.

The Jesus Movement itself largely died off because of the rise of the "Me Generation" and the death of the hippies as a whole, but its impact was tremendous.

Definitely worth reading, and worth investigating in further depth.

Scott Jeffries says

When I was in college, a "revival" broke out on our campus, at least that is what the papers told us. The word spread among fellow Christians, and people started traveling from all over the state to be a part of our movement. A handful of our students were being asked to come to other college campuses and churches to testify to the movement of God among our young people. We heard reports of lives being changed at these spots where the testimonies were given. Still, I saw very little change in my own observations of campus life and those I associated with.

What exactly was I looking for that I wasn't seeing in my experience? Frankly, what I wanted to see was something that looked similar to what is described in Larry Eskridge's book God's Forever Family. This book is one of kind, a thorough and historical look at the Jesus People Movement of the late 1960's and early 70's. If you are not familiar with this movement, think Hippies who are Born Again but refuse to shed some their Hippie characteristics.

The most moving and inspiring parts of Eskridge's book are the stories of transformation in individual lives

that then caused a ripple effect of drawing others to the same kind of life. There is Lonnie Frisbee, a drugged out and freaked out Hippie on the streets of San Francisco who gets taken in by a small group of Hippie Christians. Later, Frisbee just happens to land in Southern California and meets Chuck Smith and together they help spark a growth in young people coming to the Lord that is still felt today. There is the story of a Baptist logger, John Breithaupt, and his family moving from rural Washington to Seattle to serve the Lord. Eventually, this "straight" befriends Hippie young people and starts a "House of Zaccheus" where 20 or so Hippies could live, grow in their faith, and minister to other young people. This humble effort led to one of the strongest segments of the Jesus People movement in the Northwest.

There seemed to be very little that could stop young people from coming to the Lord. Eskridge provides little explanation for young hippies suddenly showing up at the local Baptist church. In the early stages of the Jesus movement, the only explanation was the movement of the Holy Spirit. It wasn't programs. In fact, in some cases, the resistance from church goers to the benefits of reaching out to young people was very strong. Yet, these spiritually hungry kids were not to be deterred and they always seemed to bring others with them.

The Jesus Movement seemed to be marked by four characteristics - complete infatuation with Jesus , a hunger for God's word, a desire to live out the faith in community, and a desire to evangelize. Eskridge doesn't flesh these out as he sees his role as a recorder of what happened. He also wants to emphasize the impact and influence the movement had on the church as it progressed towards the end of the 20th century.

I am so grateful for this book for it reminds me that great movements of God are not limited to the distant past or only a limited type of person. I also appreciate Eskridge's balancing act between the historical and sociological need to cover this moment in time with obvious joy in telling one of the most colorful, whimsical, and inspiring stories of Western Christianity. The chapter on the Children of God and its conflict with other Jesus People groups, though dark and disconcerting, reads like a psychological suspense thriller. Eskridge obviously had fun with that one.

What happened at my college in the 1990s should not be overlooked or ridiculed, though I have done both. God did work during that time but it was not a revival or a movement; God's Forever Family showed me that. The Jesus People Movement was messy, unorganized, and suffered from naivety and lack of sophistication but it was rich with Jesus and his love, mercy, and transformation. The movement was grassroots and unexpected, much like Jesus himself.

Oh, come Jesus,

take your place with the young

and searching today.

Work in your unexpected ways

among unexpected people.

This is where you seem to work best.

Chris Schutte says

Excellent book chronicling the Jesus movement of the late-60s / early-70s

Todd Wilhelm says

A good overall history of the Jesus People movement. I graduated from high school in 1976 so the movement was winding down in my formative years, but much of the music that came out of that movement was loved by me and my friends. It was interesting to read about all the artists I used to listen to - Chuck Girard and Love Song, Oden Fong and Mustard Seed Faith, Phil Keaggy, Paul Clark, Andre Crouch, Barry McGwire and Larry Norman.

The book dragged in parts, but I guess it's hard to avoid that when you are writing about what happened when.

"This study argues that the Jesus People movement is one of the most significant American religious phenomena of the postwar period."
(p. 7).

"The Jesus People's taste for simple, folk-based melodies and scriptural passages in their corporate worship has had a profound impact on the worship of American evangelical congregations. The minstrels of the Jesus People movement were major architects of what has become known as praise and worship music."
(p. 8).

"By the time he hit Huntington Beach, Berg claimed he was "so bitter against the churches for their hypocritical, do-nothing religion, their multi-million dollar Gospel entertainment business, and their multi-billion dollar fancy church buildings" that he was "ready to declare war on the Church System!"'"
(p. 66).

