

When The Holy Ghost Moves on the Big Screen

Some films make you laugh. Others make you cry, shriek with fear or feel warm inside. But the type Darren Wilson creates combines all this in such a way that moves audiences from lukewarm Christianity to full-hearted conviction. In fact, souls have been saved after watching his films. The walking dead have come to spiritual life, and the experience of viewing his unscripted work has softened even the most cynical skeptics.

Those aren't the results you'd expect from someone who describes himself as "the least religious person you're going to meet." Indeed, Wilson is anything but flashy, charismatic or spiritually flamboyant—certainly not a guy you'd pick to lead an underground movement of radical Christians bent on seeing God's supernatural power displayed in everyday life. He's stout, wears glasses, speaks in a matter-of-fact tone and plays the college professor role well after spending 10 years as an instructor at Judson University in northwest Chicago.

Yet over the past five years, Wilson, 38, has independently produced a film trilogy that has developed a rabid following, despite challenging lukewarm Christians to shake off their complacency. His work suggests that underneath a layer of programmatic dogma and ironclad doctrines, the power of a living God is alive and yearning to touch people where they are. And to put it in his own words, he plans to "make Jesus famous."

In his first film, *Finger of God*, Wilson went on a global trek in search of God's movement in the supernatural. The 2007 release (sold mostly on) was an underground success, as was his 2010 follow-up, *Furious Love*, which examined God's intense compassion for humanity demonstrated through street healings,

words of wisdom and gentle gestures of love rendered on random strangers. A third film, *Father of Lights*, produced in 2012, appeared to complete Wilson's search for a Savior as it came full circle to show how divinely appointed everything is, including so-called "chance" meetings.

"I thought I was done after *Father of Lights*," says Wilson during an interview in his production studio months before the release of his latest film project, *Holy Ghost*. Premiering Sept. 6 (with a second installment next year), *Holy Ghost* is a definitive wake-up call for the sleeping church. While Wilson's first three films were more about a search *for* God, this is a proclamation that the Lord *is* God. The filmmaker says he was fully led by the Holy Spirit in directing and producing it.

"God gives me butterflies to let me to know [what] to include in the films and where to travel next," he says. "When He gives me an idea for a movie, I'm in a fog about it for a while. It's a weird little dance. But I have a friendship with God, and friends talk to each other. So I fully expect for Him to talk to me. How He does that is up to Him."

For the new release, Wilson takes viewers on an international journey through India, Turkey, South Africa, Brazil, Italy, Greece, Monaco and the United States to show how the Holy Spirit is working in the lives of people around the globe. Interestingly enough, though not all of the people touched by the Spirit on camera are believers, they're all visibly stunned by His powerful presence.

Similar to Wilson's prior films, *Holy Ghost* includes periodic commentaries from a number of renowned ministers and musicians, including charismatic leaders Bill Johnson, Randy Clark and R.T. Kendall, as well as Christian artists Michael W. Smith, Jake Hamilton and Jeremy Riddle. Sony Pictures' Senior Vice President of Production DeVon Franklin also appears, as does *The Shack* author William P. Young. Wilson

invited them all to contribute, and they agreed to do so non grata, though some were more familiar with his work than others.

“R.T. Kendall had never heard of me, but his son was a huge fan,” Wilson says. “So he said yes based on his son’s enthusiasm.”

Others, like Johnson, who was the first person Wilson interviewed for his films, have been fans of his work since the first day.

“I’ve loved all of them,” the senior pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California, says. “They are raw, real and unpretentious.”

“Celebrity” Draw

What has surprised Wilson most is the unsolicited attention his films have garnered despite limited marketing dollars. He has appeared on Sid Roth’s *It’s Supernatural* broadcast and on TBN. Outside Christian circles, the interest has been just as surprising. Talk show host Ellen DeGeneres requested a copy of one film, though how she heard about it remains a mystery to Wilson. And when he reached out to rock star/actor Lenny Kravitz, the entertainer made time to speak to him.

“He’s a huge fan of my films, and he was always willing to sit down for an interview, but his schedule is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before,” Wilson recounts. “So it took a very long time. The rest of the cast are friends and are either familiar with my work or have been in my other films.”

Yet the real celebs of Wilson’s film are the masses of regular people who support them. Wilson used the crowd-funding platform to raise the money needed to produce and market *Holy Ghost* and to finance the upcoming *Holy Ghost* Tour. The response was indicative of just how much his films connect with audiences: Within 45 days, fans pledged more than

\$357,000, making it the highest-funded Christian film in Kickstarter history.

As with all his productions, Wilson narrates yet lets his lens tell the stories, which this time range from getting unprecedented access into a Hindu temple to people experiencing healings and finding faith in unlikely places. The director mingles drugs, rock 'n' roll, skepticism and salvation into an unexpected package that touches an array of emotional nerves by the time the credits roll.

While he aims to entertain, Wilson first looks to minister—though he does this in a uniquely personal way that invites others to join him on his own journey. It's *him* who is seeking God, wants to know God better and wants to share God's love with others. He just so happens to do it with a camera in tow.

