

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Beatles!”

With those words, spoken 53 years, one month, and three days ago, Ed Sullivan introduced John, Paul, George, and Ringo to a TV audience of 73 million gathered in front their TV sets to see The Beatles’ first live performance in the United States. Sixty percent of the television sets in America were tuned in to witness the birth of Beatlemania as the girls in the audience screamed, and Paul sang, “Close your eyes and I’ll kiss you, tomorrow I’ll miss you...” They played five songs that night, and by the end of the show they owned the hearts of millions of American youth of all ages.

Never before had so many viewers tuned in to a live television program; what they saw would change rock and roll – and the world – forever. The energy, the innocence, the enthusiasm, the matching black suits with black ties, the mop-top haircuts, the smiles, the irreverent banter... The Beatles exploded onto the pop-culture scene, and we were ready to follow them wherever and however they went.

In a matter of months Beatles fan clubs were formed across the country, and every imaginable knick-knack had the pictures of the band on it. There were Fab Four lunch boxes, dolls, serving trays, trading cards, coloring books, coin holders, shot glasses, mop-top wigs, and even Beatle-branded talcum powder and nylon stockings!

To say the Beatles wrote the musical score for the movie that was my formative years would be a huge understatement. The fact is that the Beatles changed my life, just as they did for many, many others who grew up in the 1960s. The Beatles used catchy melodies, intricate harmonies, honest lyrics, and unbridled energy to capture the hearts of the world, and the world was happy to go along. We bought the lunch boxes, and – some of us, the lucky ones – were allowed to let their hair grow a bit longer. Some even bought guitars and learned to play Beatles songs.

The band was putting out two albums a year, and everything was great, until John made an off-hand comment about religion. Then the world of The Beatles changed forever.

A reporter friend of John Lennon’s, wrote an article about John called “How Does A Beatle Live?” It was published in the London Evening Standard on March 4th, 1966, and it included random thoughts from John on a variety of topics. Unfortunately, it also included his personal view of the current state of religion. He said, “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now. I don’t know which will go first, rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It’s them twisting it that ruins it for me.”

What John said about the church wasn’t a surprise to anyone in England, because the Church of England *was* in decline at the time, and many others had very publicly pointed that out. In fact, Lennon didn’t even think about the interview again until four months later, when pieces of it – including his quote about Christianity – were published again in *Datebook* magazine in America and all sorts of evangelical fury broke loose on The Beatles.

Southern Fundamentalist Christians were appalled to hear Lennon blasphemously compare his pop group to their God, and dozens of radio stations banned the Beatles’ music. Not to be outdone, dozens of other DJ’s smashed Beatles records live on the air. Their anger soon escalated to a number of mass burnings where church-goers gathered to burn great piles Beatles records, magazines, and memorabilia.

Before a Beatles concert in Memphis that summer, the leaders of the Ku Klux Klan were interviewed on television, saying they were going to “get” John and the others if they dared to play in their city. The Beatles did play, but they rode into the stadium crouched on the floor of their bus to avoid snipers, and when a firecracker went off near the stage toward the end of the concert, they all looked to John, expecting to see that he had been shot.

The Beatles decided to stop touring, and their last concert was held at Candlestick Park in San Francisco on August 29, 1966, just two and a half years after their first appearance on Ed Sullivan’s show.



Without the time-consuming stresses of concert tours to distract them, the band delved deeper and deeper into their music, pushing themselves, their instruments, and their producers beyond anything that had been heard before. Feedback, offbeat instruments, adjusting recording speeds, and even backwards recordings of instruments and voices were used to create albums that thrilled fans and challenged other artists to keep pace.

The original stories told in their songs spoke of the joy of holding hands or falling in love across the dance floor; now we grew along with the Beatles as their music carried us through more complicated relationships, and deeper explorations and explanations of love.

The band was wildly successful, and they also set a number of records on the Billboard Hot 100 Charts, including:

- The most #1 singles on the chart by any band, with 20.
- The most top 10s by any group, with 34.
- The week of April 4, 1964, The Beatles became the only act to hold the top five spots at the same time. They ranked at numbers one through five with “Can’t Buy Me Love,” “Twist and Shout,” “She Loves You,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and “Please Please Me.” That week, they also had seven additional songs on the chart, ranked from 31 to 79.

The height of their fame came on June 25, 1967, when The Beatles were the last of nineteen artists from different countries to perform in the first live, world-wide satellite TV production. The largest TV audience in history, 700 million people, watched them perform a new song called “All You Need Is Love” for the first time.

Personally, I’ve never cared for that song, but it really was a simple statement of everything The Beatles had come to stand for. Love defined their music, and their actions. Ringo said it best when he reflected years later: “We were honest with each other and we were honest about the music. The music was positive. It was positive in love. They did write – we all wrote – about other things, but the basic Beatles message was Love.” He also said, “The Beatles were just four guys that loved each other. That’s all they’ll ever be.”

