

# CONFESSIONS OF A BIBLE THUMPER

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# CONFESSIONS OF A BIBLE THUMPER

My Homebrewed Quest  
for a Reasoned Faith

MICHAEL CAMP

*“Every significant breakthrough comes from  
a break with traditional ways of thinking.”*

*—Stephen Covey*



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book is based on my personal recollections and academic research. In so far as the book describes my inner spiritual journey and the conclusions I came to, it is one hundred percent true. With the exception of public personalities, the names and some descriptions of people in the book have been changed to protect their privacy.

I took creative license in portions of the book by enhancing scenes, creating dialogue, and making a composite of multiple real-life conversations, and sometimes people, into one. Although these are not altogether factual, they are based on my life experience. Most, but not all, are the scenes where I have conversations with Dan, Gina, Lori, and Steve at Silver City Brewery and Restaurant.

CONFESSION 1  
BEER AND JESUS

*“Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.”*

*– Benjamin Franklin*

*Silverdale, Washington 2010*

My first confession is that I unashamedly love beer...*and* Jesus. The roots of this dual affection grew in my formative years on a memorable trip to the Bible Belt during the 1970s Jesus Movement—an evangelical phenomenon that appealed to spiritual seekers and burned-out hippies. That’s an experience I would soon recount in my mind’s eye. But at this moment, as I walked into my favorite watering hole, Silver City Brewery and Restaurant, I had two immediate goals: one, see a glass of an award-winning cold microbrew in my hand and two, get lucky—but not in the usual sense. I made a beeline for the bar.

As was typical, the whole place was packed and buzzing with noise and laughter from a variety of people—families and couples in the restaurant and groups of men, women, and couples in the bar area—it’s one of the community’s most popular pubs in this small Navy town west of Seattle. I looked around a bit. The pub area with its row of tall oak tables surrounding the actual bar is open, so you could see most of the art-deco-style restaurant beyond. You could also see the adjacent small but state-of-the-art brewery through towering windows with its four, massive, silver brew kettles.

Scanning the area, I quickly saw how promising things appeared. Right in the middle of the bar, next to an attractive, bright-eyed, thirty-something woman with short auburn hair sitting with a female friend, were two unoccupied stools. I recognized my good fortune. It wasn't the ladies, it was the seats. Immediately finding a place to sit in Silver City's pub on a Friday night was about as unlikely as winning the Washington State lottery.

*I better nab those babies fast.* I threw my coat on the seat next to the woman and sat down on the other. My second desire was to get that beer. I got a bartender's attention, and he walked over. "Hey, bro, what'll you have tonight?"

"Ah, let's see; give me a Ridgetop," I said, referring to their Ridgetop Red Amber Ale. "Oh, and, Brett, I'll start a tab, since I'm waiting for a table for dinner."

Now I felt better. My beer was being poured, and I had a seat for myself and my fellow middle-aged friend Dan, who was due to meet me. Dan and I frequent Silver City to shoot the breeze. While most patrons talk about sports, work, and their personal lives, and singles try to meet interesting people of the opposite sex, we have an obsession. We talk about religion and spirituality and how they influence politics, public policy, and popular culture. Sports come in a distant second.

Dan is a semi-retired dentist who served in the Navy. He and his wife Gina, a dental hygienist, regularly put their Christian faith into practice by volunteering on a dental relief team that goes to Senegal, West Africa, every year, a practice I deeply admire. I'm also impressed with Dan's ability to stay trim despite his love of beer. Some people have all the luck. I have seen him sitting here many times, slightly balding and gray but in great physical shape, putting my bursting belly to shame. At least I still have a full head of hair.

I would describe Dan as a progressive evangelical and an anomaly. Although he attends a fairly conservative evangelical church, he is politically and socially liberal. Like progressive Christian author Anne Lamott, he has a hard time loving George W. Bush. He's one of the few who welcomes my crazy ideas. Gina does, too, but she's a bit more skeptical of some of my conclusions.

Tonight, it was different. Dan and I were meeting our wives for dinner. It was 7:00. Before I entered the bar area, I had put in my name for a table for four. Since it could be as long as a thirty-minute wait, and the ladies weren't meeting us until then, I knew Dan and I had plenty of time for a brew.

