



For those not familiar with the labyrinth of parallel universes that form the patchwork of New York City neighborhoods, Williamsburg, Brooklyn is perhaps the most loved and hated piece of real estate in the five boroughs.

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Once the setting for the immigrant coming-of-age in a time of poverty tale, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, today's Williamsburg is, for most New Yorkers, the embodiment of all that is young, trendy, beautiful, pierced, tattooed, and yes, hipster (that most derogatory of terms; no one uses the "H-word" in reference to themselves). The residents of Williamsburg are a walking inconsistency: both admired and loathed for youth and sex appeal, personifying the abhorrence of materialism and the desire to be part of the newest trend. When in search of meaning, shouldn't the residents of this little cultural contradiction on the East River be able to look to a spiritual voice that also knows a thing or two about contradiction? Revolution Church pastor Jay Bakker is a son of the Bible Belt come north, a recovering alcoholic who holds services in

a bar (with \$3 service drink specials), and a preacher who can wax eloquently and urgently on the beauty of biblical grace while also able to surmise the artistic arc of The Misfits.

"The Misfits—especially the early stuff—was really tongue-in-cheek. It was like vampires and all that stuff. It was kind of silly," Jay Bakker says while sipping his tea in his favorite "Billyburg" café, even though he's more of a Social Distortion fan (with three Social D tattoos included on his arms full of ink). "It was when Glenn started taking himself seriously—that's also when the music started going downhill. But, I also liked Glenn's first album. So, yeah, I can listen to music and still not necessarily agree with the message. Supposedly, [Misfits' bassist] Jerry [Only] is Christian, though."

MANY FIRST HEARD OF JAY and his work with his Revolution Church through the six-part documentary series on Sundance Channel, *One Punk Under God*, which chronicled Jay's move from Atlanta to plant the seeds for a new branch of Revolution in NYC. Along the way, he alienated his more traditional Christian backers (and funders) through his unorthodox teachings, namely his stance on acceptance for homosexuals. "It's hard, because so much of conservative Christianity can be very hostile towards me. Not all of them. But, I think most of them by now have written me off, which is unfortunate." This year, Bakker plans to work with gay and lesbian group Soulforce to bring gay Christian families to megachurches to "just have a peaceful dialogue." And even in this spirit of simply bringing people together—for a discourse if nothing else—Bakker has faced backlash from various parts of the current religious right elite. "Focus on the Family released this little statement to different churches that said we were 'snakes in the Garden of Eden.' And, it's like—that makes no sense to me. We can't even agree to disagree."

This Soulforce campaign wasn't the first run-in Jay Bakker has had with the Christian establishment, and very unlikely will it be the last. It's the friction between two very different world views: the philosophy of the religious elite as presented on Fox News and AM radio waves around the nation, and that of Revolution, which is perhaps best summed up in the stickers that the church hands out DIY-style: As Christians, *WE'RE SORRY for being self-righteous judgmental bastards*. Jay's main theological argument—and one that has worldly ramifications—is that God's love is free to all, while "[Conservative Christians] have made a return to being all about the law, about pleasing God and not realizing that God loves us just the way we are. They've kind of made it about earning God's approval and put a price on salvation, which I think is extremely dangerous." Grace, which Jay defines as an unwarranted love from God to every human, is the underpinning of Revolution Church. And it was the discovery of this unwavering love from the universe that helped shape Jay's worldview and guide the future Pastor Bakker through the very public chaos of his early adolescence.

Jay is, in some circles, better known as the son of one-time American Christian royalty Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, whose public downfall have become a part of the American cultural ether.



Jay Bakker and assistant pastor and musician Vince Anderson

They started toying with the idea of starting their own church for "people who didn't go to church—punk rockers and hippies and stuff like that."

Jay was brought up along with his family's Christian media empire, which rose with the reinvigoration of the American right in the '70s. To say the least, Jim and Tammy Faye "kind of pioneered Christian television." They were the founders and hosts of the PTL ("Praise the Lord") Club, which was broadcast all over the globe and, by the 1980s, was one of the world's most powerful Christian media outlets. By the mid-'80s, the PTL had branched out into a satellite cable network, a mall, and a retreat center called Heritage USA in Fort Mill, South Carolina, where Jay was raised. In addition to offering housing for single mothers and homeless services, Heritage USA housed a roller rink and, famously, a water park, becoming one of the most visited places in the nation, just behind Disney Land and Disney World.

Then, in 1987, "the scandal happened." Jim Bakker was found using PTL funds to pay off a church secretary after an affair and was sent to prison for the church's irregular bookkeeping. At age eleven, Jay found himself not only facing the road through adolescence without a father, but doing so as his family's legacy fell apart before the global peanut gallery. "A huge media blitz happened. It was pretty traumatic. You know *Nightline*, newspapers—there were *Saturday Night Live* skits—all that stuff."

