

A Missionary in the Making

I am the most saved person I know. A preacher's kid, I'm sure I've been saved at least 150 times. No evangelist ever had an unsuccessful revival in my dad's church because I got saved every night. It didn't matter what the sermon was about, I went to the altar. I got saved so often that I wore my own path in the carpet.

Dad's favorite sermon was about the rapture. That's all he preached. I can still hear his raspy voice saying, "Jesus could come tonight at midnight, and nobody is going. For straight is the way and narrow is the gate, and nobody finds it. Two will be in the bed, and neither one is going to make it. Nobody's going!"

The only hope he gave us was, if you came to the altar right then, you might have a chance. So I went to the altar, every night. Every night! The sermons were filled with guilt. If you had a bad thought, that was enough to keep you out of heaven—and you'd better come forward. I went to the altar every night because I had lots of bad thoughts—and not just thoughts; I had a bunch of bad actions.

If they couldn't get you with the rapture, they would get you with the unpardonable sin. I wasn't sure what the unpardonable sin was, but I knew I had committed it. I lived in guilt, absolute guilt. Every time something was wrong, I was guilty.

I can remember Teen Challenge groups coming to my dad's church. A preacher named David Wilkerson started Teen Challenge in the late 1950s as an outreach to street gangs and drug addicts in New York City. An Australian aborigine could not have been more exotic in the rural South of my youth than the guys from Teen Challenge. They shared fascinating stories about drugs, women, darkness and demonism. It was as close as a Pentecostal kid could get to sin without having to repent.

The Teen Challenge guys had something we church kids did not—a testimony.

A testimony conferred superstar status. No matter how violent, depraved or dysfunctional you were, a hell-to-heaven testimony qualified you for ministry. Transfixed, the congregation leaned forward in rapt attention. There was nothing like having a testimony. It almost made you want to go out and sin so you could get a testimony. Whenever I was feeling apologetic about not having a sensational story of redemption, I felt as if God reminded me, “I haven’t called you to talk about the pit. I called you to talk about My promises!”

I started preaching at 15. At 16, I was traveling throughout the South, and by the time I was 17, I was preaching 500 times a year. I have preached more than 20,000 sermons over the last 50 years. OK, for those of you who’ve heard me, maybe it would be more accurate to say that I’ve preached one sermon thousands of times. I’ve traveled 8 million miles and spent 50 years in India. I’ve had the joy of helping to plant over 2,000 churches and build 100 Bible colleges. Today, more than 5,000 young men and women have graduated from our Bible colleges in India.

I never saw myself as a person of great talent. I never stood at the head of my class in school. I always believed the greatest ability I have, or anyone has, is availability.

And I believe God looked down from heaven and saw a 10-year-old kid lying on a pallet in a parsonage floor in Pensacola, Florida, and said, “I’m going to send him to India.” {eoa}

This has been excerpted from Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 of Born to Give (Charisma House).