

a biography

ARCHIE WORD

VOICE OF THUNDER
HEART OF TEARS

by Victor Knowles

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DEDICATION

To the memory of
Don DeWalt,
who looked upon
Archie Word
as his
“Father in the Faith.”

And to Bill Jessup,
who counted
Archie Word
as his
“Brother in the Lord.”

*What went ye out into the wilderness to behold?
a reed shaken with the wind?*

*But what went ye out to see?
a man clothed in soft raiment?*

*But wherefore went ye out? to see a prophet?
Yea, I say unto you,
and much more than a prophet.*

—Matthew 11:7-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	9
Prologue	11
Foreword	17
Introduction	21

PART I THE LAD FROM LINDSAY

1. "In the Beginning was the Word"	27
2. The Runaway	47
3. Return of a Prodigal	65
Picture Section One	85

PART II A SINNER SAVED BY GRACE

4. The Briar and the Lily	91
5. Converted to Christ	111
6. The Longest Year	127
7. Holy Toledo!	145
Picture Section Two	171

PART III "AMERICA'S FOREMOST EVANGELIST"

8. "Hear A. Word Preach the Word"	177
9. Where Angels Fear to Tread	197
10. Fame and Fortune Beckon	219
11. To Tackle a Thief	245
Picture Section Three	271

PART IV
THE MAN FROM MONTAVILLA

12. "The Fightingest Church in the Northwest"	277
13. The Church at 550.	301
14. Montavilla Leads the Nation.	325
15. To Build a Fire	351
16. "Repent or Perish!"	375
17. "Let 'er Split!"	401
18. "Here I Stand!"	425
19. "We'd Rather Have the Devil!"	453
20. Lambasting Sinners	479
21. The Flames of Hell.	505
Picture Section Four.	529

PART V
A LEGEND IN HIS LINE

22. On the Road Again	535
23. The Last Hurrah	559
24. Mending Fences	585
25. "He Is Not Dead!"	603
Epilogue	629
Where Are They Now?	633
Bibliography	639

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Last but not least, my own family. How patient they have been with me for the last four years as I burned the midnight oil and kept some of them awake with the tippety-tap of a computer keyboard. Special thanks to my father, Dale V. Knowles, and my wife, Evelyn, and oldest daughter, Mindy.

It is inevitable that I have overlooked someone. If you are that person, thank you for your help in producing this biography.

—Victor Knowles

PROLOGUE

The road to Glasgow, Kentucky, is a winding, snaking ribbon of concrete. A modern four-lane highway takes you north and east out of Bowling Green, home of Western Kentucky University. Soon the road narrows into two lanes and points due east. It is as though one is also driving back into time.

Smith's Grove. Patrick Henry's sister lies buried here. Hays. Merry Oaks. Faded remnants of yesterday, hanging on in the 90s. Weatherbeaten barns, growing grayer with age than its owners, wherever they are. Here and there a few stately brick homes with gleaming white pillars can be seen, but only a few.

As the road dips through hollows and wends its way around ridges, old shacks with tin roofs become

common, if they are not already common enough. A Missionary Baptist church can be seen every two or three miles. Next to the churches are sprawling tobacco fields which shamelessly bask in the hot July sun. Over in Clay County, according to the *USA Today* we bought back in Paducah, forty per cent of the county's 24,100 citizens grow marijuana, the new cash crop in Kentucky. Mary Jane growers are the "bootleggers" of the 90s. But this is Barren county — strictly timber and tobacco country.

There are no whitewashed fences in Barren County. Only stone walls and split-rail fences making a zigzag pattern across the sleepy Kentucky countryside. Nor are there any fine-blooded thoroughbred horses grazing in the pastures. Only polled herefords and Holstein cows dot the meadows, seeking shade beneath groves of hackberry trees. Farm ponds are in abundance. Heavy-bodied deep-voiced bullfrogs croak out a summer's melody.