Sometimes Dan and I come with a friend named Steve. Steve is a theologically conservative early-forty-something evangelical with a moderate streak. Out of this motley crew (my wife Lori and I, Gina and Dan, and Steve), it is usually Gina, Dan, and I who like to ask the tough questions about the Christian faith that we've noticed most believers are hesitant to address. Questions like, why did God command the Israelites to destroy whole towns, sometimes including women and children? Why do some of the actions of the God of the Old Testament seem at odds with Jesus' clear teaching on love? Why do evangelicals tend to be militaristic despite Jesus' pacifist teachings? Why would a God of love create an eternal hell? Why doesn't the church readily support environmental causes?

I wondered if we'd end up talking about my book—my spiritual journey into and out of conservative Christianity. Dan had recently read a draft of the manuscript. Since he actually liked it, it must have been way beyond what Anne Lamott calls the “Shitty First Draft”<sup>24</sup> stage. I glanced around. No sign of Dan. A family was called for their table. I noticed a teenage boy among them. *I was about that age when my journey began*, I thought. I took my first gulp of beer. That's when that unforgettable trip to Dallas, Texas, deeply embedded in my brain, began to play back. For now, I forgot about Dan.

### *The Jesus Revolution, 1972*

I was fifteen years old and desperate to be noticed. My preference was to be noticed by Leslie McMahan—the well-endowed hot blonde in biology class. My mom and youth leaders in my Baptist church wanted me to be noticed by God—or more accurately for me to notice God and “accept” Jesus. I had serious misgivings about this. But I had to acknowledge tapping into a Higher Power was desirable.

Maybe not as much as getting on Leslie McMahan's radar screen, but desirable nonetheless.

On June 12, 1972, I stood in a church parking lot in suburban Massachusetts. It was a year after *Time* magazine's cover story on what it coined "The Jesus Revolution." War demonstrations on college campuses and in Washington, D.C. had dominated the previous five years. In Vietnam, the South Vietnamese Air Force, in coordination with American military, had just dropped a napalm bomb on a small village. A photograph of children running away in the aftermath became the 1972 Photo of the Year. My high school friends and I were reveling in songs by Deep Purple, the Doobie Brothers, and Don McLean, who wrote "American Pie."

I was about to embark with my Baptist youth group to attend Explo '72 (Explo being short for explosion) in Dallas. It wasn't my idea to go. It was Mom's. And the youth group leader's at church. I think it was a conspiracy.

I had to admit, Mom had had a genuine born-again experience. A few years prior, after floundering in liberal New England churches, she rediscovered Jesus among a group of Charismatic believers who had somehow infiltrated some Baptists. That was a miracle in itself. New joy and purpose filled her life. In her zeal to see me experience something similar, she encouraged me to attend Explo. Encouraged may be too weak a word. Cajoled is probably more accurate. I reluctantly agreed. Mom meant well.

"Your life will never be the same," said the youth leader at the Baptist church.

Other than being geared toward youth, Explo was similar to Jesus Festivals that would occur in later years on acres of farmland, like Woodstocks without drugs. In fact, some people called Explo the "Christian Woodstock" because of the last day's huge, eight-hour Jesus rock concert that drew 200,000 people. Coincidentally, the Watergate burglary in Washington, D.C., occurred during the concert. The weeklong event, organized by Campus Crusade for Christ, included Bible teaching, evangelism training, and outdoor music throughout the city of Dallas, including the Cotton Bowl.

Over 75,000 high school and college students attended. The vision was to equip these youth for world evangelism. My goal was a tad less dramatic: to survive the week without turning into a straight-laced Jesus freak.

I occasionally attended youth group to please Mom and Dad and make life at home a bit more bearable. I'd attend when I wanted a favor, like permission to stay over a friend's house or borrow Dad's brand new Toyota Corona.

Part of the message at youth group was appealing: the part that claimed that God loves all and wants to forge a close relationship with each of us. For me, who yearned to be accepted by my peers, the thought of being connected with a loving, accepting Higher Power was comforting. Maybe this was a way to feel like I belonged, to be at peace with myself and overcome my inner doubts and fears. Maybe even get enough confidence to have an in with Leslie McMahan or some other pretty girl.

Part of the message was disconcerting though: the part that said one needed to repent of one's life of sin and begin to follow Christ and obey His Word, the Bible. Not that I didn't have any sins to repent of or didn't need some positive change in my life. I most certainly did. But some of the things I was hearing that were considered "His Word to obey" were pretty narrow and restricting. Things like don't curse, smoke, drink, party, or feel up your girlfriend...at all. Beware of popular youth culture, secular music, school dances, and rock concerts. Start attending church and regularly share the gospel message—called witnessing—with your friends and perfect strangers. You know, become a Bible thumper. Hell, I'd probably have to swear off the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*, most certainly *Playboy* magazine, and possibly James Bond movies.

