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## **Flirty Fishing – Gender Ethics and the Jesus Revolution**

by **Julianne Johnson**

In the late 1960s, an intersection of free love, gender ethics and evangelical Christianity converged in a society of youth that became known as the Jesus Movement. Interchangeably known as the Jesus Revolution, Jesus Freaks or the Jesus People, this was a society of young people who were lost in a sea of moral challenges, protests and demonstrations. The Jesus Movement struggled to reconcile traditional religious and gender roles with the changing social mores of the 1960s and 1970s counterculture, which emphasized gender equality and sexual liberation. Complicating cultural identity even further, extreme factions of the Jesus Movement collided with the traditional examination of seduction and human sexuality under a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible.

As a contemporary religious movement, the Jesus Revolution wanted to harness modernity while subscribing to a fundamentalist doctrine. Largely, the Jesus Movement believed in traditional gender roles for their members and clearly defined the different responsibilities of men and women or “brothers and sisters” within the movement. Gender roles played by women within the movement were at times strikingly different from the greater social crusades of the era. Subcultures that developed out of the JM, such as the Children of God communes, approached women and sexual freedom from entirely different justifications of the word of the Lord. This study will investigate the roles that gender played in the JM with a particular focus on the Children of God communes and the sometimes blatant use of female sexuality as a “hook” to entice new members to the movement known as “flirty fishing.”

### **Who Were the Jesus People?**

During the turbulent 1960’s, a grassroots movement of hippie Christians began to appear

in churches, coffeehouses and street corners throughout Northern and Southern California. Deep cultural challenges to the core of American ideals and American exceptionalism pushed young people further away from any establishment doctrine. In an era littered with assassinations, military engagements and scandals, adolescents sought acceptance through rebellious acts of counterculture. The JM was attracted to the rebellious peace and brotherhood message of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> Their fellowship was a unique convergence of the cultural context in 1960s American youth and evangelical religion.

It is a mistake to lump all of the JM branches into one neat package of evangelism. Beginning in Haight-Ashbury and the suburbs of San Francisco, altruistic leaders like Ted Wise shared spiritual findings with congregations of young hippies. Wise established one of the first Christian coffeehouses in the Haight known as “The Living Room.”<sup>2</sup> Quickly the JM spread and spiritual leaders gaining guerilla training on the streets soon started their own movements under the umbrella of the JM. Outposts of the JM sprouted up all over California as youthful recruits joined in droves looking for salvation from the chaos in the world around them. Groups such as Arthur Blessitt’s “His Place” in Hollywood, Don Williams’ the “Salt Company,” Tony and Susan Alamo’s “Alamo Foundation” and David Berg’s “Teens for Christ and the Children of God” were established throughout Northern and Southern California. The majority of JM leaders believed that they were called by God to do his work and that without the Lord’s endorsement, they would have no authority.<sup>3</sup> The substantial growth of the JM at this tumultuous period in American history indicates uneasiness with both the dominant culture and counterculture mainstreams.

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1 Time, 58.

2 Plowman, 44

3 Simmonds et al, 277

Clearly, the JM youth were searching for acceptance and commonality that they found with other Jesus Freaks on a path to spiritual enlightenment.

### **Gender and Commune Life of the JM**

JM communes began as a single place of refuge for hippies looking for salvation. Many stressed the literal interpretation of the Bible, hard work, salvation and the superiority of men over women.<sup>4</sup> Young women of the late 1960s and 1970s were fighting for equality throughout America. The climate for women's rights did not lend itself to fundamentalist religious living and withdrawing oneself completely from society; therefore women were less likely to join communes. Indeed, these traditional patriarchal views of gender could be considered a backlash against contemporary feminist manifestos.

Still, many young women chose to commit their hearts and minds to communes within the JM out of convenience or to escape the stormy, turbulent times in which they lived. Mary Harder, a Professor of Sociology and Director of Women's Studies from the University Nevada wrote in 1974, these communes offered escapes where "structure and goals differed markedly from the dominant society in which they exist[ed]."<sup>5</sup> One of the fundamental beliefs in the JM communes of this era was that women were to be submissive to men.<sup>6</sup> The women would take on the traditional mother/caregiver roles while the men worked in a more organizational and leadership capacity. Women members in the Calvary Chapel's House of Miracles which opened in 1968 would sometimes have to borrow bicycles to go dumpster-diving in order to feed their

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<sup>4</sup> Simmonds, et al, 272.

