

California's Jesus Freak

He's 50 now, but evangelist Greg Laurie is as popular today with the younger crowd as he was during the Jesus Movement.

Try to liken Greg Laurie to America's greatest preacher, and he will shrug off the compliment. Suggest that the Southern California pastor may one day fill Billy Graham's shoes—as The New York Times predicted—and he will dismiss it out of hand.

"I am flattered, but also I am realistic. I know that I am not a successor to Billy Graham," Laurie demurs. "For that matter, I don't think anybody is."

Fair enough. But why would the venerable Times rank Laurie as a contender to step up as America's "unofficial" national evangelist? The other four mentioned by the newspaper—Luis Palau, Franklin Graham and his sister Anne Graham Lotz, and T.D. Jakes—are widely known. But Greg Laurie?

Though Laurie is a relative newcomer to the national spotlight and has a culturally savvy, Gen-X-attracting style that differs from more traditional approaches, a simple answer emerges. Laurie's name is among other evangelical heavyweights because of his three decades of unprecedented ministry success.

Most noteworthy: the almost 60 Harvest crusades he has led in jam-packed stadiums from Hawaii to North Carolina since 1990. The events have resulted in 243,931 decisions for Christ (18,764 new believers and rededications a year). Also, there is Laurie's 15,000-member congregation, Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, California, which has 70 outreach ministries and draws hundreds to its altars each week.

Besides that, there are the award-winning books, his broadcast on the Trinity Broadcasting Network, his daily syndicated radio show and a monthly Bible study that overflows the 1,500-seat Grove concert hall in Anaheim. About 2,000 people made professions of faith at that event in 2002.

Yet Laurie says he doesn't focus on exact attendance figures and cannot tell you what the offerings brought in. It is not a lack of caring; it's just that Greg Laurie is a man who is obsessed with one thing.

Jesus Movement Beginnings

So just who is Laurie? And why is this 50-year-old, balding, Harley-Davidson riding father of two grown sons so absorbed with telling people about Jesus?

Go back to 1970. Simon and Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" topped the pop charts, and the Jesus Movement was in full swing. Hippies by Volkswagen busloads flocked to a little country church in Costa Mesa, California, called Calvary Chapel. Even Time magazine noticed the spiritual upsurge.

Laurie at that time was 17, and he fit right in with the longhaired, blue-jeans wearing Calvary crowd. He had been a believer for only a few months, having responded to an impromptu altar call given on the lawn of his Newport Harbor High School by the now-legendary hippie Bible teacher Lonnie Frisbee. Instantly Laurie felt the evangelism itch.

Home life for Laurie, who was born in New Jersey and moved to California in time for high school, had been tough: Alcoholism and divorce ruled the roost. When he heard Frisbee's message,

he was admittedly so naive about spiritual things that he thought he could have Jesus and smoke marijuana, too. But in a matter of days, sure enough, the pot was gone. He started carrying an oversized Bible, and he wore a cross around his neck. (Or was it a fish symbol? He can't remember.)

During his first evangelistic mission on a nearby beach, he stammered his way through a gospel tract, reciting it word for word to another teenager. The girl eagerly repeated a prayer for salvation. Thus, the man who 30 years later would pastor the fifth largest church in the nation had his first convert.

"I saw the potential right away," Calvary Chapel founder Chuck Smith told Charisma about his protégé, who showed up on his doorstep one afternoon in 1970. Not satisfied with most of the gospel tracts of the day, Laurie had created his own, using one of Smith's sermons as the text.

"As soon as he showed me the cartoons he had drawn, I realized that Greg had the ability to comprehend the message and relate it in an attractive way," Smith says. Calvary Chapel printed 10,000 copies of the tract—then 100,000. Today more than 1 million imprints of the whimsical "Living Water" tract have been circulated.

Smith remembers how Laurie would cover for Calvary's staff at lunchtime, even answering phones and extemporaneously counseling anyone who asked. "No one knew that he was only a teenager and he wasn't supposed to be doing that, but he had such a heart to help," Smith recalls.

Soon Laurie grew a Jesus-style beard and began baptizing new believers in the Pacific Ocean. Despite his age, people

started calling him “pastor.”

A Church Is Born

Nothing has come the usual way for Laurie. This was especially true when it came to the founding of Harvest Christian Fellowship, a church Franklin Graham now calls “cutting edge—like no other in the nation.” After high school, Laurie was evangelizing the locals and catching waves on his surfboard when he got the call.

