

Devotional Thoughts :: David Wilkerson: Pentecostal Evangelist, Prophet, and Pastor (Bio Sketch)

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The following is a biographical summary of Gary Wilkerson's David Wilkerson: The Cross, The Switchblade, and the Man Who Believed (2014).

Early Years: Call To The Ministry

David Wilkerson was born May 19, 1931; and then raised on Albert Street in Turtle Creek, Pennsylvania. His parents were Assemblies of God ministers, and in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, that meant things were very strict. There was little to no parental love shown to the kids. Their dad, Kenneth Wilkerson "the son of J. A. Wilkerson, did not make very much money as a pastor, so he made his sons David and Jerry work at the local grocery store, to help support the family. The two played basketball, ping-pong, and even double-dated together. But when David was 16, at an Assemblies of God camp meeting, a prophet called out a specific, detailed prophetic word that exactly explained his situation, and it was a powerful call to ministry (p. 58). As he started to mature, he saw a lot of things he disagreed with his dad about, and he wanted to be different. During these years, however, his dad enabled him to get preaching opportunities with churches. Eventually, he got his first pastorate from 1954-1958 at Gospel Tabernacle Assembly of God in Philipsburg, PA. Taking after his grandpa J. A., David discovered his preaching voice and began to preach Gospel-holiness with zeal and conviction; but he also had a certain flamboyance in those days. What good he did do in this time was, under the influence of Kathryn Kuhlman, as he came to imitate her healing ministry; and for a time, operated in words of knowledge and healing, and even had a local televangelism ministry called "The Hour of Deliverance."

Teen Challenge: Call To Help Drug Addicts in New York City

By 1957, around age 26, he grew discontent with the boring routine of pastoral ministry in his local church, even with a healing ministry. He was especially irked by the "bless me club" attitude of Pentecostal churches at the time. Also, there was general superintendent Thomas F. Zimmerman, who disliked both the flamboyance and wildness of J. A. and David, as he was trying to make the Assemblies of God become more culturally respectable, and started to weed out any "fanaticism" during the church services. At this time, Pentecostals were not known for social work or evangelistic outreach: almost all focus was just on the church members and praise and worship in God's presence. David was more Great Commission minded; he wanted to go out of the church and preach the Gospel to the lost. At first, he tried to satisfy his evangelistic drive by going on a mission trip to Argentina. But when he got there, he discovered the church youth were worldly-minded, and only cared about teenage life in the USA, about Elvis Presley, rock and roll, and the gangs of New York. David was so disconnected from a worldly lifestyle, and so absorbed in ministry, that he had no idea what they were talking about. This experience showed him that traveling to a foreign country is not necessary to obey the Great Commission. He saw the USA in need of plenty evangelism all by itself. In his pastorate back home, he entered a season of intense prayer, seeking God for revelation and guidance. During this time he saw the Life article: "Mass Murder Trial of a Teen-Age Gang." It broke his heart. And God's voice said within him, "Go to New York and help those boys."

In bold faith, he tried to reach the boys during the murder trial, but was unsuccessful. However, he got publicity from it, which opened up doors for him to preach to gangs in New York, with them lending him a receptive, open ear. "You must be on our side," they said. Whereas the police, parents, and others had written them off as hopeless, the gangs saw Wilkerson as a guy with a lot of guts who was trying to help them. Street preaching in the Fort Greene Projects was risky stuff, but with God on his side, he saw miraculous results. He saw that a major problem with the gangs was drug addiction. The violence and stealing were often just symptoms of the growing drug culture that had developed. Before there were any such things as drug rehab centers, Wilkerson decided to start Teen Challenge, a faith-based drug withdrawal program, with help from Assemblies of God and other churches through fundraising. What was extremely phenomenal was that he prayed for drug addicts to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit, with the Bible evidence of speaking in tongues, and found that it often brought instant deliverance from drug addiction, miraculously going against what doctors said was possible! During this period, David's dad died, which was saddening. But on a lighter note, word about Teen Challenge began to spread through Christian Life magazine, and caught the eye of leaders such as Pat Robertson, David du Plessis, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Leonard Ravenhill. After getting to personally know Ravenhill a bit, Wilkerson asked him to be the chaplain for Teen Challenge, which he graciously accepted. Winkie Pratney, editor of

The Revival Study Bible, said of this holiness preaching duo: “An evangelist or a revivalist isn’t looking for the normal, common thing. They’re looking for what needs to happen. That’s why they’ll say to you the tough thing, and they don’t really care whether you like it” (p. 104).