These types of thoughts flooded my mind for days until the day Dad dropped me off at that parking lot. Other youth group members and two parent chaperones stood talking while we waited to climb into church vans and drive to the airport to catch our flights to Dallas. With moderately long brown hair parted on the side, a T-shirt, flared

jeans, and sandals, I stood alone, hands in my pockets. I didn't really connect with the other youth group members. One thought filled my mind. *I can't believe I'm going. Will I return a Bible thumper?* Suddenly, I noticed my friend Jim and another acquaintance named Ted had arrived. I sighed in relief. *All right! Some people I know to hang with.* Jim, Ted, and I didn't exactly fit the youth group mold.

"Hey, Jim!" I called. "I wasn't sure if you were coming."

"Yes, I guess our moms won out, huh?" he responded. Jim was my age. He and his parents attended the Baptist church. We were both pretty much in the same boat: we were expected to attend this event. Sounded like Jim got the cajoling treatment too.

"Hey, Ted, what are you doing here?" I asked, since I knew he didn't attend youth group and his parents didn't go to the church.

"Explo's going to have some huge Jesus rock concerts I wanna see."

That was a shock. I didn't know Ted very well, since he was a year older. I soon learned that Ted, with his torn, flared Levis, T-shirt, cross necklace, sunglasses, and shoulder-length hair parted down the middle and tucked behind his ears, was a self-described Jesus freak. It was his idea to go, not his parents. Later, I realized his parents were a lot like me. They were the ones who were apprehensive. I imagined them worrying his Jesus conversion meant he'd end up in a cult, maybe dropping out of school and joining a Children of God commune in California. He didn't attend a church but read Jesus Movement literature and had discovered Christian rock music, probably someone like Larry Norman who wrote the lyric, "Why should the devil have all the good music?"

"I discovered Jesus is cool, and He changed my life," Ted told Jim and me in a matter-of-fact tone. "But I don't have to go to church to follow Him."

Despite describing himself as being "into Jesus," I liked Ted. He wasn't in your face about it, nor straight-laced. He must have been an early independently-minded post-evangelical. He apparently found Jesus without the influence of an institutional church. The big sin

he abandoned was smoking weed. Thankfully, he hadn't given up trying to pick up girls. Being particularly shy around girls, I learned a lot of tips from Ted about how to flirt. Ted soon learned that at Explo, flirting was acceptable. Picking up girls was not—particularly Southern born-again Christian girls.

A day later, on our first full day at Explo, I witnessed Ted making inroads with the ladies in the air-conditioned lobby of the college dormitory where our group was housed with other youth groups from all over the country.

“Something tells me you're not from New York. Where are you from?” he asked a girl. *Boy, they make them gorgeous down South*, I thought.

“Near Atlanta. Where are y'all from?”

“We're from New England. I hope you don't hold it against us that we're Northerners,” he said.

“Of course not. It's exciting that the Lord has brought people [together] from all over the country.”

“Rebecca...nice name. I just love your accent. Tell me what Georgia is like,” he continued.

Eventually, he led into a subtle request for a date. “Man, I love to hear you talk. How about if we meet after tonight's meeting, and I'll buy you an ice cream?”

Then he made the mistake of lighting up a Marlboro.

“How can you follow Jesus and still smoke? Don't you know your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?” the girl said. Like some of the members of our youth group and the leaders, most of the people we met were seriously into the Bible. For most of them, spirituality and smoking didn't mix. For that matter, swearing, beer, drugs, and sex outside of marriage didn't either. When it came to beer, cigarettes, and an occasional slip-of-the-tongue, Jim, Ted, and I were renegades. Group meetings in hotels, special speakers in the Cotton Bowl, and Christian soft-rock music saturated the week in Dallas. In smaller group meetings, the big questions I heard over and over from zealous teens and vibrant youth leaders were “Are you saved?” or the more

popular, “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?”

“I have,” they might add, “and He walks with me every day,” as if they had him in their back pocket. If you made the mistake of answering “No,” they would typically launch into a long blurb on the “four spiritual laws,” and try to convert you right there on the spot. The goal was to get everyone saved.

