

LIVING & EFFECTIVE TRANSCRIPT — EPISODE 2 — WHEN THE BIBLE BECOMES COOL

RICH: Imagine Christianity suddenly became cool. I know it seems almost impossible. Christianity is rooted in timeless tradition and wisdom, a far cry from any movement that might find automatic acceptance among mainstream culture. Pop musicians and actors may embrace the Christian faith in carefully considered ways. But when they talk about it, they tend to keep their theological cards close to the vest. But I am talking about the whole thing, the rebirth, exclusivity of the Gospel for salvation, good works accompanying genuine faith. Even explicit hope for Christ's second coming.

I grew up in the nineties when Christian youth culture was happy to be within its own subculture. We were cool to each other, but we had pretty much accepted that we would never be cool to the world. In a way that was part of the appeal, right. We were being rebellious in our own way. If we couldn't rebel against our parents, we could rebel against the mainstream. We embraced Christian rock, we kiss dating goodbye, and ask God to make us a generation that would change the world.

In fact, most Christian youth culture movements, end up in that place. Trying to balance a traditional faith with cultural relevance. It's not to say that those movements have always been so ineffective at evangelism. Believe it or not, there was a time when genuine Christianity started to find itself in the mainstream. Jesus started catching the attention of the public in ways that went beyond scandal or skepticism. According to Larry Eskridge, author of *God's Forever Family*, the model for the movement was right there in the New Testament. He was actually involved in the Jesus People's movement back in the 1970's.

LARRY: The Jesus People's movement embraced that there was a lot of bible floating around, and bibles floating around through this movement, the serious bible study that was going on in many of these Jesus People coffee houses, groups, and communes and what have you.

RICH: The Jesus movement came out of the hippy counter-culture in the late 60's and early 70's. And it actually succeeded in giving biblical Christianity more social clout than it had before. From my vantage point, it was one of the most impactful Christian youth moments in modern history. Unlike my own youth group experience, the Jesus movement expanded far beyond the church walls.

The Christian Standard Bible and Christianity Today present Living & Effective, a podcast about the moments when humanity and the Bible collide.

In a way, the Jesus movement mirrors so other Christian youth movements in the past. But could it be that we played it cool, at least for a brief moment, was there strict adherence to the bible? In a time when the counterculture that they were apart of wanted to be chill about religious beliefs?

LARRY: So these earlier proto-Jesus People who come out of San Francisco and in some of these other places. It really becomes clear that the book of Acts makes a huge impression upon them. And as one of the early lights said we were going to live the book of Acts like its a script.

RICH: But is trying to live out the Book of Acts setting the bar a little too high? After all, there is a lot of debate about just how much the modern day church is supposed to look like the church in acts. Some argue that a lot of the miraculous events that took place in the book of Acts were only meant for that period of time. There are a lot of things we just can't replicate from that time. Of course, it's this type of thinking that might explain why, young, idealistic Christians left there traditional churches in the first place. Those churches just weren't that optimistic that something big would happen in that day in time, in the same way, that these youth were.

Everything we see there is doesn't look anything like these churches that we visit, or maybe the church that I was raised in. What about this Acts chapter 2, with this Pentecost stuff, with these gifts of the spirit stuff? What about living in common? Which was the kind of stuff that was emerging in the counterculture, a communal movement, so that resonated. We see this and have this experience, and here it is right in the Bible. They want to do that too. The communal living sort of springs right out of the Bible into the Jesus movement.

In a sense, Christian youth of that time took the counterculture as an opportunity to embrace something that was a lot closer to the book of acts than their churches seemed to be. They really wanted to fill that gap, but it wasn't sure if they would be able to impact the culture in the way as the early church did, and if they did if the pay off would really even be worth it. I mean, would it really be as fulfilling and utopian as a community as they might expect? Well, they had a kind of an uphill battle, before they could even get close to finding out. It turns out the counterculture came preloaded with its own significant downsides.

LARRY: The sixties represented this period of rejection and a sort of breaking free from all of the restraints of straight society. Such as old social taboos, freeing up sexuality, experimentation with drugs. Which was a major part of the whole thing. As publicity around the movement grew, it becomes increasingly attractive to a lot of people who were A) seekers, but B) also people who were well adjusted in there own situations. A lot of runaway kids end up in San Francisco in the summer of 1976. It becomes chaos, the streets become cluttered, dirty, thousands of kids sleeping in the San Francisco night, on the street, they are freezing to death. Crime, venereal diseases are running rampant, people are on bad drug trips. It really becomes a negative sort of thing.

