

The "Toronto Blessing"

Modern man, strongly influenced by secularism and scientism, and so preoccupied with the material here and now, has never been able to erase completely his spiritual yearnings. He feels empty because he has not been able to experience God. In his search to fill his spiritual void, he seeks meaning in some form of New Age activity or in consumerism.

Many modern Christians also feel a spiritual void. They know God, but He seems hidden, so far removed from daily reality. They hunger for a genuine and close walk with God. Ever since the "Toronto Blessing" has been in the news, thousands believe that this is God's food and medicine for His spiritually hungry and hurting children. The "Toronto Blessing" began at Airport Vineyard Christian Fellowship near Toronto's Pearson Airport. Since January 20, 1994, meetings have been held six nights a week, drawing crowds of 800-1000. Extensive accounts of the "Toronto Blessing" appeared in Christian Week and Faith Today. Even the Globe & Mail, Maclean's Magazine, The Fifth Estate, and The CBC Evening News featured it as news. Visitors from around the world are travelling to Toronto with the hope of, receiving spiritual empowerment and blessing. Upon their return home, these pilgrims pass on the apparently portable "spiritual refreshing." In Great Britain, a Church of England publication reported that some 2000 congregations have experienced the so-called "Toronto Blessing."

Christian Week reports that by the end of 1994, an estimated 75,000 had attended the Airport Vineyard services, a cumulative attendance approaching 200,000, and among them some 10,000 clergy and pastors. Many of the latter came, spiritually weary and burdened, longing for a fresh encounter with God. Pastors from mainline denominations have claimed emotional healing through their experiences at these meetings. The focus of the national and international media attention has been on the outlandish and spectacular manifestations - falling down, uncontrollable laughing, shaking, dancing, weeping, and even the occasional roaring-seen by participants in the services as powerful manifestations of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The "TB" can be traced to South African born Rodney Howard Browne, an itinerant evangelist in the southern United States. Howard-Browne describes himself as a "Holy Ghost bartender," serving the "new wine of holy laughter." He equates "holy laughter" with the Biblical notion of joy. On a Trinity Broadcasting Network televised service Browne said that "holy laughter" was a last days expression of God's "Holy Spirit." During the service people fell to the ground in hysterical laughter.

One of the characteristics of Browne's "anointing" and the whole "laughing revival" is that it is readily transferable from person to person., Those anointed by Browne can now anoint others. The August 1994 Charisma magazine described Browne as the "spiritual conduit" for "holy laughter." A video advertised in the same issue documents the spread of this phenomenon. It is entitled "The Laugh that was Heard 'round the

World." This revival started by Browne made its way to the Toronto Airport Vineyard church. It has also received endorsement by Pat Robertson on his popular 700 Club. The spectacular manifestations of the "TB" have been welcomed by some as "God's work"; others see them as "another assault of Satan to divide the body of Christ." Rev. Richard D. Holiday, pastor of West Toronto Baptist Church in Etobicoke, gave a three-point critique. He said Christian worship must "involve intelligent communication." It must be done "decently and in order." It must be "Christ-centred and cross centred." He believes the Airport Vineyard is deficient in all those areas. Holiday believes that this movement has been able to flourish because we live in a climate of spiritual mediocrity, where preaching the great doctrines of the Christian faith is devalued, where the need to be reconciled to God is downplayed, and where there is a preoccupation with variety in worship services.

Rev. William McLeod, who was involved in the Saskatchewan Revival in the 1960s is concerned about the lack of repentance from sin in the "TB". "It doesn't seem to have the earmarks of the revivals of the past – the intense conviction of sin and realization of the holiness of God," said McLeod. Asked about the characteristics of the Saskatchewan revival, McLeod replied, "There are two main lines. Honesty before God and before men, and a mighty out-pouring of the love of God in the hearts of those who have repented." The Mid-West Memo, published in Regina, gave this remarkable description of what took place in the 1960s: "There is no extreme emotionalism in evidence anywhere. A quiet non-charismatic work of the Holy Spirit is the order of every meeting."

The controversy over the "TB" phenomena is driving wedges into congregations. While many people have already taken sides, there are many who still try to come to terms with what is going on. Unity is the heartfelt desire of every one who loves the body of Christ (Ps.133:1). But many wonder whether the "laughing" revival is really of God. They think of Jesus' warning that all who perform mighty deeds in His name are not necessarily known by Christ (Matt.7:21-23). Some sense a spiritual elitism. If you don't have the Airport Vineyard experience, you don't really count. Personal experience becomes a yardstick by which the spirituality of others is measured. Christian Week reports that denominations have been ridiculed by speakers because they were seen as closed-minded to what was happening.