*The Four Spiritual Laws* was a popular tract that outlined the problem with sinful mankind and the solution found in Jesus, which was, of course, to accept him as your personal Lord and Savior. Then he could be in your back pocket too. The laws went something like this:

- (1) God has a wonderful plan for your life.
- (2) You are in sin and separated from God.
- (3) Jesus is the only provision for your sin.
- (4) You must individually receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Without “receiving” or “accepting” Jesus, this wonderful plan would not kick into high gear or, for that matter, any gear. I had mixed feelings about this message. A wonderful plan for my life? I wonder if it includes hooking up with Leslie. Probably not. Okay, maybe a Christian version of Leslie. The plan sounded like God would be looking after me. Does that mean I’ll overcome my low self-esteem and gain the assurance to meet life’s challenges? That would be nice. Since God had the plan already, maybe I wouldn’t have to think for myself. That takes the pressure off. But is that a good thing?

“After I accepted the Lord, He changed my life and filled my heart with love. He can do the same for you,” they might say after explaining the tract. If they had “accepted the Lord,” the questioner might ask them to share their “testimony,” which is the story behind how they came to the Lord.

The questioning about a personal relationship with God made me uncomfortable. That’s not where I was. Yet, Lord knows, I could use a personal touch from a Supreme Being if there was one to be had. And

for the most part, it did appear these people sincerely cared about a person's spiritual condition. I had met others like them in the youth group. But something was wrong. I began to ask myself why I hadn't accepted the Lord. It seemed everyone else had. I was the oddball who had wandered into a private club. When people discovered I (or anyone else) wasn't a member, they immediately went into witnessing mode: "Mike, you'll never find peace in your life unless you repent and accept Christ," implored one in a private conversation.

"Will you be ready to meet the Lord when He returns?" asked another in a small group meeting.

"Make sure you're not left behind," said a third who was referring to something called the Rapture, a prophetic event about which I would soon learn.

When asked about being saved by one of the many refined and dollish girls with sparkling eyes and a strong Southern accent, the temptation to say "yes" even though I really hadn't "accepted Him" was irresistible. Although Ted was not your stereotypical believer, I believe he was honest. He *had* accepted Jesus, in his own independent way. He could say "yes" all day long and proceed to lay on the charm. Trouble was, I hadn't, and if I said "no," to the big question, I might have to endure another earnest description of *The Four Spiritual Laws* and the peer pressure to join the "club" that accompanied it.

Blue-eyed with long blonde hair, a vivacious girl whom I met in our small group meeting approached me once. I was glad she wasn't shy but wondered if she or one of her friends would ask me the big question.

"Nice to meet you, Mike. Where are y'all from?" she said with her Southern drawl, even though it was only me standing there.

"Our group is from Massachusetts," I answered. "And where are you from?"

"We're from South Carolina." After some more chitchat, the question came: "How about *you* Mike, have you accepted the Lord?" Her blue eyes locked on mine, waiting for a response.

“Well, umm... yeah, I have,” I said, hoping she wouldn’t notice my insincerity or ask me to share my “testimony.”

“Praise the Lord!” she said.

Her genuine excitement caught me off guard. But I had just discovered a way to get off the hook from another round of witnessing and another explanation of *The Four Spiritual Laws*.

The other popular subject at the conference was the pre-tribulation version of the Rapture, a belief in the imminent return of Jesus to take believers back to heaven and leave unbelievers to suffer through a seven-year period of tribulation during which the Antichrist, mentioned in the New Testament book of I John, is revealed. The believers would be “raptured,” taken bodily up to glory, or maybe beamed up like on *Star Trek* with Jesus in the heavenly transporter room, so whatever place they occupied at the time would become unoccupied. Planes and cars would be left unattended, causing mass catastrophe and confusion. It was popularized by the new national bestseller by Hal Lindsey called *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey predicted that we were living in the generation that would see Christ’s return at the end of history and therefore the Rapture. The book was at the peak of popularity in the summer of 1972, and I remember seeing people carrying copies of it along with their Bibles.

At Explo, earnest evangelist types couldn’t resist using this concept of the imminent return of Jesus or the Rapture in their witnessing to people to try to get them to “accept” the Lord. “God’s Word says when Christ returns, everyone who hasn’t accepted Him will be left behind to endure the worst period of suffering the world has seen since the beginning of time,” I overheard someone say one day.

Other people believed in the post-tribulation version where there is no beaming up to heaven. Christ would return *after* the tribulation period, not before, to exercise judgment on unbelievers and receive believers at the end of history. At times I heard these folks say something like, “The Bible predicted our contemporary events, which means we are probably living in the last days when Christ

will return.” Either way, when witnessing, talk of the Rapture or the return of Christ would add a little incentive for the witnesses to more seriously consider giving their lives to Christ and to be ready for the end, although the “pre-tribulation” notion was definitely more dramatic and apparently the end-times theology of choice at Exlo.

