



# Broken and Surrendered: The Making of a Man

Story by Debra Smith  
Photos courtesy of CC Costa Mesa

*"I was certain I would go out and turn the world upside down for our Lord. The Lord let me labor for 15 years, as I used up all my ideas, energy, talents, and abilities."* CHUCK SMITH

## A Mother's Secret Promise

Two months before Chuck was born in 1927 in Southern California, his 3-year-old sister Virginia contracted spinal meningitis. As the girl went into a seizure and then disconcertingly stilled, her mother scooped Virginia into her arms and darted down the street to the parsonage. As the pastor began to pray, Virginia's father entered the room. Chuck later tearfully recounted: "When he came in and saw her lifeless body, he fell on his knees and started crying—realizing she was gone. Then she opened her eyes—and she was healed. So that made a dramatic change on the family." Chuck's mother was already a devoted believer, but his father then became one as well. And unbeknownst to Chuck, his own life was also radically impacted.

conveying that he intended to spend his life leading God's people rather than practicing medicine, Chuck was surprised at his mother's simple smile. Not until years later did he learn the full story: On the day of Virginia's healing, his mom had silently devoted herself and the life of her unborn child—Chuck—to God's service in vocational ministry. However, Chuck clarified, "I didn't know that until she was on her deathbed. She didn't want that to influence me; she wanted it to be the Lord" directing his life's course.

As a toddler, Chuck was taught by his mom how to memorize Scripture. She prompted him to recite Bible verses aloud while they did chores and grocery shopped, and she read Bible stories to him and Virginia every night. He regarded biblical characters as heroes and even friends: "I ran with David" mentally, Chuck later said. But despite his mom's faithful discipleship, the young man's priorities were athletics and academics. Then two years after yielding to Christ as Lord and Savior at age 14, he attended a summer youth camp. He wasn't initially interested in going—he had made plans to surf. But his pastor urged him to utilize the scholarship a lady in the church had donated. While there, Chuck was challenged to live his life in light of eternity. His dream heretofore had been to become a surgeon, which he felt would guarantee him success and affluence. But meditating on the preacher's words, Chuck was drawn to the pastorate.

In 1945, Chuck moved one hour northwestward to study at Los Angeles' L.I.F.E. Bible College. In addition to gaining preaching experience and growing in awareness of the Lord's nearness while there, he began to recognize how his values and beliefs differed from the Foursquare Church—the Pentecostal denomination in which he was raised and educated. After graduating, though, Chuck felt confused and aimless. He didn't feel ready for the responsibilities of a senior pastorate, but he saw no other opportunities for Christian service. So he got a job and stayed near the Bible school, hoping his presence would remind professors and others of his availability should any vocational ministry opportunities arise. Soon, he met Kay—first noticing her at a Sunday night church service, then speaking to her at a ball game the next week. Her beauty attracted him; her devotion to Christ interested him deeply. Six weeks later, they were married.

Arriving home, 16-year-old Chuck timidly approached his parents. He feared his announcement would deeply disappoint his mother, whom he loved intensely. After

In a few weeks, the Smiths moved to Arizona. Kay's sister had arranged for Chuck to pastor a new Foursquare church plant, which could pay only \$15 weekly—a scant amount, even in 1948. In hindsight, they were grateful for the opportunity to learn to live on little. Handling money with wisdom and integrity, Chuck reflected, would become essential in the ministry to come.



Photos: Chuck at various points in life: as a boy, surfing, with his wife Kay, and with their four children. In the upper center photo, he was leading one of Calvary Chapel's early trips to Israel.

After pastoring two different churches in Arizona for a total of nearly four years, the couple moved with their two children to Corona, CA. Chuck became overconfident, he said: Rapid church growth in Tucson, AZ, had left him with self-assurance that he had the ability to build a thriving ministry anywhere. But in Corona, he and Kay found themselves unable to build the same rapport they had enjoyed with those in Arizona. Adding to his sense of defeat, he soon lost the full-time grocery store job he also worked in order to make ends meet. Chuck resigned and left the church, feeling crushed. In his mind, he was done not just with that particular fellowship—but with vocational ministry altogether.

He later reflected on his life until this point: “I had always been athletic—captain of the football and baseball teams, played tennis, loved to surf. I thought I had a lot to offer. I was strong, athletic, full of ideas, and had all kinds of energy. I was certain I would go out and turn the world upside down for our Lord. The Lord let me labor for 15 years, as I used up all my ideas, energy, talents, and abilities. I had nothing to show for it. I became so discouraged. I was defeated. I had passed the prime of my youth, losing a lot of my energy and giving up on most of my ideas.”

Chuck was a bored and restless delivery-truck driver about three months later when he received a phone call from Dr. Van Cleave. A Bible college professor whom Chuck greatly respected, Van Cleave believed that learning to serve God effectively consisted primarily of failing—in order to be broken of self-reliance and come to the beginning of God-reliance. As one of Chuck’s biblical heroes, the apostle Paul, said:

*A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. ... And He [the Lord] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b, 9a

Dr. Van Cleave encouraged Chuck to apply for a pastorate in nearby Huntington Beach, CA, and the opportunity led the Smiths into years of fulfilling ministry. There Chuck used a commentary on the Gospel of John to begin preparing sermons that became different than anything he had previously experienced: expositional Bible teaching.

Almost by accident, it seemed to him, he stumbled from delivering fiery, topical sermons intended primarily to stir emotions to conveying calm, verse-by-verse sermons intended chiefly to teach God’s Word. The change excited Chuck greatly, as he perceived parishioners to be growing spiritually more rapidly and deeply than ever before.

After teaching through John and then Romans in Huntington Beach, Chuck pastored two more California churches. Later he wrote of an attendance competition that he was being pressured to participate in during those years: “I was so sick of contests and of trying to hype the people for this kind of thing.” He prayed and sensed the Lord impress upon him Acts 2:47, “And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (KJV). Then, perceiving the Holy Spirit directing his thoughts to Zechariah 4:6b: “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts,” Chuck gratefully determined not to participate—but just to continue preaching God’s Word. As months passed, Chuck remarked, “All the other churches were getting involved in the contest, and we were getting involved with the Lord.” In time, he remembered, “I received a beautiful letter of congratulations. ‘Your church has won first place with the greatest increase in attendance during the contest period.’ I was supposed to attend a rally and pick up a trophy.” He responded with another letter: “I thank you for the honor, but it would be embarrassing to bring a trophy to the church, inasmuch as none of them knew a contest was going on. The Holy Spirit added to the church daily such as should be saved.” The experience underscored his reliance on the Lord.

In 1965, he accepted leadership of a non-denominational church plant in Corona. The decision was difficult: After 17 years within the stability of an established church network, the Smiths were returning, with four children, to the city where Chuck felt he had previously failed. But confident that the opportunity was from the Lord, they chose to trust Him and embrace the risk. The adventure started beautifully. Within a year, however, a disagreement with another church leader led to an impasse. So in 1965, Chuck assumed his eighth pastorate—of an independent church called Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, CA. Attendance was approximately 25. But unbeknownst to all, the Jesus Movement was about to break upon them. ✚



*‘Not by might ... but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts. ZECHARIAH 4:6b*

