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**---FEATURES**

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the first of a five-part story on the Jesus Movement. The series is based on an 80-page combined June and July issue of Home Missions Magazine. It was written for the magazine by Editor Walker L. Knight and associate editor Everett Hullum Jr., who also man the Baptist Press Atlanta Bureau. Re-write for Baptist Press is by Assistant Director Jim Newton.

The Jesus Movement:  
What Is It, and Why?

by the Baptist Press

"HAL-lay-lu-ya, hal-LaY-lu-ya, Hal-lay-IOOO-ya."

Arms around each other's shoulders, they sway to the soulful, rhythmic chorus. Back and forth they sway, their voices ebbing and flowing.

Beside you, a girl almost whispers: "Wow, man, Jesus is really heavy."

Turned on, the crowd is celebrating the crystalline beauty of a new discovery: Jesus. The young people have found him--suddenly, unexpectedly, breathtakingly. Jesus is theirs. He is where it's at.

"Wow. Jesus Loves you. It's out of sight. Oh, wow! Praise the Lord."

Their faces glow, Their eyes sparkle. Their cheeks flush with the passion of their new belief.

For three to four hours, they sing, pray and study the Bible. They hold hands, interlock arms, move with the music. They raise their hands high, as if to reach heaven.

A rock group plays. It is hard rock; but pure, unadulterated, undiluted gospel in content.

The music, itself, is a key factor in the movement, for the movement rides the crest of the guitar's sound wave, pushed and pulled by the pandemonium of youth...to who knows where?

It is a religious phenomenon, striking suddenly with a mysterious, charismatic simplicity. And it scares you, because you can't understand it or explain it away. It stomps out rationality.

One manifestation, you could account for; even two, perhaps. But look at those kids grooving on Jesus in Long Beach, Calif. Look at the tears running down the faces of those Oklahoma youngsters; those crowds jabbing their "one-way" fingers skyward in Tennessee and the hot, clasped hands of those teenagers in North Carolina.

The Jesus movement is sweeping the country, from the Pacific to the Atlantic. It's real. So real you run out of adjectives. It's bright, dizzying, exciting, unnerving, vibrant, puzzling, ecstatic, even frighteningly simplistic.

It is unorganized, free-wheeling, unstructured dynamite. A non-movement led by non-leaders. Ask the kids who started it, and they reply seriously: "The Holy Spirit." And who leads it? "Jesus Christ," they reply.

For lack of a better word, the "movement" is raging across the nation like a wind-driven brush fire, jumping any obstacle to break out in dozens of forms and dozens of places.

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A "Jesus Festival" in Evansville, Ind., draws thousands. Young people pour into revival meetings in Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Ohio, Kentucky, Florida. Georgia teens organize a high school youth for Jesus. In Birmingham, Ala., they picket a pornographic book store. Record crowds of teenagers pack evangelistic meetings in North Carolina, Illinois, Tennessee.

Christian communities spring up in major cities across the country. Thousands are baptized dramatically in the Pacific Ocean. "Jesus freaks" roam the streets "rapping" about Jesus with everyone they meet. Teenagers take over revivals in local churches and spend hours "sharing" their faith, experiences, and testimonies. High school students take their Bibles to school and avidly read the scriptures at every spare moment.

They are intensely evangelistic, highly legalistic. They believe the Bible word-for-word, literally. They are pietistic. Many have received "the baptism of the spirit." And they are convinced: Jesus is coming again, SOON!

During the first half of 1971, Jesus was "where it is at, man," among the youth of the nation. Drugs are out, Jesus is in!

Discarded is the drug culture in which minds were left dizzying with psychedelic hangovers. Discarded is the try-anything craze that sent them scurrying after any thrill, from sex to satanism. Gone is the gut-deep emptiness. The search is over: Jesus is the answer.

Like all new "movements," it has attracted the national spotlight of the news media. Life and Look carried big picture spreads. Time and Newsweek devoted shorter pieces to it. Most focused on the locality where the movement has been most intense--Southern California.

But "the movement" is not confined to Southern California. It stretches from coast to coast. Nearly every major city has seen some manifestation of it.

It is in the churches. It has touched Southern Baptists. Not all the participants in the movement should be labeled "Jesus freaks."

In Houston, a "Spiritual Revolution Now (SPIRENO)" crusade sponsored by the First Baptist Church resulted in more than 11,000 decisions, including 4,001 professions of faith. The pastor of the church estimates that 70 per cent of the converts have been baptized and shepherded into some church in the city.

Record crowds of teenagers, including an estimated 20,000 who packed the coliseum in Greensboro, N.C., attended youth evangelism conferences in Tennessee, North Carolina, and Illinois. Dignified, formal First Baptist Church of Nashville reverberated with the "Jesus yell" ("Give me a 'J'; Give me a 'E'; Give me a 'S', Give me a 'U', Give me a 'S'"), following the Tennessee youth evangelism conference.

