



# Introduction

*Though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers... (1 Corinthians 4:15).*

*...walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had (Romans 4:12).*

I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT WE SHOULD NEVER FOLLOW A MAN, WE SHOULD follow only the Lord. Otherwise, we'll become disappointed or disillusioned. Perhaps. If anyone other than God becomes our main focus, or if we develop unrealistic expectations, of course we'll become disappointed. However, the Apostle Paul had some things to say along these lines. Quite often (while under divine inspiration, I might add), he instructed us to follow him:

*Be followers of me... (1 Corinthians 4:16 KJV).*

*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ... (1 Corinthians 11:1 NIV).*

*Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you (Philippians 4:9 NLT).*

Abraham is another example of a man whose footsteps we are instructed to follow:

*...walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had... (Romans 4:12).*

From the earliest days of my Christian walk in the 1970s until now, David Wilkerson's example has been profoundly influential. While working with him on staff at Times Square Church, I saw firsthand how passionate about and dedicated to the Lord he was, and I did my best to learn all I could from him. The lessons I received and our many conversations are more valuable to me than gold. What a wonderful pastor, evangelist, father, and prophet he was!

Aware that appreciation is only a few steps away from worship, I keep in mind that we all have "feet of clay."<sup>1</sup> If we follow even the best examples with a reckless abandon, we'll undoubtedly inherit their blind spots and their inevitable areas of weakness. Even so, how many "Davids" do you know (in any generation) who have slain more giants than David Wilkerson? Let me list some of these giants for you:

***The giant problem of urban gang violence in the 1950s and 60s.***

A skinny preacher from Pennsylvania had the audacity to believe that through him, God could save the likes of Nicky Cruz, the notorious leader of the Mau Maus gang in Brooklyn.

***The giants of heroin, crack, alcohol, and other life-controlling addictions.***

Teen Challenge, now with over 1,100 centers in 110 countries, is by far the most successful drug rehabilitation program in history. Just as King Saul's entire army shook in their boots over the thought of going against Goliath, the "experts" in the 1950s considered heroin addiction insurmountable.

***The giant need to lead many people to Christ during the Jesus People and Charismatic movements.***

Traveling with the singing group Dallas Holm & Praise, David Wilkerson conducted evangelistic services throughout the country, helping to launch the Charismatic movement in Catholic and Episcopal churches. He led countless hippies and other young people to the Lord.

***The giant need for a strong and consistent word from God to an anemic American church.***

For decades, hundreds of thousands of believers eagerly anticipated the arrival of David Wilkerson's timely, powerful, convicting newsletters in our mailboxes.

***The huge need for a Gospel witness in Times Square, the crossroads of the world, which had become a cesspool of sin and filth in the 1980s.***

Times Square Church, now over twenty-five years old, was miraculously birthed through the faith and vision of Pastor Dave. This congregation has stood as a beacon of truth and righteousness for this city and for the Body of Christ worldwide. Truly, fruit that remains.

The slaying of one of these five giants would probably qualify someone to be listed in an updated "Faith Hall of Fame," found in Hebrews chapter 11. For God to use one man to accomplish so much, surely it's worthwhile to take a closer look at his unique life and amazing walk of faith.

On many occasions, Pastor Dave told me I was like a son to him, and he was certainly a spiritual father to me. However, with privilege comes responsibility. Have I lived up to the responsibilities of being one of his many spiritual sons? I hope so. Like Pastor Dave, I came from a small town to the dangerous neighborhoods of New York City. However, walking in the faith-filled steps of

Father Abraham doesn't mean that we all must live as tent-dwelling patriarchs in the deserts of the Middle East! Following in David Wilkerson's footsteps refers more to *how* we live our Christian lives than to *what* we accomplish for the Lord. Even though we might not be called to build international ministries like Pastor Dave did, we all still have our God-appointed giants to conquer.

After Pastor Dave was suddenly promoted to glory in April 2011, I felt compelled to write down what I learned from this man of God before many of his edifying words spoken personally to me would begin to fade from my memory. I wrote almost non-stop for a number of weeks and then put this manuscript on the shelf for a few years. When I shared it with one of my Bible school students last year, he couldn't stop telling me how much it encouraged him. I asked one of David Wilkerson's relatives to read through it, and she felt that it was definitely worth sharing with others. So, I took it off the shelf and decided to have it published. One of the greatest lessons we can learn from Pastor Dave is the fact that God can take an ordinary person and teach him or her how to walk in extraordinary faith. As his brother Don once said, "David's life shows us that God can use anyone to save anyone." In other words, a country preacher armed with faith in God can reach hardened gang members who seem to be unredeemable. How can we also walk in that same type of faith? As I share my journey and how Pastor Dave deeply impacted my life, I'll endeavor to answer that important question.

My dad died when I was sixteen and he was sixty-one. When I wrote about Dad years later, some of my older siblings hardly recognized the gentle, mellow father I had come to know and love. Likewise, the six years I worked closely with David Wilkerson are only one slice of the whole pie. I daresay the David Wilkerson of the 1960s was a very different man than the one with whom I worked. Every chapter title is a quote from Pastor Dave. However, this book is not a full biography of his life but rather a journey through mine,

emphasizing his constant and positive influence upon me.<sup>2</sup> May what I have written inspire you to rise up and become a conqueror of the giants in your personal life and in your generation!



## “Every piece will still love you.”

FROM DEEP WITHIN THE SANCTUARY, LOUD AND DESPERATE SCREAMS were heard: “Stop that man! He just stole a purse from one of the choir members! Stop him!” Mark and I were both standing at the front door of the church, the only way out. We could easily have prevented that guy from getting past us if we had had a few seconds to process what was happening. We should have at least tried to trip him as he flew past us. He tucked a large leather purse under his shirt like it was a football and ran down the street, darting around people and poles and cars. He crossed Seventh Avenue and disappeared down the subway steps. Mark and I looked at each other, nodded in agreement, and took off after him.

After all, we were in charge of security in the new church. It had been going for only a few months, but already hundreds of people were attending. How was that possible? David Wilkerson announced Times Square Church’s opening through his mailing list many months before starting in Town Hall. He rented those facilities for Sunday morning and Tuesday evening services. A few weeks after a very successful launch, the church outgrew that space and moved into the Nederlander Theatre on 41st Street, right in the middle of

busy Manhattan. The services were packed, dynamic, and filled with spiritually hungry people from across the Tri-State region.

David Wilkerson, the author of the best-selling book (and movie) *The Cross and the Switchblade*, heard from God that he was to raise up a church in Times Square of all places! Surely God had not written off New York City, as many people in the Body of Christ had been feeling for the past few years. The mass exodus to the suburbs had officially ended. The Lord still had great plans for this city! The enthusiasm and expectations were so high that everyone involved was extremely excited, including me and Mark. We were both in our twenties and felt so blessed to be on staff. Along with Wally and Alex, we actually lived in the theater, and our duties were to maintain the facilities and handle security issues. Sometimes we found homeless people hiding in the bathroom stalls or in the closets after church services were over. A few times, we discovered the door to the roof opened, apparently because someone was intending to come back in the middle of the night to take whatever they could carry out.