Did his Calvary Chapel mentors want him to go to seminary and learn Greek? No. Did they want him to plant a church in someone’s living room in a hip beach town? Not a chance. Rather, Laurie was dispatched as a substitute Bible study teacher to the Southern California equivalent of Siberia—a town named Riverside.

“Dear God, anywhere except there!” was Laurie’s reaction.

Calvary Chapel pastors had been leading a Bible study at an Episcopal church in Riverside. Once the center of Southern California’s citrus industry, it was a city in decline by 1972. The Episcopalian elders had hoped to spark a Jesus Movement-style revival among their young people, but when Laurie arrived they were not so sure. “They told me they were going to keep a close eye on me,” Laurie recalls.

As the elders watched, the Bible study boomed. Attendance rocketed to 300, and more people started calling Laurie “pastor.”

“It was almost laughable,” Laurie recounts in his book *The Upside-Down Church* (Tyndale), “I was only twenty years old! I had only been a Christian for three years. I hardly felt qualified to be a pastor. Besides, I really felt called to evangelism, not pastoring.”

When the Riverside Bible study outgrew its Episcopal confines, Laurie rented a vacant church building. Again, Chuck Smith was his mentor-on-the-spot, writing out a down-payment check to get the penniless congregation a home. For the next few years Laurie quietly built up his church, all along staying connected with Smith and his Calvary cohorts in Costa Mesa.

During the 1970s, Laurie created more tracts and drew cartoon characters for the covers of early Maranatha! albums. He was also emcee for weekly Calvary Chapel concerts in Costa Mesa. Virtually every act in early contemporary Christian music—from Love Song to the Second Chapter of Acts to Jamie Owens-Collins—performed at the free events.

Each night, after the music had rocked the sanctuary and the testimonies had stirred the people, Laurie would stroll to the microphone. “Turn with me to John 3:16,” he would say. Nothing fancy, nothing concocted. The message was always biblical and to the point.

Hundreds always responded to Laurie’s altar calls. Fellow Calvary Chapel pastor Raul Ries says that’s because Laurie “has the gift of evangelism.” The huge response continued when Laurie took over from Smith and taught Calvary’s long-standing Monday night Bible study.

Serving on the ministry team in those days was Crystal Lewis,

the popular vocalist. Lewis told Charisma: "In some ways Monday nights were not that much different than crusades are now." God, it seemed, was preparing Laurie to reap a greater harvest.

Chuck Smith had a plan: Rent the Pacific Amphitheatre in Orange County, bring in some Christian artists and have Laurie preach like Billy Graham. Despite criticism from those who said stadium evangelism was gasping for its last breath, Smith put his checkbook behind his vision and the first Harvest crusade was launched in 1990.

Would anyone show up? Billy Graham was still drawing crowds, and Promise Keepers had revived stadium events for men, but Laurie was not certain. After all, this was 1990, not 1970. Yet the response was overwhelming: 90,000 people crammed onto the amphitheater turf and Laurie delivered a vintage invitation for Jesus.

"I was blown away," says singer Jamie Owens-Collins. "The people coming forward looked like lava flowing from a volcano." The decision-for-Christ total was 4,125.

But Laurie himself was not counting. There was much more to do.

Twelve years and 60 crusades later, a crowd started gathering 11 miles north of the Pacific Amphitheatre at Anaheim's Edison International Field for the 2002 Harvest crusade, the 13th annual meeting in Orange County. Churches of all denominations from San Diego to Santa Barbara teamed up with Laurie. Local believers rallied to get the word out, distributing flyers, putting bumper stickers on cars and inviting friends.

The friend factor, in fact, is a key to Harvest's success. "God reaches people through people," Laurie often says. "So the way to get nonbelievers there is through believers." Eight-five percent of the people who go down on the field to make a profession of faith at a crusade were brought by friends.

Jeremy Patrick Gray, 18, is living proof. In 2001, invited by friends, he attended as a drug-using, gang-rolling, beer-drinking unbeliever.

"I thought it was Ozzfest and jumped on top of the third-base dugout," Gray remembers. "PAX 217 was on stage, and I started dancing. Then, even before Greg preached, I knew God was there with me. I started shouting: 'Hey, I just accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior! I want a Bible!'"

Gray testifies that he has since been sober, has reunited with his parents and now teaches Sunday school. "I want to start a youth ministry at a continuation high school," he adds, "reaching kids who are like I was."

Chrissy Conway, now a member of the Christian group Z0Egirl, came to a Harvest crusade because she thought it was an En Vogue concert. "That night turned out to be the night of my salvation," she told Brio magazine. "If I had known it was a Christian concert and crusade, I would have never gone."

