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# The Toronto Blessing, Some Personal Reflections

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*Graham Harrison*

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It is still less than 12 months ago that the so-called 'Toronto Blessing' first landed on this side of the Atlantic. Taking its title from the Vineyard Church near the Airport in that most cosmopolitan of all Canadian cities and showing a remarkable propensity to find acceptance among a wide disparity of ecclesiastical groupings, the phenomenon by now has penetrated to most corners of the British Isles. It has found wide, though not universal, acceptance among charismatics of various labels as well as having its advocates and practitioners among more sedate and traditional mainline churches. Two churches in particular – one Anglican, Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB in the vernacular), and one Baptist, Queen's Road Wimbledon – seem to have been the centres from which its influence has spread far and wide.

Whatever one's initial reaction to reports of what was happening in these and other places it would be foolish simply to ignore it and to assume that like many other transatlantic peculiarities on the religious scene it would soon vanish away. I had already heard a friend (whose theological acumen I have good reason to respect) speaking of personal beneficial participation in it. Consequently I gladly seized an opportunity of attending both of the aforesaid churches to find out at first hand what was going on. These visits were supplemented by the tapes of Ellie Mumford (the wife of the minister of the Putney Vineyard Church) who allegedly was the human vehicle by which the 'Blessing' crossed the Atlantic, by two programmes on Welsh TV featuring the topic, and by attendance with some other ministers at a meeting in South Wales where all the activities associated with the movement were on display. Add to that various items of literature ranging from one of the many books written by its enthusiastic advocates to articles in the secular and religious press both for and against it, and these, such as they are, constitute my qualifications for putting pen to paper on this topic.

No doubt there will be those who will have deemed the whole exercise a waste of time, as anybody with the minutest quantity of theological nous should have been able to have seen from the beginning that whatever the origin of the Toronto Blessing it most certainly was not heaven. However, I happen to believe that sometimes strange happenings have occurred in the history of God's dealing with His people. There have been, as well, extraordinary activities that while ultimately bearing the clear mark of Satan initially perplexed and confused discerning men of God. Furthermore, the history of what Ronald Knox called '*Enthusiasm*' is littered with the stories of individuals and movements who once seemed to be carrying everything before them but who eventually ran into the sand, leaving behind as wreckage broken lives that once were sure that the hand of God was moving them in all that they did. Paul's words to the Thessalonians surely are still relevant: 'Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.' I endeavoured, therefore, to approach the whole investigation not naively, but with as biblically open a mind as it was possible for me to have and to make a genuine attempt

at some sort of assessment of what by now has become a widespread movement. Few would disagree that our land is in crying need of a visitation from heaven. There is precious little to encourage many congregations in their ongoing battle and surely we ought to be eager to learn of any authentic news that would signal the reversing of the ebb tide. I was especially wary of the 'knee-jerk' reaction (whether pro- or anti-) which seem to have characterized some of the pronouncements that have been made about it. I also wanted to avoid the rather fatuous adoption of the Gamaliel principle. '*Time will tell*' usually amounts to a theological cop-out!

Now the antecedents of what broke out in Toronto have been traced to some rather bizarre characters on the American extreme charismatic/Pentecostal scene - Rodney Howard-Browne and Kenneth Copeland. For some that constitutes the end of the discussion; enough said, so to speak. But again you cannot short circuit the discussion in that way. There have been those who query the authenticity of the 1859 Revival in Wales because Humphrey Jones, the man who brought it back from the USA, ended his time in Aberystwyth prophesying that the Holy Spirit would descend in bodily form on one of the local hills. Discernment is what is needed, not the instant quote made on the basis of the presence or absence of some notorious name somehow connected to those subsequently involved in the movement. It would not be difficult to show from history that our gracious God sometimes seems to read men's hearts rather than their heads in deigning to bless and use them.

### **What Actually Happens**

These meetings typically begin with anything from 45 minutes up to an hour of what is called 'worship'. This invariably consists of a series of chorus-type songs, each usually quite short in duration and therefore leading to the inevitability of successive repetition. There will be a band or a music group leading the session. Most of the congregation will be standing for much of this time, many of them with their arms and hands raised. When prayer is offered it will probably have a background accompaniment of soft music. This not infrequently will continue into a time of communal prayer which usually will take the form of a general singing in tongues to the backing of a series of harmonious chords from the keyboard and/or the guitars. In the instances of which I have experience this was followed by a sermon (in one case lasting about 40 minutes). Then came the moment that everybody had been waiting for—the invocation of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this was done simply with the words '*Come Holy Spirit*' or some such phrase as '*We invite You to come*'. At other times a more extensive prayer was offered and an indication was given to the congregation that they were likely to witness unusual things. It would be suggested to them that they must not feel inhibited about any physical response or effects that might be produced, and usually a variety of Scriptural quotations would be adduced to give validity to what it was anticipated would be happening. By this time space had been made at the front of the auditorium so that people could come forward to be ministered to by what were described as members of the 'Ministry Teams'. These could be authenticated by the badges they were wearing. This, presumably, was a well-intentioned precaution to prevent gatecrashers and weirdos from getting in on the act.