RICH: This was a challenging environment for the Jesus People to step into. But it also presented a pretty good opportunity for the Christian faith to be as seen in a new a light.

LARRY: It's out of that, that you get a core group of these sort of proto-hippies that are a little bit older than your average hippy, but are people that become converted, in the midst in all of this. Then begin to see what a mess they are seeing in San Francisco, start saying its the responsibility of the church to do something about this.

In the Bay Area what happens is that you get a number of evangelical pastors to form an organization to help some of these, sort of these, hip evangelist to work amongst their own people. John Mcdonald is a classmate of Billy Graham's, from Wheaton college, you have Ed

Plowman, who eventually became the contributing news editor of Christianity Today. They are helping these other folks go to the streets, start communal homes. To help and connect with the hippies to feed them, point them in the direction of some sort hand up. But you also have other pockets where they youth culture is moving towards hippy. And are moving into, at that point, the contemporary drug culture.

So they begin to, try to reach out to those kids. In the process, there is a tendency to try to identify with the kids a little more and win them over. That usually means some kind of counter-culturally friendly manner, dress, language and what have you.

You also have a second, and what appears to have been a larger cohort of people, and these are the kids in the evangelical church, counter-culturally conservative churches. Who, let's face it, in the late sixties, maybe like rock and roll music and you kind of like the long hair and the fashions. While your church is telling you that these things are no-nos.

The Jesus People come along, and this is sort of a way to kind of survive the youth cultures in the seventies. You become a Jesus person! There is this whole group, a lot of high school kids, coming out of the church and suburban small towns. Of whom embrace the Jesus People personality as a way to be relevant. That it expresses Christianity in a way that they can understand, in a way that they like. Gives them a little elbow room for youth culture and a Christian baptized expression of youth culture.

RICH: A brief aside here on the concept of cool. I have this theory I would like to share with you, which I am sure is not unique to me. It just seems kind of self-evident. The theory is that there is this is the elusive ideal of cool, that has little to do with trends and everything to do with authenticity. That's way fads run drock like lava lamps and Fortnite tend to be seen as cool for brief moments while there are still new innovations. They become lame, when everyone's dads start dabbing or what have you.

And let's be clear about this, the hippy counterculture was actually cool and most likely the sincerity of that movement that made it cool. Most likely it was its sincerity that made it cool. You can say a lot about hippy counter-cultural, but you would be hard pressed to doubt that they were sincere.

These people believed that they could change the world. They just may not have fleshed out exactly how. But they believed that they could do it.

So it's sort of obvious why Christian youth tended to gravitate toward these trends. It's not so much that they actively wanted to be cool and relevant. I think it's just that they did relate and they liked this concept, they liked what they saw. It didn't mean they had to throw out everything they know about their faith. In fact, Jesus People were known for one particular belief, that would have been seen as potentially offensive to anyone who wasn't on board.

LARRY: Yeah, this is a serious, Gospel of explicitly...

RICH: right!...

LARRY: ...The “Turn or Burn” message was huge. Certain groups emphasized it more than others but you know that the reality in most of the literature. That God was coming here, Jesus came to die for your sins to save you.

RICH: This didn't apply across the board, but if you think about it, in some ways, this made the Jesus People even cooler. It's hard to question their authenticity.

LARRY: Which is radical, in your face approach, amid the sort of hippy love and peace, “whatever your thing is, cool,” mindset. They began flashing the one-way sign, which was the index finger held up, indicating one way to Jesus and one way to heaven.

RICH: Almost by accident, Jesus People begin looking like hippies and squares.

LARRY: The Rose Bowl parade on January 1, 1971. Billy Graham and Ruth Graham were the co-marshalls of the parade. There a bunch of the Jesus People showed up and began passing out their newspapers, passing out coffee and donuts to people on the parade route. Billy Graham starts returning this sign, now he has no clue what this is. Other people started doing this as well, with this upraised raised finger. This “number one” sort of thing, because Billy Graham has identified with Richard Nixon and that sort of conservative side of the social barricades. By the time that the parade was over, Billy Graham knew what was going on. He began to comment on this, and the press goes “wow.” Now Billy Graham is in his heyday at this point. He is probably at the peak of his cultural appeal. That really began to get the newspapers and magazines curious about what was going on.

