

## How evangelicals use marijuana to sell religion

By [Aaron Griffith](#)

March 26, 2014

States are backsliding one by one in allowing marijuana legalization, the president is [comparing the drug to alcohol](#), and Christian Right stalwart Pat Robertson [reversed his harsh views on weed](#)—what’s an evangelical to do in these high times? Are evangelicals undergoing a sea change in their thought about marijuana usage?

[Maybe](#). Or [maybe not](#). Either way, evangelical leaders are still blowing smoke about weed. In the aftermath of the recent Colorado and Washington legalization campaigns, evangelical talking heads have done their best to reiterate how God and ganja don’t mix. In “[Don’t Let Your Mind Go to Pot](#),” Reformed Baptist author and teacher John Piper proclaims that the problem with marijuana is that it alters one’s perception of reality and “leads away from the kind of sober-mindedness and self-control that is essential in using the mind for the glory of God.” [In an article](#) for the hipster evangelical magazine *Relevant*, Seattle pastor Mark Driscoll deals with the drug’s new legal status in his home state of Washington. Driscoll’s core argument here is that marijuana usage is evidence of personal weakness and emasculation. The natural outgrowth of a culture where self-medication is used to escape life’s problems, marijuana is what people (particularly young men) turn to in order to escape the calls of responsibility. Finally, Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore [spoke recently](#) about the dangers of marijuana for poor people in its adverse effects on work ethic.

To get some perspective on the significance of Piper, Driscoll, and Moore’s comments, it’s worth considering how evangelicals thought creatively about drug usage during the countercultural era. Like the above, their arguments usually had little to do with drugs’ health risks. Francis Schaeffer and Billy Graham saw drug culture as an example of the nihilistic disillusionment in the hearts of people who live without belief in God. In their outreach, drugs functioned as a tool of conviction, providing a picture of depravity with which to contrast with the good news of the gospel.

Other evangelicals focused on the spiritual problems associated with drug usage, in both drugs' elusive promises of otherworldly escape (that threatened to bypass salvation via the cross) or their [revelatory potential](#) of demonic realms. Interestingly, connections of drugs to the supernatural provided mid-20th-century evangelicals a novel way to re-enchant their worlds, which were gradually losing spiritual luster in the face of scientific advancement. And through these connections evangelicals actually agreed with figures such as Timothy Leary in their analysis of the effects of psychedelics. Both thought that drugs provided a path to transcendent spiritual states, they just differed in their opinion as to whether this was a good thing. A statement from a former junkie in a 1970 issue of *Guideposts* illustrates the apologetic benefit of this evangelical realization: "Drugs sure do one thing for kids . . . By revealing the inner world of self, they show that there is a world other than the material one . . . [They] know now that since science never can have all the answers to life, science can never again be their god."

And this is perhaps why drugs such as marijuana are still so important to evangelicals today. Marijuana provides a powerful reference point for the grand religious struggle of good v. evil in American culture. Drugs never were just about what harm chemicals can do to one's body; they are a symbol of a culture going to hell, riding on a cloud of smoke. This hell can be one of spiritual blindness, of not being able to use reason to deduce from nature God's invisible qualities so as to "remain without excuse" in terms of knowledge of the Creator (Romans 1:20).

For more traditional Reformed types such as Piper, marijuana is therefore a threat to the providential neatness of creation that otherwise would naturally lead one to simultaneous worship of God and scorn of deviances that might threaten divine order. Or this hell can be one of childishness, an unwillingness to grow up out of immaturity and into modern masculine respectability that Driscoll champions and epitomizes.

The recent cultural shift towards acceptance of marijuana may actually be a gift for evangelicals. As more and more people start rolling joints legally, evangelicals have a new forum to roll out versions of their timeless truth in reply.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#).*