

Remembering David Wilkerson

How the unabashed New York evangelist changed countless lives—including mine

It was early evening on April 27 when a phone call let me know the devastating news: David Wilkerson had been killed in a car accident. Dr. George Wood, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, had just learned the news and felt I would want to report it. Knowing how important this was, we had a story online within 40 minutes. Our website's traffic was so great, the site temporarily crashed, and the article had more forwards on Twitter and Facebook than any in Charisma News history.

That's because David Wilkerson was one of the great Christian leaders of our generation, and his passing is a loss to the global church. He was the model of integrity, and he finished strong in a day when some televangelists are photographed in foreign countries with women they aren't married to and others are exposed for secret gay activity while publicly opposing the gay agenda. Wilkerson was the paragon of virtue, and his influence was tremendous.

We covered him many times in *Charisma*—twice on the cover. Wilkerson was best remembered for his book *The Cross and the Switchblade*

and for founding Teen Challenge, which now has centers around the world that help men and women overcome life-altering addictions. In 1987, Wilkerson founded Times Square Church, which has had a great impact in New York City.

What hasn't been highlighted as often until now is how Wilkerson influenced others in ways he probably never knew. For example, the young Roman Catholics at Duquesne University who received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which sparked the Catholic charismatic renewal, had read *The Cross and the Switchblade*, as well as *They Speak With Other Tongues* by John Sherrill, who co-authored Wilkerson's book with his wife, Elizabeth.

There is a chapter in *The Cross and the Switchblade* in which Wilkerson tells a Catholic priest that the former drug addicts who received the baptism in the Holy Spirit had more power to live for God. In the book he described what the Bible says in Acts about the Holy Spirit. My longtime friend Bert Ghezzi told me that those books certainly made the students (which included him) more open to the Spirit in those fateful days in early 1967.

It seems nearly every Christian leader from that era has a David Wilkerson story. Dr. Wood remembers that at the time Wilkerson's dad was pastor of the Assemblies of God church in Turtle Creek, Pa., his own father pastored 30 members at the

Assemblies

church in nearby Pitcairn, Pa. A young, enthusiastic David Wilkerson wanted to preach in Pitcairn, but Dr. Wood's father wasn't sure David was ready and didn't let him.

John Sherrill remembers that when *The Cross and the Switchblade*

was translated in many languages, sales took off except in one Scandinavian country. Wilkerson suspected the translation was bad, so he

had someone read it and discovered the translator had stripped out all

references to the power of the Holy Spirit due to a personal theological

bias. He insisted the book be republished with the material on the Holy

Spirit reinserted. The sales after that took off.

I also was impacted by Wilkerson. I read

his book as a teenager, and his description of drug addiction scared me

so much I never experimented with drugs, even though it was the norm

among many in my generation. I had the privilege of interacting with

Wilkerson many times over the years and have my own story about him.

In February 1972, as a junior at the

University of Florida, I found out Wilkerson was speaking at a youth

rally in Lakeland, Fla. I drove 120 miles from Gainesville with two

friends to attend. It was that weekend I met a beautiful woman named

Joy, who today is my business partner, my wife and my best

friend.

Years later when I took a picture (shown here) with Wilkerson at his church office in New York, I was able to tell him about his influence on my life and career—because without Joy, there would never have been a *Charisma* magazine.

I, along with millions of others around the world, thank God for the life and influence of David Wilkerson.

Steve Strang is the founder and publisher of *Charisma*. Follow him on Twitter at *@sstrang*. To read more of his and others' reflections on David Wilkerson, plus videos, photos and articles by the New York evangelist, go to .