RICH: Unwittingly, the Jesus People movement had managed to introduce American youth culture to Billy Graham. Graham's openness to the movement gave him even more credibility with them and their peers. At that moment, it seemed that maybe these two, seemingly disparate circles in the venn diagram, were moving closer and closer together. All of this was accomplished, remember, without compromise. Quite the opposite really. The one-way finger is like a brave thing to make your rallying cry, especially in hippy culture. Where everyone is looking all over the place for truth.

LARRY: People began thinking, “wow, these Jesus freaks are coming up and they are very insistent, we can rap with them, we can talk with them, and everything is all good. There are very insistent, Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, that's it!

RICH: It's here that we see how the Jesus Movement's use of the book of the acts as a script, goes well beyond the communal living, and the overturning of traditions. They also embraced that same uncompromising approach to truth claims that the apostles did. Not only did that approach seem edgy and authentic, but to many of that time, it offered a kind of oasis of certainty. When everything else was called into Question.

Perhaps the most well-known impact that the Jesus People had was in the music community. Years later, specifically in the late seventies. The movement had mostly fizzled out, but Bob Dylan came to Christ. As sort of the legacy of the Jesus People movement. Whether or not his faith lasted beyond that era has been debated, and he has reverted to a more enigmatic approach to expressing his belief for decades now. Yet he is a complicated figure but the Jesus People movement is complicated. That in a way, there are sort of trapped between balancing these two very combative elements of culture at once. They are doing so in a way that feels authentic and coherent. And the complicated nature of Bob Dylan's story really draws out just how complex the Jesus People's movement impact really is.

LARRY: Dylan's conversion traces back to Jesus People folks. Ken Gullickson - who was one of the pastors at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa - had at this point become involved with some of the congregations of the Vineyard. They had a bible study, and Bob Dylan began to attend this Bible study. Went through their Bible survey course. That was where he was getting a lot of his Biblical input for *Slow Train Coming* and a lot of his subsequent albums. Afterward, his Christian faith was fed by a lot of these Jesus People.

RICH: So if what happened with Billy Graham was a sign of the movements early influence on church people. I think Dylan's story serves as a reminder that influence was longer lasting with those that were outside of the church.

GREG: What seemed to be this, amazing, natural phenomenon, this sort of young persons alternative to the Timothy Leary "tune in, drop out" LSD drug culture kind of thing.

RICH: This is Dr. Greg Thornbury, author of *Why Should the Devil Have all of the Good Music*.

"You had signature events like the Expo 1972, at the Cotton Bowl, where Billy Graham had finally got on board, and 120,000 kids at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, and Bill Bright was involved. You had people like Larry Norman and Kris Kristofferson and Johnny Cash playing the music.

RICH: When the mainstream church started to embrace instead of pushing back against what youth culture had to offer, mountains could be moved.

GREG: It seemed for a moment in time, as though Jesus could be a thing that would be the nation together, rather than tear it apart.

RICH: Of course, while the model of the church we see in Acts is full of all kinds of inspiring, positive stories the story of the early church doesn't come without its fair share of negativity. The church of Acts was buffeted from all sides, from the Pharisees, from the legalistic super apostles and the more worldly crowd.

On the one hand, people can't help but respect an authentic and transparent faith. On the other hand, there are some things about the true faith that just annoy people. We see this play in really play out in really specific ways in Dylan's career.

GREG: They just released a box set of Dylan's gospel years, he sounds like a charismatic preacher. His most famous song was "You Gotta Serve Somebody": *It may be the devil or the Lord, but you are going to serve somebody.* You can't serve two masters. God will not be mocked. It was very biblical language.

RICH: By all accounts, Dylan appeared to be born again. While fans were committed and passionate about the old Bob Dylan. The new Bob Dylan rubbed a lot of people the wrong way.

What was the reaction of the fans?

GREG: "Horror"

RICH: Horror?

GREG: They were completely thrown overboard, shocked, people didn't know what was going on. When it happened it was absolutely devastating and people were booing at his concerts.

RICH: Why were they so upset?

