

God Used Lonnie Frisbee Powerfully Despite His Flaws

Near the end of the film “Jesus Revolution,” Pastor Chuck Smith gives his young disciple Greg Laurie the keys to a church and challenges him to launch a new congregation. When Laurie expresses his lack of confidence, Smith says: “God has a long history of using flawed people.”

Those words certainly apply to the Jesus Movement, the spiritual revival that started in California when a long-haired hippie named Lonnie Frisbee showed up on Smith’s doorstep in 1968. The movement brought hundreds of thousands of people to Christ during the 1970s. “Jesus Revolution” portrays Frisbee’s early days as an evangelist, but there wasn’t enough screen time to unpack his complicated life.

“Jesus Revolution” captures Frisbee’s humor, his passion for the gospel and his love for his disciples. We see him baptizing new converts in the Pacific Ocean, preaching on a college campus and sharing his testimony on a Kathryn Kuhlman TV show. But there are hints of a darker side: His relationship with his wife gets testy, he has conflicts with Smith after the pastor corrects him about his youthful arrogance and Frisbee eventually parts ways with Smith.

I’m glad the film didn’t delve into all of Frisbee’s problems. Movies can only give us a limited view of reality. But the truth is that Frisbee was a tormented soul who suffered unimaginable rejection and abuse—and in the end his brokenness ended his life prematurely.

After the initial outbreak of revival at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, Frisbee went through a divorce, fell into sexual sin, was ostracized by several ministries and then eventually repented and returned to the Lord. But somewhere

along the way he contracted HIV. He died from AIDS in 1993.

Greg Laurie, whose conversion story is the basis for "Jesus Revolution," praises Frisbee for playing a key role in the movement—but he also grieves over his tragic failure. "Lonnie messed up," Laurie said in a recent interview about the film. "We show [in the movie] that Lonnie had his struggles. We show Lonnie was flawed. Everyone in the film was flawed."

To discover the untold story of Frisbee's darker years we can turn to one of his best friends, John Ruttkay, who met Frisbee in 1979 and was discipled by him. Ruttkay recently posted a detailed, 59-minute video in which he describes the years after Frisbee was at Calvary Chapel.

Ruttkay shares portions of Frisbee's autobiography, "Not by Might, Nor by Power," along with more than a decade of first-hand memories of ministering with him. Frisbee wrote of his early years: "As a child I was starving for affection. My natural father beat me, and left. My step-father raised me in cruel rejection." Then, Frisbee said, a male babysitter molested him when he was eight. Frisbee called the babysitter "a dark evangelist sent by demonic forces to ruin my life."

The inner torment plunged Frisbee into the drug scene in San Francisco, as well as the gay underground. But then he found Jesus and immediately began allowing the Holy Spirit to use him during the early years of the Jesus Movement. Yet because there was little counseling available for victims of abuse in those days, Frisbee began to spiral downward.

To make matters worse, Frisbee began to develop a root of bitterness. He felt rejected by Chuck Smith, then by some pastors in Florida and then by more pastors when he returned to California to help launch the Vineyard movement.

Even Ruttkay lost contact with Frisbee briefly in the early 1990s. Then, in 1992, Frisbee tracked him down and admitted to his friend that he had contracted HIV. He was emaciated and

going blind. Yet Frisbee told Ruttkay he had repented for his sins and that he had gone to various people to ask for forgiveness.

Frisbee's struggle created a quandary for Christian leaders in those days. They couldn't just excuse his behavior, but they didn't know how to help him—so Frisbee felt like an outcast. Yet he never justified his actions.

Frisbee wrote in his book: "God is clear in the Bible that the wages of sin is death ... I am totally forgiven by my Lord, but I am also paying the consequences of my sin even right now."

Frisbee was also outspoken at the end of his life about homosexuality. He wrote: "Some not only embrace the lifestyle, but actively, willingly and creatively attempt to promote the gay agenda, therefore becoming dark evangelists. ... Every pedophile in the world is a dark evangelist. ... Right now Satan is attempting to sell homosexuality to the whole world, not just America. He wants to destroy Christianity, the family unit and really to destroy mankind."

Yet Frisbee ended his comments on a merciful note: "I'm saying all this without wanting to condemn anyone, but to speak the truth in love. I am saying: Turn to Jesus, because He is the only One who can deliver you."

Those are some of Frisbee's last words.

✖ Frisbee's funeral was held 30 years ago, on March 18, 1993, at the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. He was only 43. Ruttkay says that he, his wife and Chuck Smith all compared Frisbee to the biblical character Samson during their eulogies. Like Samson, Frisbee had deep character flaws and internal conflicts, yet he managed to point many people to God. Frisbee's tormented life is both a tragedy and an inspiration to us today.

And now, through "Jesus Revolution," this deeply flawed man's

story is reminding a new generation about a Savior who can forgive anybody. {eoa}

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