Harald Bredesen, a Lutheran pastor who experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues, came to work with Teen Challenge. One night when he was at dinner with Norman and Ruth Peale, he began to tell them about his experiences. Ruth was very impressed. Soon afterwards, she went to go tell her friends, John and Elizabeth Sherrill. They were very interested, because even though they were upper class Episcopalians, they had been doing research on an international and cross-denominational tongue-speaking phenomenon, called the Charismatic Movement. This would eventually be put into their book *They Speak with Other Tongues* (1964). As well established writers for *Guideposts* magazine, they had publishing connections; they started reporting on Teen Challenge, and it eventually led to the publication of *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1962). The book was such a publishing success, that it launched David Wilkerson into international fame, at least in the church and ministry world: especially with Assemblies of God and the Southern Baptist Convention. He wrote many books over the course of his life; in fact, books became his only source of income (p. 153). But even until the last year of his life, this one book still opened up doors for him to hold pastors’ conferences in foreign countries (p. 283). The book sparked the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. And although it turned out to be something controversial, it even persuaded the actor Pat Boone, to make a movie based on it!

David Wilkerson Youth Crusades: A Mixed Blessing

His notoriety as an expert on deliverance from drug addiction made him a key evangelist to preach salvation to the hippies during the Jesus Movement, other than perhaps Chuck Smith and Billy Graham. During the altar calls, he would receive specific, detailed words of knowledge of problems young people were going through, and they would cry, repent, and give their lives to Jesus. A church called Melodyland in California was a popular venue: so much so that they lived for a year in California. By the late ‘60s, the drug culture spread throughout the United States, and was now even among suburban white, middle and upper class kids. It was no longer just an inner city gang issue like before. He had tremendous popularity from 1967-1972, due to overwhelming invitations for preaching opportunities. He was booked: “preaching at about 100 locations per year. He started an itinerant evangelistic ministry called David Wilkerson Youth Crusades; appointed a few crusade staff members, and basically lived on his crusade bus, writing books in the back. He spent 2 hours a day in prayer. But all of this traveling away from his wife and kids, took a toll on his family relationships; he was absent from home too often. It also stressed him out so much, that he got bleeding ulcers, like his father; and needed to get surgery. I say in this case, as in my article on Leonard Ravenhill’s life, that it would have been better for these godly evangelists to have followed the apostles’ example: “Don’t we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord’s brothers and Cephas?” (1 Corinthians 9:5). The apostles traveled with their wives and kids. Especially with the home school movement being available today, I can’t see any reason why a modern evangelist, would need to travel without his wife and kids. I think I can hear Wilkerson saying in the spirit: “It’s not worth it!”

The Vision: David Wilkerson As a Prophetic Figure

His crusade ministry continued to go on, but gradually lost its popularity over the years, as the Jesus Movement ended, and evangelistic crusades generally gave way to televangelism. At the same time, he started to have a spirit of prayer come on him, and he would seek God for long periods of time, shut up in his bedroom (Zechariah 12:10; Matthew 6:6). He would see vivid inner visions during these times of prayer, that would all share common themes, and eventually formed a sort of collage, a complete series of messages. The main theme he saw was that persecution and trials were coming to the body of Christ in America. He actually prophesied this collective revelation at a charismatic conference, which he called “The Coming Persecution.” The Vision (1973), the book that made him in the popular Pentecostal and Charismatic mind, a prophet “although he cringed at that title, and refused to be publicly called one due to the prevalent accusation of “fanaticism.” “prophesied things that came to pass in the next 10 to 40 years, with striking specificity and detail: such as “Economic Confusion,” “Drastic Weather Changes and Earthquakes,” “A Flood of Filth,” “Persecution Madness,” “The Number One Youth Problem of the Future: Rebellion Against Parents,” the rise of homosexuality in the church, etc (p. 172). Leaders in the Assemblies of God, the Southern Baptist Convention, and even Teen Challenge rejected him because of this book. He was scoffed at, accused of being mentally ill “just as he was accused when he went to minister to the gangs of New York. The Vision separated the wheat from the chaff in the Charismatic Movement: local Pentecostal pastors and independent charismatic churches were the most accepting of this new message. It was seen as a sign of the end-times message (p. 176). Some believe that this book played a forerunner role for the gift of prophecy, the prophetic movement, and prophetic ministry coming into being among independent, non-denominational charismatics “several years before the “Kansas City

prophetsâ€• showed up: Mike Bickle, Bob Jones, Paul Cain, etc. In response to his visions, David wondered if there would be an immediate economic collapse in America, and so he sought to protect his family and staff. In an almost classic survivalist-prepper style, but at the leading of the Holy Spirit, he moved out to Possum Kingdom Lake in Lindale, Texas: â€œliterally in the middle of nowhere. But as an itinerant evangelist, it served to be a good central location in the USA for traveling. It turned out to be a very relaxing environment for his family, staff, and friends. They jokingly called it Camp David. In 1974, it served as a perfect location for a family reunion. Gwen, his wife, suffered from cancer scares and depression during this time; and with a demanding crusade schedule still requiring lots of travel, it made their relationship hard.