Admittedly, I was starting to buy some of this, although the beaming up to heaven part was hard to swallow. Some people appeared so sure and confident and undoubtedly genuinely cared that people get saved. They also talked as if the Rapture could happen anytime, possibly right after breakfast.

Part of me wanted that assurance. Not about the Rapture, but about knowing Love. I felt a powerful draw—a pull to finally know the answers to life’s daunting questions. To feel like I belonged to a caring community. To experience a personal God. To gain His approval. But I also was skeptical about the religious expectations. Could they be reconciled?

One memorable early evening at the festival before one of the large rallies, where the general public would also attend, Billy Graham would speak and Christian bands would perform, Jim, Ted, and I went wandering into the downtown Dallas neighborhood around the stadium. It was stiflingly hot and humid and the air was still. We were sweaty, thirsty, and bored. Somehow Ted, being the oldest, managed to get someone to buy us a six-pack of Colt 45 malt liquor.

“Shit! How did you get that?” Jim said, when Ted reappeared after exploring the neighborhood.

“Ingenuity, my boy. A black guy with an Afro and beads had something to do with it,” Ted replied.

Ted had sworn off smoking pot, but figured there was nothing sinful about drinking a couple of beers. Jim and I knew this wasn’t exactly what the youth group taught, but couldn’t argue with his logic—besides, the beers were really cold—so we sat down somewhere in a rundown secluded neighborhood in Dallas and consumed the whole six pack of 16 ounce cans between us. Soon we were filled with the “spirit.”

Ted then noticed some kids playing in a vacant lot a block away and decided he wanted to go “witness” about Jesus to them. So off we went, with me extremely uncomfortable at the prospect of telling others about Jesus, whom I had not “accepted.”

Ted managed to spout out some kind of line such as, “Hey, kids, did you know Jesus loves you and wants to change your life?”

Jim piped in a few words, and I stayed on the back burner observing my first experience with witnessing for Jesus when I wasn’t the witness. After a few minutes we heard a van stop a couple blocks away and a man who was obviously involved with Explo yelled out, “You guys need some Bibles to give to those kids?”

Ted was flabbergasted. “How did you know we were here?” he asked the man. Jim was amazed. I didn’t know what to think.

“I think the Lord must have led us here,” the man said. We distributed Bibles to each kid, said a few more things to encourage them to read the New Testament stories about Jesus, and then headed back toward the stadium. There was an eerie feeling in the air as if something out of this world had just happened. Either that or the Colt 45s had kicked in. Ted was talking a mile a minute proclaiming it was a miracle, as we headed back toward the stadium—by then people were beginning to enter for the evening’s event. He kept stopping people on the way and spouting how the Lord had just miraculously provided Bibles for kids we had witnessed to in a nearby slum. Personally, I had my doubts this was a miracle.

Energized by what happened, Ted hurriedly entered the stadium with his long hair flying in the wind, while Jim and I followed like devotees tailing a prophet; he proceeded onto the field straight to the front of the stage on the 10-yard line. We wound up sitting on the grass in the front row. Ted and Jim kept exuberantly sharing our recent experience with people sitting in the general vicinity. I was the shy one and just sat there with my beer buzz and listened to the conversations.

I couldn’t help but make the following observation: the level of excitement about our “miracle” was in direct proportion to

the amount of Colt 45s we consumed. Ted drank three cans and was ecstatic, as if he had just witnessed Jesus raising the dead. Jim had two and was excited as a fisherman who saw Jesus walking on water. Wimpy me had only drunk one; I was the reluctant disciple, the doubting Thomas. Later on, a male youth leader in our room, when hearing how we had “felt the presence of God,” made a similar comparison.

Jim and Ted appeared to confuse their beer buzz with a Holy Spirit high. Did that make drinking beer wrong? Preachers of the day didn’t just warn against the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse. They generally said *any* use of alcohol and drugs was worldly—even for those who weren’t underage. I wondered. To me, apart from getting shitfaced, beer didn’t seem so bad. Or maybe tying one on once in a blue moon was acceptable. Did things always have to be so black and white?

Several bands performed before Billy Graham spoke that evening, including André Crouch and the Disciples, Love Song, and Johnny Cash. Love Song was a popular rock band affiliated with the denomination Calvary Chapel. Its members all had beards and long hair—in a curly afro-style or tied in ponytails. The leader, Chuck Girard, later became a famous contemporary Christian rock musician. Their music was sweet and their voices earnest, singing lyrics about the reality of God and the power of Jesus to deliver folks from whatever ailed them—addictions or fears.

