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‘The Lakeland Outpouring’: A Florida Curate’s Egg

In 2008, much attention was given, especially in some charismatic circles, to the ‘Lakeland Outpouring’ in Florida and especially to Todd Bentley. Nigel Scotland here provides an account of these events and begins the task of assessing the Outpouring and the claims made for and against it and its charismatic figurehead.

In 1895 Punch magazine published a cartoon by George du Maurier entitled ‘True Humility’. It depicts Mr Jones, a green young curate taking breakfast at the bishop’s residence. The bishop exclaims, ‘I’m afraid you’ve got a bad egg, Mr Jones’. The young clergyman is too nervous to agree and replies, ‘Oh, no, my Lord, I assure you that parts of it are excellent’. The expression ‘a curate’s egg’ in this instance signified something that was partly good and partly bad, but as a result is entirely spoilt. In popular usage the phrase ‘curate’s egg’ has tended to denote a mix of the good and the bad. It may well be that the intensive religious meetings that were held in Florida during the summer of 2008 will in the end prove to be something of a ‘curate’s egg’. Clearly there have been some bad elements, as numerous bloggers and armchair critics have been actively engaged in pointing out, but whether they outweigh or invalidate the good which others perceived is an issue that perhaps can only in the end be judged, if at all, with the benefit of future hindsight.

The Lakeland Outpouring

So what was the ‘Lakeland Outpouring’? One thing is certain: it was not ‘a revival’, as Ignited Church, the place where it began, were at pains to point out.¹ Nor was it an ‘awakening’. The one thing Florida churches are not, is asleep. In fact they are far more lively than in most places in the Western world. Probably it is most accurate to suggest that Lakeland was indeed an ‘outpouring’ of some kind. To the great majority of participants it was an outpouring of worship and of the fire of God’s Spirit for evangelism and the nations. For other believers it was an ‘outpouring’ of Christ’s presence in their lives, bringing emotional and physical healing.

The Lakeland ‘outpouring’ had three aspects:

- Ignited Church, the place where it began with the coming of Todd Bentley and his team on 3rd April, 2008

1 Fresh Fire Meetings did, however, in some publicity refer to Lakeland as ‘a revival’.

- Todd Bentley's 'Fresh Fire Meetings' at Lakeland Airport which took the form of talks and seminars
- Those who participated by watching the evening meetings on *God TV*.

Ignited Church

Significantly, Ignited Church where the 'Lakeland Outpouring' first occurred was the same congregation which had spawned the March 1993 nightly revival services led by the South African Evangelist, Rodney Howard-Browne, at the conclusion of which 'thousands awaited prayer'.² These soon exploded across the continent to Brownsville and Pensacola to become the 'Toronto Blessing'.

That a second movement should happen in this very same place came as no surprise to some, for in January 2008 the whole Ignited congregation was called to a month's prayer and fasting. Added to this is the fact that Lakeland is situated in the heart of revival country, the 'Southern Bible Belt': a glance at the Lakeland telephone directory shows that there are more than 300 Christian churches in the same area!

Ignited Church, standing on Highway 98 with its flame-shaped spire and live screen message board, is one of the town's many independent churches. Pastored in 1993 by Dr. Karl Strader who came from a Methodist background, it is now led by his son, Stephen Strader. In 1993, Stephen was in charge of all the technical aspects of the church's ministry but a subsequent year working with Rodney Howard Browne³ inspired and equipped him for the ministry which he then took on when his father retired. Stephen is a delightful, laid-back, somewhat portly man who delights to tell listeners in his introductory talk that he 'buffets his body daily' though in a rather different manner to St Paul since he prefers to do it in places such as *TGI Fridays!*

Once the 'outpouring' began, Stephen Strader and some of his staff team organized a series of morning teach-ins which ran from 10.00am till 1.00pm each weekday. These covered a range of topics that included revival, the nature of faith, healing and what is meant by prosperity. There were additional opportunities for pastors and Church leaders, more focused on leadership and pastoral issues. Some participants found them as beneficial as the evening meetings led by the Fresh Fire team.

The instruction given by the Ignited staff made it abundantly clear that Lakeland was not about replicating and sending out Todd Bentley clones with nodding heads and shouts of 'bam' (a wrestling term I am informed) to boot. Rather, as they saw it, the purpose of the outpouring was that each individual participant should find their particular and personal calling, seek passionately after God's presence, and be wholly secure in themselves and what God had called them to do. As one seminar speaker

² Strader 1996: 25.

³ Rodney Howard-Browne was born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He married Adonica in 1981 and for the next six years they taught and preached in Southern Africa. In 1988 they traveled to the USA. They pastor a church in Tampa, Florida which has 3,000 members and now travel the greater part of

every year with emphatic results. For instance, 539,000 attended their crusade near Durban in 2004. Their eighteen year old daughter died of Cystic Fibrosis at the age of 18 in 2002 and they have resolved 'to make Satan pay' by bringing healing to as many as they can across the globe.

put it, 'You can't take Todd Bentley back with you. You can't even take back what Todd Bentley is doing. You can't be Todd Bentley. You have to be authentically you. Your purpose in God will never be lived by anyone else.' Dr. Karl Strader put the matter clearly, 'It's not about taking an anointing back. It's about becoming what you are called to be'. Seminar speakers were at pains to emphasise that the 'outpouring' was not about gifts or experiences, 'it's all about Jesus, period'. It was also recognized and stressed that, as in all moves of the Holy Spirit, 'there is a mixture of the flesh and indeed some demonic activity'. The flesh, it was pointed out in some of the seminars, was visible in some of the airport gatherings in such aspects as immodest dress (could be any church!), excessively loud shouting in intercession and praise, and other religious exercises. Despite many bloggers and article writers questioning and condemning Lakeland for not being 'a genuine revival',⁴ it was underlined again and again at Ignited Church that this was no sense a revival.