1977-1982: The â€œLindale Revivalâ€•

What I would like to call the â€œLindale Revival,â€• occurred around 1977-1982. This is also mentioned in Melody Greenâ€™s No Compromise, ch. 13; Mack Tomlinsonâ€™s In Light of Eternity, chs. 12-14; and Gary Wilkersonâ€™s David Wilkerson, pp. 196-204. The video sermons of Leonard Ravenhill on sermonindex.net come from this era. â€œAs time passed in Lindale, Dadâ€™s godfather role expanded when young ministry leaders began showing up to pay him visits. He had come to be seen as a spiritual father in terms of innovative outreaches, and had befriended several progressive, adventuresome young leadersâ€• (p. 198): namely, Leland Paris of Youth With A Mission (YWAM), Winkie Pratney of A Gape Force, Keith Green of Last Days Ministries, etc. There were also â€œJesus musicâ€• pioneers, such as the Second Chapter of Acts. Leonard Ravenhill also relocated to the area and became a mentor to Wilkerson and Green (p. 200). Ravenhill preached a lot at Last Days Ministries:â€œand this is where his video sermons were recorded. Each of these ministries had their own Bible study groups; and for a short time they formed Lindale Community Church, with Ravenhill as the pastor. But it was short lived, due to personality conflicts, and the rigorous travel schedules of the leaders.

During this revival, Wilkerson started Twin Oaks Leadership Academy in 1976. It was a one-year ministry training program for former drug addicts in Teen Challenge. The most notable to come out of this program was Steve Hill, the evangelist who led the Brownsville Revival from 1995-2000. As promising as it was for these graduates, Wilkerson had bittersweet experiences: sickness in the family, ministry strains, pressures, etc. Family and friends rejected him; and he was going through spiritual dryness. His staff urged him to take up a hobby. He started collecting classic cars, but soon he felt guilty of materialism. He sold them all and gave the money to a feeding program in Haiti. Billy Graham, and presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, invited him to their homes; but he politely declined each time, because he felt it would lead to compromising his preaching in some way. These were bittersweet times for Wilkerson. His crusade ministry was almost ready to shut down.

The Early â€™80s: End of Crusade Ministry, Beginning of â€œPuritanâ€• Phase

Wilkerson could have been a televangelist. He was offered the opportunity many times to go on TBN, CBN, etc. But he declined every time. Again, it seems he discerned a spirit of compromise about it, and he was always a â€œno compromise, no nonsenseâ€• preacher. In the early â€™80s, and especially by 1982 or so, what were formerly only crusade ministries, and had now become booming televangelism ministries, and extremely wealthy: those of Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, etc. The â€œprosperity gospelâ€• was taking shape in Pentecostal televangelism, and it was probably for this reason mainly, that Wilkerson wanted to distance himself; also, there was no strong preaching against sin, which was in his blood.

In 1985, he went through a significant shift spiritually and theologically, towards more Puritan type of thinking. Now that his crusade ministry was over with, he abstained from TV (he had liked Barney Fife on The Andy Griffith Show, sports, etc)â€œbut now he saw it as a distraction; and he gave himself continually to prayer, fasting, and listening to Godâ€™s voice (Matthew 6:6). This lasted for a whole year (1985-1986). As the seeker-sensitive/church growth movement picked up speed, Wilkerson used his newsletter mailing list to rebuke these â€œpillow prophetâ€• pastors who are compromising the Gospel, not preaching on Hell, sin, righteousness, and judgment; and instead only preaching comfortable messages that scratch the itching ears of their megachurch members (2 Timothy 4:3). He liked the â€œJesus musicâ€• of the â€™70s (Keith Green, Dallas Holm, Craig Smith), but he hated the commercialized, entertainment-driven Christian rock and contemporary Christian music industry of the â€™80s. He preached against these and other things in Set the Trumpet to Thy Mouth (1985). He became really hardcore on repentance preaching, under Ravenhillâ€™s influence, who had given him a bag of what were probably the â€œPuritan Paperbacksâ€• from The Banner of Truth Trust. He loved William Bridgmanâ€™s A Lifting Up for the Downcast, The Works of John Owen, and probably Thomas Brooksâ€™ Precious Remedies Against Satanâ€™s Devices (pp. 38, 275, 286, 292). It should also be mentioned that William Gurnallâ€™s The Christian in Complete Armour changed his life. He experienced more rejection from church leaders because of this. Leonard Ravenhill and David Wilkerson put out a magazine called The Refinerâ€™s Fire, which preached repentance, and pro

moted holiness theology. Writers featured: T. Austin Sparks, George Warnock, C. A. Coates, Leonard Ravenhill, J. B. Stoney, P. T. Forsythe, Adam Clarke, William Gurnall, John Fletcher, H. Foster, Watchman Nee, C. H. Mackintosh, Lillas Trotter, William Law, Andrew Murray, and Arthur Wallis.