Soon you drive under an overpass, a toll road, the Cumberland Parkway, which will also take you to Glasgow. But why bother? Why pay good money when you can see the backside of America for free? On we go, driving a leisurely fifty miles an hour on State Highway 68. The smell of freshly-mown hay filters in through the open window. Massey Ferguson tractors toil in the fields, looking like busy rust-red ants. There are many abandoned gas stations along this stretch of highway, most of them missing pumps. We do spot one Esso pump but that is in a farmer's front yard, covered with columbine. Climbing ivy has a field day with the telephone poles. Hanging ferns adorn nearly every front porch of the white clapboard houses.

Only a few miles out of Glasgow we cross Beaver Creek (Kentuckians pronounce it "crick"). As we learn later, this is where many baptisms took place among the Baptist and Christian Church folks. And we are looking for the family roots of one of those people, Archie James Word, born April 21, 1901, near Glasgow.

Right now, however, we are looking for the remnants of a town that no longer exists, Oil City. Suddenly, about a mile or so out of Glasgow, we spot a sign — "Oil City Road." What a stroke of good luck! The paved road drops gently into a pleasant valley. There are a few new houses, some trailers, a couple of old abandoned houses. On our left is the Brotherhood Freewill Baptist church. The modern "handicapped only" parking sign in front of the building seems an anachronism in this pastoral setting. We drive slowly by and spot a little cemetery set back in a grove of hickory and pine trees. The soil is red and rocky. A mockingbird sings in the quietness of the hour and place.

A toothless old woman — "jest moved hare from Tennysee" — tells us she knows nothing about the old Word place. "Ask ol' Wininger back up the road a piece. He knows everything about these hare parts." But first we take the Oil City Road to its end, past the old Wininger homestead (1849), down into the valley, until our progress is blocked by a power plant. Such is progress.

We turn the car around and drive back to where Oil City Road and Highway 68 converge. There we find old Wininger himself, in the flesh. He is glad to see us, welcoming us into his living room where we find the breeze of an electric fan most refreshing. What a gold

mine we have found in Charles Winger, born 1912, once the President of the Barren County Historical Society. Not only can he tell us about Oil City and Glasgow, he can take us right out to the old Word place. "Ah'm glad to do it. Ah'm always giving folks tours who come around here a researchin'."

We soon discover, to our chagrin, that Oil City Road won't take you to what is left of Oil City, birthplace of Archie Word. You have to backtrack west on 68 until you come to Dripping Springs Road. There you turn north to take a somewhat circuitous route into the remains of Oil City. By now the summer skies have turned black. The rinsing rain comes in great slanting sheets. As the tires sing merrily on the wet asphalt, and the windshield wipers make their own mechanical music of sorts, old man Winger tells us about Barren County, Glasgow and Oil City.

Barren County got its name from the Indian practice of burning off the ground. At one time, buffalo and elk were plentiful. Glasgow, population about 14,000, was founded in 1799, and was named after her sister city in Scotland. This was once rough justice country. Murderers and horse thieves were hung, posthaste, not always with benefit of judge or jury, at Gallows Hollow Hill, only a mile or so from Winger's place. The last hanging took place in 1900, just one year before Archie Word was born.

"Do you smoke?" Winger asks.

"No, I sure don't," I reply.

"Good," he says, and hands me his business card. "Turn it over and read it."

I do and bust out laughing. "Man, if this doesn't sound like Archie Word himself!" I hand the card to Evelyn and she reads to Emily and Portia,

THIS MEANS YOU

you miserable, stupid, vulgar, slobber-jawed, wry-mouthed, crooked-faced genus homo. Can't you see that

NO SMOKING

of stinking tobacco is wanted here? That foul stinky stench is not desired. Smoke out among the pigs and goats in a tan yard where you may be of some benefit!

Religion came to Barren County in the person of none other than Alexander Campbell himself in 1823 and again in 1831 when the great man preached in Glasgow. He was followed by Barton W. Stone, Jacob Creath, and Z.T. Sweeney. The Christian Church was then located on the corner of Green and Wayne streets; today it is located on Glenview Drive.

The rain was letting up a little by now. We were getting closer to the mortal remains of Oil City, a town which got its name from the discovery of petroleum. Winger continued to talk out of a rich and fertile memory. William Penn's niece was buried in a cemetery near here. Oil City was never a big place, maybe 200 at best. There was a general mercantile store run by a one-legged man named Butler. There was also a one-room school called Sinking Springs School, a salt plant, a water mill where you could take meal by mule to be ground. Denton Mill pond (later Staples Mill) was where the baptisms took place on Sundays and during revival meetings. And there was Mount Tabor Baptist Church.