Although I was enthralled and impressed with Billy Graham’s preaching, I honestly don’t remember the main message he gave. It must have been that can of Colt 45. But based on hearing him in later years, I’m sure it had something to do with God’s love, being born again, and living for God. He probably read the story of Jesus and Nicodemus from the book of John, which is when Jesus made his famous statement, “You must be born again to see the Kingdom of God.” Billy was a very likable preacher.

I remember the end of his sermon, when he gave the obligatory altar call, explained the gospel message (similar to the *The Four*

*Spiritual Laws*) and, as a call to action, challenged those who were unsaved to “give their hearts to Christ” so they could have their sins forgiven, be reconciled to God, and live a new and exciting Spirit-filled life, but not without some persecution. As an Evangelist, this was Billy’s main event, his urgent appeal. Like most revivalists, he implored those who hadn’t to publicly “trust Christ” before it’s too late, meaning before the Rapture or before they die an untimely death or before they get so caught up in the world that their hearts become hard. If not, the Bible says you must face eternity separated from God. Although he wasn’t an in-your-face, hell-fire-and-brimstone preacher, the message was loud and clear. Your eternal destiny hung in the balance that very night. It was an invitation with dire consequences if you didn’t accept it.

After his call to the crowds and as a public sign of their decision to follow Jesus, he asked people to come down to the front of the stage where “counselors” would be there to pray for and encourage the new converts. “All over this stadium, people are giving their lives to Christ. You can come too. Don’t worry, the buses will wait for you,” he said in his trademark drawl as lines of people who responded to his appeal moved out of their seats and walked down to the field level and up the aisles to the front.

I distinctly remember that by then I had progressed to a pseudo-acceptance of Jesus; a superficial decision that at least made me feel I wasn’t an outsider. I had grown tired of people imploring me to invite Christ into my heart when I had so many misgivings. So I pretended to be one of them. I used this as an excuse to *not* respond to Billy’s altar call, reasoning that I had already “accepted Christ.” If I were honest with myself, I would have admitted I just wasn’t ready, but the psychological and emotional pressure to conform and convert was overwhelming. Whether I was being addressed individually or as part of a larger audience in front of an evangelist, there was little space given to take more time to consider the claims, address intellectual objections, or have the freedom to just say “no, thank you,” without feeling like I was the devil incarnate who had the unmitigated gall

to reject an irresistible offer of eternal life from the Creator of the universe. No, this was revivalism.

Billy and other speakers never said, "It's okay to doubt the Gospel message. God doesn't want you to 'accept' Christ tonight if you're skeptical." That would be too reckless. After all, someone might get in an accident and die on the way home and have to face eternity without Christ. And maybe God would call the preacher to account. No, the speakers expertly set the stage for the "unsaved" to make a decision to follow Jesus during this meeting. What would be called manipulation in another context was called "the Holy Spirit tugging on your heart" at a revival meeting. Undoubtedly this approach explained why in later years the Billy Graham Association admitted a high percent of crusade converts were not members of a church a year after their "decision." They probably felt the same pressure to convert that I did.

Despite all this, in the midst of the enthusiastic crowds, I was impressed with the heartfelt Jesus-rock music and the thousands of young people praising God with honest expressions of joy on their faces. It was infectious. I was also impressed with the tight-bell-bottom-blue-jeans-clad, beautiful young woman sitting next to me. She and her lucky, longhaired, bearded boyfriend were the quintessential Jesus people flower children in bell-bottoms with Bibles rather than bongos, sporting Jesus buttons in lieu of passing joints.

At one point, ominous dark clouds rolled in over the stadium blocking the sunlight; it started to rain lightly. Whoever was speaking encouraged everyone to "praise God anyway." A roar of shouts and voices rose up heavenward and after a few minutes, a glorious sunshine broke through some parting clouds with bright yellow rays highlighting the throngs of worshipers. The crowd paused in wonder and then broke into thunderous applause, raising hands in thanksgiving to the Lord, who apparently spared us from a threatening thunderstorm and torrential downpour.

Was this a supernatural occurrence caused by a transcendent Higher Power? Or was it simply a natural coincidence? To me, it

seemed miraculous, unlike the incident when that man brought us Bibles to distribute to kids. The timing of the sunshine breaking in was spot on. If it was God, did this mean He approved of the religious dogma being espoused? At the time I assumed it did. I was grateful to see such a sign but confused about some of my doubts.

