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

by Larry Eskridge
Oxford, 2013. 386 pages

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Larry Eskridge’s study of the Jesus People movement of the mid-Sixties through the Seventies won a recent book award from Christianity Today. Eskridge has been on the staff of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College since 1988. My own interest in this book is partly personal: I was actively involved in what was then (rather ostentatiously) known as the “Christian World Liberation Front” in Berkeley, especially from 1971-73 (I am under contract to finish a book, co-authored with Jeanne DeFazio, Radical Evangelical Witness: Berkeley’s Christian World Liberation Front, 1969-75; hoping for 2015 or 2016). More to the purpose of the Mockler Memo, the story of the rise and fall of various parts of the Jesus Movement has, I believe, some important lessons for today’s burgeoning faith at work movement.

In Eskridge’s narrative, the Jesus Movement pretty much began in Marin County and in the Haight-Asbury neighborhood of San Francisco amid the drugged-out, psychedelic counter-culture of the mid- to late-Sixties. The movement was about casual dress, hippie life-styles, guitars, long hair, dropping out of mainstream culture, sharing, and experiencing Jesus as the true “high” in life. Crash pads, creative evangelistic artwork, drug rehab ministries and houses, self-appointed Bible teachers and movement leaders, simple living, and new Jesus folk and rock music were some of the major features of the movement. I don’t question that Ted Wise and the West Bay folks were early Jesus People, but I do question whether they actually had much influence beyond their own circle. They had little or nothing to do with anything I saw going on in Berkeley and the East Bay. The Jesus People Movement was a far flung, multifaceted, movement without a leader as I saw it.

On the positive side (mostly), the Calvary Chapel movement which began in Costa Mesa in Southern California had solid growth under the Bible teaching ministry of Pastor Chuck Smith, one of the first mainstream pastors to welcome the Christian counterculture into his church. Hundreds if not thousands of young people were converted and then baptized in the nearby Pacific. Chuck Girard and the soft rock group Love Song began producing Eagles-quality Christian music which was soon sung and played everywhere. Eventually more than 600 Calvary Chapel-related congregations dotted America. Some would view the Vineyard Movement (founder John Wimber) as an equal or greater long term contributor to the growth of the Christian church (again, original music included).

On the negative side, the Children of God (David “Moses” Berg) and the Way (Victor Wierville) were, almost from the start, authoritarian cults with unaccountable, theologically twisted and ignorant, exploitive leaders. In the cultural chaos of the time, thousands were led astray, not wanting to go back to the “establishment” but desperate for some authority and direction in their lives. The Jesus Movement was part of a counter-cultural rejection of the arbitrary authority and shallowness of middle class, white
American culture and the mediocrity of its churches. The problem, however, was that this rejection was (speaking in very general, over-simplified terms) as shallow, predictable, and mediocre as what it criticized and rejected. There were no roots and it wasn’t long before casual dress, guitar music, and male facial hair were about all that survived of the movement.

Beyond Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard, and the contemporary Christian music industry, two parts of the Jesus Movement that stand out in this story are Jesus People USA in Chicago and the Christian World Liberation Front in Berkeley. JPUSA has now been a part of the Evangelical Covenant Church for many years. Their grounding in biblical theology and their choice of accountability to a wonderful denominational family are keys to their long time powerful ministry and witness. JPUSA owns a huge former hotel in which many of its people reside. They run dozens of businesses and ministries, generate great Christian rock and Black Gospel music, and are respected and valued for their presence in a tough part of Chicago. Most Jesus People groups were lily white. JPUSA looks much more like the kingdom of God.

The Christian World Liberation Front was founded in 1969 by Campus Crusade as a special evangelistic outreach in the heart of the counter-culture and university student movement: Berkeley. Within just weeks of its founding the wise, well-taught, creative, and non-authoritarian Crusade leader Jack Sparks learned the language and culture of Berkeley and gave his heart to the people around him. CWLF separated amicably from Crusade and many of us who joined the movement and its leadership in the next few months and years didn’t even know about the original Crusade connection (and probably wouldn’t have joined had it persisted). CWLF was radically committed to Jesus and Scripture. If the Bible was silent, we tried to be silent. Where Jesus and the prophets said “jump,” we tried to jump. Our leader Jack Sparks welcomed powerful, creative, gifted associates around him. For many of us it was like being set free from the fear and retreat of the Evangelical churches. Most of us were passionate, committed Christians from public university environments, not from Bible schools and Christian colleges in the hinterlands. We were eager to engage the culture with the Gospel in thoughtful, bold, creative ways and here was our opportunity.

The stories will have to wait for my book in a couple years but what needs to be said here is that the CWLF grew rapidly into a multi-faceted set of ministry, educational, and service organizations. In 1975 a major shift took place when founder Jack Sparks (who, by the way, should be credited with the term “God’s Forever Family” which adorns Eskridge’s book) decided to leave and join in a new Orthodox Church movement. The various parts of CWLF then organized as the Berkeley Christian Coalition. Right On magazine became Radix and is still published in 2014. “The Crucible: A Forum for Radical Christian Studies” (which began in my living room in 1972) eventually was a root of New College Berkeley (a graduate school which also began mostly in my living room in 1977) and lives on as a study center in the Graduate Theological Union. The “Spiritual Counterfeits Project” survived external lawsuits and internal “coup”s” to continue to play its cult-watching role. The former leaders of the movement went on to become pastors, professors, journalists, actors, chefs, missionaries, social workers, business folk ..... the whole gamut of Christian leadership and presence. CWLF was not just about long hair and guitars.
So what are the lessons for the faith at work movement? The first and most important factor is to prioritize a robust, ever-deepening, biblical theology of work. Marketplace ministries and faith at work organizations are proliferating like rabbits. Charismatic, supremely confident leaders step forward. But it is essential that our leaders as well as the rank and file continually learn and remain humble and teachable. Superficiality harms people and kills movements. We have great resources like the Theology of Work Project and books by Lee Hardy, Katherine Alsdorf, Bill Pollard, Amy Sherman, and Tom Nelson. The superficial platitudes offered up by some of the pop gurus are no substitute.

Second in importance is collaboration and accountability. The Jesus People were undermined not just by ignorant, heretical leaders; they were extremely vulnerable because of their independence from peers and mentors who could have strengthened them and held them accountable. Any leader or movement that resists or avoids accountability to peers and which has no mentors, any movement that is too big or too good to learn from others or collaborate, is dangerously weak. Part of the responsibility lies with those leaders but part of it lies with churches, seminaries, and denominations: we need to reach out and embrace these otherwise independent, detached movements and leaders, learn from them, and serve them.