

BLINDED BY THE RIGHT?

How hippie Christians begat evangelical conservatives

By T. M. Luhrmann

Betsy Jackson voted for John McCain in 2008. She greatly admired Sarah Palin. She thought the Alaska governor was brilliant and witty, and that she took a ferocious beating from the media because she was a woman in the limelight and that's what the media does to such women. Jackson also loved that Palin did not keep her Christianity "quiet."

These views are not unusual for someone in Jackson's demographic. She is what she calls a "spirit-empowered" evangelical Christian, meaning one strongly influenced by Pentecostal practices. She is sixty-one, a gracious, gregarious, attractive woman with a big laugh and a warm smile. She lives in a sprawling suburb in southern California, the kind of planned subdivision where all the streets meet at right angles and the strip malls repeat themselves remorselessly every fifteen to twenty blocks, in a modest house filled with Bible commentaries and other Christian books. Her town borders Orange County, a Republican stronghold, and many of her white neighbors who identify with a political party call themselves Republican, as do the vast majority of evangelical Christians nationwide.

But you would not have predicted Jackson's current political views from her early life. She grew up in a staunchly Democratic household, the child of uneducated Catholics who would no more vote for a Republican than they

would walk naked into traffic. On their living-room wall hung a black-velvet painting of JFK, next to the one of Elvis. Jackson's mother was a farmer's daughter from the Midwest, and her father was an Italian immigrant who did scientific work on a military base ("All of his stuff is classified, that's all I ever knew").



They lived a comfortable, conventional lifestyle, but by the mid-Sixties, Jackson decided that it was an empty lie. Her parents quarreled, and the household that seemed so overtly proper was often full of anguish. Jackson's sister withdrew and became the perfect student. Jackson herself discovered drugs. They were dirt cheap, they were plentiful, and there wasn't much else to do in the Mojave Desert. And at least the drug culture was a kind of community, bound together by the trust you're forced to develop when you're breaking the law.

Jackson and her peers not only rejected the staid middle-class life of their parents, they set out to create a new world. They dressed differently. They lived communally, moving from apart-

ment to apartment together. They shared everything—clothes, money, cars, bodies—and they behaved as if it should all come free. They were furious at the government for waging war but also for not providing them with shelter, food, medical care. They thought these basic needs were basic rights.

"Politically," Jackson explained to me last summer, sitting in her tidy living room, "I was very left. I mean left, left, left, as far as you could get." She was protesting constantly against the Vietnam War, of course, but also spoke up for the legalization of marijuana and for every other progressive cause that came along.

Then she became a Christian. She still went to protests. She was still a hippie. She still wore bell-bottoms: "We'd cut our bells, and we'd insert even more, so they were like four feet around. It was all that—the flowers, the backless dresses, the whole thing." But within a few years she was voting Republican, and the backless dresses lay dumped in a box in her closet. Her roommate had asked her what Jesus would think if he walked into the living room and found her wearing one of them.

The Christian youth movement of the late 1960s is one of the most important and least studied in American religious history, and it involved hundreds of thousands or perhaps millions of people across the country. It was this movement that pushed American evangelical Christianity into the mainstream in the decades after the Vietnam War—and was the source of

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its distinctive, lilting music, its come-as-you-are informality, its charismatic intimacy with God.

Of course, American evangelicalism has deeper, older roots, but the hippies changed what it meant to be Christian in America. They made speaking in tongues common. They made reading the Bible literally a mainstream practice. They made the idea of Rapture—the process by which believers will be spirited up to heaven when Jesus returns for the Second Coming—a cultural touchstone.

But they also went through a dramatic political transformation. We know that most evangelicals are now vehemently right-wing, and that most hippies were decidedly not. They seem to have been largely apolitical or, like Betsy Jackson, on the left. (A 2004 survey of more than 800 former hippie Christians found that only 22 percent thought of themselves as politically conservative back in the 1960s, whereas 57 percent had come to describe themselves that way.) So what transformed an Aquarian ethos woven around gentle Christian communalism into a fiery form of conservatism?