Todd Bentley & Fresh Fire Ministries International

Todd Bentley (b.1976) clearly stands in a direct line of twentieth century healing evangelists that includes Maria Woodworth-Etter, Ameer Semple McPherson, James Coe, William Branham, Jack Lake and Katherine Kuhlmann. Their lives and writings have clearly fired, challenged and inspired him. Categorized by church historian, John Crowder, as 'a modern day miracle worker' and one of the 'New Mystics', Bentley spent three months of 'intense soaking' during which he was 'plastered in the presence of God for up to twelve hours a day'.⁵ From this overwhelming experience, while still in his early twenties, he launched his 'Fresh Fire Ministries International' (FFMI) through which hundreds of thousands are reported to have come to faith in Christ and claim to have been healed.⁶ Fueled by stories from books such as T.L. Osborn's *Healing the Sick*, Todd declared, 'Healing is for Me!'.⁷ As a healing evangelist, he evidenced a particular gift for healing the deaf. Observers have witnessed the ears of rows of deaf people pop open at his meetings.⁸ Despite what many critics, and indeed sympathizers, regarded as controversial methods, Todd clearly presented himself as a man who did his utmost to listen to God intently and in an attempt to discern the nature of the illness of some of those who stood before him in the meetings.

God TV

The third aspect of the 'Lakeland outpouring' was *God TV's* broadcasting of Todd's services, first at the Lakeland Centre and subsequently in the 4,000 seater tent which was set up on the edge of Lakeland airport. A decision was taken to broadcast the proceedings at a very early stage by Wendy and Rory Alec, the owners of *God TV*. It was this which opened up what was happening to audiences across the world and resulted in many making the decision to journey to Lakeland and, in Todd's own words, 'get some'!

As Stewart Hoover pointed out in his classic study of the Electronic Church, 'Religious broadcasting is a powerful new force on the national and international

4 See for example, 'Is this a real revival taking place in Florida?', *Church of England Newspaper*, 30 May, 2008.

5 See Crowder 2006: 228, 230.

6 See Bentley 2008a: 253-257, 278, 291.

7 Bentley 2008a: 144.

8 Crowder 2006: 228.

religious scene. Proponents and critics alike attribute to it a power far beyond that of conventional churches and conventional religious expression'.⁹ Such indeed proved to be the case as Todd Bentley and his team had one eye constantly on their television audiences. They welcomed them each evening, inviting them to receive pronouncements from the platform and join in prayers for healing or other needs. Those who were present at Lakeland were also frequently urged to contact sick relatives and friends on their cell phones so that they could receive the focused prayer from the three or four thousand people who gathered each evening.

The Fresh Fire Meetings: What happened?

The main evening meetings in Lakeland began at Ignited Church but after only a very short period it was obvious that more room was needed. In consequence the venue was moved to the Lakeland Centre on Florida Avenue. When this was no longer available, on account of previous bookings, two huge interlinked tents capable of accommodating 10,000 people were set up on the edge of Lakeland Regional Airport.

The evening gatherings there began at 7.00pm and generally lasted until 10.30 or 11.00pm with prayer and ministry often extending on until 1.00am. Attendance seemed to hold steady at between four and five thousand a night with more coming at the weekends. The predominant evening format was two hours of worship followed by ministry directed by Todd (or one of his associates) from the platform. These often ended in opportunities for what was described 'impartation' of the power and presence of God. On other nights there were sermons, sometimes of considerable length: on Saturday 12th July, Roy Fields, one of Todd's team members spoke for an hour and a quarter on 'The Importance of the Heart'.

Fresh Fire worship might be described as a 'high-octane' version of New Wine. Many of those who came from overseas found that, in order to really enter into it, there was the hard but necessary task of breaking through the American revivalist culture and atmosphere. Revivalist worship has traditionally often been very high volume and Lakeland was no exception. Lasting for about two hours each evening and led usually by Roy Fields on keyboards, the vocalists could distinctly and clearly be heard a hundred yards and more away from the tent.

The music was for the greater part heavy rock. The words which best described the singing were loud, passionate, occasionally raucous, intense and repetitive. At times the atmosphere reached almost hysteria pitch but was probably nothing much beyond what would be found at a pop concert or on the football terraces on a Saturday afternoon when the home side is hitting the back of the net. *God TV* homed in on particularly intense and powerful moments when, with the aid of repetition, participants were urged and exhorted 'to press into' the Lord's presence. Refrains such as 'Rain down, rain down', 'I am pouring out a vial of worship' and 'How Great is our God' punctured people's subconscious and were compellingly memorable.

During the worship there was much shouting, cheering and flag-waving by representatives of the thirty or more nations who were present on any given evening. The small cluster of Todd's interns, team members and visiting revivalists

⁹ Hoover 1988: 220.

who had seats on the platform usually swayed and rocked and some even engaged in a little 'turkey trotting'. That said, the worship was decidedly Christ-focused with many songs addressed to and/or in praise of Jesus, offering Him worship and adoration or making supplication for his presence in the world or individual lives. Most of the participants were left free to worship in whatever way they chose, with many sitting and some just listening or reading their Bibles.