"IN THE WAKE of nationwide publicity in both the secular and religious press, the Jesus People showed up in nearly every corner of the United States in the early 1970s. In the process, it was transformed from being a religious expression of the counterculture to a widespread evangelical youth culture of choice. While the movement continued to make converts among the remnants of the counterculture and drug culture—providing the necessary streetwise bona fides and color for the movement—increasingly, the Jesus People's demographic became younger and more middle class."
(p. 145). O

Joel says

Connected a lot of dots for me. This is a pretty thorough look at the movement.

Jonathan says

This has all the marks of well-written history (I say this as a historian myself): carefully researched, logically organised, simply expressed; explaining, not just recounting. It is thought-provoking, not just with regard to what happened then but also to what's happening now. It is grounded in memory and contemporary reports. Eskridge recognises the pitfalls of memory, but what better source is there at a distance of 40+ years, when the events have faded but the actors are (mostly) still alive?

The general plan is chronological, but there are also thematic chapters that focus on different phases of the movement's evolution: coffeehouses, music, etc. The most fascinating accounts are the earliest manifestations in California: the weed-smoking beatniks preaching Jesus in Haight-Ashbury to the bemusement of street people and local churches; the first attempts at communal living; the early connections between San Francisco and Los Angeles; the sudden, surprising influx of hippies into straight little Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa.

The theme that comes through most forcefully is that this was a true revival, along the lines of the 18th century Great Awakening in New England, with the highs and lows of any such revival. The lows were the naivety of its apocalypticism and communal living; the ease with which enthusiasm led to accepting unorthodox beliefs (they can't be wrong because they're so committed!), the wholesale relegation of women to the kitchen and childcare. The high was that many lives were changed for the better, even rescued from self-destruction.

Eskridge emphasises both how strong the movement was, and how short its heyday was: about five years, 1968-1973. The question that hangs in the air at the end of the book is: Where did the movement go? Eskridge touches on several possible answers: it was absorbed into the larger church; it shifted its energies into right wing politics; its music became Contemporary Christian; its format became Seeker-friendly mega-churches; it simply grew up and had kids of its own. Each of these is a partial answer.

I suspect that the answer to why it did not have a more lasting impact lies in its end-times eschatology and charismatic-pietist emphasis on inner spiritual life. This gave it no culture-changing focus of its own, and allowed its energies to be coopted by the Religious Right at the end of the 70s; by men like Jerry Falwell who never sympathised with the hippies anyway, and who offered a respectable anti-establishment alternative—conservative activism centred on opposition to abortion—to former counter-culture people now approaching middle age. This suspicion is based on my own experiences with the incipient Religious Right in the late 70s, and makes me interested in reading a book that Eskridge mentions (p 282): Preston Sturges's *Hippies of the Religious Right* (Baylor U. Press, 2007).

Scott says

Fascinating look at the Jesus People Movement in America. We still feel its effect in our churches today.

Greg Watson says

God's Forever Family is a well organized history of the Jesus People movement in America. Larry Eskridge provides a readable account from the movements' inception in San Francisco to its outgrowth nationwide.

Nearly any city of any size would come to have a Jesus People inspired coffee house.

The movement began as a hippie-Christian counter to the secular counter-culture, from which many of the hippie-Christians were recent converts. As the movement grew and the secular counter-culture declined, the Jesus People turned inward and became a ministry to evangelical youth. Eskridge is especially good in showing the interaction (and friction in some cases) between the hippie-Christians and their "straight" counterparts within the evangelical church.

Eskridge also shows how the movement declined due to economic hardship in the mid-1970s, leadership struggles, and due to the participants in the movement getting older and moving into married life. Despite its decline, the movement would have long-term consequences on evangelical church life and secular culture in the form of contemporary worship and the social conservatism of the pro-life movement.

The energy and enthusiasm of the Jesus People, especially their zeal for in-person evangelism, is something the church needs today. This book shows us why.

Jamie Moore says

Excellent account of a very important but overlooked period in the history of the church. One of my favorite reads this year.

Faith says

It has been a while since I've read a more recent history book and it was an interesting experience to read about my parent's generation when they were my age and also about a movement that in many ways made evangelical Christianity (the tradition I grew up in) what it is today. Particularly evangelical youth culture has been greatly changed by the sixties and seventies, something I had hardly realized. Things in the book seem both familiar and strange, just yesterday and eons ago.

The author does a good job supporting his argument that the Jesus People were an important religious movement across the Untied States, though he sometimes gets mired a bit in the details. Certainly the first and last chapters are the most interesting- covering the beginnings of the movement and its ongoing impact. The one critique I would have is that the book is too male centered. The majority of leaders for the Jesus People (like other evangelicals) were men and so in some ways it makes sense Eskridge would focus on them, but the women that made the movement possible get lost in some places. It's also unclear how patriarchal the Jesus People were, a question that the author seems unable to answer. Part of this may be that the majority of his survey participants were men, which either reflects a male majority community or just that they happened to be the ones that took the survey. The question of gender and women's roles is certainly something that should be searched out more.