The revivalists also give the impression that physical disorder and discomfort are not ordinarily God's providential will for His people. Yet Biblical references make plain that good health and wellbeing at all times is not God's plan for all believers.

Personal testimonies during the Airport Vineyard services usually focus on personal supernatural experiences. But emotionalism and powerful spiritual experiences are not necessarily signs of being filled with the Spirit. Similar experiences can be witnessed in non-Christian religions. Martyn Lloyd-Jones argues that we can't judge the truth of a movement in terms of feelings. He says that people who belong to the cults will often tell you that since they joined their particular cult, they have never known such love, peace,

and joy. The inerrant Bible should be our sole yardstick for truth. Subjective feelings are not reliable.

Is "holy laughter" the same as the Biblical "joy of the Lord"? In his book *When the Spirit Comes with Power*, John White tells about his encounter with the laughter phenomenon in the Sign and Wonders class at Fuller Seminary in 1984. He relates that Wimber had prayed that the Holy Spirit would equip a number of pastors and missionaries for the work God had called them to do. Right there and then a South African pastor began to giggle and couldn't stop. He continued to giggle, White writes, for several hours, waking during the night to do so.

Modern Pentecostal and charismatic movements view laughter, weeping and falling as characteristics of being slain by the Spirit. Defenders of this experience point to historic Protestant revivals. John Wesley's *Journal* tells of people, who during his preaching, "were struck to the ground and lay there groaning."

Numerous Biblical texts are cited in support of "being slain in the Spirit." After having carefully examined these texts, P.H. Alexander concludes that there is no biblical evidence for the experience as normative in Christian life (p.791 *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*).

There is no biblical support for the phenomenon of "holy laughter." Laughter is rarely mentioned in the Bible. Of the 40 references 22 of them refer to scornful laughter, as in Nehemiah 2: 19 when Nehemiah said, "they laughed us to scorn." Interestingly three references to authentic laughter in the New Testament warn against laughter (Luke 6:21;25; Jam.4:9)." Does this mean that laughter has no place in the Christian life? Of course not. The late Dr. Okke Jager's book *De Humor van de Bijbel (The Humour of the Bible)* gives a detailed description of God's sense of humour. But laughter is not something God chose to emphasize. There is no Biblical evidence either for the equation of laughter with the joy of the Spirit.

Does the "TB" display the characteristics of a true revival? What may we expect from a revival? Are spectacular manifestations drawing agnostics, atheists, the secular man to the Lord and His church? During the severe religious persecutions in the former USSR, young Pentecostals had to endure the brunt of the suffering. When they went to social functions they were often abused and even beaten up, but in spite of this their numbers greatly increased. This was not on account of spectacular manifestations. There were none. Their lives were seen in sharp contrast with ordinary Soviet life, with its alcoholism and spiritual emptiness.

In past revivals Christians were aware that love for God should be shown by an earnest desire to keep His commandments (John 14:23-25). There was a recognition of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Jesus Christ and not the Holy Spirit was the focus of revivals. Self was put to death - to be crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, risen again with Christ, given new life with Christ (Rom.6). Sin was shunned and holiness sought. The exhortation of Hebrews 12: 14 was taken seriously: "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord."

In past revivals radically change - attitudes and temperaments (people were witnessed, moral standards were raised, and churches prospered spiritually and numerically. Christian fathers assumed leadership in their families and churches. Christians became active in community and national affairs. They became the "salt and light." They made a social impact. As a result of spiritual awakenings organizations for the promotion of Christian causes and social concerns, Christian universities, colleges, seminaries, Bible institutions and mission bodies were founded. "In times of awakening in American history," wrote Os Guinness, "individuals were certainly awakened, but worldviews were also changed, communities transformed, progress given a dynamic leap forward, and social justice brought back into central focus. The great awakenings began in times of trouble and confusion but they were not pathological or reactionary. They were restorative and constructive. Their effect was to revitalize faith, enterprise, idealism, and a sense of national purpose."

We may not accept uncritically every movement that claims to come from God. Scripture and church history teach that Christians are always waging spiritual warfare. There are still two kinds of forces at work, the forces of God and the forces of the devil (Eph.6:12). In our longing for more of God, a greater blessing, and a deeper spiritual experience, we are still called upon to test the spirits. We must use our critical faculties to discern truth from error. "Do not believe every spirit," commanded the apostle John, "but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4: 1).