For Roy Fields, it was 'all about falling in love with Jesus all over again' and 'restoring the joy of our salvation'. Todd Bentley often did not preach a sermon but devoted the time to testimonies although there were series of sermons and opportunities were also given for people to commit themselves to Christ.

Todd Bentley and FFMI were adamant that the 'Florida Outpouring' was not for the church but rather for those beyond its bounds. Several FFMI platform members professed to have encountered the 'Angel of Winds of Change' who had come 'to release winds and coals of fire across the world'. However, they seemed not to be able to articulate the precise form in which the appearance took place. These winds and coals of Fresh Fire were said to be the presence of the compassionate, transforming, healing power of Christ.

Like the Toronto Blessing, Lakeland Fresh Fire was held to be transferable and so Todd urged people from around the world to 'come and get some'. FFMI team members sought to impart it in various ways through worship and song, together with the provision of opportunities to pass through prayer lines or to be prayed for in national groupings or individually. Ultimately of course the authenticity of such 'impartations' can only be assessed by the impact those who returned from Lakeland will have on their local communities in the days and months that lie ahead.

A significant part of most of the Lakeland Centre and airport evening meetings was devoted to healing and testimonies of healing. Todd frequently appeared to operate out of what charismatic and Pentecostal Christians have taken to be 'words of knowledge' where the person concerned listens, as best he or she can, to what they take to be the inner voice of God and then speaks it out.¹⁰ In Bentley's case this was in the form of announcing that an individual person had been healed of a particular disease or that healing of a specific condition such as deafness or asthma had taken place. People who knew or felt themselves to have been 'touched' or impacted in some physical way were then sometimes invited to come up onto the platform and share what they felt had taken place. On some occasions individuals who had been healed at previous meetings returned to tell their story.

Inevitably, with powerful platform rhetoric and a considerable array of unverified resurrection stories, some of these present were captured in the emotion of the moment and mistakenly believed themselves to have been physically touched or healed. Undoubtedly some also responded to calls for prayer or ministry in the intense emotion of an altar call or as a result of group pressure rather than out of their own volition. The overwhelming psychological intensity of being in the midst of a very large congregation with friends or family standing alongside willing the

10 Not all New Testament scholars understand the term 'word of knowledge' (1 Cor. 12:8) in this way. Some, including the charismatic scholar Arnold Bittlinger, see it as referring to 'knowledge about God', relating back to 1

Corinthians 1 (Bittlinger 1967: 30-32). It is, however, clear that Jesus knew things about people (e.g. he knew the Samaritan woman had had five husbands).

sick to respond to prayer calls, exerted an immense emotional pressure on them to do so. It could of course be argued that many hundreds of people who followed Jesus and witnessed his miracles were also caught up in the emotion of the moment but left him at the time of his crucifixion, probably for that very reason. That said, there were undoubtedly many hundreds, indeed thousands, who received healings and other lasting benefits either at Lakeland or through having watched on *God TV*.

Assessing the outpouring

Todd Bentley's story

It has often been remarked that religious movements are like the shining sun which casts a shadow in its wake. Lakeland was no exception. Depending upon one's perspective, there were, as well as the positive benefits to which many testified, a number of dysfunctional or concerning aspects to the meetings. The majority of these centred around Todd Bentley himself who, like prominent twentieth-century healing revivalists such as John Lake, William Branham, Jack Coe and others, came from a dysfunctional home background.¹¹ Indeed, any sensitive observer would marvel at what Bentley went on to accomplish given the emotional deprivation and acute loneliness he endured during his early years.

Bentley, born when his father was just nineteen, had a thoroughly fractured family background and upbringing. After numerous rows, his father left his mother when Todd was only four. His education consisted of spasmodic attendance up to eighth grade. By the time he was twelve, Todd was drinking, smoking and regularly stealing from local shops. He had his first sexual encounter when he was just eleven by which time he was heavily into pornography. Although he was never a Satanist, Todd spent many teenage hours communicating with spirits from the grave and inviting different ones to visit and empower him. He was into heavy metal and found comfort in the music of *Iron Maiden*, *Motley Crew* and *Metallica*. In his early teens he started to do dope with his father and was often high on speed or acid. Drug addiction and a prison sentence at seventeen were followed by several foster homes and three drug overdoses.

He was finally delivered from this downward spiral when six foot four Wally, a recent ex-offender and new Christian, pushed a Bible against Todd's throat and said, 'You're going to have to get saved...You'd better repent or you're going to burn'. Too scared to raise any objection, Bentley cried out for Jesus to save him. His life soon changed dramatically because, as he put it in his own words, 'There's no high like the Most High'. He had a powerful baptism in the Holy Spirit and believed himself freed from the grip of the demonic.

¹¹ See Liardon n.d. [10th edition]: Maria Woodworth Etter's husband, P.H. Woodworth Etter was unfaithful and finally after twenty-six stormy years of marriage they were divorced in 1891 (58). Charles Parham was taken into custody in 1907 and charged with sodomy under Texas law (129). He also supported the Klu Klux Klan (133). John G. Lake's first wife, Jennie, died while he was away ministering in Kalahari.

Most accounts attribute her death to malnutrition and physical exhaustion (182). Kathryn Kuhlman married Burroughs Waltrip in 1938 despite the Holy Spirit's prompting that the relationship was wrong. Waltrip divorced his wife after having met Kathryn. Kathryn married him because he claimed his wife had left him when in fact the reverse was the case. She left him in 1944 (285-7).