We never actually had anyone come into the building in broad daylight and steal anything, not until the purse snatcher. The female choir members left their purses on the front row seats when they went up to the theater's stage to rehearse. The shady character walked right into the church and slowly made his way down the aisle. (Everyone must have assumed he came for an audition.) All the women's purses were in plain sight on the front row, right where they could keep an eye on them. That guy took the first purse he came to and took off like a late freight train. Mark and I noticed as we came to the top of the subway steps that he didn't anticipate anyone following him. There he was, on the bottom step, casually rummaging through the large purse as though it was his! He saw us coming and darted across the subway station, heading toward another stairway exit. We somehow reached that exit first and cornered him against a wall. I grabbed the purse from his trembling hands. (He must have been a drug addict.) Then I declared in my most authoritative voice,



"How dare you walk into a church and steal a purse...from a choir member!" I looked up the steps in the direction of the church, realizing it actually looked more like a theater than a house of worship.

When my eyes glanced back upon our little criminal, I saw his face grimacing as though he was exerting all his strength. Before I realized what was happening, he pulled out a long, razor-sharp screwdriver and plunged it toward my stomach. A second before it reached its target, Mark's hand came pounding down on his wrist, and the screwdriver fell to the ground. The addict reached down for it but suddenly decided against that course of action. He lifted himself up, took one last defiant look at us, and ran up the steps and back into the hustle and bustle of the city streets, never to be seen by us again.

Mark and I just stared at each other, soaking in all that had happened in the past three and a half minutes. He picked up the weapon and almost touched the tip of that screwdriver, but he decided against it because of its sharpened, razor-thin point.

"Thank you so much, Mark!" I exclaimed.

"Thank God, Charles. Thank God."

We soon noticed that the lady whose purse was stolen (and recovered) was nervously waiting in front of the church. On our way back, Mark jokingly repeated my remarks: "How dare you walk into a church and steal a purse from a choir member! Boy, Charles, you sure convicted him!" We broke out into hearty laughter, both because it was quite silly of me and because we were so relieved that things turned out OK.

As we approached the theater, Mark read aloud from a poster taped on the inside of one of its advertising windows: "Come hear David Wilkerson, the author of *The Cross and the Switchblade*." Mark then held up the screwdriver and joked, "Hey Charles, maybe one day you'll write a book called *The Cross and the Screwdriver*!" Again, another round of laughter as we entered the sanctuary and secured

the doors behind us. For years after this incident, Mark would occasionally ask when I was going to write my book *The Cross and the Screwdriver*. I passed it off as a foolish notion. But for the next six years, I did my best to soak in all I could from Pastor Dave, who was such a great example of a man of God to all who received from him, either through his sermons or newsletters (regularly sent out to over a million homes) or by working alongside him. In the churches and Bible schools that I've pastored and taught in since, people have been blessed when I've shared bits and pieces of what I experienced and learned directly from him. Many times have I heard these words: "I just love it when you share your stories about David Wilkerson!" I will do my best to share everything exactly as it occurred, starting in Tennessee, thirty-nine years ago.

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Cleveland, Tennessee, is where the Church of God was birthed and where David Wilkerson's grandfather was from. This was where I experienced a spiritual rebirth as a teenager in 1978. It was such a peaceful little town, located about thirty miles northeast of Chattanooga. We moved there from Waverly, Tennessee, in the middle of my junior year of high school, right after Dad's funeral. One day I went to an art exhibit in the Cleveland mall. I was standing in front of a huge nine-foot by nine-foot painting of a dried-out dandelion flower that was ready to be plucked and blown away by the wind. I was still deeply grieving, still in shock over the passing of my father. At the suggestion of my concerned mom, I went to try to get my mind off my constant grief and on other things.

A tall man quietly walked over to the same painting and started thinking out loud: "Isn't it amazing," he began, as he kept his eyes glued to the painting, "with all those seeds, only one-fourth of them will find good soil. One-fourth will be trodden down and eaten by birds. Some will spring up on rocky soil, and others will be choked by weeds. Only a portion of these many seeds will actually produce

anything." I had been reading the New Testament constantly, so I knew he was referring to Jesus's parable of the sower. I almost proudly replied, "I know, the parable of the sower...Matthew chapter 13." He turned to me and said, "It doesn't matter how many Scriptures you know. You can know the entire Bible and still not know God and die without Christ and go to hell."

"Oh my gosh," I thought to myself, "how does this guy know I spend my spare time reading the Bible? He must be some sort of prophet, like Jeremiah or Daniel. He sure has my attention!" For the next few minutes, I stood there completely mesmerized as this guy spoke about the pain of losing loved ones, the torture of adjusting to too many new things at one time, and the blessings in becoming a born-again Christian. As he continued speaking about God, Heaven, and eternity, I could somehow feel the authenticity of his words. Pure authenticity is hard to describe if you've never heard it before; it's like describing the color blue to a person born blind.

"Everything you see, everything will one day burn up, but our souls are eternal. We will live eternally with or without God...with Christ or without Christ." For the first time in my life, I felt the presence of God. I wanted to fall on my knees right there in front of Radio Shack and say, "How do I become born again?" Instead, I gave in to my fears and told this prophet guy, "See ya," and I rudely and quickly walked away.

A few months later, our paths crossed again! This time he asked assertively, "Would you like to come to my church next Sunday morning?" This twenty-something-year-old guy named Charles Thompson sure was kind. But as far as I could remember, I had never in my life gone to a church service or even entered a church building. As I finally answered, my voice got fainter and slower until I was nearly whispering. The words were that painful. "I'm still in high school, and my mom doesn't drive, and my dad died, and...I don't know." As a self-absorbed, hurting teenager who wasn't sure about Christianity, I imagined he was thinking, "What a loser" and that

he'd just walk away. Instead, he put his right hand on my shoulder and replied compassionately, "Don't worry, man. I'll pick you up," speaking with a cheerfulness that was foreign to my world.

Every Sunday he did what he said he would do: he took me with him in his old backfiring Pinto to Keith Street Church of God of Prophecy. Our trips back and forth were somewhat awkward. I didn't know what to say. I secretly wondered why he wanted to be friends with a shy, hurting kid who wasn't even sure if God existed. "Maybe it's all a myth," I'd often say to myself, parroting my older siblings' opinions. Besides, it all seemed too good to be true, like a well-written fairy tale—delightful to hear, but not grounded in real life. The love expressed in the Bible seemed too unreal to me, too disconnected from real life, too much for my heart to believe...until Testimony Sunday.

Testimony Sunday was a quarterly occasion at the church. On that particular day, the preacher shared for only a few minutes, and then he opened the floor for whoever wanted to testify. Charles Thompson was the second one to stand, and he waited for the usher to hand him the microphone before beginning. He said, "God's been dealing with me lately about walking in love. I witnessed to this teenager a few months ago." He paused and looked down at me, sitting beside him. "I offered to give him a ride to church. He accepted, and I've been doing it ever since. I never told him that I live on the other end of Bradley County and that I have to get up earlier on Sunday mornings now than I ever imagined I would...or could."