One way to tell the story is that the rightward shift was sheer accident: the happenstance of which pastors were on hand when the hippies first became Christians, and who continued to dominate the movement as nonhippies joined its ranks. The Jesus People, as the movement was sometimes called, largely began in California, spurred by an intense search for meaning amid the social chaos of the time. By 1967, the Summer of Love, as many as 100,000 young people had found their way to San Francisco. They thought they were leaving behind a corrupt world of hypocritical elders and joining a revolution.

What they found was a city in which municipal services had collapsed. There was little free food, limited housing, and almost no police presence to speak of. They kept coming, and many simply slept on the streets at night, hungry and unwashed. Women were at particular risk: even before that famous summer, a hippie broadsheet remarked that “rape is as common as bullshit on Haight Street.”

Many Americans were bewildered by the movement. But some evangelicals—including Billy Graham, then at the

zenith of his fame—understood and even approved of its members’ search for meaning (if not their use of LSD). After observing a group of hippie Christians from his float in the 1971 Rose Bowl Parade, Graham wrote that he “had an almost irrepressible urge to get into the street and identify with them.” A few pastors began to venture into the constant disorderly party that was Haight-Ashbury. They offered coffee, food, relative safety—and, of course, the gospel. In a storefront called the Living Room, a young pastor and his wife painted scriptural verses and a psychedelic oxbow on the walls, and gave out coffee and soup donated by a local grocer. An estimated 20,000 people came through their doors in two years.

The Jesus that emerged in Haight-Ashbury looked a lot like a hippie, with long hair, sandals, and flowing robes. He, too, was a radical revolutionary. He, too, had a vision of an utterly transformed world in which people would be who they *could* be, not who they were raised to be. And of course Jesus hung out on the street and (in the words of a popular poster of the time) associated with “known criminals, radicals, subversives, prostitutes and street people.”

By 1971, there were Christian hippies in Washington and Wichita and Dallas and Detroit. There were as many as 600 Christian coffeehouses nationwide. Thousands of people had been baptized in the ocean, teenagers with dripping clothes and goofy smiles. The cover of the June 21 issue of *Time* showed the familiar face of Jesus framed in acid orange. Inside, an unsigned article read:

Jesus is alive and well and living in the radiant spiritual fervor of a growing number of young Americans. If any one mark clearly identifies them, it is their total belief in an awesome, supernatural Jesus Christ, not just a marvelous man who lived 2,000 years ago, but a living God.

A year later, the movement had picked up enough steam to attract a crowd of 75,000 to a single event in Dallas.

The Jesus People kept the clothes and the hairstyles, the communes, the street papers and the rock music. They traded the intense high of hallucinogens for the intense high of Pentecostal-

style spiritual experience, sometimes intermingling the two. And the most important clergyman to take charge of them was Chuck Smith, the new straight-arrow pastor at Calvary Chapel, an undistinguished nondenominational church in Costa Mesa, California.

Smith had been raised Pentecostal, but had come to find his faith constricting, even claustrophobic. The churches that had banded together under the label “fundamentalist” were typically so world-rejecting that some of them even forbade congregants to vote. Now pastors like Smith began to reach back toward the mainstream. The pot-smoking, draft-dodging hippies on Huntington Beach troubled and fascinated him, and he thought they needed help. He urged his daughters to introduce him to a few of them.

“One evening around five o’clock our doorbell rang,” Smith later recalled in an article for the Calvary Chapel website. He opened the door to greet “a real, honest-to-goodness hippie—long hair, beard, flowers in his hair, bells on the cuffs of his pants.” This was Lonnie Frisbee, soon to be a linchpin of the movement, who had drifted south from San Francisco, preaching on the beaches.