Not long after his conversion Todd related that he 'distinctly heard God's audible voice, "I want you to go to Abbotsford, British Columbia"', a location in his home state (although he had never heard of it). It proved to be the small town where he met and married his wife, Shonah, in 1995 and where *Fresh Fire Ministries* was born in 1997. Todd developed a great burden for the sick as he studied the writings of T.L. Osborn.

About that time, Patricia King, a Christian leader in British Columbia, prophesied at a Christian Conference that God was sending Todd to the nations and that he would do no further secular work.¹² So it proved, and *Fresh Fire Ministries* moved out across the globe with seemingly astounding results as Todd took to the road in more than twenty countries. He traveled widely and by 2003 had already visited more than thirty countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and North and South America, professing to have seen over a hundred thousand people commit their lives to Christ. The influence of his Nairobi Crusade was such that the crowd swelled to 30,000 on the last evening with 1,500 making a decision to follow Christ. At Mwanza in Tanzania an estimated 210,000 attended his meetings with over five thousand committing themselves to Christ¹³ and 15,277 were converted at Kigali in 2003.¹⁴ Despite these startling statistics, which even allowing for inaccurate reporting or exaggeration are impressive to say the very least, Todd's life and ministry has been the subject of ongoing debate and concern.

Strange encounters

One area which provoked the 'Revival Police' (Lakeland shorthand for the critics) to get out their notebooks was the fact of Bentley's many professed divine and angelic encounters. Todd worked with a fairly straight-forward view of the heavenly realms: the first heaven is 'the realm we live in right now', the second heaven is where the demons live and the third heaven is where God lives.¹⁵ Along with the apostle Paul and many recent revivalists, Todd claims to have visited and experienced 'the third heaven or dwelling place of God'.

'In my visits', he wrote, 'it felt as though a huge vacuum cleaner sucked me up through a roof – yep, a roof!'. On 'landing' on the occasion of his first visit he wasn't too sure whether, like St Paul, his body had gone with him or not. 'I am of the impression', he wrote, 'that our body doesn't leave, but our spirits travel'.¹⁶

Bentley is somewhat reluctant to share the intimate details of the third heaven because, as he put it, 'it seems to cheapen the experience, much like a husband and wife exposing what goes on in their secret union'.¹⁷ He did, however, reveal that on one of his Third Heaven trips he was taken to Paradise and walked in the Garden of Eden where he modestly reported that he tasted fruit from the Tree of Life.

The frequency with which Bentley and other celebrities of the charismatic world make these trips to heaven contrasts strongly with the experience of the apostle Paul who only ever once (2 Cor. 12:1-4) reported having been caught up in the third heaven. Even then he never mentioned the incident until some fourteen years

12 Bentley 2008a: 162.

13 Bentley 2008a: 291.

14 Bentley 2008a: 319.

15 Bentley 2008b: 117-8.

16 Bentley 2008b: 118.

17 Bentley 2008b: 119.

later when he stated that he was given a thorn in the flesh to keep him humble. In the light of the New Testament evidence, critics might suggest that some contemporary revivalists are in reality engaging in a form of astral projection and travel, a phenomenon common among New Religious Movements such as Eckankar and certain UFO religious groups.¹⁸

Closely related to Bentley's ethereal journeyings, many have expressed doubts about some of his reported angelic encounters. Orthodox and conservative Christians should have little difficulty in accepting the reality of angels and Christians encountering and being guided by them. There are many references to the ministry of angels in both the Old and New Testaments including an injunction to give hospitality to strangers because in so doing 'some have entertained angels unawares' (Heb. 13:2). Distinguished Christians, including Billy Graham, have written books on the subject of angels.

Where Bentley's encounters have raised questions in people's minds is in their nature, scope and frequency. For instance, he related how he was visited by four of the seven spirits mentioned in the Book of Revelation.¹⁹ On another occasion he saw many angels in an auditorium at Albany, including one (who was twenty feet tall and named 'Healing Revival') whom Todd believed had been sent by God to establish a healing revival.²⁰ In January 2002, when he was in British Columbia, Bob Jones, one of the Kansas City prophets who had been removed from ministry for 'serious sin' in 1991,²¹ released two angels to Todd to be part of his ministry.²² They have apparently remained with him ever since that time, serving, guarding and guiding him.

Bentley has a lengthy chapter entitled 'Angelic Hosts' in his book, *The Reality of the Supernatural World*. Here he gives much detailed information such as the fact that Seraphim have six wings with feathers some of which 'fall in meetings'.²³ He is also clear that angels are there to serve God's people and that although we should not speak directly to angels we should pray to the Father to release them into our lives.

Many scholars are of the view that angels only appear in male form, a conviction that may have arisen from the patriarchal nature of Judaism and the early Christianity which emerged from it. On this score Bentley's encounters with an angel called 'Emma' have aroused the suspicions of some of the heresy hunters, although it could perhaps be countered that 'the two women with wings' referred to in the book of Zechariah (Zech. 5:9) were angelic beings. Emma was, according to Bentley, the angel 'that helped to birth the whole prophetic movement in Kansas City in the 1980s'. He related in a Fresh Fire release that 'she was a mothering-type' and that he first met her in a service in Beulah, North Dakota. With an appearance that 'was almost like Kathryn Kuhlman in those old videos when she wore a white dress and looked like she was gliding across the platform, Emma appeared beautiful and young about 22 years old but she was old at the same time. She seemed to carry the wisdom, virtue and grace of Proverbs 31 on her life'. Bentley goes on to relate that she walked up and down the aisles of the church

18 See, for example, Partridge 2003; Scotland 2005: 66-7.

19 Bentley 2008b: 238.

20 Bentley 2008a: 232.

21 Moriarty 1992: 102.

22 Moriarty 1992: 242.

23 Bentley 2008b: 212. See also Bentley 2003 (online at www.etpv.org/2003/angho.html along with other writings by and about Bentley)

putting gold dust on the people. After exclaiming, 'God what is happening?', the Lord told him, 'She is releasing the gold which is both the revelation and the financial breakthrough that I am bringing into this church'. Todd was particularly encouraged by this because 'within three weeks, the church had given me the biggest offering I had ever received to that point in my ministry. Thousands of dollars! Thousands!'

