

Film Documents Life Of 'Hippie Preacher'

A new documentary explores the life of Lonnie Frisbee, a Jesus movement evangelist who died in disgrace

A documentary based on the life of a charismatic evangelist is raising eyebrows-and difficult questions about God's grace in the face of persistent sin.

The Life and Death of a Hippie Preacher, produced by filmmaker David Di Sabatino, is a biography of Lonnie Frisbee, a pioneer in the Jesus movement who indulged in drugs and homosexuality during his ministry and died of AIDS in 1993. Di Sabatino said he believes Frisbee was instrumental in founding the Calvary Chapel and Vineyard movements and that neither group has given him proper recognition.

Frisbee was 17 years old when he went to the highest peak of Tahquitz Canyon in California, stripped off his clothes, dropped some LSD and began to see a vision of what he believed God had for his life. Self-described as a searching individual, Frisbee said in the film that though he experimented with mysticism, drugs and homosexuality, he didn't find satisfaction until he met Jesus Christ and became a born-again Christian.

Frisbee came down from Tahquitz Canyon on a mission to reach the world with the gospel. After several street missionary trips, Frisbee, who became known as "the hippie preacher," became an assistant pastor under the tutelage of Chuck Smith, senior pastor of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, Calif.

Teens and young adults loved him, and Calvary Chapel experienced phenomenal growth. Frisbee later became involved in the Vineyard Church in Corona, Calif.

A worldwide missionary effort put Frisbee in several European countries, where he ministered to thousands. But while Frisbee was working with Vineyard founder John Wimber, a young man came and told leaders that he and Frisbee were having an affair.

The revelation eventually led Smith and Wimber to distance themselves from Frisbee, said Vineyard Church historian Bill Jackson. "Lonnie was a fractured guy that God chose and used mightily but was duplicitous," Jackson said. "These great men of God felt incredibly betrayed. ...

"This is tragedy on both sides of the coin," he added. "But if you erase Lonnie from history you wouldn't have those two movements."

Di Sabatino, who edited *The Jesus People Movement: An Annotated Bibliography and General Resource*, wanted to make the film because Frisbee's story shows "a great glimpse into the heart of God, a patient and loving father who often uses a cast of strange characters in his plan of redemption," he wrote on his Web site, .

He also said he wanted to "help" the Calvary Chapel and Vineyard movements "come to grips with a more truthful albeit messier story about how they came into existence."

Frisbee's former wife, Connie Bremer-Murray, said the hippie preacher's passion to serve God was genuine. "God chooses whom He will choose," she told *Charisma*. "And the Lord is able to

forgive.”

Contemporary Christian musician Bryan Duncan, who became prominent at the end of the Jesus movement, said he saw and enjoyed an advance copy of the movie after he found information about it online. Duncan said he understands how a Christian leader can fall from behind the pulpit-or anywhere else.

“I run into a significant number of men that struggle with sin,” Duncan said. “I don’t claim to understand the malady, but I do understand the compulsion. It’s a backward thought process.”

He said some people think that when they find Christ they will be instantaneously transformed. “I haven’t found that to be true,” Duncan said. “Whatever darkness you bring to Christ, you will probably work on that for a lifetime.”

Di Sabatino said making The Life and Death of a Hippie Preacher has been worth the effort. “He was a tough character, and he was hard to deal with,” he said. “If I knew him today I don’t think I would have liked him. But I am very glad I did this.”

The documentary has aired at several film festivals, including the Newport Beach Film Festival, Reel Heart Film Festival, and the Raggamuffin and Mill Valley film festivals, but at press time no national release date had been set.

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