In spite of all that love, the incredible stress of being a Beatle while trying to live a normal life got to each of them. Ringo quit the band during the recording of the *White Album*, and George left while they were working on *Let It Be*. Both came back, but they all seemed to know that when they gathered to create *Abbey Road*, it was going to be their last album.

People who were there spoke of the band's renewed energy, and a sense of wanting to give their best effort throughout, because this was their last shot. It is fitting that the last song of this, their last album, was called "The End." It was recorded in just seven takes on August 18, 1969. And it is appropriate that the last words of that last song were, "And in the end, the love you take, is equal to the love you make."

On April 10, 1970, Paul McCartney issued a press release in which he announced he was leaving The Beatles. Like much of the world, I was in shock. I was sick with sadness. I was angry. I felt lost. Looking back, it's hard to believe that it was only six years after their first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show.



The *real* end of The Beatles happened years later, and sadly, it was tied to John's earlier comments about Christianity. On December 8, 1980, Mark David Chapman shot and killed John Lennon outside his apartment building in New York City. Chapman had been a Beatles fan, but in 1971 he became a born-again Christian and turned against John for the comments he had made about The Beatles being more popular than Jesus, and because of the song "God," which appeared on Lennon's first post-Beatles album, in which John railed against false idols and the way people are deceived by them.

That night, in front of the Dakota apartment building, The Beatles died with John Lennon. With him gone, there would never again be any hope for a reunion of the greatest band of all time.



Was John right when he pondered the popularity of The Beatles and the state of the Christian church? Is Christianity going? Is it vanishing and shrinking? Were the Beatles more popular than Jesus? Are they more popular than Jesus today? Which has the bigger impact in *your* life today, the music of the Beatles or the church? Which is more relevant to *you*?

Christian churches around the world are struggling to stay relevant in the lives of the people who live outside their doors, but nearly 50 years after they broke up, The Beatles continue to be amazingly popular. When their album called "1" was released in November of 2000, the remastered collection of number-one hits sold 11.4 million copies between its release and 2010. It was the best-selling album of that entire decade, *40 years after the band had split!*

And in the first three months after their music became available on Spotify's streaming-music service in 2015, people around the world played 24 million hours of Beatles music. A conservative estimate of total Beatles plays on Spotify during that period of time is over a quarter of a billion songs, and 57 percent of the 6.5 million listeners were under the age of 35 – *they weren't even born until twelve years after the band broke up!*

Can you imagine how different the Christian church would be if it had that same kind of appeal and relevancy? Can you imagine how popular Jesus would have been if he had been born today? Think of how easily he would be able to spread his message with television, and social media, and Twitter? Why did The Beatles have satellite TV and not Jesus?

George Harrison once said, "Life is an energy field, a bunch of molecules. And these particular molecules formed to make these four guys, [the Beatles] ... I have to think that was something metaphysical. Something alchemic. Something that must be thought of as magic." I think that magic

was God. I'm pretty sure it was God that brought John, Paul, George, and Ringo together to try to change the world with their modern message of love, as Jesus had tried to do before them.

So who speaks for God today? Outside of our churches, who is spreading God's message of unconditional love for the downtrodden, for those who have been left behind in the rush for personal success? I wonder how many other messengers God has sent over the years that we didn't recognize, or that we ignored because they weren't as glamorous as the Kardashians.



I read somewhere that you can hear everything The Beatles recorded together in about twenty hours, and you can read everything Jesus said in about twenty minutes. There really isn't a lot to either collection of work, but each is large beyond measure.

The Beatles were in and out and done before they were out of their twenties. Jesus didn't begin his very short ministry until he was thirty.

All four of The Beatles came from the Mersey section of Liverpool, the toughest section of a rough port city in Northwest England.

Jesus was from Nazareth, a small village 16 miles from the Sea of Galilee. People from Nazareth were often looked down on by the more educated and urban Jews who lived near the bustling city of Jerusalem. Nobody expected the savior of the Jews to come from a place like Nazareth.

And the message Jesus shared of unconditional love for all people was certainly not what Jews expected their savior to be preaching. They were waiting for a descendent of the great King David to rise up and crush their enemies, remove the Romans from their lands, and create for them a great nation. Gentle Jesus was not what anyone expected, but it wasn't long before he was calling out the religious leaders of the time, and changing the world forever.

Who is more relevant to you today, The Beatles or Christianity? Which one do you access more often? Which one elicits a deeper, more emotional response?

There are many similarities between The Beatles and Jesus, and many differences, but the message they shared was the same. It was always about love.

I will close now with a quote from George Harrison's song "Within You Without You," which appeared on The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* album: "With our love, we could save the world, if they only knew..."

Amen