Everyone seemed to laugh and clap their hands—everyone except me. I was thinking, "Where's he going with this?" He continued, "But how could I tell him that God so loved the world that He sent His Son all the way from Heaven to earth to die for us, and that that same God now lives in my heart, and then tell him that he lives too far for me to pick him up?" He looked down at me again with an expression that said, "I hope this hasn't embarrassed you." I looked up and saw the compassion of Christ looking down at me through

him, and I saw God's love in him. I suddenly knew that it was all real and true and that this man was reaching out to me because Jesus Christ lives in him. Jesus Christ, the resurrected Son of the living God, was actually reaching out to me through him!

The following day, as soon as I had a chance to be alone, I repented of my sins and asked Jesus to be the Lord of my life. The immediate and overwhelming peace that flooded my soul assured me that my prayer had been answered! The first one to call was my new friend, Charles Thompson. He was thrilled and immediately asked if I would like to spend next Sunday morning in church with him, and the rest of the day as well. I knew Mom wouldn't mind so I accepted his offer. Charles Thompson was excited about my spending an afternoon with him and "the guys." For weeks, he'd been sharing with me about the Christian ministry he was in. Previously, he had given me some literature regarding the dramatic conversion of the Charismatic director of Reality of Life Ministries, Mike, a man who had been the leader of a gang in the South Bronx called the Young Aces in the 1960s.

One humid New York City summer, the police were hot on Mike's trail and determined to put him behind bars for good. He accepted an invitation from relatives to visit them in Cleveland, Tennessee. While there, he encountered the resurrected Lord at a Church of God camp meeting. He was immediately and completely delivered from his heroin addiction. The first thing Mike did was to return to the city and report to his parole officer. He had broken parole by leaving the state without permission. The dumbfounded officer demanded a urine sample, which came back negative. Soon afterward, a blood test provided remarkable evidence of Mike's conversion and deliverance. His blood showed no evidence of any drug use ever and was actually as pure as a newborn baby's. The parole officer was deeply touched by Mike's change of heart and the physical manifestation that accompanied his spiritual new birth.

The parole officer wasn't the only one impacted by Mike's conversion. Within the period of about a month, Mike was able to lead over half of his former gang members to a salvation experience. The other half of those angry Young Aces collected enough money among themselves to hire a professional hitman to kill their former leader. When a hitman named Eddie knocked on Mike's South Bronx apartment door, he had a loaded and cocked .357 Magnum revolver hidden in his leather jacket.

The door opened wide, and Eddie asked him, "Are you Mike?"

"Yes, I am," Mike responded with a smile. "And you, you have been mad at God ever since your father died when you were six years old."

"What? Wait a minute," Eddie said, shaking his head as if needing to awaken from a nightmare. "How do you know this about me?" he demanded.

Mike took a step closer and said, "When I opened the door, I saw inside of you the broken heart of a six-year-old boy. I saw you standing near a casket as someone told you, 'God took him.' It wasn't God. It was alcohol, cirrhosis of the liver. It was the devil who took him, the same stinking devil who's been lying to you your whole life."

Eddie stepped a few feet back, his eyes filled with shock and tears. He slowly pulled out his loaded gun and lowered it as he also lowered his eyes and head. "I'm a good-for-nothin' hitman. I came to blow your brains out tonight for a measly five hundred bucks. If God really showed you this, does this mean that He cares...about me? I mean...could He forgive *me*?" Mike led him in the sinner's prayer that evening and soon made him a part of his ministry. They ministered together in various churches and street outreaches throughout the metropolitan area. As the ministry grew, many of the gang members who got saved didn't have homes to go back to. Mike decided to follow the examples of two of his heroes, David Wilkerson and Keith Green. Both had residential programs for young believers with

life-controlling problems. Teen Challenge and Last Days Ministries became role models for Reality of Life Ministries.

Mike's testimony was broadcast throughout the world on the radio drama *UNSHACKLED!* from Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago. Enough funds came in to purchase a farm near Cleveland, Tennessee. In the summer, he would still evangelize on the streets of the Big Apple. For those who got saved and had nowhere to go, he'd bring them home with him to Tennessee. Throughout the winter months, these new believers received constant discipleship and nurturing twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Mike, his sweet wife Naomi, and their two little boys were happy to share their home and hearts with these young men. One of those converts was none other than Charles Thompson, the man who led me to Christ.

Charles and I were driving down the highway, heading toward the farmhouse. "I know you've met some of the guys in church already. It's a good time for you to come and meet the rest of us. Mike travels a lot, but he's in town this weekend. We're going to watch a movie this afternoon called *The Cross and the Switchblade*. David Wilkerson is one of our heroes, and Mike wants everyone to be familiar with his ministry and Nicky Cruz's testimony." As I walked into a huge living room, I realized why Charles waited until I accepted Christ before bringing me there. The room was filled with ex-heroin addicts, ex-gang members, ex-speed freaks, and ex-criminals. They were loud, boisterous, obnoxious, and totally New Yorkish. Besides Charles Thompson and Kenny, I was the only other white guy in the group. That didn't bother them or me because these guys were now my brothers.

"Hey brothers! Here's my friend, Charles Simpson! He accepted the Lord this past week. Isn't that great?" They all bombarded me with high fives and bear hugs. As we sat down, munched on fresh popcorn, and watched the movie, at least five times one of the guys spilled his popcorn, jumping up in excitement over familiar movie scenes portrayed on the television screen. *The Cross and the*

*Switchblade* tells the amazing story of a young pastor of a small-town American church who embarked on a mission to help the members of troubled street gangs in New York City. In the late 1950s, a gang of teenagers viciously killed a polio-stricken, fifteen-year-old boy named Michael Farmer. Through prayer and reading about that incident in *LIFE Magazine*, David Wilkerson felt that God's will for him was to travel from rural Pennsylvania to the rough streets of New York City. One of the highlights of the movie was when a notorious gang leader seriously threatened him. A strange and heavy silence fell on all of us as we watched Nicky Cruz threaten the skinny country preacher.

"You come near me, and I'll kill you!"

David Wilkerson replied, "Yeah, you could do that. You could cut me up into a thousand pieces and lay them in the street, and every piece will still love you."

Tears welled up in my eyes as I saw the love of Christ displayed on the screen in front of me—the same unselfish love I saw in Charles Thompson. "Every piece will still love you." Wow! Maybe one day, with God's help, I'll be able to love like that. Maybe, just maybe, if God could so use a young preacher from Pennsylvania, He could also use my life to bring others into His Kingdom. After the movie, I stayed glued to the couch as everyone else went off to various appointments or work assignments. Eventually, I slid off the couch and onto my knees and began to cry as an overwhelming feeling came over me. The Lord was speaking to my trembling heart: "If you let Me fill you with the same type of love you saw in David Wilkerson, I will also send you to the broken and the hurting."



I quickly became friends with all those precious guys and hung out with them every Sunday afternoon and evening. They soon invited me to travel with them on Wednesday evenings. They visited various churches in the region to give their testimonies. Often



they would show a slide presentation of the needs of New York City: a picture of a homeless man slouched over in a subway car, a dear lady sleeping on the streets in a measly cardboard box, a girl with scary dark rings under her eyes showing the photographer the many needle marks on her skeletal arms. Each time I saw those pictures, a burden deep in my heart got a little stronger. I knew God was using those images to strengthen a call to the broken and hurting, to the mission field of lost souls, to the asphalt jungles of New York City.