<sup>5</sup> Harder, 347

<sup>6</sup> Simmonds, 276

flock.<sup>7</sup> Women were often excluded from positions of authority. They were responsible for cooking, cleaning, washing, and caring for children. The men of the JM used biblical justifications for this exclusion of women from powerful positions citing passages from the Bible like, “Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent” (Timothy 2:11-12).<sup>8</sup>

The obvious sexual attraction between men and women could cause temptation and distraction from the work of the Lord. Women in some JM communes were required to dress and compose themselves in such a manner as to not arouse males or show vanity in their own appearance. Though varying degrees of gender restraints existed, women members of the JM communes struggled with the concept that their bodies could cause sin. The overarching message of the Jesus Revolution seemed to suffer from a gender identity crisis. Young women coming from a counterculture of free love and acceptance were suddenly asked to cover up in the name of the Jesus. Where their cultural counterparts were burning their bras in protest of women’s inequality, the JM women were repeatedly told they were “weaker vessels” because of their gender.<sup>9</sup>

### **Flirty Fishing and the Children of God**

Not all JM women were asked to hide their natural sexuality. The Children of God movement lead by David “Moses” Berg was one of the most publicized and polarized factions of

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<sup>7</sup> Eskridge, 71

<sup>8</sup> Harder, 348

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 349

the early JM.<sup>10</sup> Contemporaries viewed the Children of God (COG) as just another part of the Jesus Freaks. However, Berg's vision of what represented holy, Christian community living differed greatly from the overarching themes within the larger JM. Berg believed that women could be used as an important part of proselytizing efforts for the group. Berg was not afraid to use female sexuality as something more powerful than its fundamental biblical justification.

The Children of God (COG) was a more hostile JM movement that lived as though the nation at large or dominant culture was already under "Communist rule" and that Christians would soon be persecuted by the government.<sup>11</sup> Led by Berg, the COG was more isolated than other communal movements and therefore expected more sacrifice from its members. Berg's leadership, though low profile, was intense. Berg claimed that God had given him a vision of a spectacular ministry that was to be lived out in the midst of their followers. Marriages between generations within the COG were encouraged and sharing of sex with partners other than your spouse was also practiced. The COG alarmingly supported promiscuity between adults and children.<sup>12</sup> This was the definition of "free love" taken to a frightening extreme. The COG, rather than prohibit the acknowledgement of sexual realizations between genders, used the sexual and sensual nature of humanity as a means to bond with God.

Female members of the COG were often asked to go out into society and go "flirty fishing" to recruit new members into the fold. Some scholars contend that "flirty fishing" was used as a form of evangelical outreach at a time when many sects of the JM were eliciting new members and trying to increase their fellowship. But Berg's articulated preferences for the

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<sup>10</sup> Eskridge, 180

<sup>11</sup> Eskridge, 181

<sup>12</sup> Raine, 1

female appearance and the use of their bodies to please men places “flirty fishing” in line with a more doctrinal approach of the COG. Berg believed that women must attend to men’s physical, emotional and spiritual needs at all times.<sup>13</sup>

In 1974, Berg began preaching the idea of women baiting men to join the COG. He used phrases like, “Hook them through her flesh!” and “Hooker for Jesus.”<sup>14</sup> Berg argued successfully with his flock of followers that the act of “flirty fishing” was another way to show one’s ultimate commitment to God and Jesus. He cared little for the possibilities of rape and sexually transmitted diseases amongst the women in the COG, underlining an embedded acceptance of gender abuse within the COG and from Berg himself. The practice of “flirty fishing” became so widely accepted within the COG that male and female members began to view women’s bodies as merely a recruitment tool or a vehicle for the exchange of money or food for the good of all members.

Many former female members of the COG have become very outspoken against the gender practices that were introduced by Berg at the height of the movement. Some former COG children have committed acts of violence against their families or themselves because of the sexual experiences they had in the COG communes. Rickey “Davidito” Rodriguez was Berg’s adopted son and heir apparent, but in 2005 he murdered himself and other high ranking members of the COG that had practiced sexual relations with him as a child. Even considering all of the obvious gender manipulations, some COG women still find nothing wrong with the practice of “flirty fishing”. “Most of us weren’t that shocked by it. It wasn’t that much different than the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 6

whole hippie, free love thing.”<sup>15</sup>

Taylor Stevens is a popular fiction writer who was raised as a member of the COG because both her parents were devotees. The author grew up in communes throughout the world and incorporates her experiences, including her experience watching women use “flirty fishing” to raise money for the cult, in her novels. When Stevens is compared to a feminist writer because of the strength of her female characters, the author is doubtful. “I’m not even one hundred percent convinced I know what ‘feminist’ is,” she says. “I was not raised in an environment where the word was in our vocabulary.”<sup>16</sup> But her experiences as a female child in the COG have certainly influenced gender ethics in her own novels. Her heroines are strong and powerful and rescue other women from the folds of conformity.

## Conclusion

The JM organically grew from hippie movements throughout America and interpreted fundamental doctrine to fit the needs of their generation. Beautiful young women committed their minds and bodies to the name of God during the Jesus Revolution. The JM gained national attention because of their seemingly incongruent melting of evangelical Christianity and flower power. Scholars of both history and religion argue over the importance of the Jesus People. Larry Eskridge is a prominent scholar on the JM and a former member of the movement itself. His 2012 book *God’s Forever Family* theorizes that as the JM matured members naturally segued into shaping present day American Evangelism.<sup>17</sup> If we accept Eskridge’s thesis then it becomes paramount that we gain a deeper understanding of gender roles within the JM and sects like the

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<sup>15</sup> Lattin, 69

<sup>16</sup> Kelly, “Child of God.”

<sup>17</sup> Eskridge, 276



Children of God. Studying gender ethics within the JM will help improve our understanding of gender roles within sects of evangelical Christianity today.

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