"The projects are super-personal," he says of his work. "You saw the progression of my own faith [on film]; it's very much for me."

At the same time, he's also come to grips with the audience God wants him to reach. "I make these mostly for the Body [of Christ], the sleeping church," he says. "It's for the old me, for those who are fed up with the church and Christianity and have lost their saltiness."

Awakened to a Supernatural God

The "old me" to which Wilson refers isn't exactly a prodigal son-like past, but it does include a distinct spiritual transformation in his life. A native of Monroe, Michigan, he attended an American Baptist church as a youngster where his dad was an elder and his granddad a preacher. He remembers his parents being "gung-ho for the Lord," but says he was just going through the motions.

"I was a dead Christian," he admits. "I went to church because

I was supposed to.”

His wife, Jenell, changed that. The two met while attending Judson University, where Wilson later became an English instructor and currently houses his production company, Wanderlust Productions. During his time at Judson, Wilson says he “stumbled” into a life of active Christianity. He was admittedly afraid that God wanted too much from him for him to ever fully surrender.

“Secretly, what I feared about working for the Lord was, ‘What are You going to take from me?’ ” he says. “When in truth, He wanted to take it all. I was too scared to trust Him.”

But as his wife grew in the Lord, she refused to leave her new groom behind.

“When she started to pray, that’s when things began to happen,” Wilson recalls. Jenell begged him to attend a 2006 prophecy conference in Toronto that ultimately changed the trajectory of his life. There the skeptic encountered an angelic form that not only helped to reawaken a relationship with God, but also told Wilson to make the film God wanted him to make.

The experience began his faith journey into documentary filmmaking. Though Wilson had studied screenwriting, he had no experience in film production and is the first to say he doesn’t have credentials to make the films he does.

“The one thing He showed me is that I’m not prepared or qualified for any of this stuff,” he says. “It’s not that I am talented, but willing. That’s what God looks for.”

Pushing Unity ... and Theological Buttons

As he embarked on making docu-ministry flicks and seeing miracles wrought in the lives of everyday people, Wilson began to expect the supernatural everywhere—and capture it on

camera. In the process, he also encountered the deep chasm that can exist between those who make room for the Holy Spirit's supernatural power and those who deny it manifests today in the same way as with the early church. It's on this front that *Holy Ghost* blatantly sets out to reunite split factions of the church.

"In the new movie, there's a push to bring the Word and Spirit churches together," he says. "With *Holy Ghost*, I'm trying to bridge these two. I want to push people to love each other."

At one point in the movie, author/theologian R.T. Kendall speaks of the "silent divorce" between these two camps. This was on full display last fall when John MacArthur's *Strange Fire* book and conference lambasted the charismatic movement and labeled millions of Spirit-filled believers as heretics who've swallowed a false gospel. The attacks sparked responses from countless leaders in the Spirit-filled community, including Wilson.

"When I first read about and then followed along with your conference, it both frustrated and angered me," Wilson wrote in an open letter to MacArthur. "Not so much because you were calling people like me a liar or a charlatan or even Satan's puppet. No, I was frustrated because I know, wholeheartedly, that you are wrong on this issue."

While others have made careers out of being self-appointed watchdogs for extremes in the church, Wilson prefers letting his films speak for themselves. And as he demonstrates in *Holy Ghost*, it's obvious he's more concerned with showcasing God's life-changing power than theological arguments.

One of the more powerful segments of the film includes an unexpected encounter a group of millennials has during a Korn rock concert. "It's not exactly where you'd expect a great move of God's power," notes evangelist Todd White, who prays with throngs of concertgoers in the film and sees many accept

the Lord right there with tickets still in hand. “But you’ve got Him pouring out His spirit and the enemy trying to deceive.”

White, a former drug addict-turned-praying evangelist, appears in *Father of Lights* and *Holy Ghost* and believes it’s time for the works of Jesus to be on display as they are in Wilson’s movies. “The world has so much out there,” White says. “It’s time for the body of Christ to rise and shine and glorify Jesus and bring honor to His name.”

“[In] the first film, [Wilson] expressed severe skepticism,” White adds. “He was in a place of wondering like with anybody who presses into God. Then, when you find out that it’s real, you go as far as you possibly can. Most people who watch the film are convicted. Nobody has ever responded with, ‘That’s so fake,’ because it was all real. People want to know who God is and see what is real.”

Johnson believes this authenticity in *Holy Ghost* will help to raise the bar in the church’s awareness of walking in the supernatural.

“It’s challenging the comfort zones for some,” Johnson says. “He’s provoking people to think. There will be opposition, but that’s what I think it’s supposed to do.”

So far, Wilson has done more than make people think. “I realize that people get changed, get healed and get saved from watching,” he says. Yet he’s quick to point out that these reactions have little to do with him; he’s just the one behind the camera watching God touch people in extraordinary, supernatural ways. And that’s exactly why countless viewers watching his films continue to rally behind this “ordinary” guy.

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To watch a trailer of *Holy Ghost* and find out where the film is showing around the country, go to