By the time I graduated high school, I totally agreed with Keith Green, the director of Last Days Ministries, who wrote: "I don't believe that God wants every Christian to go to college just because, 'Well, everyone goes to college now, unless they're too dumb!' You shouldn't go to college unless God has definitely called you to go. Just like everything else in our Christian lives, He's the Master, we're the servants. He's the General, we're the soldiers. If you're really a Christian, you're at the beck and command of the King. If you're not at His command, then you're really not a Christian."<sup>3</sup>

Boy, was my unsaved family upset! I made As in high school and could have gone to any college I wanted. Telling them it wasn't up to me but up to Jesus to decide what my next steps would be sounded ludicrous to them. Even more ridiculous was accepting a full-time, live-in position at the ministry farmhouse as a counselor/intern for the salary of just room and board! I would have paid to have the privilege of being part of a ministry that daily saw lives transformed right before our very eyes.





## 2

“Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!”

AS SPRINGTIME APPROACHED, STAFF MEMBERS WERE HOPING AND expecting Mike to choose them as his traveling and preaching companion for his upcoming evangelistic outreaches in New York City. Mike’s father, Miguel, who lived in the South Bronx, came for visits to the farmhouse because Mike didn’t always bring his wife and kids with him on his journeys to the Big Apple. Miguel was a frail but very friendly man. I liked him immediately, and we hit it off right away. But I couldn’t understand how Miguel could witness a transformation in his son and not also enthusiastically follow the Lord. He would joke, “I know Jesus could deliver me from this,” as he’d hold up a whiskey bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag. “But I don’t want to be delivered!” No wonder Mike wasn’t overjoyed when his father came to stay.

One morning during Miguel’s visit, I woke up to a quiet, empty house. It seemed that everyone had places to go and things to do that day. On the large dining room table, propped up by the centerpiece

so I wouldn't miss it, was a yellow writing tablet with this note, written with a black magic marker:

Charles, after you feed the animals, could you please change the starter in the Pinto? The new one is on the freezer, along with the tools you'll need. Thanks, and we'll all be back this evening. Mike.

I guessed Miguel wanted to go sightseeing. "Man," I thought to myself, "I don't know how to change a starter!" I looked out the window and noticed that someone had placed a mechanic's blanket on the concrete driveway under the Pinto for me. It couldn't be too hard. I decided to attempt the repairs before feeding myself or any of the farm animals. If I couldn't do it, I'd have the rest of the day to find someone who could. I found the new starter and the tools, crawled under the car, and got to work. The screws on the old starter were very hard to loosen. For a while, I wasn't sure if I could even get them all off. I was relieved when the last one finally loosened. As I began unscrewing it, it didn't dawn on me that gravity was about to kick in. Down it suddenly fell, right onto the concrete, smashing one of my fingers in the process. "Well, praise the Lord anyway," I said out loud as I immediately began examining the cut. "Thank You, Jesus, that it's not too deep." I grabbed a nearby rag, ripped off a few inches, tied it around my throbbing, bloody finger and completed the job. (It would only leave a small scar on my finger.)

As I walked into the house to wash up, I was startled to see Miguel pouring himself a cup of coffee. I said to him, "I thought you went out with Mike today."

"I was going to," Miguel said as he sipped his coffee and stared at me from behind his cup as though he'd never seen a white boy from Tennessee before. "At the last minute I decided to stay here." When Miguel said goodbye to me a few days later, I never imagined I'd see him again soon.

*"Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!"*

About a month later, my roommate Pete and I were in our room in the farmhouse, enjoying our day off together. Pete was listening to a cassette tape of a man preaching about Aaron and the golden calf he made for Israel to worship. Suddenly, the preacher compared the episode of Moses coming off the mountain and angrily throwing down the Ten Commandment tablets to the anger God feels over His lukewarm church in America. As the sermon continued, the preacher's voice got stronger and louder until he was yelling. But it was inspired yelling, like how a father would yell to his toddler who's about to run out into heavy traffic. The preacher said, "Within that entire multitude of people who came out of Egypt with Moses, only two men followed the Lord with all their hearts—Joshua and Caleb. Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!"

"That guy's anointed!" I exclaimed. "Who is that, Pete?"

"You don't know? That's David Wilkerson."

"David Wilkerson! The same guy in the movie?"

"Nooo. The guy in the movie was Pat Boone. He's a Christian actor who played David Wilkerson. This is the real David Wilkerson!"

Angel then yelled up the staircase from the first floor. "Mike's calling a ministry meeting in the living room right now."

"Oh boy," Pete exclaimed as we began to walk down the steps together. "He's gonna announce who's going with him to New York this summer. It has to be my turn this year! Charles Thompson went last year, and Angel the year before. It's my time, man!"

Mike had a weird look on his face. Then what came out of his mouth was even weirder. "Umm...I gotta leave for New York earlier than usual this year. Papi's really sick in the hospital. I got this letter from him today. Gotta go tomorrow. Don't know when I'll return. Let's pray."

"Wait," Angel interrupted. "Who's going with you?"

"Charles Simpson." Startled grunts and groans filled the room.

“WHAT!” Pete loudly protested, expressing what everyone else was thinking. “Mike, are you crazy? He’s just an intern! Besides, it’s my turn to go. Why in the world would you pick him over me?” Pete looked over at me, and if looks could kill, I would have dropped dead right then and there. I was glad he didn’t carry weapons anymore!

“Pedro, ¡cállate!” Mike said in an authoritative tone that I think meant “shut up and listen!” “I didn’t pick him over you. Papi did. Listen to this letter.” He unfolded it and read it aloud: “Dear son, I hate this hospital and I hate this food. Doctors aren’t giving me long to live. If you wanna see me again, come now. And bring Charles Simpson with you. There’s something inside that young man I’ve never seen before. He actually didn’t curse when the starter fell on his finger. He even thanked God that it didn’t cut him too badly. Please bring him with you. Love, Papi.”

I looked down at the tiny scar on my finger, as everyone stared at me in shock. I added the details of what happened that morning, noting that I didn’t even know Miguel was around. How ironic that the little bit of self-control I exhibited that day revealed Christ to someone who had already seen so many lives transformed. I might not run across hardened gang members like Nicky Cruz in New York City, but maybe, just maybe, if I went with Mike, I’d be able to lead dear Miguel to the Lord before he entered eternity.

For the first time in my life, I flew on an airplane—from Chattanooga to New York City. My mission was to reach Miguel before he passed away and to assist Mike with his evangelistic campaigns. I was nineteen years old, and it was a very cold March in 1980. I had been a Christian for only two years, and I was as nervous as I was excited about visiting New York City for a few months, or maybe longer. When we arrived at LaGuardia Airport, the place was packed. “I’ve never seen so many people in one place before,” I kept mumbling to Mike as I hustled to keep up with him.

He turned back toward me and said impatiently, "You haven't seen anything yet. And close that gaping mouth of yours. You look like a gullible tourist." I felt more like a tourist than an assistant to a world-famous evangelist. Well, maybe not world famous yet. Mike looked worried, and I knew he was already having second thoughts about bringing me with him. We went straight from the airport to St. Barnabas Hospital. Mike and I both fervently prayed for his dad. He was too sedated to talk (or at least he pretended to be), so we made our way over to Miguel's apartment in the South Bronx via a wild taxi ride. The taxi cabs were like a bunch of yellow demons, disregarding every traffic law. Amazing! By the time we arrived, the sun had gone down. At the end of a dingy hallway, we found Miguel's apartment door. It had four locks on it. Four! One of them was called a police lock. It consisted of a steel pole attached to the floor and the inside of the door. "Wow!" I thought to myself. "We never lock any of our doors in Tennessee." (If I had kept expressing out loud how weird this place was to me, Mike would surely have sent me home on the first flight out the next day.)

