

# Greg Laurie: Nothing Ambiguous About Bob Dylan's Spiritual Life

Throughout Bob Dylan's career, fans and critics alike have struggled to figure out the enigmatic singer-songwriter.

Like everyone else in the 1960s countercultural movement, Dylan believed in subverting everything the previous generation had embraced as truth. But he did not spout mere clichés like "Make love, not war." Dylan's songs were intelligent, poetic and powerful. People of all ages would pore over his lyrics, trying to figure out what he was honestly saying. His songs often echoed biblical themes.

He quickly became a spokesperson for youth who wanted a change from the conformity of the previous decade, which many felt was repressive, stodgy and dogmatic. Songs such as "Blowin' in the Wind," "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Only a Pawn in Their Game" captured that desire for change.

He campaigned for civil rights (he sang at the March on Washington in 1963), women's rights, sexual liberation, rebellion against war and generally anything anti-establishment.

Dylan's conversion to Christianity was not something that came on suddenly. It was a slow buildup over the years. Dylan readily admitted to reading the Bible but said up to that point, he had viewed it as literature and nothing more.

Unlike most in the 1960s counterculture, Dylan had not rejected faith completely. In November 1978, he had a legitimate spiritual metamorphosis after a fan in San Diego tossed a necklace with a tiny silver cross onstage. Dylan picked it up, placed it in his pocket and forgot about it

until the following night.

Feeling a little melancholy and perhaps alone and isolated in his hotel room in Tucson, Arizona, he fished the necklace out of his pocket and placed it around his neck. It felt natural.

In a time of “sex, drugs and rock’n’roll,” no one wanted to listen to Dylan deliver a lecture from the Bible, but he was on point with the exact message America needed to hear.

My wife, Cathe, and I witnessed this at a show at the Santa Monica Civic Center in November 1979. When *Slow Train Coming* was released, the new Dylan stood up for the world to see. I could hardly believe that he had become a Christian. I knew about the many biblical references and allusions in his songs, but this shocked the system. Dylan was the ultimate anti-establishment voice, a “don’t follow leaders” guy. But now, he was following the ultimate leader, even hosting backstage prayer meetings before each show.

Dylan was treated like a traitor in Santa Monica that night. The auditorium was nowhere near sold out, and the people who did show up were booing and heckling him to no end.

Dylan’s record label, Columbia, was fed up by that time. One executive read the superstar the riot act. He screamed at Dylan, “No Torah! No Bible! No Quran! No Jesus! No God! No Allah! No religion. It’s going to be in the contract!”

It didn’t appear that Dylan listened to the executive’s ultimatum. He often quoted Scripture during his next tour and told his audiences that Jesus was coming back.

Dylan was telling the truth, and many people did not like it. But he doubled down in his following albums. *Saved* (1980) and *Shot of Love* (1981) expanded on the biblical themes of his conversion.

The reason? Dylan had found something better than the empty

life of rock stardom: a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is what his earlier classic songs were pointing toward. Now that he had found it, most people did not want to hear about it. They resented him—even hated him—for expressing it.

Dylan's 1983 album "Infidels" signaled an end to his gospel-infused work, and even Dylan recognized this.

"Jesus Himself only preached for three years," Dylan told *The Los Angeles Times*—roughly the same amount of time Dylan was an outspoken Christian. In the 2020 song "I Contain Multitudes," Dylan wrote that he was a man of contradictions and many moods.

The furor over Dylan's spirituality is largely in the past. Every few years, there's a new interview, and the questions about his faith arise. He usually gives an evasive answer, saying it's all about the music. Everyone except Dylan seems to have a problem with this ambiguity.

Perhaps a conversation with Dylan's former wife, Carolyn Dennis, will clarify the enigmatic entertainer's faith. She said, "I noticed a Bible in his room one day as he was packing. Amidst all the rumors that he was no longer a Christian, I asked him if he was still a believer. His answer was short and simple: 'I believe the whole Bible.'"

Like you and me, Bob Dylan is a work in progress. I pray that he grows in his faith and perhaps publicly talks about it more in the days ahead. {eoa}

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