GREG: Well because he wasn't Bob Dylan anymore. Bob Dylan was supposed to be this sort of outlaw, who sat on his own fence post and whistled his own tune. His music had always been very evocative, it was socially conscious, but it wasn't preachy. All of a sudden, he is preaching at people.

RICH: You would have thought that Dylan's endorsement of the Bible would have increased Christianity's social standing at that time. Instead, religion was seen as a passing fad. By that time, around 1979, the novelty had just worn off. What was once cool was now just crowded. The longer it lasts, the more opportunity people had to jump on the bandwagon. The movement had ultimately lost its edge.

GREG: It's just like a game of telephone. Once it gets passed down the line about 20 or 30 times the message doesn't have the intensity or the sharpness of the original vision of the people who started it. It becomes kind of banal.

RICH: Believe it or not, that is right out of the book of Acts too. A lot of times we look at the whole story of Acts as a success story about the church. It is also a series of case studies as to how they handled mundane process problems, scandal, and conflict with the outside world. After the honeymoon phase, the church found itself confronted with spiritual leaders who persecuted them because they were jealous.

Spiritual leaders who tried to capitalize on the movement. Starving widows, racial tensions, the first martyr, and the dude who martyred that guy, wanted to become an apostle himself. To deal with that whole thing Paul and Barnabas get into a big fight. Not to mention, half the sermons they are preaching basically makes everybody listening mad. They spend a lot of time running away from people in general.

You get the point.

whatever the time period, being a part of the Jesus movement is not easy. Maybe that's the point, maybe part of what makes the Jesus movement impactful in the first place is the degree to which they open themselves up to critique from both sides.

I asked Trevin Wax, the author of *This Is Our Time* and the director of Bibles and reference at Lifeway, to help me figure out exactly what to make of the model that Jesus Movement left us.

TREVIN: It was a full embrace of the Word of God – a fresh embrace of God's Word and the desire to live according to God's Word. This was compelling to some in the Christian church and some in the Hippy world. At the same time, it was pulling against both of those worlds as well. In all of the places where God's Word was running up against both the church culture of the day, that was in some case more inclined to promote and to perpetuate certain man-made traditions, and going up against the societal views of the day. To put forth views that were out of step with mainstream traditional culture.

RICH: Ironically, some of the only tangible vestiges of this anti-institutional movement are the anti-institutional movements that they spawned. Namely, the Vineyard and Calvary Chapel, maybe that's for the best. Maybe it isn't the end of the world that the movement faded as quickly as it exploded onto the scene.

The Jesus People weren't fighting to shore up cultural influence for the long haul. They were trying to be faithful to God's Word, as it was revealed to them. That put them right in the middle of those who valued tradition and those who valued change. Like the apostle Paul and the rest of the early church leaders, they confronted the assumptions of people on both sides of their movement base. With nothing but scripture to make their case. That kind of bravery comes with its own reward.

One of the benefits of youth culture is the ability to see with clarity the errors of those who have come before. This is particularly true with the Jesus Movement.

GREG: The Jesus movement was very socially minded and conscious. This was a way of bringing Martin Luther King's beloved community to a largely white community, and recognizing the sins of the institutional church of the past.

On the next episode of *Living and Effective*, the Jesus Movement recognized that when it comes to the institutional church's role in the Civil Rights Movement, there was a lot for the church to reckon with. But while most of the early church fell silent in those early days of racial strife, God was using the Bible to stir up a kind of supernatural bravery.

GUEST FROM NEXT EPISODE: You could be arrested, you could be maced, you could be beaten. You could see yourself in Bible verses like Psalm 23, "walking through the valley of the shadow of death." If God is for us, who can be against us?

RICH: This has been Living and Effective, you can find more info at livingandeffective.com. Make sure to rate and review us on Apple Podcasts to help us spread the word. Living and Effective is a collaboration between Christianity Today and Christian Standard Bible. It is written and produced by me-an editor at Christianity Today-and Cray Allred. Executive producers are Nick Rynerson and me, Richard Clark. Engineering by Jonathan Clauson, and music by Sweeps and the Always People. Special thanks to Trevin Wax, Brandon Smith, James Kinnard, Michael Wojcik, Jennifer Clark, Natalie Lederhouse, Derek Rishmawy, Lisa Sharpe, Ted Olsen, and Mark Galli.