1987-1997: The Pastor of Times Square Church

After 30 years of crusade ministry, and his one year prayer sabbaticalâ€”he was led of the Spirit up to New York City again for a street rally. While up there, God told him to move back to the city and plant a church. He planted Times Square Church in 1987, first renting several theaters, and then buying the Mark Hellinger Theater for \$15 million!! He had a newsletter mailing list, which still had a massive following, including a following in New York, because when he announced by newsletter and The New York Times that he was planting a church, hundreds of people instantly attendedâ€”from all walks of life. Reminiscent of his early days at Teen Challenge, but more similar to William Booth and the early Salvation Armyâ€”he started an urban ministry called The Upper Room, which was a soup kitchen and discipleship center for street people: the homeless, the addicts, the prostitutes, etc. Job leads for the unemployed. Out of this ministry, he found that the Holy Spirit was leading him to appoint ministry leaders. The problem was, though, that they were from all sorts of denominational backgrounds. So he gave up his Assemblies of God ministerial credentials, and had the freedom to appoint ministry leaders, at the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without denominational interference. He made Times Square Church into a non-denominational or â€œinter-denominationalâ€” Pentecostal church.

1997-2011: Pastorsâ€™™ Conferences, Time With Wife, Settling Down, Etc.

1994 was a really tough year for Wilkerson. Leonard Ravenhill died; church battles occurredâ€”causing family and friends to leave the church; cancers attacked the family. During this period, he sought personal assurance of Godâ€™™s love through studying the Puritan view of Godâ€™™s grace. He also functioned on what seems to be a Spirit-led episcopal church government. He was the senior pastor, and through the guidance of the Spirit, he appointed elders under him to assist with mercy ministries, etc. Carter Conlon, who had defended him during the church battles, and had stayed by his side through thick and thin, was appointed senior pastor. After 10 years of pastoral ministry, he stopped pastoring in 1997. Wilkerson spent the rest of his years traveling with his son, Gary, preaching at pastorsâ€™™ conferences all over the world, and mentoring him to be the successor of World Challenge. As he approached death, he stopped all ministry, and spent time with Gwen his wife. He was taken from this world on April 27, 2011 in a car crash; and is, without a doubt, now one of the great saints of Heaven.

Re: David Wilkerson: Pentecostal Evangelist, Prophet, and Pastor (Bio Sketch) - posted by Folksman, on: 2020/5/7 11:0

Thank you for sharing this.

I learnt a lot of about the history of David Wilkerson in ministry before Times Square Church.

Re: - posted by TrueWitness, on: 2020/5/7 16:17

Must see historical classic David Wilkerson:

<https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/220932>

-Daniel

Re: - posted by sermonindex (), on: 2020/5/7 19:00

Wow it is amazing the deception in those hippie preachers. Wilkerson was standing true for the gospel of repentance, what a need for it in our day.

Mark 1:15 New King James Version (NKJV)

15 and saying, â€œThe time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.â€”

Re: - posted by deogloria, on: 2020/5/10 19:38

"Wilkerson was standing true for the gospel of repentance, what a need for it in our day."

Amen. I think there is a increasing need for the Gospel of repentance today. Here is another one of his powerful messages:

Another Jesus, Another Spirit, Another Gospel - David Wilkerson

http://ia800504.us.archive.org/17/items/SERMONINDEX_SID15998/SID15998.mp3

Re: David Wilkerson: Pentecostal Evangelist, Prophet, and Pastor (Bio Sketch) - posted by leyoung (), on: 2020/5/13 9:4

It is quite amazing to see the life of this dear brother and saint who was so instrumental in my generation. God highlighted his and other lives like Leonard Ravenhill, Winkey Pratney, the Sherills who documented lives in books, the deadness of institutionalized churches in the 50s, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the 60s and 70s, the excesses of television evangelists in the 80s, the prophetic movement that went off the rails after so long, the decline of the church in the 90s, the back to repentance and holiness moved by remnant saints, the rejection of that message as a postasy took place in the 2000s giving women places of authority and pastorships and teaching which allowed men to abdicate in church leadership, marriages, fatherhood, the breakdown of scripture to accommodate sin in the church and seeker sensitive messages which sent our children spinning out into the world unprepared,

....but at the core our God taking hold of dead hearts and resurrecting them, in the midst of seeming chaos, the Word of God reigning supreme, our God calling us continually back to Himself and He is not yet done with us as He calls us back to Himself in a wicked and adulterous generation.

He alone is our Rock, our Shelter, our Stronghold. His mercy endures forever, He will not leave us or forsake us if we be long to Him.

May we finish well when this race is done. It truly is a short time we have here on this earth, but eternity awaits...