Among other angels whom Bentley claimed regularly supported Fresh Fire Ministries is 'the Scribe Angel' who appeared behind people when he prophesied over them. The Scribe Angel 'looks like Abraham Lincoln and has the appearance of a historian!'. He apparently has a scroll and one of those old-fashioned quill pens and writes down Todd's words in gold ink.²⁴ Other angels who work for FFM deliver messages, partner with us in warfare, assist with evangelism, and minister healing and strength.²⁵

Although Bentley has categorically stated that Christians should not worship angels or engage them in conversation, his familiarity with them and his dependence on them for guidance, evangelistic help and assistance with his bank balances brings him perilously close to those individuals at Colossae whom the apostle Paul denounced for not dissimilar reasons. New Age web sites are replete with details of how to pray to angels and receive them as guardians, healers and spirit guides, which seem very close to some of Todd Bentley's views. The New Testament is, however, clear that Christian people are to seek these ministries from God alone.

Unorthodox styles and procedures

When Bentley ministers to the sick he clearly has some unorthodox procedures. These include pushing some people down (though some who fall do so without assistance) and shouting 'bam' or 'boom' when praying for them. He also makes a number of other inarticulate utterances such as Chacka BumBa. Additionally, there have also been one or two occasions when Todd has literally endeavoured to 'kick cancer out of someone's body' and reportedly kned someone in the chest in response to the Holy Spirit 'who told him to do it'.²⁶ Interestingly, similar practices were not unknown in the pagan world of the first century Roman Empire.²⁷

The falling phenomenon and pushing people over, both of which happened on many hundreds of occasions at Lakeland, have been a feature of the Charismatic movement since its beginning.²⁸ Falling to the ground has been a well-documented occurrence in times of religious awakening since the Wesleys, Whitefield and the Second Great Awakening in America. It is widely held that many who fall at Christian

²⁴ Bentley 2008b: 231-2.

²⁵ Bentley 2008b: 226-34.

²⁶ *Church Times Blog*, 27 June, 2008 (www.churchtimes.co.uk/blog_post.asp?id=59129)

²⁷ Tacitus, the Roman historian, relates how when Vespasian visited Alexandria two men came to him, one with diseased eyes and the other with a diseased hand, and said they had been advised by their god to come to him. The man with the diseased eyes requested Vespasian 'to moisten his eyes

with spittle' and the man with the diseased hand asked Vespasian 'to trample on his hand with the sole of his foot'. Vespasian was finally persuaded to comply with their requests. The man's hand was immediately healed and the blind man saw. Tacitus recorded, 'Both facts are attested to this day, when falsehood can bring no rewards, by those who were present on the occasion' (Tacitus, *Histories* 4:81).

²⁸ Scotland 2000:47-48 on 'The Charismatic Pushover'.

meetings do so under the power and influence of the Holy Spirit but others may do so as a result of autosuggestion or because they feel themselves to be in a secure environment or because the music has put them into a light hypnotic state. Yet others have regarded falling as a psychological fail-safe response on the part of those who have no capacity for a spiritual dynamic. None of these are necessarily dysfunctional. What is, however, is the practice of pushing people over which can be very easily accomplished by placing two fingers on the person's forehead while placing the other hand in the small of the their back. Whilst such a procedure may boost the ministering brother or sister's ego it clearly can undermine the recipient's dignity and self-respect. Indeed, it is hard to imagine Jesus pushing people over.

Not a few Christian eyebrows have also been raised by (and pontifications made against) Bentley's many tattoos which he received comparatively recently and well after his conversion. These, together with his somewhat portly frame and thinning hair, give him the appearance of a maverick. Many regarded his tattoos as a mutilation of the temple of the Holy Spirit while others found them objectionable, urging they were a form of demonic self-mutilation. It should though be noted that while tattoos were forbidden under the old covenant, the ceremonial Levitical law was never held to be binding on Christians and increasing numbers of Christians have taken to tattooing parts of their anatomy.

Whilst it is hard to endorse some of Todd's meaningless booms, bams and chacka bum bas from dominical example, it is worthy of note that on several occasions in the New Testament, Jesus is recorded as teaching 'in a loud voice' and 'offering up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears' (Heb. 5:7). He blew on people to receive the Holy Spirit, denounced clerical robes and titles, called King Herod 'a fox' and compared the religious leaders of his day to white-washed sepulchres. Some claim that Todd's occasional pushings, slappings and putting the boot in are no more startling than Jesus placing his fingers in people's ears, spitting at them, anointing their eyes with clay paste or touching their tongues. And nothing Todd has done could match for startling effect Jesus sending a cluster of demons into a herd of two thousand pigs, causing them to run down a steep hillside to a violent death in the sea!