The hippies often had nowhere to stay. Smith, through Frisbee, offered them his house. Then he rented a second house for them—and, as they kept coming, arranged for another one. He kept his services casual, so that the rebels who hated middle-class ticky-tackiness (as Pete Seeger called it in 1963’s “Little Boxes”) could feel comfortable in church. Smith took the pulpit on Sunday, but he gave Wednesday evenings to Frisbee. “The doors blew open at that point,” a congregant recalls in a documentary about Frisbee. The Jesus who presided over these sessions was the countercultural Jesus: personally attentive, unconditionally loving, a Jesus who offered a great big bear hug of acceptance.

Within six months, Calvary Chapel grew from 200 congregants to 2,000. They ran out of space at the original church, rented a larger one, and outgrew that too. They purchased ten acres on the outskirts of Costa Mesa, put up a circus tent capable of holding 1,600 folding chairs, and began planning back-to-back services. Smith remembers

looking out over the vast empty space before the first congregants showed up: "I had never seen so many folding chairs in all my life! I turned to Duane [a volunteer] and I asked, 'How long do you suppose it will take the Lord to fill

to cocaine. She never did much LSD—she was scared of hallucinogens—but she smoked plenty of pot. When she enrolled in community college in Bakersfield, she also began selling. About twice a month, she drove to

But Jackson had nowhere else to go. She wasn't crawling back to her parents' conventional life—she had seen that and come to loathe it. She moved in with her sister in San Diego, but soon parted ways with the good girl of



this place?" He looked at his watch and said, "I'd say just about eleven hours."

Duane was right. By 1973 they had built a permanent sanctuary that could seat 2,200, and within three weeks they were holding triple services. Today there are hundreds of Calvary Chapel churches in the United States, and thousands more like them. Smith has trained hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pastors. And like most of the old-time evangelicals who reached out to the hippies, he is politically conservative.

By the time of her high school graduation, Betsy Jackson was addicted

San Francisco and spent the weekend in Haight-Ashbury. She would sell there, going from one party to another, sampling the drugs and hanging out. She was part of the revolution, and she was making money hand over fist—enough to buy herself a Porsche, which she drove up and down the freeway to San Francisco like an advertisement for the California dream.

Except that after a while, it didn't seem so romantic. She began to realize that Haight-Ashbury had "a real sleazy side" to it. She thought that a lot of the people she met there were naïve, too innocent to recognize that they were being used.

the family. Somewhere along the way, she visited an addiction-treatment center, but she didn't like it. Jackson left with the Bible they gave her, but she never opened it.

One day when she was twenty-one and living in Ocean Beach, she came home to find that her boyfriend had become a Christian. Just like that. He had met someone who told him that he wouldn't get to heaven unless he accepted Jesus, and so he accepted him. He'd been deep into LSD and mescaline, but by the time Jackson returned from work, he had renounced alcohol and drugs and begun to speak in tongues.

The remarkable thing—and best proof of Jackson’s claim that she hated the life she was living but didn’t know how to get out—is that she took this at face value. “I was listening to him,” she told me, “and something inside said, He’s right, he’s right, he’s right.”

She had always believed in God, even though she hadn’t attended church in the years since her confirmation. When someone told her about a church group that met close to her apartment, she decided to give it a chance. They played guitar and dressed like she did, and she enjoyed it. Jackson started going regularly. She was still smoking dope and doing cocaine and going to psychedelic concerts where people blissed out to strobe lights and the guys onstage wore glitter in their hair. Yet now she found the tension between the two worlds terribly confusing.

She began to pray with a young woman she liked. She shared an apartment with this woman and found an expanding group of kindred souls. Jackson thought this new version of the communal life might give people what they’d originally sought from the counterculture: a different way of being in the world, a better way, a revolution that they *wanted* to belong to.

“We had done it our way,” Jackson recalls, “but it wasn’t working.” Jesus offered them what they couldn’t create for themselves. It was the community she’d wanted, but with rules. No sex outside marriage. No charade that sharing your body was a political act. No lying. No stealing. No assuming that just because the capitalists were pigs anyone could make off with your personal property.