Mike settled into bed in Miguel's room, and I got into a sleeping bag on the living room floor. The sofa was nothing more than a small loveseat; it was much too small for me. As I was about to doze off, I heard a rattling noise by my feet. "Oh no," I said to myself. "Sounds like a rattlesnake! Does Miguel have a pet snake? Do people in this city actually keep them as pets? There it goes again. It's definitely coming from behind that chair." But as quickly as it started, it suddenly stopped. I finally was about to escape into dreamland when the snake started up again. This time it was louder and longer. About fifteen terrifying minutes later, it stopped. I realized the whole apartment was quite warm. "Aha! That's not a snake." I walked over to the lamp beside the chair and bravely turned on the light. I saw what the head of my snake really was—an old, rusty cap to a radiator connected to a steam boiler in the basement. I had come so close to running into Mike's room, hysterically screaming,

“There’s a rattlesnake in here!” He would have sent me back to Tennessee for sure.

As morning came, I awoke to a new world. People have often asked me what it was like going from a small town in Tennessee to the South Bronx. Was it like traveling to China? No, more like traveling to a new planet. I laid in my sleeping bag for a few minutes, realizing that everything was...different. It was the smallest apartment I’d ever been in. The “rattlesnake” heating system was definitely new to me. The smell of Bustelo coffee filled the air as Mike sang in a foreign language. We soon made our way out to the Hub, a busy section of the South Bronx. Three major streets intersected there. I realized that everything was foreign to me: the way people dressed, what they ate, and how they talked and even walked! Also, their pace of life, the smells, the sights, the sounds; the list went on and on.

The next day, Mike needed to go to Grand Central Station to get a train to Connecticut to visit a sponsor. He decided to take me with him to the Metro North train, and then I’d return to Miguel’s apartment on my own. I would just have to retrace my steps. As we arrived at Grand Central Station, my jaw opened really wide once again. Underneath the ground there were various types of small grocery stores, retail stores, restaurants, and all kinds of places. There was a bank and a shoe store, and even a barbershop! It dawned on me: we were actually in an underground city!

I grabbed Mike’s arm, and he stopped walking for a moment. I quickly whispered into his ear, “Mike, is this where the Mafia is located?”

“What do you mean? The Mafia’s all over this city.”

“No, Mike. I mean, is this their headquarters?”

“What?” He looked at me quizzically and resumed his brisk walk through the maze of Grand Central Station.



*"Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!"*

"Isn't this the underground world? I mean, isn't the Mafia in the underground?"

Mike gazed at me with a puzzled look and then cracked a smile and said, "That's a good joke, Charles. The underground world! You are joking, right? Please tell me you're joking." I wasn't joking, but I guess I should have been. My naiveté was just beginning to show itself.

A few days later, I met some tenants in the building: a cool guy named Bobby and his girlfriend, Madelyn Cohen. One of the screws holding my glasses together fell off as Mike and I were walking somewhere in Manhattan. He said, "There's an eyeglass store on this block. Let's stop and get that fixed right away."

When I noticed the name on the door, I got really excited. Cohen's Fashion Optical. As the clerk began working on my glasses, I asked if Mr. Cohen was around. The clerk looked up at me as if I had escaped from a mental hospital.

"What?" he rudely asked.

Mike quickly intervened, telling the guy that I was a tourist. With a very thick southern accent, I slowly continued, "But ain't this Cohen's Optical? I was just gonna ask Mr. Cohen if he knew Madelyn."

The bored clerk decided to play around with me, asking, "And who is Madelyn?"

"Madelyn Cohen lives in the Bronx, in the same apartment building as Mike's father. Y'all don't know Madelyn?"

The clerk and a few other co workers who joined the unusual conversation broke out in seemingly endless laughter. Afterward, a lady who must have been the manager of Cohen's Optical said to me, "Cohen's Fashion Optical was founded by Jack Cohen in 1926. We now have quite a few stores in several states. There are thousands of Cohens in New York City. The chances of Jack ever having met Madelyn are about a trillion to one." They began hysterically

laughing again as Mike pushed me out the front door. I was in a different world than down south. If there were an eyeglass place in Cleveland, Tennessee, with the same last name of a neighbor, the chances of their being related are at least two to one. I was unable to explain that to Mike.

One evening, Mike went somewhere on his own. I decided to go back up to the rooftop of his father's apartment building. Mike had shown me previously how to unlock the roof door. We had spent time looking over "the hood" (short for neighborhood). I wanted to venture out into the dark city at night and explore that strange world, but Mike said it was too dangerous. Even two of us walking together at night would be too risky. On that isolated roof, I felt safe. I could see the post office where the notorious killer Son of Sam had worked. A few blocks away was Lincoln Hospital. I listened to the ambulance sirens as they approached one of the busiest emergency rooms in the country. Then I heard a police siren down the block. It started to die down, drowned out by a fire engine a few blocks away. Then another ambulance, a police siren a mile away, another fire truck nearby. For the next hour, I stood there startled that the sirens never stopped. What kind of place was this? It was said that the Bronx was burning, and I believed it. The slum landlords were having their own buildings burned down so they could collect the insurance money and get out of there. Fear suddenly gripped my heart, and I wondered if I'd ever get out of that surreal asphalt jungle alive. I recalled and recited aloud to myself the words I had heard from an anointed sermon: "Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!" "Oh Lord," I fervently prayed, "I surrender my entire life to You."

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Mike's dad took a turn for the better and was grateful to be back home in his little apartment. One rainy Sunday before going out for a full day of preaching engagements, Mike asked me to stay home

*"Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!"*

and keep his dad company. Miguel and I decided to watch *West Side Story* on his small black-and-white television. The movie ripped my heart to pieces. It put names and faces on all the New Yorkers for whom I had been praying since I first saw Reality of Life Ministry's slide presentation in Tennessee. Who wouldn't feel for Tony and Maria? Their unsuccessful attempts to build a happy life together in the midst of the gang culture in the Big Apple were so heartbreaking. No wonder *West Side Story* won more Academy Awards than any other musical film in history. I tried hiding my tears from Miguel, but he was crying harder than me. It was the hundredth time he'd seen it, and only my first. He took a few tissues and then handed me the box. After it was over, he quickly turned the channel to some sporting event. Clearing his nose, he seemed to immediately forget all about the movie. Not me. I would never be the same.