Extravagant prophecies

There were a number of extravagant prophecies given during the Lakeland Outpouring. Perhaps the most obvious was that of Wendy Alec of *God TV* who prophesied that Jesus would appear in person at the Todd Bentley meeting on 8th June. It didn't happen. On the 23rd June, Joshua Fowler prophesied that Todd would go with a glory even like William Branham and that Great Britain would be set ablaze by the power of God'.²⁹ On the 13th July, James Goll, in a highly animated display, prophesied that 'Todd Bentley, but not only Todd Bentley, will go into another level of commissioning. He will be one who will help go to every continent and uncap the hot lava eruptions of the love and power of God in Jesus name. Call it global advance, call it global awakening, call it global glory'.³⁰

29 *The Apostolic Alignment*, Part 2, 23 June, 2008 from stephenstrader@gmail.com

30 Published text of James Goll's prophecies, 13 July, 2008. The delivery of the prophecy is also online at www.youtube.com

Bentley's marital difficulties

Bentley ministered at Lakeland for a hundred days without a rest. It was therefore inevitable that his relationships and marriage were going to hit the buffers bearing in mind the previous difficulties with his wife Shonna. The first signs were apparent when it was announced on the Fresh Fire web site that Todd would be taking some time off 'to refresh and to rest from the Florida Outpouring after nearly one hundred days of ministry'.³¹ Speculation was soon in the air and by the following month even *The Church Times* carried an article entitled 'Florida Outpouring: Bentley to be humbled for a season'.³² This reported the announcement that Mr and Mrs Bentley were 'presently experiencing significant friction in their marriage, and are currently separated'. Three days after that announcement it was stated that Todd Bentley has entered into 'an unhealthy relationship' with a female member of his staff and that he had announced that the outpouring would cease on 23rd August. Finally, on 28th November, 2008, the Fresh Fire Leadership and Board of Directors announced that Todd had committed adultery and had confessed himself 100% responsible for the divorce.³³

The Branham connection

One of the major lines of criticism of Todd Bentley is his long-standing devotion to William Branham (1909-1965). During the heyday of Branham's ministry he held many healing campaigns at which it was reported that the lame walked, the blind saw and the deaf heard. There were even reports of his meetings in *Time* magazine.³⁴ In his early years Branham believed in the divinity of Jesus and the finished work of Christ. Towards the end of his life however he denied the Trinity, calling it 'a demonic doctrine' and taught that he was the reincarnation of Elijah and the seventh angel mentioned in Rev. 10:7. He was constantly in touch with a variety of 'ministering angels' some of whom were allegedly working with Todd Bentley at Lakeland. Branham came to teach the doctrines of a Latter Rain and Manifest Sons of God which assert that in the very last times before the ending of the age the Holy Spirit would be poured out in super-abundant measure such that there would be unprecedented miracles of healing that would hasten Jesus' return and would cause an elite of semi-divine figures to emerge on the earth. They have been variously referred to as the 'Elijah Generation', 'Joel's Army' or the 'Manifest Sons of God'. Only the most literal and specious interpretation of passages in Joel and Malachi could even begin to support the idea of anointed charismatic superstars orchestrating a world-wide revival in the eschaton.

In addition to this erroneous teaching, Branham developed a low view of women and was undoubtedly a misogynist, believing that a man could divorce whenever he wished and remarry a virgin but a woman couldn't remarry under any circumstances. Following his death a small group known as the 'Messengers' or Branhamites have lived on believing him to be the Laodicean messenger to the church age.³⁵

31 Announcement from Fresh Fire Ministries, 12th August, 2008. Online at www.freshfire.ca/?Id=1064&pid=8

32 *Church Times*, 22 August, 2008.

33 *Fresh Fire Ministry Update*, 28 November, 2008. Online at www.freshfire.ca/?Id=1067&pid=8

34 Liardon n.d. [10th edition]: 326-33.

35 Liardon n.d. [10th edition]: 340-1. Branham's influence also lives on through the controversial Kansas City prophet, Bob Jones.

It was this man whose writings and teaching Todd Bentley was so taken up with. Whilst Branham achieved some remarkable successes in his very early days he is hardly the ideal role model. Many of the self-styled American apostles seem, however, to be under Branham's influence.

Ineffective pastoral supervision

In the early days of charismatic renewal much attention was given to accountability which resulted in controlling leadership and heavy shepherding. Sadly, it often proved to be the case that those controlling leaders were themselves answerable to no-one save perhaps to trustees they themselves had appointed. Todd Bentley was clearly in just such a situation. His trustees, who later acknowledged their failure in the matter,³⁶ allowed him to work, leading and organizing meetings for a hundred consecutive days. The FFM directors also stated, 'As fatigue began to set in, significant personal issues in Todd and his relationship with Shannah were exacerbated'. This led to his replacing his times of 'soaking in God's presence' with alcohol, movies and leisure time spent with the younger 'more impressionable members of his staff and road crew'. The same document admitted that Todd 'has consumed more alcohol on a few occasions than is prudent or becoming a Christian leader (or any believer for that matter)'.

Quite apart from a breach of the command to rest such a punishing schedule would inevitably have spelled disaster for any marriage, particularly where a wife and family were thousands of miles away. This was the case with Todd who had only two years previously been counseled through a similar situation by his friend and mentor, Bill Johnson. Todd now sadly developed a deep emotional attachment to one of his female staff members and it wasn't long before the church press was regaling the world with news of impending divorce proceedings.