The church still stands in a stand of sugar maple trees. It is the oldest remaining church in the area.

Luther Word, Archie's hardshell Baptist father, probably went to this church. Winger laughs softly.

"One time the local preacher sent a little black boy out to fetch a roast from a farmer named Paul, just before church began. By the time the boy got back, the preacher had already started his sermon, so he slipped into the back pew and waited for the sermon to end. About that time the preacher rared back and yelled, 'And what did brother Paul say?'

"Quick as a wink the lad jumped up and hollered, 'He sed you ain't gwine to get any mo' meat 'til you done pay for what you already et!' " End of sermon! But not the end of our story.

The rain has stopped. We round a bend and there it is — the old Word place. A beautiful farm and handsome brick house now grace the land. A Glasgow lumberman named Holloway owns the place. The meadow is green and lush. A neat wooden fence works its way up the hill to the house on the horizon. Virtually nothing is left to announce the fact that Luther and Maggie Word once lived here, that Archie Word was born here.

We continue down the road to where the railroad depot once stood. All that is left are the railroad tracks. It was here, on this spot, that the Word family, in 1906, boarded the Glasgow train and headed for California via Park City, never to return as a family. But part of our family has returned, if only for a few hours, to visit the birthplace of a man who should not be forgotten, Archie Word, who in time became "America's foremost evangelist."

—Victor and Evelyn Knowles

FOREWORD

Evangelist Archie Word: A man to be remembered! And how I do remember him! More than sixty years ago he came into my life. For that I remain deeply grateful.

Archie Word came into my life via a revival in my home church, the 14th & E St. Church of Christ (Christian), San Bernardino, California, the year after my high school graduation. Early on I sensed he was "gunning" for me. On the closing Sunday of a six-week revival he announced a special Sunday afternoon service. I resolved to boycott that service, but I couldn't do it. "Better late than never?" Right on! On the final verse (the second time around) of "Just As I Am," like the prodigal son, I "came" (along with several others)

who committed themselves that day to *the ministry of The Word* that A. Word had drilled into our souls. Never for a moment has that decision been regretted.

Workaholic? "A workman that needed not to be ashamed" would more aptly describe him. Hour-long sermons followed by extended pleading in the invitation made for a long evening following a busy day of house-to-house block-calling. Calling, on foot for the most part, began at least by mid-morning and continued well into the afternoon. Years later, while calling with him in a three week's revival during my ministry with the Westside Christian Church, Wichita, Kansas, he just about "walked the legs off me." A year later he invited me to conduct a meeting for him with "the Church at 550 NE 76th Ave.," Portland, Oregon. There, he did it again. Archie Word, in the pulpit and out of the pulpit, was a tireless worker.

Obsessed? To borrow an expression, his was truly a "Magnificent Obsession." He was a man possessed with a sense of urgency. Ever mindful of wasted years, he was determined to make the most of the years that might yet be allotted him. And he did.

Resourceful! In his nomadic years, before settling in Portland, he made do with beggarly facilities (by today's standards) as he and Mrs. Word and their growing family "house trailered" in a homemade contrivance that was generally parked in back of the church. Privation, not privacy, would best describe the accommodations. But never did I hear him so much as suggest that he was thereby "suffering hardship for the gospel as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." Neither did Sister Word ever so much as speak one word of self-pity. Demure, but not self-effacing, she was a perfect helpmate for Archie Word.

Dedicated! If ever I knew a man dedicated to the work of evangelism, Archie Word was that man. "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel," epitomized A. Word as he preached The Word. He was (and is) a man to be remembered. We are debtors to him, and debtors also to Victor Knowles for his years of research and writing that have resulted in the book awaiting your reading and reflection.

