

Pagan to Preacher

By Jim Golden

Woodstock, love-ins, freaks & hippies, Timothy Leary, Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, the Sixties were the years of discovery. The air seemed to be alive with limitless excitement and endless possibility. All the hopes and dreams I had labored to fulfill had been put to death on the gallows of failure. The doorway to a "new era" was suddenly flung wide open, right in front of me.

You had to have been there. You had to have been a part of it to know what I mean. It was like the dawning of a new age. It seemed as though a whole new culture, or race of people were born overnight. We lived in a kingdom of "love, joy and peace." Many of our generation's inhibitions and bigotries were drowned in a sea of "Leary's elixir of love."

Slogans like, "let LSD (a popular hallucinogenic drug of the era) set you free," filled the thoughts of a war-weary generation of youth. We were tired of the older generation dictating to us the way we should live or think. Jimi Hendrix, a former Marine, became the champion of this new freedom as an acid-rock guitarist and psychedelic Guru. A new outlook on life was birthed with lyrics like, ". . . nobody can die when it's time for me to die, it's my life, so let me live it like I want to."

Music has a strange and powerful ability to influence its listeners. When I was going through my metamorphosis into this new age, I had Jimi telling me to, "Live my life like I wanted to," while B. B. King convinced me that the "Thrill was Gone." Pretty confusing in retrospect.

This "new era" ushered in an age of "love" and acceptance many had only dreamed about. We were the counter-culture, a society within a society. We were a generation that was truly on a "Magical Mystery Tour." No one knew where we would end up or where the road would take us, and we didn't care. We were true existentialists, living our lives without regard for any future consequences, adopting a philosophy of, "If it feels good do it!"

During this time of awakening most of my experience came through a gang I was in. My involvement with them became more and more scary. I found I was being groomed for a special position. My role would be to eliminate any undesirable elements within the gang. I had just received my first contract and was given the rifle that would assist me in my task. I was ready to go. The place was all set up, but my target never showed.

This failed assassination plot was only one of the many criminal acts I had been involved in over the years. Running drugs out of Mexico into the United States, providing protection for the models in a pornography ring, burglary, and extortion were all a part of my growing résumé. In fact a few weeks later I was arrested for robbery while on tour as the road manager of a country-rock band. Up to this point I had everything that I should have needed to make me happy. But I wasn't. I didn't need to rob the store. I thought the excitement might just fill the void.

There was an emptiness in me crying out to be filled. I will never forget being confronted by seven cops with 12 gauge shotguns in a restaurant in Cook County

confronted by seven cops with 12 gauge shotguns in a restaurant in Cook County, IL. After spending a week in their jail and watching a prisoner in my cell die from an epileptic seizure, I waived extradition and was brought back to Maryland.

I entered a plea of guilty and to my surprise was released on my own recognizance to await sentencing. The police questioned me at length about my involvement in the gang. They told me some of the horror stories about the "brotherhood" I was involved with. The reality of what I was becoming began to sober me. I was becoming disillusioned in preparation for the TRUTH.

During this time, a couple who worked for the business I robbed, also lived in my home. They were running a covert operation for God--they were praying for me. Scott was the man who lived in my house. I knew he and Karen were Christians but the definition of what a Christian was wasn't clear in my mind.

Scott always seemed so happy or peaceful, so one day I asked him if he was taking a drug I hadn't heard of yet. I was not prepared for the answer he gave me.

"Yes, Jim, I take LJC every day."

"What the hell is LJC anyway? I never heard of that one," I bellowed.

"Jim," Scott said, "LJC stands for **Lord Jesus Christ**, and he is better than any drug you will ever take."

"Don't give me that Jesus stuff," I snapped back, "I've heard it all before. Christians are nothing but a bunch of hypocrites!"

"Jim, that may be partially true, but don't judge Jesus because we don't measure up to his standard of perfection," Scott replied.

What happened next, I can only describe as the divine intervention of God. As I was turning to go away to catch a buzz and go for a ride, I found myself spin on my heel and ask Scott when he and Karen were going to church again.

He quickly answered, "**tonight**." I could hardly believe the next question that came out of my mouth. "Scott, do you think it would be cool if I go?" I don't know who was the more surprised, him or me.

The rest of that day I had the feeling that my life was going to change. I had a date with destiny and my destiny's name was Jesus Christ. As I listened to the little gray-haired evangelist proclaim the Gospel, (the good news of God's love for me), it was better than a cold glass of spring water after a hot day in the desert. I had never heard anyone say that we had to accept Jesus as our Lord in order to get the benefits of His glorious salvation.

Ellen B., the Evangelist, said that to simply acknowledge Jesus intellectually as the Son of God wasn't good enough. The demons did that and trembled, but none of them would be saved or end up in heaven. You had to trust Him with your life. Jesus is either Lord of al or not Lord at **ALL!**

The ride home found me in a daze. I didn't know what was happening. It was as if time was suspended. It was like the whole universe awaited the answer to some

time was suspended. It was like the whole universe awaited the answer to some unasked question.

As I walked into the house Karen's queries as to what I thought of the service fell on deaf ears. Behind my bedroom door a force greater than anything I could have imagined was waiting for me.