I decided to fast and pray the next day, interceding for all the real-life Tonys and Marias I saw while Mike and I prayer-walked the streets of the Bronx and Spanish Harlem. I cried a lot that day. I wept over the lost, cried for Miguel, and also wept with gratitude that I was not a lost soul in that wicked city. That evening, Mike and I were invited to a Spanish pastor's apartment. We were to discuss rearranging his calendar to accommodate Mike's change of schedule. When we arrived, we found his living room filled with members of his church. They were the sweetest New Yorkers I'd ever met. We joined them in exuberant singing as they alternated between Spanish and English songs. After a long time of singing, the pastor jumped to his feet and asked if anyone wanted to testify. A lady next to me, with her hair in an extremely tight bun, stood up and shared in very broken English. She was grateful that her "Niño" in prison wrote her, saying he finally accepted the Lord. When she sat down, I stood up suddenly and shared how grateful I was that the Lord saved me. I hoped and prayed and believed that God would use me to win souls for His Kingdom. The words and the tears rolled out of me like a river. I could have stopped them, but I knew the anointing of the

Holy Spirit was upon me, so I continued speaking for quite a while. It wasn't until I sat down that I realized many others were weeping and praying. Some had even sunk out of their seats onto their knees. I turned to Mike and whispered, "I hope I didn't go too long."

He smiled affectionately, slapped my knee, and simply said, "No, you didn't."

At the end of the meeting, the pastor made a beeline right to me. I was thinking, "Oh no! Maybe I did testify too long and he's gonna rebuke me as only a New Yorker can."

Instead, he extended his hand and gave me a vigorous handshake. He said, "Young man, I have to go out of town next weekend, and I'd love for you to preach for me in my church while I'm gone."

In shock, I looked over at Mike, and he was smiling real big. He was nodding his head up and down a number of times. It finally registered in my frozen brain. "Uh, sure, Pastor. I'd be honored." Maybe I should have said, "You've got to be kidding! Surely you have the wrong guy. I've never preached a sermon in my life." I frantically began preparing one in my head, right at that moment. I thought about it on the ride home. I spent every spare minute the following week either working on the message, praying about it, or worrying about it.

Before I knew it, I was in his small church, being introduced to the congregation by one of the deacons. I preached my heart out. I preached all my sermon points, threw in everything I knew about Christ, looked down at my watch and was horrified to see that I'd gone only eighteen minutes! I kind of started over from the top and changed a few phrases so people wouldn't think I was being redundant. I looked down again and noticed I'd gone only five more minutes, a grand total of twenty-three minutes—way too short for a Pentecostal service. I paused and bowed my head and silently prayed, "Lord, what should I do now?"

*"Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!"*

The sweet Holy Spirit said to my trembling but listening heart, "Give an altar call for those who would like to get saved today." I was about to argue with those promptings because the smiles of encouragement on all the people's faces were a pretty good indication that those folks were already saved—and probably had been for a lot longer than me! I simply obeyed. I said that Jesus was there at the altar, ready to forgive and give a new life to anyone who would repent and call upon Him. Then I noticed a young man standing at the entrance of the front door, listening intently to my every word. He slowly made his way down the aisle. Gasps of "Thank You, Jesus" and "Hallelujah" could be heard from the stunned congregation. The young man, apparently a local gang member, came to the altar, fell to his knees, and began crying like a little toddler. Three deacons and I walked over to him as the pianist played some soft background music. The young man looked up at me with tears and snot running down his face and said, "What do I do now, Preacher?"

I didn't plan on this happening so I shrugged my shoulders and said, "I don't know." I had been so focused on planning the sermon, I didn't even think about the altar call. But, thank God, the deacons knew what to do, and they led him in the sinner's prayer as I went and sat down with Mike on the front row. The whole church was thrilled beyond measure, but none more than I. Except perhaps the young man who accepted Jesus that day! "Lord," I quietly whispered as we sang a song of rejoicing to conclude the meeting, "this is what I want to do with my life."



One evening, while visiting an old friend of Mike's, I was sitting on a large windowsill with a panoramic view of most of the South Bronx and parts of Manhattan. Everyone else was in the kitchen. I was alone in the living room—a rather large one for the Bronx. I was somewhere between daydreaming and praying when all of a sudden I had a vision of my last moments on this earth. I began soaring

through the clouds into Heaven. I heard a voice say, “Look down.” I thought about Lot’s wife who turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back, so I didn’t look down. A gentle inner voice said, “I want you to look back for just a moment to see from where you will leave this world.” I looked down and saw New York City below me, quickly fading out of sight. I knew the gentle voice was the Lord’s, and He was saying, “This is your new home, Charles. This is your mission field.” Instantly, I knew that my visit to this city was more than just a temporary stay.

Mike came into the room and told me that Miguel had just prayed with him over the phone for the first time ever and had accepted Jesus as his Savior.

“Wonderful!” I joyfully exclaimed.

“I hope he meant it,” Mike slowly commented with urban pessimism.

When I arrived back home, Miguel was sitting at the kitchen table with a strange snicker on his face and a brown paper bag in his hands with that hidden bottle inside. I grabbed it out of his hands and said, “Didn’t the doctor tell you one more bottle could be the death of you?”

“Well, why don’t you just pour it out into the bathroom sink for me then!” he yelled back as I stomped out of the room with it. I marched to the bathroom, and as I poured the junk down the drain, I noticed it smelled a lot more like Coca-Cola than alcohol. I looked inside the crumpled bag, and sure enough, it was a sixteen-ounce bottle of Pepsi! “You owe me a Pepsi,” Miguel laughed, “and an apology.”

“I’m sorry,” I humbly and quickly replied.

“I know you care deeply about me, Charles. And I know that God cares. I believe in Christ. I really do. But remember, things are not always the way they seem.”

*"Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!"*

Those were the last words I heard him say. When Mike and I returned the following evening, we found him lying unconscious on the living room floor. The paramedics said it looked like he died of a massive heart attack a few hours before they arrived. Mike didn't sleep much for the next few days. He was busy making arrangements and calling Puerto Rico and other places, trying to track down relatives. He didn't eat much, either. I was concerned that the death of his father had totally broken his heart. At the dreary funeral, he was coughing his head off because a bad cold had set in. For days afterward, he would lie on his dad's bed, staring at the walls, coughing. He wouldn't eat, and he wouldn't go to the doctor. He wouldn't answer the phone. When I answered it for him, he wouldn't talk to anyone. I repeated to him over and over the last conversation I had with Miguel. I tried to convince Mike that his dad really did believe in the Lord at the end. Even that didn't seem to help.

With Mike lying in bed all day, all I could do was sit in the living room and pray. The more I prayed, the more it dawned on me that Mike was in severe danger. I called the guys in Tennessee. Pete answered and listened carefully to me. He then said, "Charles, the enemy is trying to take Mike out. Such a creep, kicking him while he's down."

"What should I do, Pete? Should I call an ambulance?"

"An ambulance? Is he that sick?"

"Pete, he's as pale as the bedroom walls, hasn't eaten in days, and won't take any medicine. I don't think he wants to get better. I don't think he wants to live anymore."

"You'd better call an ambulance, Charles. But before you do, pray for him."

"Pete, that's all I've been doing for the past few days."

"No, Charles. I mean really pray for him." I agreed, hung up, and walked into the bedroom, asking Mike if I could pray for him. He muttered something unintelligible so I took it as a yes. I grabbed

his cold hand, fell to my knees, and prayed with all my might. Tears came from deep within my soul. I then felt a strong and evil presence in the room with us, and it occurred to me that Mike was in a spiritual battle for his life. I remembered reading somewhere that intercessory prayer can be a combination of beseeching the Lord and rebuking the enemy. Those words suddenly took on real meaning for me. I stood to my feet, still holding on to Mike's hand as though for dear life. I felt like if I let go, he'd drift away like an unanchored canoe. I then rebuked the enemy in Jesus's name. The change was dramatic and instant. Color returned to his face.