Slowly, without rehab, Jackson got herself off drugs. And now she began to vote Republican—because that’s the way people in church voted. The group house she had joined was a Calvary Chapel offshoot, founded by a man who had himself been an addict before finding his way to faith. And like Chuck Smith, Mike MacIntosh, who now presides over a San Diego megachurch, was and is quite conservative politically.

The politics made Jackson a little nervous at first, but soon she began to feel comfortable. It made sense that

the scriptural was political—that what the Bible said about marriage became the way you voted on marriage. If the biblical interpretation sometimes seemed surprising to her—well, she was new at this.

Of course, this is a tempting narrative for secular liberals. It suggests that these people just stumbled into their politics—that when the hippies encountered old-time evangelical pastors, they followed them inexorably to the right.

The standard corollary to this stumbling-into-the-stable account is to suggest that a few savvy individuals figured out how to manipulate these new Christians by making politics all about abortion. There’s something to this. When the Supreme Court established the right to legal abortion in 1973, the decision shocked Christians like Jackson and spurred them to take political action. Yet this shock was hardly inevitable. Although the idea that the Bible forbids abortion has become a kind of received wisdom in our culture, the scriptural derivation is ambiguous. The Bible never actually mentions abortion, which was legal under Roman law, and Exodus distinguishes between the murder of a person and the murder of a fetus. The first is punishable by death, the second by a fine.

In the mid-1970s, then, the argument still needed to be made, and specific individuals stepped forward to make it. The most important of these was Francis Schaeffer, whom many observers now credit with jump-starting the religious right. Nobody, argues the historian Preston Shires, “was more influential in bringing evangelicals to a pro-life position, the position that made political activism not only possible but potent.”

Earlier in his career, Schaeffer had been apolitical. He was a quirky Christian. He read the Bible the way the Jesus People read it: true as written and relevant for today. But he ran what was a cross between a philosophy seminar and a spiritual retreat in L’Abri, Switzerland, and people of all religious stripes attended it. He seems to have been regarded as a kind of hippie Socrates—challenging, questioning, and supremely confident of his intellectual authority. In the early

1970s, he became part of the elite Washington circuit, and, as a friend of Jack Kemp, was more warmly received by Republicans than by Democrats. Still, he refused to align himself with any political party.

Then came *Roe v. Wade*. In Schaeffer’s view, the Christian faith mandated the protection of *all* life, even the smallest—and therefore abortion was an un-Christian act. Three years after the Supreme Court’s decision, he published a book entitled *How Should We Then Live?*, which argued that the world had been undergoing a slow-motion ethical collapse since the Renaissance, when God had been displaced from his rightful place at the center of our lives. There were, Schaeffer wrote, two alternatives: a moral existence based on God’s revelation in the Bible, and an amoral, totalitarian existence. In that equation, liberal Christianity came out more or less in the same place as Nazism and Stalinism. Abortion was Schaeffer’s symbol for what was fundamentally wrong with the modern era.

How Should We Then Live? became a runaway bestseller and then the basis for a ten-part film series that led many Christians into politics. (Michele Bachmann has repeatedly noted that the films had a “profound influence” on her life.)

When people talk about their time as hippie Christians, abortion does indeed become the dividing point, the River Jordan, between their countercultural past and their present. I sat at my kitchen table last summer with an ex-hippie evangelical pastor, Ken Wilson, and asked him why the Jesus People had become so conservative. “Abortion,” he replied without hesitation. With *Roe*, the choice became clear: Democrats would support abortion, so you couldn’t vote for them.

Jackson became politically active only with Operation Rescue, the evangelical crusade to end abortion. She would stand and shout in front of clinics and hand out pamphlets and get onto buses to talk young pregnant girls into making a different decision. And suddenly she was taking conservative positions on a whole cluster of additional issues—marriage (no divorce), homosexuality (always wrong). Calvary Chapel never preached politics from

the pulpit, she said, only values. But values, as Jackson was quick to concede, ultimately told you how to vote.