This crisis situation in Todd's marriage was then compounded by the visit to Lakeland on the 23rd June of a large number of senior charismatic apostolic brothers and sisters from across America and beyond. They came to what was described as 'a ceremony celebrating the formal apostolic alignment of Todd Bentley'. In a spectacle that even the Roman Catholic Church would have found hard to match for self-aggrandisement and pomposity, they came ostensibly to endorse Todd's 'outpouring' (or was it also that they wanted to get some live TV public acknowledgement for their own anointed and international ministries?). The proceedings were led by Dr Peter Wagner who announced himself as 'President of the International Coalition of Apostles' and went on to give an address entitled 'Lakeland Outpouring Apostolic Alignment'. He began with the following lines.

36 See *Fresh Fire Ministry Update*, 28 November, 2008: 'The fact that the revival was in Florida, three thousand miles from our home office in Abbotsford, BC, Canada, meant that the entire administration for the

revival was provided by a rotating stream of church leaders and Board members who would assist behind the scenes and on the platform and then return to Canada, usually on the verge of total exhaustion'.

A warm welcome to those of you who are present in this tent and to you who are watching on GOD TV. You are about to witness an event which could well have historic implications not only for the Lakeland Outpouring but also for our nation and for many other nations of the world. Prophets have been telling us for years that God is about to launch an extraordinary spiritual awakening with signs and wonders, and for over two months Todd Bentley has been leading one of the more obvious fulfillments of those prophecies. This is an exciting place to be right now!

My name is Peter Wagner and I am President of Global Harvest Ministries based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. I have served the body of Christ in apostolic ministry for many years, and currently I preside over the International Coalition of Apostles which brings together over 500 recognised apostles.³⁷

Wagner then called on three of the chief apostles present (Ché Ahn of Pasadena, Bill Johnson of Redding, California and John Arnott of Toronto, Canada) to testify that they perceived that the grace of God was being given to Todd at the Lakeland Outpouring. Having received their unanimous 'yes', Wagner proceeded with the commissioning which he declared was a representation of 'a powerful transaction taking place in the invisible world'. He decreed that Todd's 'power, authority, favor, influence and revelation' would all increase and further added that

A new supernatural strength will flow through this ministry. A new life force will penetrate this move of God. A government will be established to set things in their proper order. God will pour out a higher level of discernment to distinguish truth from error. New relationships will surface to open gates for the future.

Ché Ahn then declared it 'to be a miracle that all of these distinguished apostles would be able to make it together...with our international commitments' and Bob Jones added that 'this Outpouring (and you Todd) would go to a whole different level'.³⁸ Todd was then anointed with special 'revival oil' which the congregation were informed had been sent courtesy of Fed Ex by Apostle Chuck Pierce who was on international work in Africa.

Sadly for Todd, Lakeland and the 'international apostles', these predictions proved to be very wide of the mark and only served to exacerbate the damage which was caused by the news of the breakdown of Todd's marriage a few weeks later. Indeed, Todd himself must have known at the time of this commissioning that it was in fact a sham. Not only did the whole affair reveal a total lack of discernment and a significant number of ill-judged and erroneous prophecies on the part of Wagner's team, it caused many people considerable confusion that so many 'top' men and women should have been so publicly led astray.

Wagner himself made a somewhat feeble attempt to put a spin on his mistake by stating that 'Bentley had to be brought into alignment before correction could be offered'.³⁹

37 *The Florida Outpouring Day 83* (p 11) from stephenstrader@gmail.com. Text of Wagner's speech is online at www.gloryofzion.org/lakelandreport.htm and the commissioning can be viewed at

www.uk.youtube.com

38 *The Florida Outpouring Day 83*, p 11.

39 Reported on 19th August on www.endtimespropheticwords.wordpress.com.

The vanity and arrogance of what was effectively Todd Bentley's coronation by this aspiring elite of the charismatic world appeared very distant from the humble teaching ministry of Jesus who made himself of no reputation and took the form of a servant.

Some positives from the Outpouring

Just as the egg which Mr Jones, the curate, cracked open at the bishop's breakfast table, was not all bad, so there are positives which can be taken from the Lakeland outpouring, if only in terms of lessons to be learned from what took place.

In the first place, it is clear that a very large number of people had their faith and expectancy levels raised and were given fresh hope in hugely painful and difficult personal circumstances. The majority of them were viewing Lakeland on *God TV* and, according to the Alecs, they sent in 45,000 emails testifying healing and stories of faith and conversion. Additionally, Ignited Church in Lakeland received more than 5,000 emails detailing similar stories and answers to prayer. Many of them doubtless only exercised a minimal superstitious faith as they held a cell phone to their ear or put their hands on a television set or computer screen but found new help or a healing touch nonetheless. A continuous stream of brief, written healing testimonies was passed over the foot of the television screen throughout every Lakeland evening broadcast. At this stage, however, it is still too early to attempt any form of serious assessment as to the lasting nature of such accounts. Yet they stand at least for the moment as a significant positive although there were of course many hundreds whose immediate needs were not met and were left in varying degrees of disappointment.

In addition to the reports and testimonies of physical healing, there were undoubtedly many who embraced the Christian faith for the first time, both at Lakeland and, as a result of watching the services on *God TV*, in other countries across the globe. Indeed, there were a number of occasions when people who wanted to commit their lives to Christ were invited to come to the front of the platform to give public testimony to the fact. I was present at Lakeland from 7-13 July and witnessed at least thirty people make a commitment on Thursday 10th July and many more on Saturday 12th. I also chanced to meet two such people whose lives had been changed by their new-found faith in Christ.