He opened his eyes, said a soft, "Thank you very much," and dozed off into a peaceful sleep.

Mike awakened a few hours later. He was completely well and back to his old self. He called his wife, then Angel, and then Pete. He told them that he had felt like he was slipping into eternity. Way off in the distance, he heard my prayerful voice asking God for mercy and rebuking the enemy on his behalf. Mike told everyone on the other end of the phone line that he was so glad he brought me with him to New York City. That day the Lord called me into an intercessory prayer ministry!

A few days later, Mike treated me to lunch at a great Puerto Rican restaurant. Once we were stuffed to our gills with chicken, rice, beans, sweet bananas, and flan, he changed gears and got really serious.

"Charles, I've been prayerfully thinking about something for a few days. I know it seems crazy, and it's certainly not what we planned. I'm not going to force you to do anything you don't feel peace about. But it's something we need to consider. You know my father's apartment is where I stay when I come up for my outreaches. The apartment was free for him because it came with his building superintendent's job. Would you be willing to take over his job and



*"Because they were sold out to God, they were given supernatural courage!"*

live in his apartment, at least for a little while? I'm sure we could get Pete to come up and be your roommate."

"Mike," I tried to interject, but he just kept talking over me.

"We could try it for a little while, and if you want to go back to the farm, maybe we could eventually let Pete take the super job. My uncle works at the superintendents' union office. He says he can work something out for us. The job also comes with a salary. The apartment has that small backyard, and a full basement, and..."

"Mike, Mike, OK! No need to convince me. The Lord spoke to me a few days ago and told me that this is my new home. He's expanded my mission field from Miguel to all the Tonys and Marias in this city. God has called me to be a missionary to New York City!" I shared with him the vision I had of looking down upon New York on the day I die. I told him about the way *West Side Story* tore my heart to pieces, and the nudging I felt every time I saw the ministry's slide presentation of the hurting people here, and what God spoke to me after watching *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

Mike asked, "Are you afraid of living here in the city, Charles?"

"On my own I would be. But for those who are completely surrendered to God, He gives supernatural courage." Mike was pleasantly shocked at such an answer coming from a young, skinny teenager from Tennessee. No need to tell him that my answer actually was a quote from a David Wilkerson sermon. I was experiencing it for myself. Just as true as when it was first preached by David Wilkerson, God was giving *me* supernatural courage.



## “God is raising up believers to follow in our footsteps.”

MIKE SOON LEFT TO GO BACK TO THE MINISTRY HEADQUARTERS IN TENNESSEE, and Pete had to first tie up some loose ends before he could join me. I then decided to read *The Cross and the Switchblade*, the copy Mike had once given to his dad. I opened it up to the title page and read the cursive script: “Papi, The same God who changed me and the people in this book wants to change your life also. Your loving son, Mike.” Angel told me months ago that the book was so much better than the movie. I quickly discovered how true that was! I couldn’t put it down. I took it with me everywhere I went.

While reading the book on a subway train to Manhattan, the Lord spoke to me in an amazing way. I got on the number 5 train at the 149th Street Station, located at the busy Hub. As the 5 train headed into Manhattan, it shifted directions from going basically east to west in the Bronx to going north to south in Manhattan. While in this transitional tunnel, the long turn is quite noticeable. The noise of the squeaking wheels filled everyone’s ears. Those around me seemed oblivious to it, but the piercing noise sounded like those wheels were screaming. I even wondered if those wheels

were about to fall off. I opened the paperback book I simply couldn't put down and continued from chapter 14, where I had left off a few hours earlier:

One morning, just after I had stepped off the ferryboat at the foot of Manhattan, I walked down the stairs to the subway that would take me over to Brooklyn. The subway at this point makes a great loop, and in the turn, its wheels scream piercingly. This place will always have a special meaning for me. Because it was there, among the screams of the subway, that I suddenly saw my old dream take on substance. It sprang full grown to mind. The house I had dreamed of—we might call it Teen Challenge Center—would be located in the heart of the roughest part of the city.<sup>4</sup>

I closed the book and started weeping as the manifest presence of God fell upon me. I read again:

The subway at this point makes a great loop, and in the turn, its wheels scream piercingly. This place will always have a special meaning for me.<sup>5</sup>

Suddenly, the turn of the 5 train that I was on was completed, and the wheels stopped screaming. "Lord," I prayed. I was about to continue my prayer with, "Lord, whatever could this mean? What are the chances of my reading this for the first time, reading it at the exact moment I experience the same sounds, caused by essentially the same thing?" My prayer didn't even get that far. When I simply whispered, "Lord," with my eyes closed and tears streaming down my cheeks, His presence upon me intensified. The Holy Spirit spoke gently and clearly to my heart, "You are to follow in the footsteps of David Wilkerson."

"Lord, what does that mean?" No explanation; just an awesome feeling that God was divinely ordering my steps. I finished reading

the portion of the book where David Wilkerson described the original vision of Teen Challenge:

The house I had dreamed of, we might call it Teen Challenge Center: an atmosphere of discipline and affection. Christians living together, working together; a family.<sup>6</sup>

The very night Pete arrived in the Bronx, I told him of the subway incident. I asked him what he thought it might mean for me to follow in the footsteps of David Wilkerson. "That's a no-brainer, Charles," Pete remarked in his frank and friendly New York-Rican way. "Let's see, you're both from a small town. You're both called to preach the Gospel. And you're both sent by God on a mission to New York City. Duh!"

"I guess I'm supposed to be preaching, huh?" Pete's grin meant yes. "With Mike having all the connections, and he's back in Tennessee now, where am I supposed to preach?" I asked.

Pete replied, "I know I'm handsome—but do I look like Jesus to you? Get on your knees in prayer, man. Ask Him where He wants you to preach."

For the next few months, I prayed and prayed and prayed. No phone calls. No pastors knocking down my front door. No conference committees trying to get me as their keynote speaker! But as I waited on the Lord, a faint whisper began to rise from deep within, and it grew a little stronger each day. To my question of, "Lord, where do You want me to preach?" I could hear a faint answer: "The 2, the 4, or the 5."

Then one day I realized that the nearby subway stations had three train lines that came together: the 2, the 4, and the 5 trains. It took another few months before I mustered the courage to stand up in a subway train and say with a thick, slow, southern accent, "Hi y'all. My name is Charles, and I'm from Tennessee. Since y'all are trapped in this subway car with me for the next 120 seconds,

you are forced to listen to my little sermonette.” However, an amazing thing happened. I chose the 5 train because of its inspirational screaming wheels. The third time I nervously stood up to speak, a dear old saint (an elderly, godly-looking African American woman) whom I had never seen before in my life literally ran over to me. She declared, “Young man, I’ve been preaching the Gospel on this train for decades. I’m gettin’ too old to leave my apartment nowadays. I’ve been prayin’, intercedin’, and beseechin’ the Lord Jesus to raise up someone to take my place. And you’re the one. Here, take my mantle, take my anointing, and boldly proclaim the Good News!”