The next morning, at breakfast, we saw on the front cover of the *Dallas Morning News* a full-page-wide photo of a scene at ground level in the stadium. There they were, that pretty woman and her boyfriend standing in the front row of the huge crowd at the Cotton Bowl, arms lifted up, bodies captured in sway to the music with thousands of people surrounding them. Many had their hands raised with one finger pointing heavenward—the “Jesus-is-the-one-way-to-God” sign of the movement.

“Hey, we were right next to them!” we all shouted.

I believed you could just see my elbow off to the side of the photo. Or maybe it was Jim’s. Regardless, my friends and I were now on the grid of the Jesus Movement. That same day, we three “Jesus people” played hooky from the day’s training and hitchhiked to Fort Worth, found a hole-in-the-wall bar and tattoo parlor, and got crosses tattooed on our upper arms. At least Ted and Jim did. Always the hesitant one, I chickened out. I wasn’t ready to take up my cross, even if it was only a superficial mark. Despite our age, the bartender served us Lone Stars on tap and told us to put salt in it to make it taste better. This wasn’t your Northeastern, sophisticated cocktail lounge. This was the heart of Texas.

Unfortunately, since our flight home was early, we missed the last day’s big “Christian Woodstock” concert, where other performers, like Larry Norman—the father of Christian rock music—joined those we had already heard. This final rally was captured on the cover of *Life* magazine the next week with the caption “The Great Jesus Rally in Dallas.”

At home, I was a bit embarrassed admitting I attended Explo. It was a completely surreal experience. Nevertheless, despite the fact that I was turned off to much of what I heard there—the pushy

witnessing exchanges and the notion of God abandoning unbelievers to face seven years of tribulation—I was impressed with my glimpse of a real and powerful God, who actually could show up. At the time, I wasn't motivated enough to "accept the Lord." I still wondered about some of the baggage and doctrines these Jesus people pushed along with the spiritual experience. Within seven years, something happened to me that changed my hesitancy. It was only a matter of time before I "accepted" Jesus.

## REFLECTIONS AT THE MICROBREWERY

"There you are," Dan said, interrupting my recollections of Explo. "I'm surprised you found some seats."

"I got lucky."

Dan looked at his watch. "Good, we still have time to kill. I'll grab a brew too."

After Dan ordered a Fat Woody (a Scotch Ale), we got into a typical conversation. This night, as I had thought, he wanted to talk about my book. He didn't hesitate to dive in. "Man, from the start, you touched on so many things that resonate with me. We've talked about a lot of this stuff before, but now I see it with more depth. For example, your adventures in Dallas—I never went through the Jesus Movement like that."

Brett, the friendly bartender, plopped down Dan's tall mug of beer. Dan continued. "It was fascinating reading about your experiences with your two friends. I'm curious. What do you think was real and what was phony at this Expo?"

"Explo, not Expo," I corrected him. "Well, I believe God was there at Explo. Yet there were some strange things that didn't jive. I mean, it was weird. Like the pushy witnessing exchanges. I don't think God was cheering those on."

"I can see how that would make you feel antsy," Dan said. "I've encountered those earnest evangelist types myself."

“Yeah, it really was uncomfortable. It was like at every corner you’d meet someone who felt obligated to get you saved, including the speakers who made you feel foolish if you didn’t make a commitment to Christ. Another thing was *The Four Spiritual Laws* tract. Knowing the Bible better than I did in the 70s, I see that not everything in it was derived from Scripture. For instance, that phrase ‘accept Him as your personal Lord and Savior,’ is not even in the Bible.”

“Right, I always wondered about that,” Dan acknowledged. “I never saw where that came from. Another thing. I’ve always been fascinated that Jesus never evangelized like modern evangelists do.”

“That’s a great point, Dan. He didn’t try to get crowds to ‘accept’ him as Messiah. He only told select people to follow him.”

“You also mentioned they pushed the Rapture doctrine a lot; you know, the same stuff in today’s *Left Behind* series by what’s his name.”

“You mean Tim LaHaye,” I offered.

“That’s him. That whole thing seems to contradict Jesus’ teaching on love.”

We both marveled how people could believe God threatens non-Christians, regardless of how good or bad they are, with seven years of harrowing trials and pestilence unless they convert to Christ—even though Christ was the one who told people to be like God and love their enemies. I was also thinking of another angle. The imminent nature of the Rapture encourages an individualistic view of salvation.