At this point various individuals would come forward for ministry. It was quite fascinating to observe the same technique which seemed to be followed in each of the centres that I attended. It could not properly be described as laying on of hands - at least not if the old-style Pentecostal way of doing this was in mind. Instead it seemed to be a peculiar

waving of the hands by one of the Ministry Team a few inches away from the head, face, shoulders and upper body of the recipient. Occasionally in some (but by no means all) instances a finger would touch the forehead, the nape of the neck or the shoulder. But emphatically there was no hand pressure to push the subject backwards or down. However, in most cases down they would go, some more quickly than others, some after a considerable time. In a few cases they never went down at all and the process was abandoned with the subject returning to his or her place. The actual 'descending' (this seems to me to be a better word than 'collapsing' to describe what happened) was almost invariably a quite gentle thing with the subject in some cases almost lowering himself to the floor.

There were other more violent episodes. Some were doing what is best described as 'jogging-on-the-spot'. This could go on for a considerable period of time. I did call into the Putney Vineyard church some time after their morning service had ended. Many had left, the musicians had abandoned their instruments, most people were standing around drinking coffee. But there was one woman jogging away on the spot with a lady standing by her presumably to catch her when exhaustion took over. There were also some in the other meetings that I attended who soon manifested a violent shaking of parts of the body or else were 'pogo-sticking' – bouncing up and down. Again, these led to eventual prostration in most cases. Apparently different centres have different physical reactions predominantly associated with them.

Most frequently it was when people were on the floor that the laughing began. This varied in nature, volume and intensity. Some were quietly giggling, others seemed to be having a good 'belly-laugh', while there were some who were shrieking in notes that would not have out of place for some of the witches in *Macbeth*. In HTB while this all was going on the person leading the meeting was constantly encouraging people to come forward for ministry or to indicate where they were so that members of the team could come to them to minister to them. At one point the clear exhortation was given, 'Don't be British!'; by which I presume was meant that the stiff upper lip and the restraint of the emotions which otherwise might characterise a somewhat upper-crust Knightsbridge congregation would be better abandoned if they really wanted the blessing of God to come down on them.

The people who went forward seemed to be of a variety of types and backgrounds and they spanned a wide age range. The youngest I saw was in Wimbledon where a little girl who could not have been much more than 4 years of age, if that, was being 'ministered to' by two ladies who, even kneeling beside, her were still taller than she. That, I must confess, I found most disturbing as indeed was the participation of several other children in these activities there and in other centres.

I think I heard two 'lion roars' in HTB, although I could not be definite that this was not something to do with the amplification system. In any case such roars together with a variety of animal noises are part and parcel of the typical Toronto Blessing scene.

It was interesting to hear the testimonies of several who had experienced the 'Blessing'. None spoke of being in a state of unconsciousness while lying prostrate on the floor. Instead they described it as a very enjoyable experience. Some affirmed that they had had a vision of a beautiful and brilliant figure whom they presumed to be Christ. Many have testified to a greater love for God and a more urgent concern about spiritual things following such experiences. If such be the fruit, so it is argued, need we be paranoid about the root?

While some have spoken of the whole movement in terms of revival this is not what is

claimed by those most closely involved with it. They do, however, speak of it as being the likely precursor of revival, a sort of pre-libation, with the implicit suggestion that to resist it is to resist the working of the Holy Spirit. One of the most surprising features of the movement is the way in which it has trawled church history to identify instances of what is now described as the 'Toronto Blessing' occurring in quite other, and theologically impeccable, contexts. In essence this is not dissimilar to some of the more naive attempts to show that everybody who was anybody in Christian history has spoken in tongues. The current 'patron saints', so to speak, are Jonathan Edwards and particularly his wife Sarah. Ellie Mumford in particular slips into the eulogistic mode about the latter and claims her as a fascinating instance of one who had all that current advocates are claiming, but two and a half centuries before it hit Toronto. A careful reading of the descriptions that Jonathan Edwards gives of his wife's spiritual experiences will not, I think, verify the interpretation being put on them. Furthermore, there are elements conspicuously present in Edwards' accounts that are equally conspicuously absent from the current phenomena, as we shall see.