It looked like she threw her shawl over me, but whatever it was, it was invisible! I didn’t even believe in that type of Pentecostal weirdness, yet an unmistakable warmth and supernatural energy flowed down onto my shoulders and into my heart. The next time I stood to give a small sermonette, heavenly authority poured from my surprised lips. Everyone on the train turned their bulging eyes and listened attentively and quietly! That subway car came to a stop between stations for a number of minutes due to track signal problems. It was a sure indication to me that God wanted that group to hear a little more than a sermonette, so I gave them a full sermon!

I soon graduated to subway platforms, where my audience could hear a ten- to twenty-minute sermon, depending on how frequently the trains were running. Pete and I went to Central Park in Manhattan, where I discovered if I stood near a certain lake, my voice bounced off the water and up to all the surrounding hills where multitudes of people were picnicking. One man angrily came down and told me that if I didn’t stop, he’d throw me into the lake. I felt the thrill of my first bout of real persecution for Christ. It wasn’t being thrown to hungry lions, but it was a start! Frequently, old ladies on the subway attacked me with their purses, often screaming something about being Jewish and not wanting to hear my speeches about Jesus. More often, people would come over to me when I finished, grab my arm, and say, “Please, pray for me.”

One day, I finished preaching on the 138th Street subway platform. A man who had been listening for a while introduced himself as the youth pastor of a nearby church. I was thrilled when he asked if I could preach to his youth group the following Friday night. When the time came, Pete and I walked over to the Youth Center on Brook Avenue. Pete remarked, "Man, this is a bad neighborhood—as in really bad."

That evening, I preached on the Great White Throne Judgment, remarking that the word *great* is an adjective describing the word *white*, which in the Greek means "bright" or "shining."<sup>7</sup> The greatness of the brightness of His throne will expose and convince everyone of just how deserving we all are of eternal punishment. Oh, that we would allow God to convince us now so we can obtain His mercy and forgiveness instead! All the kids sitting in the rows in front of me seemed to be believers already so I felt like I was "preaching to the choir." Halfway through the service, I noticed that the front entrance was filled with teenagers straining to hear what I was saying—ten, maybe fifteen of them. I knew it was the anointing of the Spirit that was drawing them so I passionately pleaded with them to come in and accept Christ. Some of the kids in the first few rows came to the altar that night (probably for the hundredth time), but none from the curious group from the outside. It was a bittersweet moment for me.

I got together with this same youth pastor a few days later to talk things over. He said, "Hey, you mentioned you're from Cleveland, Tennessee. Did you know that's where the headquarters of our denomination is?"

"No, I didn't know that" (a statement I had used a lot since coming to that strange new world).

"Yeah, Church of God, Iglesia de Dios," he said. "It's taken a long time to get my credentials with them. Are you licensed with the Church of God?"

“No, I’m not licensed with anyone.”

“That’s too bad,” he remarked. “If you had a Church of God license, I could get you all kinds of preaching engagements.”

Pete came home from work one day with an exciting announcement. “Guess who’s preaching in Manhattan this Sunday? David Wilkerson! He’s doing an open-air meeting at Lincoln Center in the morning; then he’s preaching at Glad Tidings Tabernacle in the evening.”

“Alright!” I replied. “Isn’t that the church that took up the offering that enabled Brother Dave to buy the Teen Challenge house in Brooklyn?”

Pete’s startled look said, “How do you know that?”

“I read the book a few months ago. Let’s see if we can go to both meetings.”

Sunday arrived quickly, and the weather was perfect for outdoor preaching. The subway trains were running slow. By the time we arrived at the outdoor amphitheater right next to Lincoln Center, the singing was ending and Brother Dave was being introduced. I was so ready to hear stories about gangs and drug addicts. Instead, this thin, frail-looking man with dorky sunglasses got up and talked as if he was an uncle who lived on the Upper West Side! He spoke about Lincoln Center, Columbia University, the Planetarium, and Central Park (subjects of interest to Manhattanites but very boring to us Bronxites!). Then he spoke about the sins of cheating on your income taxes, stealing towels from fancy hotels, and watching pornography on television late at night when the family has gone to sleep. Pete yawned in deep boredom, but I turned around and looked at the audience. Wow, what a sight! Tons of middle-aged men, obviously under deep conviction, were fidgeting in their seats, not knowing where to hide.

David Wilkerson then said, “You men are so proud and yet so cowardly that if I give an altar call, you’d all be too chicken to come



up here. But the Lord still loves you anyway. When you get home, go to your bedroom, shut the door, get on your knees, and repent of your sins. He'll meet you right there and forgive you. Good afternoon." He shut his Bible with a loud thud and walked away!

Not even those who sponsored the event were expecting such a blunt ending. They weren't prepared to come up for a closing song. It took five awkward minutes for them to respond, and yet in those long minutes, conviction rose to such a level that I saw many people's eyes tearing up. Some had their heads bowed, not knowing where to hide.

I turned back around and leaned back into my seat and simply said, "Wow!"

Pete looked at me with anger and replied, "Wow is right! I am so disappointed. David Wilkerson is boring. That was the dumbest message I've ever heard."

"No, Pete, you've got it all wrong. It was actually brilliant. He didn't come here to entertain these people. He came to preach to them what they needed to hear. Look at all the guys walking out of here without talking to anyone. There's such deep conviction in the air. Brother Dave tailored his message to his audience. Can't you see that? These people wouldn't relate to gangs and switchblades."

Pete shrugged his shoulders and said, "I hope he's more anointed tonight."

At Pete's insistence, we spent most of the afternoon standing in front of Glad Tidings in the hopes of meeting Brother Dave face to face. Finally, five minutes before the meeting was to start, Brother Dave and Don Wilkerson came walking up the street. Pete boldly jumped right in front of them and announced, "Brother Dave! My name's Pete, and this is Charles. We're part of an evangelistic ministry, and we're called to minister in the Bronx. Charles is from Tennessee, and I'm from Spanish Harlem. We've been so blessed by

your ministry and movie. We've shown it all over the Bronx and all over Tennessee!"

"Nice to meet you guys," Brother Dave said. He politely shook our hands and then walked into the church. Pete kept talking as though he was still standing there. I nudged him with my elbow and said, "Let's go find some seats. The music has started."

The place was crowded, yet the entire front row was empty—a common occurrence when bigwigs speak in churches in case they bring their whole team with them. Pete marched to the front and plopped himself down on the front row as though he was with the speaker. I sat down next to him. Brother Dave's message was fiery, Pentecostal, and great! Nothing mild about the sermon or its delivery!

Pete leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Is this the same guy we saw earlier today?"

"No, it's his twin brother, who even dresses exactly like him."

Brother Dave looked down at us, and I wondered if he was about to rebuke us for talking while he was preaching. Instead, he used us as an illustration to drive home a sermon point. "See these two young men on the front row? That's Pete from Harlem and Charles from Tennessee. They both have been called by God to preach the Gospel in this great city. I'm so glad God is still calling and raising up young believers to carry on His work in this place and to follow in our footsteps."

We could hear many hearty "amens" rising from the lips of those in the audience, many of whom were clearly senior citizens, people who had labored in this city even before Brother Dave was born. All I could think was, "Oh my, there are those words again, 'Walking in the footsteps of David Wilkerson,' and this time, they're coming from the horse's mouth!"