“Fear of the Rapture—the end of the world and all that—distracts people from what really matters,” I added. As I spoke, the memory of dire warnings from end-times books rang in my ears: a looming worldwide tribulation is coming soon, under the diabolical control of the Antichrist. “People become protective. They end up worrying about saving themselves and their friends and family from future judgment rather than making the world a better place.”

“Yes!” Dan agreed. “And people lose hope that things can get better. They just think things are supposed to get worse. In reading

your manuscript, I appreciated your explanation on how people get these bizarre interpretations to begin with.”

“Yeah, people insert pet theologies into the Bible.”

“Why is that?” Dan wondered. “It must be a real blind spot for people to read into Scripture what’s not there.”

“When people take things literally or out of context and don’t try to understand whole narrative, the historical background, the original language—things like that—it’s actually not hard to do,” I said. “I’ve fallen into that trap myself.”

Dan and I continued to talk as we sipped our microbrews. We would agree that these issues we were addressing—manipulative evangelistic techniques, Bible abuse, and unwarranted end-times beliefs—reinforce the problems with religion—organized and created by humans to control others—as distinct from spiritual inspiration, the belief that there is a Higher Power, a First Cause, a God or gods if you will, with a stake in or a stamp on our existence. Jesus had a problem with religion, not spiritual inspiration. When he confronted the Pharisees, he exposed the fallacy of religion and the way it stifled people’s freedom and the free flow of God’s grace.

Right then, my cell phone vibrated in my pocket. Lori was calling to let me know how things were going. We already knew that she and Gina would arrive separately.

“Lori might be a tad late,” I let Dan know. “Oh, something else interesting happened at Explo,” I continued. “During the last concert, Kris Kristofferson performed” (the soft-rock musician well known in the 70s).

“Oh, yeah, Kristofferson,” Dan said. “He became a famous actor. I didn’t know he was part of the Jesus Movement.”

“Well, it’s unclear how much he was. According to reports by members of Love Song, the event promoters held him up as a new convert to Christ. You know, they basically paraded him as a trophy at the concert. The crowds were surprised and excited that he apparently was a Christian. Thing is, he wasn’t the right variety.”

“Not meeting their expectations, huh?” responded Dan. “I’ve

heard of other musicians who have suffered that fate too, like B. J. Thomas. Performers have some kind of Christian experience, and suddenly they're expected to use their celebrity status to reach the lost or spout some religious agenda. After his conversion, Christians booed B. J. Thomas at concerts because he still played his secular songs. Can you imagine that?"

"I know. I heard that too," I said. "It's the idea that converts are obligated to fit a certain mold and buy into an evangelistic mentality. You know, getting someone saved like Kristofferson is, as some people would say, 'an incredible opportunity to reach young people for the Lord.'"

"Right. Whether the 'saved' celebrity wants to, or feels called to, or not," Dan added.

"So at this last concert, Kristofferson and his band were heard swearing and seen smoking cigarettes in their backstage room," I continued. "As a result, other devout performers freaked out. They apparently doubted the authenticity of Kristofferson's faith, kind of like Ted's wannabe girlfriend I wrote about did when he lit up a Marlboro."

"That's too bad," Dan said. "These celebrities are human. If they experience Jesus, why do we think they should immediately clean up their act and fit some stereotype?"

"Exactly. Not to mention that the expectation to quit smoking and swearing is just a man-made behavior code. I mean, the use of profanity and the practice of smoking cigarettes are superficial indicators with no direct correlation to a person's heart condition. So what if he smokes and swears?"

Our conversation continued for a while before we changed the subject. Something dawned on me as I recollected things; it was at Expo I first saw how organized religion insisted on gauging one's spirituality in terms of how well one conformed to a narrow view of behavior, speech, and thought codes. I saw signs of it back then, but I didn't understand its ramifications until years later.

Reminiscing with Dan triggered thoughts of many other

experiences through the years. As Dan and I checked out the Celtics-Lakers basketball game on one of the wall's flat screens, more memories flooded my mind. I didn't realize it, but this evening would prove to be more than a time out with friends. My reflections on my journey and the others' responses would become a mirror in which to see who I had become and reveal what the present-day implications would be for a more reasoned faith. Dan was a sympathetic listener. Not everyone would be. It was going to be a long night.

Watching the Boston Celtics got me thinking about the next step in my search in the mid-to-late 1970s. It was then that I discovered something about God outside organized religion that blew me away. It opened up a whole new path to experience the Divine that didn't exactly mesh with what I saw at Explo. As Dan got caught up in the game, I couldn't help recalling the details.