

David Wilkerson Eulogized as Great Man of God

✖ It should come as no surprise that David Wilkerson was eulogized as a great man at his funeral Monday in Tyler, Texas, only a few miles from where he was killed in a car accident on April 27, three weeks before what would have been his 80th birthday.

We reported on the funeral itself a few hours after it ended. I wrote my own tribute to him last week about how I've attributed my never experimenting with drugs as a teen to my reading *The Cross and Switchblade* (and being scared about the dangers of drugs). In 1972, I drove to Lakeland, Fla., to attend a David Wilkerson youth rally with some friends. It was that weekend I met my future wife, Joy.

Over the years I've attended the funerals or memorial services of some great men such as Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin Sr. Their funerals may have been bigger in terms of audience size or media coverage, but this one impacted me as much as any.

David Wilkerson was a great man. He impacted millions who read his books, saw the famous movie version of *The Cross and the Switchblade* or attended his rallies. He also reached countless other millions through the ongoing work of Teen Challenge (now run by the Assemblies of God) and World Challenge, the ministry umbrella he used for many years to cover his multifaceted ministry. In his mid-70s, when most men are slowing down, Wilkerson felt called to start *Please Pass the Bread*, a ministry to feed the poorest of the poor. In honor of this, Wilkerson's family has asked for donations to this ministry in lieu of flowers.

Carter Conlon, who worked with Wilkerson for 17 years at Times

Square Church in New York City, told the crowd it was hard to honor a great man: "You can honor a good man because you can recount his good works. But you don't have to speak of great men. Their works go before them."

He added that Wilkerson never saw himself as a great man and was always shocked that God would use him. "He realized his own frailty," Conlon said.

Among the dignitaries in attendance were Jim Cymbala, officials from the Assemblies of God, ministry leaders such as Ron Luce, David Shibley and Don Stephens, and leading pastors such as Robert Morris of Gateway Church in Dallas. But none spoke other than Dallas Holm, the singer who traveled with Wilkerson for many years, and Nicky Cruz, Wilkerson's most famous convert. The other speakers were long-time associates and family members.

Friend, Brother, Father

A common theme held throughout the funeral: People remembered Wilkerson as being consistent. Wilkerson loved Jesus more than anything. He was a prophet and an evangelist. But there was also a tender side that his family regularly experienced that most didn't get to see. And family, friends and associates all told stories of how giving he was.

Dallas Holm shared about how naive he was when Wilkerson first took him from where he was raised in Minnesota to New York City. He recalled how during an altar call Wilkerson had drug members bring their weapons and drug paraphernalia and throw them on the stage. The crowd laughed as Holm described how he was singing and dodging the things being thrown—including a pillowcase full of marijuana.

Nicky Cruz got a laugh when describing his initial reaction when David Wilkerson wanted him to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues. He told Wilkerson he wanted to speak in Italian because he had met a pretty young Italian

girl, which made Wilkerson angry that he would be so flippant about something he considered so important.

"I've come to say goodbye to my spiritual father," Cruz said, adding that he never met his own father. "I've told people for years that if it weren't for David Wilkerson, I'd be in the pit of hell today."

Today Cruz attends The Springs Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., led by Gary Wilkerson, one of David's two sons born nearly the same day as when Cruz was born again. Cruz concluded his eulogy by saying: "The world lost a true man of God."

Wilkerson's younger brother, Don, who ran Teen Challenge for many years, talked about how his famous brother felt called to go to New York City after reading an article in Life magazine about some gang members on trial for murder—and how he created a media sensation when he showed up at the trial. Don said people ask him how he got his own call to go to New York: "It was on the phone," he said. "David called me and asked me to come to New York to help him."

As with others, Don told funny stories, such as when Wilkerson told him, "I have an almost-new BMW that I want to give you," and Don thought he was being given a new car. Instead, his older brother went on to say he was giving it to him so he could in turn sell it and give the money to missions.

Wilkerson's son, Greg, described his dad as "the greatest example of a loving God," adding that he "was a great man behind closed doors." His son-in-law, Roger Hayslip, who is married to Wilkerson's daughter, Bonnie, said he taught him how to be self less and was the "epitome of a man who'd give and would never blow his own trumpet." Other family members told of how Wilkerson prayed for his children and grandchildren, spent time with them and answered their questions. Once two of his teenage grandsons, who were going

through a time of questioning, asked him, "If there is a God, why is there suffering?" Wilkerson, who obviously had far more life experience than his grandsons, admitted he didn't know the answer any more than they did, but he noticed that often those who complain the most do the least to help the hurting—and he would rather be busy with helping those who suffer.