### **A Personal Assessment**

Let me now turn to the question of how one is to attempt an assessment of this movement. There are, I think, three areas in particular in which it needs to be scrutinized with some care before its claims are either accepted or rejected *in toto*: the **biblical and theological**, the **historical** and the **psychological**. Each of these areas merits attention. There is the further consideration as to whether we are faced with a stark choice between total acceptance or total rejection of the whole as a sort of package deal. Might it be possible to say that there are people who have been blessed of God during their participation in the goings on at one or more Toronto Blessing meetings and at the same time to affirm that this does not thereby authenticate those proceedings? Perhaps an analogy will help to make this point. The Reformers were rightly highly critical of the Roman Catholic Church. Generally speaking they did not regard it as a true church of God. However, this did not lead them to anathematize all Roman Catholics and declare that they were not Christians. Rather, they recognized the work of God in such individuals, maintaining that such blessing as had come had been despite, not because of, the Church of Rome. Similarly there can be no doubt that a man like Staupitz helped Luther along the road to God even though it may be wondered whether he ever arrived himself. Some individuals whom I have spoken to have maintained that for months before they ever heard whether there was such a thing as the Toronto Blessing they had felt constrained to seek the Lord out of a deep sense of need and failure. Is it not the case that the Lord graciously condescends to such heartfelt seeking and visits the individuals concerned in a transforming way? They may well misread what He has been doing and commit the simple logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after this, therefore, because of this), thus attributing the blessing to the instrumentality of the meetings that they have been attending. One does not therefore have to deny what seems to be an evident improvement in their spiritual experience in order to be able to hammer a movement that one might judge to be very seriously flawed, to put it no more strongly.

It is certainly not difficult to find fault biblically with the movement and its claims. To be frank, the simplistic equation it makes between the phenomena occurring in its meetings and various physical experiences recounted in Scripture as coming upon men in both Testaments who were encountering God borders on the absurd. The biblical instances

commonly adduced as supporting the phenomena usually include Ezekiel (1:28, 3:23), Daniel (8:17, 10:9) and even King Saul (1 Sam 19:24), as well as John (Rev 1:17) and the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 18:6). Even a cursory reading of these passages should be sufficient to establish a world of difference between what the Bible is speaking of and the type of experience referred to above. One thing seems to characterize the biblical happenings—a sense of awe and reverence together with a conviction of total unworthiness. If these factors were present in the meetings that I attended and especially in the experiences of the people lying prostrate or laughing or jumping, then I must admit that it was not at all evident to the onlooker. The impression rather was one of hilarity and light-heartedness, not to say light-headedness!

Some questions, then, need to be asked about the phenomenon that has become most typical of the Toronto Blessing - **laughter**. This is the feature that has been fastened upon by the secular media in the cynical way that one has become accustomed to expect of them when they deal with anything related to Christianity. The sad thing is that this time they have been presented with all the ammunition they need to make their case. Now let me make it abundantly clear what I am saying. I am well aware of the fact that there are instances in church history of outbreaks of laughter among the Lord's people when He has drawn near to bless them. In most times of revival there is an outbreak of joy that sometimes is expressed in laughter. After all, the New Testament does speak of 'joy unspeakable and full of glory'. But that is hardly what we are being confronted with here. Instead it has become the expected, indeed the invariable, pattern that these meetings have as their central and expected result fits of laughter. Before someone objects that surely there is biblical warrant for this and trots out Psalm 126:2, 'Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing', a little work with the concordance and lexicon would be advised. Words sometimes translated as 'laugh' or 'laughter' occur some 80 times in the Old Testament. Apart from the instances describing the reactions of Abraham and Sarah to news of the forthcoming birth of Isaac almost all of the remaining occurrences are to do with scorn and derision, often directed by the enemies of God against His people and sometimes by the Lord Himself at those enemies. Nor does the New Testament provide any contrary evidence. There are only six occurrences of words for laughing and laughter. Three of them describe the derision that greeted our Lord's affirmation that Jairus' daughter 'sleepeth'; one (James 4:9) speaks of laughter being turned to mourning; the other two (Luke 6:21, 25) have the same contrast. It would therefore seem quite extraordinary to claim that laughter is seen anywhere in Scripture as a recognizable indication of the blessing of God. Still less could it be held that there is any biblical warrant whatsoever for conducting meetings with the hope and intent that such laughter will ensue. Exactly the same sort of objection must be raised against the use made of those Scriptures that mention drunkenness. 1 Samuel 1:13f., Acts 2:13ff. and Ephesians 5:18 are pressed into service to prove that a state of high spirituality quite possibly will be read as apparent inebriation and that the physical effects sometimes associated with the Toronto Blessing are thoroughly in line with such precedents. Indeed the suggestion is that such a condition is virtually presumptive evidence that what has caused it is of God. But contrition for sin, a deep self abasement coupled with an overwhelming feeling of unworthiness, these are the marks that seem to accompany profound and life-changing experiences of God as they are recorded in the Bible, not hilarity. Yet in none of the meetings that I have attended connected with the Toronto Blessing has there been any evidence of such factors. In short, neither in their actual references from Scripture nor in their method of handling