Permit me to add a memorable anecdote that deserves recording. The opening night of the Wichita revival Archie arrived early enough to "decorate" the auditorium with his far from subtle posters. The first elder to appear on the scene, upon observing the gaudy display, commented in a disapproving tone obviously intended to be heard: "This looks like a Safeway store!" Archie quietly stepped to his side and, taking hold of his elbow, marched him out onto the front steps. Across the street was a grocery store with scarcely a customer to be seen. Down the street, a block away, was a Safeway store with drivers lined up waiting for a place to park. At that point Archie asked: "Who's got the business?" Safeway did! And we did! What a man! A man's man, and God's man in one.

—Russell Boatman

INTRODUCTION

The year before Archie Word was born (1901), they hung a horse thief on Gallows Hollow Hill, just a mile from his birthplace, near Glasgow, Kentucky.

When he was only a freshman in high school, he ran away from his home in Lindsay, California, and lied his way into the U.S. Navy. Although the young tough never made it “over there” to fight in France, he fought many a night on board the ill-fated ship, the *U.S.S. South Dakota*, becoming an undefeated light-heavyweight boxer. One dark night a German torpedo took Archie’s ship right in the boiler room. Archie found himself in the icy Atlantic, praying “the first real prayer” of his life. All around him men were screaming and dying.

After his stint in the Navy, Archie returned to California and finished high school, graduating at age 21. He became notorious as a bootlegger in the San Joaquin Valley. Soon he was running three dance halls and saloons in Fresno; singing, playing the violin and acting as his own "bouncer." For three years he lived hard, drank hard, fought hard. He saw the inside of many a jailhouse. By his own testimony, he was "hard as nails."

One night in 1925 he was nearly killed in a grisly automobile accident. One of his drinking buddies was killed, while another wound up in San Quentin on manslaughter charges. Chastened somewhat by his brush with death, Archie decided to try education. The burly ex-boxer and bootlegger tried business college — twice — but was expelled from school both times. Discouraged, he returned to his home town of Lindsay. One day, while he was pumping gas at a local service station, a man named W.S. Lemmon pulled up to the pumps. He listened in amazement as Archie sang while filling his gas tank. Lemmon, a preacher at nearby Porterville, asked Archie if he would like to sing at his church. At first Archie guffawed, but when he went home that night, he thought, "Why not?"

Archie had lived on booze so long, however, that he fortified himself before he went to the church. The elders were horrified — even threatening Lemmon with his job if he allowed Archie to sing. But Lemmon, an ex-cowboy and professional baseball player himself, saw a diamond-in-the-rough in Archie Word. "I'm going to let him sing," he told the elders. "If that young man is ever converted to Christ, he will be a power for God!"

It was not just fate or chance that the president of

Eugene Bible University happened to be present the night Archie sang. He offered Archie a full music scholarship, on the spot. Archie, who had tried college twice and been expelled twice, decided that the third time might be the charm he was looking for.

The rest is history. After two months at the Oregon Bible college, the ex-tough's heart was broken in an upper room prayer meeting and he surrendered his life to Christ. After two years of music ministry he entered the full-time preaching ministry in 1930. Three thousand were converted during his storied evangelistic career on the West Coast (1930-1935). A veteran California newspaperman (who had covered the revivals of D. L. Moody and Gipsy Smith) dubbed him "America's foremost evangelist." Eventually, Archie's revival slogan, "Hear A. Word Preach The Word," wound up in *Ripley's 'Believe It or Not'*.

From 1935 to 1968 Archie Word served as minister of the Montavilla church in Portland, Oregon (a church which helped start nine other churches in the Portland-Vancouver area). During this 33-year ministry he was recognized by the *Christian Standard* as having sent more men into the ministry than any other preacher in the fellowship of Christian Churches/Churches of Christ.

The last 20 years of his life were spent criss-crossing the U. S. in old-fashioned revival meetings. One newspaper reporter said that he preached "with a voice full of thunder and a fist full of punch." Those who knew him best, however, could never forget the tears in his eyes and the tremble in his voice whenever he would tell sinners how Christ had rescued him from a life of sin.

He always said he wanted to die in the pulpit and

he came close. He died November 17, 1988, a new half-finished sermon outline on his desk.

—Victor Knowles

PART I

(1901–1922)

THE LAD FROM LINDSAY

“He has talents equal to his business.”

—*The Pleiades*, 1922