Wilson told me that he, too, had been part of Operation Rescue. But soon, he said, he noticed that the people on his side of the picket line were white and affluent, and that many of the women on the other side of the line were not. And he thought that if Jesus showed up, Jesus might not be standing on his side. So he quit. Which is to say that the issue of abortion, for all the powerful emotions it stirred up, seems insufficient on its own to explain what happened to the Jesus People.

There is yet another way to tell the story, which is that the politics of the Christian hippies never really changed—that the movement they fostered carries those values still. Hippies hated the government and anything that smacked of the establishment, just as many evangelicals do today. In this telling of the story, what began as the Jesus People ended up as the Tea Party.

There is truth to this version as well. When Larry Eskridge, the leading historian of the Jesus People, went to a Midwest reunion of former Christian hippies in 2010, quite a few made it clear that their hearts were with the Tea Party. And then there is the former Christian hippie I spoke to last summer, Don Anderson. He first encountered Lonnie Frisbee when the young preacher and his wife were living in the basement of a commune in northern California called the House of Acts. “It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life,” Anderson told me, “because as I walked down the stairs, it was as though I was walking into a swimming pool of warm liquid, which was the love of God. . . . There’s tie-dye hangings and incense burning. [My wife is] lying there. She’s weeping. She’s laughing. She’s singing in tongues.”

Anderson, who is now conservative, told me that he did not think of himself as political during his hippie days. But he said that he and his peers were clear back then that institutional authority was their enemy: “There was a tremendous sense of the way institutions—family, community,

civil government, college administrators, the whole thing—had been manipulating and exercising power for their own sake.” He sees that same resistance to institutional control as a core value of the Tea Party.

Jackson, too, distrusts the government. She recoils from anything that smacks of socialism, which she defines as “where everybody gets what everybody else has.” So she abhors Obamacare, and welfare, and any other scheme concocted by the people sitting in “those big mansions.”

But Jackson’s not a member of the Tea Party. For that matter, neither is Anderson. They both find the Tea Party too radical.

In the end, there is a version of this story that trumps, at least to some degree, those I have already told. This is also a version that many secular liberals miss, because they get sidetracked by politics they despise and they assume evangelical Christians are sheep who follow the fools at the head of their party. This story begins with what it meant for young Seventies-era Christians to follow Jesus seriously.

The radical innovation of the Jesus movement was the claim that Jesus is a person—not only historically, but now—and that he has a personal relationship with you in particular. This Jesus thinks, feels, loves, weeps, and gets angry, just the way he did in Palestine. You can ask him what shirt you should wear and what shampoo to buy. He’s *alive*, and he wants to have the kind of friendship with you that you have with your best friend, only better. The words sound commonplace these days: this is the way most evangelical Christians talk about God (the word “God” is often used interchangeably with “Jesus” in this context). But they weren’t commonplace in 1965.

This way of thinking about God profoundly changes the way the believer believes. If God is present in a literal sense, you no longer need to turn to intermediaries to learn what his wishes are. You can ask him yourself.

Of course, that raises as many questions as it answers. In the Gospels, Jesus says, “Follow me.” But he does not say precisely how. His parables often make little sense, and his followers rarely understand them. In one



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Gospel, his parents behave at one point as if he has lost his mind. Again and again, Jesus seems to look directly at the reader and ask: “Who do you say I am?”

This is, arguably, the central question of Christianity. And when the hippie Christians discovered Jesus, they came to him in the wake of 2,000 years of interpretation and exegesis. It would be naïve to imagine that they truly grasped him in a fresh and immediate way—and discovered, by means of prayer and immersion in Scripture, who he was.

But that seems to have been what it felt like for them. When they talk about Jesus, they recount how hard it was in the beginning, when they could barely recognize what God was saying to them. Eventually they came to view him as an imaginary friend who was also real—held in the imagination and shaped through their reading of the Bible. Yet there is almost always a sophisticated awareness that what they are imputing to God might not be God after all, but their own fickle thoughts.