But it isn't confined to the big cities. A SPIRENO crusade in Hamilton, Ohio, led by Evangelist Richard Hogue resulted in 873 decisions, including 700 professions of faith. More than 7,000 jammed a local auditorium for the final service.

Another youthful Baptist evangelist, James Robison of Hurst, Tex., recorded 11,000 conversions last year. The local church revivals he led in Pasadena and Irving, Tex., broke records for the number of conversions in a one-week, local church revival in the SBC, with more than 1,500 conversions in the two meetings.

In Niceville, Fla., a revival led by Evangelist Freddie Gage of Houston resulted in 1,500 decisions, including 461 professions of faith. Castle Hills Baptist Church of San Antonio has been in a "continuous revival" for more than a year, and a revival at a Baptist church in Nortonville, Ky., ran six weeks after the young people took it over.

In California, where the movement is the most intense, eight young men take turns preaching in weekly youth services at Truett Memorial (Southern) Baptist Church of Long Beach, and kids by the dozens "testify" of their faith in Christ.

First Baptist Church of Beverly Hills, just two blocks from Sunset Strip, supports weekday rock concerts during the summer and attracts kids by the hundreds.

And on Sunset Strip, Baptist Evangelist Arthur Blessitt and his staff, operate a Christian night spot called "His Place."

Blessitt, a mod dresser with long hair, is considered by some to be one of the "leaders" of the Jesus movement. With his nationwide walk across the country last year pulling a cross, and recent visit to Belfast, Northern Ireland, Blessitt is certainly one of the most well-known participants in the movement. Yet few of those within it classify him either as a "leader" or even with being within the movement itself.

Most observers agree, however, that there is no real "leader." Duane Peterson, editor of the Hollywood Free Paper (260,000 circulation) which serves as a connecting link between "Jesus" groups in California, denies that he is "the leader."

"The only leader is Jesus Christ," Peterson declares.

Jesus' presence is felt in California among the youth. At Bethel Tabernacle, a small plain church in the Los Angeles suburb of Redondo Beach, a "revival" has been in progress for three years, seven services a week, mostly packed.

Pastor Lyle Steenis says more than 4,200 drug users have passed through Bethel during that span. Most were cured. He speaks of a "30-second withdrawal" with Jesus.

"I was on dope and acid once, but now I have Jesus on the inside," said Shelly, a Bethel teenager. "When I first found Jesus, I mean, it was so cool. My teacher asked if I was on something, like, you know, if I was on drugs. And I told her I had Jesus...."

Steenis said that the first 50 kids the church sent to school with Christ affected their teachers the same way. "Why, they thought they were on dope. But they were just happy in Jesus."

The kids at Bethel have experienced hell--you can hear it in their stories of drugs, sex and witchcraft. Believing in a literal devil and burning hell is easy for them.

In a widely quoted article carried by the Wall Street Journal, Professor Robert S. Ellwood, a religion teacher at the University of Southern California, espoused some theories on why kids were "turning on to Jesus" so readily. He said the direction of religion among youth in the late 1960s was toward Eastern mysticism. The "expansion of consciousness" offered by Zen and Krishna cults both complemented and replaced the "mind blowing" of LSD and other drugs.

"But drugs and meditation didn't deliver what they promised," observed Ellwood. Now the kids are focusing on Jesus, feeling they are reaching some kind of infinity consciousness but without drugs or meditation.

Like most explanation, Ellwood's is only partially true, and it best fits the West Coast characteristics of the Jesus movement.

Blessitt, in a lengthy article carried by Religious News Service, had another theory. In the 1960s, youth became disillusioned with the "American dream" of material utopia. "They had everything, but nothing," he suggested. "They were bored sick and floating in a vacuum. They decided they didn't want to work as hard as their parents and then be as miserable as their parents."

Along came the hip movement, and the drugs, but once the trip was over, they had to face reality. Eastern mysticism offered no more of a solution than did the "cold and sterile churches" of the adults which, he said, either stood for nothing or tried to give political solutions to spiritual problems. But in "turning on" to Jesus, young people have found the Jesus of the Bible, not a "watered down Jesus," he said.

Others have pointed out, however, that "turning on to Jesus" is really just another form of psychological escape. God is now their existential cop-out, instead of drugs. Still another has called the Jesus movement sheer "mass hysteria."

Whatever it is, and whatever it is happening, one thing is sure. The Jesus movement is real. It's alive--vibrating, pulsating, ebbing and flowing across the nation. Where it is going, no one knows.

It's big, and getting bigger. And it's going to shake some people before it's through. Maybe you...

NEXT IN THE SERIES: (2) Love Is Its Theme; Evangelism Its Response; (3) Baptism of the Spirit Could Tear It Asunder; (4) Jesus Is Coming Soon; Forget The World's Ills; and (5) The Jesus Movement: How Will the Church Respond?

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