As with all three-day Harvest crusades, the 2002 Anaheim event rocked with the best contemporary Christian music (Switchfoot, The Katinas, Jaci Velasquez, Crystal Lewis, Delirious and others) and rolled with a humorous yet compelling gospel message delivered by a straight-thinking Laurie.

The Harvest team made use of all resources at hand: state-of-the-art speaker stacks, powerful overhead lighting and carefully choreographed sets. Video enhancement, song lyrics and Bible verses appeared on Jumbotrons. It all seemed pointed directly at the main attraction.

Without introduction, Laurie approached the microphone, his orange polo shirt and black slacks matching the backdrop. He got right to the point: "You can find out the meaning of life tonight."

The Laurie Appeal

"He is a great Bible teacher, anointed, an excellent communicator," Franklin Graham says of Laurie. "He knows how to communicate so that the common person in the pews can grab it and understand it."

How does Laurie do it? A self-confessed news junkie, Laurie tries to anticipate people's questions, and he mixes pop nuggets and humor into his messages. On this night he refers to Pink, Madonna, Mariah Carey and John D. Rockefeller. He often refers to his balding head.

"Other than his hair, Greg has not changed," Crystal Lewis says. "He is still very consistent, very committed. Perhaps he is a little bit more serious now, but the world is a more serious and sober place."

Despite his use of humor, Laurie says he is definitely not experiencing euphoria when he is on stage.

“When people think of crusades, they think of big crowds, and they think of excitement, but when I am up there preaching, I am in a very concentrated battle mode,” he says. “I am very focused, and I believe that I am being attacked by the enemy.

“What people do not realize is that it is very intense spiritual warfare. Sometimes I feel like I am almost in a vice as I am preaching the gospel, especially as I get to the invitation. So I am really dependent upon God for His power.”

Lewis has seen those invisible battles. “The attack does seem heavier around the time of the crusade,” she says. “Several times I have lost my voice days before the crusade.”

Does the battle unnerve Laurie or Lewis? “We are confident in the message,” Lewis says. “And we have people praying.” From start to finish of each crusade, volunteers, mostly from Harvest Christian Fellowship, are present in strategic locations throughout the stadium, interceding.

At the Anaheim event, Laurie scanned the audience and then asked: “Have you seen how miserable life is without God yet? If you want to get right with God you have to say three words: ‘I have sinned.’”

Thousands of people streamed from the stands, transforming another playing field into a praying field.

“He reaches people who would not normally step foot into church,” says Christian pop vocalist Jaci Velasquez. “You can tell he has a total heart after God. It is really an amazing thing to watch so many people come to the Lord.”

Stewart Smith of the band Delirious had never seen anything like it. "To see that many people come to Christ totally blew us away," he says.

Laurie says those moments are true miracles. "When I get up there, it is not Greg Laurie who is going to bring belief," Laurie says. "I am just the delivery boy. The gospel preached and energized by the Holy Spirit and the heart of the person listening is what is going to bring about conversion."

Laurie may not be the successor to Billy Graham. But he certainly is carrying the Graham tradition to a whole new audience, and he's always looking for new music, new technology and new methods to reach the younger generation. He told Charisma that although he plans to continue basing his ministry from his church in Riverside, he will always be an evangelist at heart, with an eye out for people anywhere who don't know Jesus.

He says there are simply too many who haven't heard how Christ can change a life.

"I suppose one could look back at a certain point in their life and say, 'Well, look at what has happened so far; isn't it wonderful?'" Laurie says. "But I tend to just see all of the things that haven't been done yet. And all of the people who aren't reached."

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Not Ashamed of the Spirit

Greg Laurie doesn't mind calling himself a charismatic—but he has strong words for the charismatic movement.

Greg Laurie believes in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaks in tongues and prays for the sick. Yet, like so many leaders in the Calvary Chapel movement, he hesitates to call himself a charismatic or Pentecostal. Why? “Because the gifts of the Spirit are not always being operated in a biblical fashion,” he says, noting that some Christians misuse spiritual gifts or behave in bizarre ways when they claim to be under the Spirit’s influence.

Laurie says: “Sometimes believers start following signs and wonders instead of signs and wonders following believers. Sometimes people become so obsessed with finding the ‘new thing’ that the Holy Spirit is doing that we forget about what is true.”

Laurie prays using his devotional “prayer language” privately, and he believes speaking in tongues in this manner edifies him spiritually, according to 1 Corinthians 14:4. But he disagrees with the way speaking in tongues is often exercised in Pentecostal churches, contending that it should be interpreted as a prayer from a believer to God, not a prophetic message from God.