Almost all evangelicals talk about faith in these terms—as a discovery process in which you are trying to understand who God is, and what he wants from you. But what are the consequences of this belief when it comes to thinking about politics? Evangelical Christians are always imagining themselves as who God *wants them to be*, rather than as who they are. Faith becomes a matter of aspiration, not acceptance. The person you can be and should be is always emerging from the person you are. (Evangelicals call this “growing in God” or “walking with God.”)

So when Betsy Jackson became a Christian, Democrats soon struck her as too whiny, and too tolerant of human weakness. Oh, she had problems with their lack of family values, but what mainly troubled her was their sense that people needed help from the government, that they couldn’t make it on their own. “God intends us to work,” she told me. What she had once thought of as rights—food, shelter, medical care—she now considered handouts. And she chastised the countercultural moocher she once had been: “Back in the hippie days, we were

all entitled. We all felt that. I think we all grow out of that. Hopefully.”

You could call this knee-jerk individualism, and many Democrats do. Barack Obama made news during the 2012 presidential campaign (and launched a thousand mocking rejoinders from the G.O.P.) when he told a Virginia audience, “If you’ve got a business, you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.”

Of course Obama was right in a certain sense: nobody builds a business without the infrastructure government provides. But to people like Jackson, what really matters is individual responsibility—and in this view of the world, the prototype for sin is addiction. That is not new. Augustine drew a similar parallel in his *Confessions*. But Augustine was describing the human condition of frailty, and the difficulty of doing what we know we should: “I was held back not by the fetters put on me by someone else, but by the iron bondage of my own will.”

In contemporary American evangelicalism, sin-as-addiction is modeled more directly on substance abuse. “We are all addicts!” roared a leader at a 2006 Wheaton College conference I attended. He strode back and forth on the stage, gesturing wildly with his fist, insisting that we turned to addiction to cope with our disappointing jobs and lackluster marriages.

For Jackson, then, “dependence” is the real problem. “I am all for those kinds of government programs that help people in the interim,” she says. “It’s when we become dependent on them—that’s where we cross the line.”

“I think welfare was good when it started,” she tells me. “I think unions were good when they started. But I think they have just gone crazy. And now, we’ve created monsters. And I feel like the Democrats would just keep feeding these monsters.”

Monsters: it is like a vision from Revelation, where the Beast surged forth with demonic strength to grab the land, and the servants of the Lord rode out in armor to the battle. Here personal and spiritual growth are on the side of the angels, and handouts are on the side of the Beast. When we deprive ourselves or our loved ones of responsibilities, Jackson insists, “we’ve stunted them. And that keeps them

from progressing forward, being what they can be, what they want to be, what they were meant to be.”

This view of Democrats as almost apocalyptic enablers would seem to be very bad news for the party, and for secular liberals in general. Yet many of the latter would agree that help is good and dependency bad. Moreover, there are signs that the right-wing evangelical coalition is breaking down. I met numerous Democrats and independent voters during the ten years I spent researching American evangelicalism. And many young people raised in evangelical families are far more liberal than their parents on such issues as homosexuality and the environment.

But in the meantime, it will be hard for Democrats to reach evangelicals unless they appreciate that the way evangelicals imagine politics is fundamentally different. When secular liberals vote, they think about the outcome of a political choice. They think about consequences. Secular liberals want to create the social conditions that will allow everyday people, behaving the way such people behave, to avoid making things worse. The idea that human beings are imperfect is built right into the equation.

When evangelicals vote, they think about what kind of people they are trying to *become*. They subscribe to at least a vague notion of human perfectibility, as long as the effort is undertaken with God’s help. From this perspective, the problem with government is that it steps in when people fall short, preventing them from being the people God wants them to be. And here is where the thinking of the hippie Christians—their contempt for government, their longing for a personal relationship with Jesus, their jaundiced view of drugs—fused with that of the evangelical mainstream. Their contemporary descendants *still* hate what they see as the ultimate drug: the human addiction to easy solutions. Someone like Betsy Jackson would rather struggle to change on her own, alternately heeding God and ignoring him. “I still battle with wanting to do it my way,” she tells me. “That’s a daily struggle. You know? I always think I have a better idea than God.” ■