Plus points from Todd Bentley

Todd Bentley undoubtedly did great damage to the 'Outpouring' which he birthed at Lakeland. As Wendy Alec put it, 'the sheep were scattered'. His marital collapse, which he kept from the international apostolic stars who had traveled many thousands of miles to validate his endeavours, was music to the ears of critical bloggers and cessationists from around the globe. Mainline denominational papers indulged in a gamut of 'we told you so' articles and radio stations were delighted to report that the outpouring had dried up. In addition, many prophets were seen to be either false or suffering from delusions of grandeur and self-importance. That said, I believe Todd Bentley, the controversial healing revivalist, cannot simply be dismissed out of hand. His lack of a stable home and middle-class education has

been an Achilles heel which has resulted in his erratic and unstable life-style. Indeed, his mentors seem not to have grasped the fact that even with God's grace and a powerful charismatic infusion, these handicaps are not easily or quickly overcome.

Bentley is a man who has struck out in faith in a manner very few others have done. Despite his rough appearance, compounded by body piercings and tattoos, he has demonstrated, over time, a strong compassion for the poor and needy which on some of his missions has issued in truck loads of food and practical aid. Though his time in Florida ended badly, Bentley has been a man with a heart for God who seriously sought to fulfill Jesus' commission to preach the gospel, heal the sick and cast out demons. Many who visited Lakeland and found his style and techniques distasteful were also challenged by the way in which he had the faith to launch out and attempt ministry in God's name. Some mainline church leaders who participated in the meetings and seminars left challenged by this unorthodox practitioner to re-focus and re-invigorate their own ministries.

The validity of the Lakeland experience is dismissed out of hand by many on account of Todd's moral lapses. But such a stance could be countered by the fact that King David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband so that he could marry her. He also had other wives, among them Ahinoam, Abigail, Maacah, Haggith, Abital and Eglah. Yet for all this, the Scripture is clear that 'David was a man after God's own heart'. Christians don't reject the reading, singing or praying of the psalms because David was a mortal sinner. This resonates with Augustine of Hippo's contention that the sacraments are not restricted by human weakness and failings (but are efficacious 'ex opera operato' - literally on account of the work which is done) and the Church of England *Article 26* ('Of the unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacrament') makes the same point that the unworthiness of the minister is no barrier to the passage of God's grace.

Todd's preaching and teaching at Lakeland was observed to be in line with key creedal doctrines such as the divinity of Christ, the Trinity and the substitutionary atonement. His preaching was usually clear, biblically based and practical. He also revealed a readiness to work with members of other denominations and was respectful of their traditions.

Ignited Church

With so much focus on the demise of Todd Bentley it is easy to overlook the part played by Ignited Church and its pastor, Stephen Strader. Their fasting, prayer and efforts launched the Florida outpouring. They proved to be welcoming hosts to many thousands of visitors from around the world, advising them as to the best places to stay and soliciting cheap deals at restaurants, Pizza Huts and Travel Lodges. From the very beginning they kept their feet firmly on the ground, stressing that what was happening was in no sense a revival. The separate seminars they organized each morning provided a balanced and sometimes critical assessment of both Todd and the Fresh Fire services at Lakeland airport. In the words of Stephen Strader, 'The reality is that there is a mixture in every Christian endeavour. There is flesh, there is the counterfeit; and yes, even the demonic tries to infiltrate'.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ *The Lakeland Outpouring Continues*, 30 August, 2008, p 5.

When Bentley's marital failure became public Ignited Church handled the situation with maturity, highlighting that what had been happening was not simply down to Todd Bentley and his team. The FF meetings continued in the tents until 2nd August and were then moved back into the town with other speakers being brought in from all over the world. During the whole five month period Ignited church gave training in evangelism which included taking more than 7000 people out on the streets to share their faith.⁴¹

Denouement

Religious 'outpourings' and 'awakenings' are often relatively short-term: either the revivalists run out of steam or interest wanes to a point where there is insufficient funding to sustain the enterprise. So what are we to make of the Florida Outpouring?

Clearly any movement such as FFMI which proclaims an end time revival will inevitably be regarded as suspect by cessationists and by fundamentalists who believe that the last days will be characterized not by a world-wide revival but by a great spiritual deterioration with 'the love of many growing cold' and the appearance of the Man of Lawlessness performing 'signs, lying wonders and every kind of wicked deception' (2 Thess. 2:8-10) before Christ returns to inaugurate the millennial period of bliss on earth. Todd's concern with angels and open three-decker heavens clearly does not resonate with liberal theology that regards this as part of first century mythology. His out-of-the-box Christianity was also not to the liking of those who eschew unpredictable religion (with people being struck down as if by lightening or writhing on the floor like snakes). That said, there will be those who remember Todd Bentley as a man who passionately pursued Jesus' commission in a manner that challenged the level of their Christian commitment.

The New Testament urges all believers to 'test the spirits' and exercise discernment. The big questions that therefore need to be asked and debated are:

- Will Lakeland prove to have had a positive influence on American Christianity and the world beyond?
- Will there come to be thousands of new Christians living out their faith in an authentic manner that captivates a secular western world?
- Will the healings and professions of faith prove to be lasting?
- Will the extravagant prophecies uttered by James Goll about revivals breaking out again in Toronto, Pensacola, Brownsville and elsewhere, including twenty cities in England and in Calcutta and France be fulfilled?

At this stage it is too early to give any serious answers. One thing we can say however is that Lakeland was indeed something of a Florida curate's egg. Whether it will come to be regarded as as bad as Mr. Jones' egg is also a matter for future debate.

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⁴¹ *The Florida Outpouring Day 83*, p 6 from
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