Laurie is also critical of emotional excesses among charismatics, including “holy laughter” and Toronto Blessing-style shaking.

“The Bible says the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet,” he told Charisma. “When I have a message from God, my voice doesn’t have to vibrate. I can deliver it conversationally. I can control the tone and volume—it is not like I am being taken over by an alien force. It is the Holy Spirit speaking through me.”

Laurie warns that charismatics can open themselves to “lying spirits” by chasing unusual phenomena, but he stops short of dismissing any particular manifestation. For example, he does believe God can knock someone over with His power, a practice Pentecostals refer to as “being slain in the Spirit.” But he cautions anyone who tries to base a movement on such supernatural manifestations.

“When the holy laughter movement was happening [in the early 1990s] I thought maybe we needed a ‘holy mourning movement,’ too,” he says. “It is not so much that I would write it all off and say God never did any of it, but I think when we build a whole movement around it, we are missing the point. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing is not spiritual phenomena. The main thing is the Word of God and the proclamation of the gospel.”

Laurie defends the gift of healing as well, but he believes many Christians fall into error or set themselves up for disappointment if they adopt the view that God always heals. “Sometimes a healing would not be the best solution because although it might seem right to us,” Laurie says, “who knows that God might want to do a work in that person’s life?”

Does Laurie have any advice for charismatics—whom he refers to as his friends? Absolutely. He hopes people in the Spirit-filled community will funnel their passion and excitement into

evangelism rather than focusing all their attention on spiritual gifts.

“We must remember that the gifts are not the goal, they are the gateway,” Laurie says. “[Spiritual gifts] are not toys to play with; they are tools to work with. We need to think more about the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon us to be a bolder witness for Jesus Christ.”

In addition, Laurie has stern words for his non-charismatic friends who deny that the gifts of the Holy Spirit can operate today. His message to them: “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water. If you do, you will miss out on the great blessing of the power of the Spirit to be a more effective witness for Jesus Christ. Lay hold of the power of the Spirit and have more passion and more excitement!”

The Case for Big Crowds

People criticize mass evangelism, but Greg Laurie just keeps preaching.

Abilene Christian University missions professor Ed Mathews defines mass evangelism as “the attempt to proclaim the good news to a large number of people simultaneously—whether in gospel meetings or evangelistic campaigns, whether with print or film, whether by radio or television.”

If that is the case, then mass evangelism has biblical roots. The apostle Peter spoke to thousands of people on the day of Pentecost, and Philip preached to the masses in Samaria. “Those were the first models,” says evangelist Greg Laurie, whose Harvest crusades fill stadiums.

Laurie believes his mass campaigns carry on an American tradition that was made popular by George Whitfield, Charles Finney, D.L. Moody, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. Moody called his outreaches 'campaigns,' though Graham coined the term 'crusade' (which has a negative connotation today for those interested in reaching Muslims and Jews).

Yet in a day when Gen-Xers prefer more intimate relationships to crowds, mass evangelism has plenty of critics. Laurie has heard all of the reasons why he shouldn't do it.

"I have just come to accept that criticism," Laurie says. "I am reminded of a person who came to D.L. Moody once and said, 'I don't like the way you preach the gospel.' Moody said, 'Madame, how do you preach the gospel?' She said, 'Well, I really don't.' He said, 'Well, I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it.'"

Laurie conducts crusades only in places where he is invited. When someone has objections, he takes the time to listen and explain his mission.

Some critics of large-scale evangelism say these events make believing in Jesus too easy. Others express concerns about what happens to the converts or that citywide campaigns pull members and resources away from local churches. Laurie has answers for the most-often-heard protests:

Will people who attend his meetings hear a watered-down gospel? "I am telling them that Jesus Christ will fill the void in their lives and give them the hope of heaven," Laurie says. "But I am also telling them they need to repent of their

sin, that there is future judgment and a place called hell. I am preaching the cross of Christ and that His blood was shed for us.”

Will new converts receive proper follow-up? “We have a thorough, exhaustive follow-up system that is in place,” Laurie says. “We do everything we can to get them integrated into a local church.”

Laurie notes that anywhere from 7 percent to 12 percent of the people who attend his crusades respond to an altar call. Of those, an average of 85 percent are brought by friends. That statistic, Laurie says, proves “that both kinds of evangelism—personal and mass evangelism—are valid and necessary if we’re going to change the world.”

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