Many have suggested that what happened next might have been the result of residual hallucinogenic drugs in my blood stream. From time to time I've wondered myself, but I do know one thing for certain--my life has never been the same.

I closed the bedroom door behind me and was overwhelmed with what I now know was the presence of God. I started to cry. I asked Him to forgive me and accept my life without reservations.

I don't believe the ceiling in my bedroom actually disappeared, but it did seem to become transparent. I clearly saw the night sky. Then, as if in answer to my plea, the stars appeared, and transformed into the face of Jesus.

There was no audible conversation or dialogue, yet we communed together throughout the night. What I remember most vividly was His eyes. Not the physical aspect. Instead, what I saw inside His eyes. The external aspect of my awareness vanished as I seemed to be drawn inside of Him.

In His incredible light, I felt His sorrow over my sin. I knew my sin had caused Him to suffer great pain. But I never felt any condemnation. He returned forgiveness and acceptance for my wickedness.

The majority of the time was spent in releasing my guilt to Him. I knew that He knew everything about me, but He seemed to want me to let Him see it all. It was as if my shame could cover my sin from His sight, but when I would let Him see all the evil, guilt and pain, He was then able to take it away from me. This went on all night long and the continual weeping seemed more like a river of cleansing than a river of agony. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, I fell asleep for a brief time.

When I awoke I felt as though I had awakened for the first time. I was so rested and full of peace. The joy that filled my heart had me literally doing cartwheels on the sidewalk that day! I felt like I was five years old and it was Christmas morning. I felt different. I knew what happened. I had become what Christians commonly call "Born-again."

St. Paul said that he had learned to be content, no matter what situation he was in. As I stood in front of the judge awaiting sentencing, I was preparing to find out exactly what he meant. "Mr. Golden, do you have anything to say before this court passes sentence on you?" I had rehearsed my speech over and over in my mind.

I knew exactly what I wanted to say, but now that the moment of truth had arrived it seemed too melodramatic.

"Your honor, if I told you there are two forces in this world--good and evil-- trying to gain control of our lives, you might think I am crazy. So I won't say that. I will say that when a person is under the influence of drugs I was using, evil always has the upper hand. What

influence of drugs I was using, evil always has the upper hand. What I did was wrong and for that I am deeply sorry. I have tried to make restitution and completed a drug and alcohol rehab course. Now I can do no more than throw myself on the mercy of the court."

As the final words dribbled down my chin I braced myself for the worst.

"After reviewing your case history, as well as your pre-sentence investigation report from the parole department and your letters of reference, I sentence you to five years in the State Penal Facility in Hagerstown."

Some of my new Christian friends were sitting in the back of the courtroom praying. The judge's pronouncement released the cry,

"Jesus, O Lord Jesus, NO!"

"But," the judge continued, "I am going to suspend four and a half years of that and recommend you for the work release program."

Murmurs of "Thank you Jesus," and "Praise the Lord" filled the back of the court room.

"You are to be remanded to the Sheriff's custody and incarcerated at the Seven Locks County Correctional Facility until such time as a determination can be reached regarding your eligibility for the work release program. Your release, and rehabilitation is in your hands. I wish you luck and hope you make the most of the opportunity before you. A great number of people have gone to bat for you."

It was 1972, I was twenty-four years old, a biker, and I had Jesus living in my heart—not as bad a combination as it might sound. One thing I always hated as a biker was social pretense. The main reason I never continued to go to church from my youth was the hypocrisy I saw in those who did.

Hypocrisy is like alcoholism. It is a disease. And, the ones who have this disease not only won't admit it, but don't believe they have it in many cases. Hypocrisy is commonly defined as saying one thing and doing another but the religious hypocrite is one who claims to live and speak for Jesus, but wouldn't recognize Jesus if He was standing in front of them with a big name tag on His lapel.

Just think about it for a minute. Who did Jesus call hypocrites? It was the "devout" or "religious" leaders of His day. Scribes and Pharisees were at the top of the list. They claimed that they knew and served God. Yet, they were nothing more than **self-appointed** representatives.

It was the "religious" leaders that were responsible for nailing Christ to the cross. One of the main reasons Jesus came was to restore each individual person to their Heavenly Father. Much of Christianity actually hinders this one-on-one relationship. It seeks to complicate our Christian lives, often making us feel we need someone "smart" enough or "anointed" enough to guide us in the right way. This subtly suggests that Jesus can't really do the job Himself

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If you are like I was, looking for what will fill that empty space inside, I will give you the words Scott gave to me. I am so glad I listened to them, and I hope you will too. "Jim...don't judge Jesus because we don't measure up to his standard of perfection." Jesus loves you and wants to be your friend and Savior. The emptiness we all feel inside is shaped exactly like Jesus and **nothing** else can fill it!

If Jesus is speaking to your heart to let Him in, please don't turn your back on Him. I implore you, be reconciled to God!. Praying is talking, ask him to take charge of your life--then tell somebody what you have done and find others who have asked Jesus to be their Savior and Lord to hang out with. And most importantly ask Jesus to fill you with his Holy Spirit that you might have the ability to live for him.