it, their hermeneutical principle, if you want to dignify it by that title, do they succeed in showing that there is either biblical precedent or biblical principle to justify what has become the hallmark of these proceedings.

What then of history? Does its testimony provide the support that the advocates of the movement need? Judging by the remarkable way in which Jonathan Edwards and his wife Sarah figure so prominently in the current Toronto apologia, one could be pardoned for thinking that there must be a direct theological line drawn from the frontier town of Northampton to the modern Canadian city. Hasten the day when theological connections of a more substantial order could be perceived! Who knows whether the fact that Edwards' writings on the Great Awakening have suddenly become best-sellers in this constituency will yet produce surprising spin-offs?

However, any such connecting line is tenuous and sketchy, to put it mildly. The reality is that Edwards (whether Mr or Mrs) and Toronto are poles apart. Most certainly there were remarkable phenomena associated not only with the Great Awakening in general, but with Edwards' part in it in particular. And Edwards does not explain them away. But neither does he seek to promote them. Never does he set up a meeting designed to cater for the likely outbreak of physical manifestations. No New England 'ministry teams' are to be found hovering hands over willing subjects prior to the latter's collapsing with shrieks of raucous laughter. There were many instances of bodily convulsions. But they happened: they were not sought. Yes, Sarah Edwards had remarkable experiences which some, rightly or wrongly, have described as being akin to levitation, and her husband in recounting them makes it absolutely clear that he believed them to be of God. But they simply were not what is happening on the Toronto scene. Contrary to what Ellie Mumford and others are saying she is never described as being 'drunk as a lord' or 'drunk as a newt' for days on end. She knew rapturous experiences of the majesty, glory and mercy of a sovereign God that deeply humbled her. Her husband in describing them makes her anonymous and did not embark on a policy of trying to reproduce them wholesale across the colony or even in the town. Emphatically, if the analogy be permitted, one would have to say that he was driving with one foot on the brake rather than the accelerator!

Basically the same comments need to be made regarding, say, the 1859 Revival in Ulster. Undoubtedly there were prostrations and 'trances' lasting in some cases for considerable periods of time. But once again it needs to be said that they *happened*. They did not become part of the agenda of the Revival. In Ulster, as in the Great Awakening, the Methodist Revival, the 1904 Revival and innumerable others, what was produced was a multitude of people being converted. Often it was in connection with the trauma that might accompany this great work of conversion that the most remarkable physical phenomena occurred.

Thirdly, it will not be irrelevant to ask whether there might not be powerful **psychological** factors at work that may well account for some of the characteristics of the movement. To raise this possibility is not to place oneself in the camp of the Dr William Sargants of this world who evidently think that giving a psychological description of religious happenings means that you have evacuated them of significance for thinking men and women. It is simply to acknowledge that many ostensibly religious activities of various ilks may have an entirely sufficient explanation in this rather than in the spiritual realm. To fail to recognize this may be to do serious damage to the cause of Christ. It may also have devastating consequences for those who are swept along on the prevailing tide under the delusion that they are being borne along by the Holy Spirit. Many such eventually become

spiritual casualties, who in turn enable the sceptical world to say 'I told you so'.

But is it fair to bring such charges against these activities and those who are so vigorously promoting them? On the face of it some would immediately respond that these dangerous elements are absent from the meetings. They would point out that in most cases the meetings proceed in what might be described as a normal, mildly charismatic way – the typical opening period of worship, the familiar songs and choruses, the band, and so on. I readily admit that what I have to say has implications far wider than the particular scene we are considering. I would want to contend that this very style of worship, even though it be quiet and apparently non-emotional (as it is in many cases), is nevertheless very powerful, if subtle, in the psychological pressures that it brings to bear on its participants. Consider the following factors. The atmosphere is relaxed and easy-going. People are off their guard. The music is repetitive as are the lyrics, and both are undemanding of any serious mental commitment. The period of time during which people are standing, often with raised arms and closed eyes, has a wearying effect physically and a wearing effect psychologically. There can be little doubt it all combines to produce a soporific influence under which the audience unwittingly finds itself conditioned into a receptive state of suggestibility. Many of them have come with a predisposition in the direction of the phenomena that are expected to occur in the proceedings. Moreover (and in saying this I impute no evil motives to those leading the meetings) the programme is conducted by leaders who are expert manipulators of the social emotions of such meetings. They seem to know when to linger and when to move on, how to strike a particular emotional note, using the music often expertly to that end. Their interjected comments, occasionally disparaging those who might disagree with what is likely to be going on, the suggestions that the Lord is present in a special way, the claims that He is going to do something remarkable in this meeting tonight, all contribute to what might not be recognized as being but that nevertheless is a highly charged emotional atmosphere which relentlessly presses down on those who are now beginning to feel guilty and spiritually inadequate if they were to deny the validity of the proceedings.