The Bakkers, mocked and ridiculed in the secular world, also found some of their fellow Christians to be, if not allergic to their family's plight, downright predatory. "So, this one preacher came in and said, 'we wanna help'.

Unfortunately, the preacher didn't help us and just took the church—that was Jerry Fallwell." At the dawn of the PTL scandal, Jim Bakker signed over control of the PTL to Fallwell, who promised the family he would restore Jim to leadership in a matter of months after the controversy rolled over. But instead—and no more than 24 hours after the ink was dry—Fallwell decried the elder Bakker in the media as a liar, a homosexual, and "the greatest scab and cancer on the face of Christianity in 2,000 years of church history." Later that year, Jim was sentenced to jail for fraud and conspiracy, never to regain control of his empire and Heritage USA—with notorious water park in tow—was dismantled and sold.

In the early '90s, Jay organized a letter-writing campaign on behalf of his father to lobby the parole board for leniency. "I called a lot of his preacher friends, a lot of different mega-pastors and stuff.



I WOULD ASK THEM and their congregations to write letters. Some wouldn't even talk to me or help—some did—but that was another very disillusioning moment in my life.”

Uprooted from all he knew growing up, Jay found solace in teenage rebellion, getting into skateboarding and punk rock, but also found himself associating with the *other* side of counterculture. He started drinking, smoking pot, and “taking a lot of LSD.” Even though he was exploring all sorts of avenues to youthful escape, Jay says he never escaped completely from his religious upbringing. “I wouldn't say I was an atheist. I would just say I was more...maybe an agnostic in a way? I did believe in Jesus, but I just believed that God hated me and I was probably gonna go to hell and there was nothing I could do about it—isn't that weird?”

When Jim Bakker was released from prison, he found that his son was a high school dropout who spent most of his time “drinking really heavily and partying with my friends. When he got out we kind of clashed because I was kind of going crazy at the time.” Jim wanted to send his son to Phoenix to join a ministry called the Master's Commission, a program meant to give one's relationship with Jesus a booster shot. After several clashes, Jim and Jay came to the agreement “that if I went and didn't like it, I could come back and he wouldn't ask me to do anything else like this ever again.”

Jay went to Phoenix, but didn't last in the program for long because “there were a lot of rules.” However, with time away from home, Jay had room to reevaluate his beliefs and found that Jesus probably didn't like rules either, in fact a younger Jesus might have felt as comfortable in an audience of rebellious kids with body adornments as he would with old ladies in their Sunday best—or, in the least, accept them all as equals. “Growing up in the church, you kind of listen to all the pastors and take their words for it....So, I started reading on my own and started applying scriptures like ‘God loves you no matter who you are, what you've done.’” It was at this time Jay met some other like-minded folks who also had an interest—in addition to salvation—in punk rock and skateboarding. They started toying with the idea of starting their own church for “people who didn't go to church—punk rockers and hippies and stuff like that.”

The new church, branded “Revolution,” did outreach by organizing skateboarding events and hosting hardcore bands, which would be followed by services. The services were held in an old abandoned bar, a tradition that has followed Revolution through its various incarnations in cities around the country. Jay's New York services are held out of Pete's Candy Store in Brooklyn, where drinking is allowed during Sunday afternoon services, complete with the recovering alcoholic Pastor Bakker (12 years sober) asking his flock to remember to tip the bartender. “People always ask, ‘What if an alcoholic comes into your bar?’ And I'm like, ‘I know there's one every week there—ME.’”

“If Jesus—or any religious voice from those days of sandals and papyrus—were alive today, it's unlikely they would still preach with agricultural metaphors and parables.” They'd speak to their audience in a familiar tongue, and in a familiar setting. During his Easter service sermon, Jay starts with a story about walking down North 7th Street in Williamsburg and seeing a Good Friday procession of Sunday school kids reenacting the crucifixion of Jesus. All the while, hipster on-lookers try their hardest to act like they're not looking, while they (in mock cool voice) “flip my hair, bro” and “loosen up my tight jeans.” Then, after some audience laughter, he follows up with, “I know, I'm a hater—I get accused of being a hipster all the time.” This is a bit of a self-effacing humor and an in-joke for the in crowd. Bakker then seamlessly transfers from the little vignette into a heavier dialogue on the foundation of faith. And all the while, the young, attractive audience sipping beers at candlelit tables takes some time away from thinking about music, fashion, or the cute aspiring actor they met last night and gives their attention to the man on stage with Bible in hand.

Bakker just signed a deal to write two books and his weekly sermons are broadcast on the internet every week through the church's site, revolutionnyc.com. Jay has plans for his growing church to “become part of the community, reaching people who are in need.” Bakker has the message of a better tomorrow through love and acceptance for all—it's always been through simple truths that revolutions are born.