Anthony Venn-Brown says

As I read God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America, memory cells ignited like fireworks on New Year's Eve. Being born in 1951, born again in 1969 and moving into Pentecostalism

pretty well immediately, God's Forever Family, was a delightful trip down memory lane.

The hippie movement was not as big in Australia as the USA but happened none the less. You can find a picture of me with beads, a tie dye shirt and ostrich feather out of my second-hand army hat on Facebook to prove it. It was soon after that picture was taken in 1968 that I became a Christian.

Reading Eskridge's work brought back memories of all the things we copied here in Australia from the Jesus Revolution. The movement was an inspiration to young enthusiastic Christians such as myself. The news reports (front cover of Time magazine no less), the Jesus People paraphernalia, the music, publications, key speakers and influencers had all crossed the Pacific. The evangelistic zeal and activities, fuelled by the urgency of the imminent second coming of Jesus, remained for years. Like many of that era, I too followed a call into a full-time ministry, living by faith.

God's Forever Family is much more than an historical record, as excellent as that is, it gives us insights and observations that can only be made from thorough research. The author takes us through all the significant events and introduces us to the groups and individuals that made the Jesus movement such an important and influential phenomenon.

In my research for my current book on gay conversion therapy, I've read several books about this era but Eskridge's work stands out. It is superior in many ways. Not only for the quality content but also for the fact that it is very readable. Something not always found in works such as this.

If you weren't there, you'll have a good understanding of how that era influenced your now in the Christian world. If, like me, you were there, you'll not only realise how much of your past has been buried in the inner recesses of your memory but be warmed by the flow of the pleasant memories God's Forever Family awakens.

Anthony Venn-Brown
Author of A Life of Unlearning

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Anthony Locke says

Fascinating dive into West Coast Christianity and into church history over the last 70 years. Listened to this because a friend said JMac recommended it to seminarians. Learned a lot about how the hippie/drug movement intersected with the Christian movement, most notably highlighting the role of music, communal living, and the rise of the come-as-you-are philosophy of ministry. Eskridge describes a series of movements in the book including the Jesus people, Children of God, and Calvary Chapel. This book, in part, helped me understand the culture of Christianity that my parents (and their friends) came from highlighting the origins and power of songs like Pass It On.

Steve Watson says

First, what I didn't like.

Eskridge took a fascinating topic, and in the second half of the book, lost my interest. Perhaps it's important to take a chapter and focus it on the rise of the Contemporary Christian Music Industry, for instance. I don't know. But the fading years of the Jesus movement likely have more interesting stories and plot lines than what Eskridge provides. The dissolution of various groups into financial disasters or cults is fascinating, but needs a more interesting storyline to tie it together. And I've got to think there are tensions in mid 70s and 80s between keeping the idealism of the movement alive, cultural conformity, and burnout that could get more attention.

Instead, I feel like Eskridge is trying to explain how the Jesus Movement led more seamlessly than we'd think to the rise of conservative evangelicalism in the 70s and 80s and is trying to cheer that storyline on. One, I don't entirely root for that story, and two, it's a heck of a lot more complicated than is discussed here. Where's the story around race and segregation? Where's the discussion of how much the Jesus People boomers lost when they burned out on this era and went conservative? Where's the analysis of what groups like the Vineyard (given almost no attention here) were up to in trying - in some sense - to extend the Jesus People years, or at least aspects of them?

I love the short anecdote Eskridge ends on of the 15-year old child of Jesus people who fills out her parents survey for herself and wants another era of fresh encounter with Jesus in her time and culture. And it's some of that same spirit that draws me to this era and helps me appreciate other aspects of the history told here so much.

The Jesus People movement is characterized as broadly evangelical (Bebbington's definition of bibliocentric, conversionist, crucicentric, and activist). (77) Then the leading features of the Jesus movement are described: -its miraculous world (80) -its apocalyptic orientation (85)

- its communal tendencies (87)
- its come as you are culture (89)
- its home in, and use of, (if also sometimes rebellion from) popular culture (90)

So much of that is compelling to me and I long for a movement with some of these qualities embedded in our own culture, just as some of the Jesus People's qualities that may have been part of its undoing are cautionary to me:

- its wholesale acceptance of fundamentalist theology and Bible interpretation, which drove it inward and away from culture
- its abuses of leadership and trust, which created unhealthy communities
- its unsustainable intensity

Lots of food for thought for a pastor.....
