

British Actor Takes the Bible to the Street Through Paraphrase

Through his stage shows and book, Rob Lacey presents the Scriptures in the language of popular culture

Rob Lacey didn't receive a sudden revelation to rewrite the Bible. But in his personal study of Scripture, the 42-year-old Welshman discovered that rephrasing passages to fit modern language connected with believers and nonbelievers alike.

So the 16-year theater veteran set out to take the Word to the street—literally—by paraphrasing the Bible in a way today's postmodern culture would understand. The project started off as a book, releasing as *The Street Bible* in Britain in 2003 and capturing the 2004 Book of the Year award at the United Kingdom Christian Booksellers Convention. In September, it released as *The Word on the Street* in the United States.

"It's an overview of the Bible that's perfect for non-Christians, and Christians love it because it gives a fresh angle to something they know very well," Lacey told *Charisma*. "But I'm very passionate that everyone realizes it's not the Bible. It's an intro and advertisement for the Bible."

In sometimes gritty and oftentimes witty language, Lacey presents Old Testament law as an instructional manual, the wisdom books as rock opera, the Gospels as one story with four narrators, the epistles as e-mails, and Revelation as virtual images. With a vocabulary and structure designed primarily for 18- to 34-year-olds, the passages reflect God's eternal truth and wisdom.

The book also is performed as one-hour and 20-minute stage shows.

Accompanied by Bill and Rachel Beales on guitar, keyboard and vocals, Lacey opens the show by reviewing the entire Bible in two minutes. "The show is the Bible as performance art," Lacey said. "It's comedy, it's theater, it's performance poetry."

Lacey gave dozens of performances last summer alone, but the ministry concept almost never got off the ground. Two weeks after inking the book contract in March 2000, Lacey was diagnosed with cancer in his bladder.

He underwent painful chemical treatments, but the disease continued to spread, and eventually Lacey had to undergo surgery to remove his bladder.

"I was a hermit in my own house, and the only positive thing in my life at that stage was writing," he said. "It was my lifeline creatively, emotionally and certainly spiritually to be soaked in the Bible. It was the only thing that kept me sane."

During the operation, doctors discovered a tumor and found cancer cells in Lacey's bones. Lacey said if his physicians had known how much the cancer had spread, they would not have performed the surgery. Afterward, Lacey's medical team told him he had less than a year to live.

"I had just finished the first draft of *The Word on the Street*, but it was nowhere near ready," he said. "If that had been the end, the book would not have been completed."

Rather than accept the doctors' report, Lacey underwent alternative treatment in Mexico. A member of Glenwood Church, a Free Evangelical congregation in Cardiff, Wales, he also visited Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship to receive prayer for healing. But his condition worsened, and in December 2001, friends and family began visiting Lacey to pay their last respects.

Still determined to finish the project, Lacey began editing his book. The work proved both therapeutic and fruitful. "Because I had seen a lot more, I had a lot more authority and courage and a right to talk about the big issues," he said. "I had looked death in the face, but because of what Christ had done, death blinked first.

"I had two very good options. I could either die and go to heaven and be pain-free, or God would heal me, and I could see my little boy grow up. It was totally dark at times, and at other times, it was glimpses of real intimacy with God, a very beautiful time."

During the summer of 2002, Lacey began to improve. In August, no cancer could be detected in his lymph nodes, and by October he not only could walk without assistance, he also began swimming to regain his strength.

Today he is in good health, and tours the country with his stage show. Lacey said he has revised the format some to allow the audience to draw their own biblical insights from the presentation.

"I was preaching through drama and wasn't just telling the stories," he told Charisma. "I realized that was rather

arrogant to an unchurched person, especially in this postmodern society. I began using Jesus' model of parables and leaving it to the Holy Spirit and the listener to work things out."

Last fall, Lacey opened the Gates Arts and Training Center with his wife, Sandra, in Cardiff. The center holds acting and dancing classes and produces plays for the community.

John Hillman