Such gatherings are ripe for hypnotic suggestion. Once it is realized that hypnosis is by no means confined to the music hall caricature of a man in a black cloak and a twirly moustache swinging his gold hunter watch pendulum-like before the increasingly glazed eyes of his victim, this allegation is not as absurd as some would claim. A number of Christian, as well as unbelieving, practising psychiatrists have asserted as much.

At this point reference should be made to the distinctive pattern of hand and arm movements made by the Ministry Team as they deal with the candidate. There is a strangeness about it and certainly no scriptural precedent for it. An interesting article a few months ago in TIME Magazine described what it called '*A No-Touch Therapy*', or TT. It made no connection whatsoever with the Toronto technique, but anyone who has seen the latter will have no difficulty in recognizing potential affinities:

'Keeping her hands a few inches away from her seated patient, nurse Janet Quinn moves them around his body from head to toe, as if she were brushing away cobwebs. At the end of each sweeping motion, her eyes closed, she makes a dismissive gesture, as if shaking water off from her fingertips.'

Quinn is giving 'therapeutic touch' (TT), a controversial form of therapy that is spreading through the ranks of nursing and already claims tens of thousands of practitioners in the U.S. and many foreign countries. According to its proponents, TT not only comforts and relaxes patients, but also relieves pain, produces chemical

changes in the blood and promotes healing.

Or maybe, as its detractors contend, TT is a form of New Age gibberish, a no-touch laying on of hands that has no legitimate place in medicine.'

(TIME, November 21, 1994, page 82. *I owe this reference to my friend Revd John Edmonds of South Woodford*)

Another factor which could be of significance in this area is the report of people who experience something not unlike what, I believe, is known technically as 'hypnotic regression'. The stage hypnotist, while having the subject under hypnosis, implants a word or a phrase somehow into his subconscious. When the subject is brought out of the trance, the repetition of that word or phrase will act as a trigger mechanism with the result that he will again come under the hypnotic influence. Ellie Mumford describes how one American clergyman who had received the Toronto effect at the Airport Vineyard Church when the invocation 'Come Holy Spirit' was given and immediately found himself doing 'carpet time' (as they call it), was writing this up subsequently for his church magazine. When he came to that point in his writing when he was about to put down those same words 'up came the carpet'. The laughter which greeted this when she recounted it at HTB was immediately exceeded when she went on to say how that as she flew back on Air France and was writing this up in her diary half way across the Atlantic exactly the same thing happened to her!

I noted also both from public testimony that was given in various meetings and also from private conversation that the experience was sought repeatedly by several who had received it initially. It was as if they could not go on without it. They had it last Sunday and now they needed it again. Nothing wrong with that in principle, you might say. Do we not all want more and more of the same grace of God? And I suppose you are right. But I have a nagging doubt at the back of my mind. Where have I heard all this before? The answer is, in the drug scene. The junkie has a fix that puts him on a high—for a while. But then it wears off and he must get another shot, and the sorry cycle continues. Was what I was hearing a sort of sanitized 'Christian' version of the same cycle? I, for one, could find no parallels from the New Testament to justify such habits.

## Conclusion

Regretfully, therefore, (and I mean that word) I have found nothing to convince me that the many thousands of Christians who by this time have allied themselves to the principles of the Toronto Blessing are right in their convictions and explanations. I do not doubt their sincerity. Nor do I find it necessary to affirm that the Lord has not blessed any of them. To be honest, I did not sense anything sinister or Satanic at the meetings that I have attended. I do recall, however, that the Scriptures do speak of Satan donning the garb of an angel of light and that he specialized in wiles and devices. My increasingly firm conviction is that somewhere along the line there may well be a lot of pieces to pick up, wounded and disillusioned Christians to be helped, cynical unbelievers to be shown the authentic gospel and, hopefully, another Great Awakening that will banish these lesser so-called blessings into the obscurity of history.

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