'Impressed by Nothing Except the Holy Spirit' Wilkerson also avoided publicity, according to those who honored him at the funeral. More than once he turned down invitations to meet with the president. His grandson, David Ashley Wilkerson, made the crowd laugh when describing the look of boredom on Wilkerson's face when Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City recently presented him a key to the city: "He was impressed by nothing except the Holy Spirit."

Another grandson, Matt Junker, said he tried to phone his grandfather on April 27. When he couldn't get through he wrote him a short letter around noon, which he read to the crowd. In it, he said he wanted to tell his granddad how much his life had meant to him, "even if you died today." The accident that claimed Wilkerson's life happened on Texas Highway 175 near an artesian well that Wilkerson visited often, around 1:30 p.m. CDT that same day.

Wilkerson's son, Gary, said Wilkerson predicted the week before his death that his wife Gwen would probably outlive him. Diagnosed with cancer several times over the years, Gwen not only survived those instances, but was also in the car accident with Wilkerson. She is currently in the hospital and did not attend the funeral, but is expected to recover.

Gary said Gwen had no recollection of the crash or that the family gathered around her bed to tell her that her husband had died. He said she turned her face to the wall and began crying, "My baby, my baby," about her husband of 57 years. As she grieved, Holm arrived at the hospital room and they asked him to sing "Here We Are in Your Presence," which greatly

comforted her. Holm sang that song again at Wilkerson's funeral.

Gary also quoted Hebrews 11:4, which includes the phrase "though he is dead, he still speaks" (NASB), and referred to Wilkerson's many books and videos that will continue to minister to people even though he's gone.

A touching 9-minute video showed a montage of photos throughout Wilkerson's life and video clips of him ministering under the anointing. Also included was one of the two Charisma covers we ran with Wilkerson, this one from February 1998, which featured him and Nicky Cruz.

There's much more I could write about Wilkerson. We've covered his death aggressively in the past week after being the first news outlet to break the news less than six hours after the tragedy occurred. We've also posted reactions from Christian leaders and various tributes as they were sent to us. The response has been incredible with traffic to our website being as much as 10 times normal on certain days.

When I wrote my original tribute to Wilkerson, I mentioned how he was a major part of the weekend in 1972 when I met my wife. What I failed to mention was that I also got to meet David Wilkerson himself. He was on the large motor coach he traveled in. I was barely 21 years old and a University of Florida junior who was on fire for God.

Wilkerson took time to talk to me about how we could use a newspaper he produced as a witnessing tool at my university.

Years later I had the opportunity to attend Times Square Church in New York City. I saw firsthand how vibrant a church it was and how much of an impact it seemed to make not only in people's lives, but also in the city.

A couple of years ago, while having lunch with a rabbi in my city, he told me that once he was walking around Times Square on a Sunday evening and it started to pour rain. He ducked

into the only place nearby that was dry: Times Square Church. As he waited for the rain to subside he noticed the service was starting, so he stayed. It was the only time he'd been to a Pentecostal service. He was impressed with the choir, the testimonies of lives changed during the baptismal service and how people ran to the altar to get saved at the end of the service. He said it was one of the most spiritual experiences of his life.

When he got home he talked about this experience at his synagogue (and he let me read a copy of the sermon). He posed this question to his Jewish audience: "Why do these Christians seem to love our God more than we do?"

I've been amazed by how many people have retweeted our stories, shared them on Facebook or made comments to me personally indicating they had read them. I've also been amazed at the outpouring of emotion Wilkerson's death has brought. For example, last Sunday my pastor Bart Malone mentioned the news, which drew an audible gasp from those who hadn't heard. My 82-year-old mother, Amy Strang, told me at lunch she cried when she heard that he had died.

Last weekend I hired a 23-year student from the Teen Challenge Center in Sanford, Fla., a few miles from where I live to do some yard work. As I drove him back to the center I mentioned to him my plans to fly out to Wilkerson's funeral. Although he had never met Wilkerson, he said he wished he could have, because this was the man responsible for starting the ministry (Teen Challenge) that had changed his life. Truly, David Wilkerson was a great man.

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