

**Note:** This Work has been made available by the authority of the copyright owner solely for the purpose of private study and research and may not be copied or reproduced except as permitted by the copyright laws of Canada without the written authority from the copyright owner.

Beverley, James A. *Holy Laughter and the Toronto Blessing: An Investigative Report*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1995.

# Holy Laughter and The Toronto Blessing

---

*An Investigative Report*

---

James A. Beverley

---



Zondervan Publishing House  
*Grand Rapids, Michigan*

*A Division of HarperCollins Publishers*

*Holy Laughter and The Toronto Blessing*  
Copyright © 1995 by James A. Beverley

Requests for information should be addressed to:

 **Zondervan Publishing House**  
*Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

ISBN: 0-310-20497-6

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

*Edited by Verlyn D. Verbrugge*  
*Interior design by Joe Vriend*

*Printed in the United States of America*

---

95 96 97 98 99 00 01 02 /♦ DH/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Contents

---

Dedication .....	6
Preface .....	7
1. The Holy Spirit Has Landed .....	11
2. Testing the Spirits .....	25
3. John Wimber and the Vineyard .....	37
4. The Holy Ghost Bartender .....	49
5. The Manifest Presence of Christ? .....	67
6. Lying Signs and Wonders? .....	85
7. Three Healing Cases .....	103
8. The Kansas City Prophets .....	121
9. Prophecy and The Toronto Blessing .....	135
10. Biblical Faith and The Toronto Blessing .....	149
Epilogue .....	161
Notes .....	163
Bibliography .....	169

# One

---

## The Holy Spirit Has Landed

---

In the London newspaper the *Sunday Telegraph* of June 19, 1994, its several million readers were told that “British Airways flight 092 took off from Toronto Airport on Thursday evening just as the Holy Spirit was landing on a small building 100 yards from the end of the runway.” This widely-circulated quotation refers to what has become known around the world as “The Toronto Blessing.” This is an apt description of the way millions of Christians now regard the ministry connected with the Airport Vineyard in Toronto. There is widespread belief throughout the charismatic and Pentecostal world that something powerful and amazing is happening in one of Canada’s leading cities. Marc Dupont, the prophet of the Airport Vineyard, has suggested that Toronto may have been the choice for this latest renewal of the Holy Spirit because of its cosmopolitan significance. One study suggests that Toronto is the most ethnically diverse city on this planet. Thus, just as Pentecost initiated the renewal of the church to the diverse nations of the world in the first century, so The Toronto Blessing is bringing renewal to a vast number of nations and peoples in the last years of the twentieth century.

Regardless of what one may think of the claim that the Holy Spirit lands regularly at the Airport Vineyard near Toronto’s Pearson International Airport, there is no doubt that The Toronto Blessing represents one of the most interesting and amazing stories in recent years. Since January 20, 1994, there have been meetings at

the Airport Vineyard every night of the week except Monday. Several different airlines offer a discount to people who fly to Toronto to attend the evening worship services. Major hotels in the west end of the city provide discounts to those who want to be in the city for The Toronto Blessing. Already four books have been published on the topic, in addition to hundreds of articles and magazine stories. This amazing story has also been covered by Canadian, American, and international television crews.

It is also well known that The Toronto Blessing has not received a favorable review from all Christians. Controversy has surfaced in individual churches and throughout entire denominations. As will be explained later, some severe allegations have been leveled against the basic integrity of this latest phase of the Vineyard. Much of that controversy has centered around the strange manifestations that have taken place in the nightly meetings. Two chapters in this book will deal in detail with this aspect of The Toronto Blessing.

Journalist Robert Hough did a story on the Airport Vineyard for *Toronto Life Magazine*. His account gives a picture of part of an evening meeting:

The man sitting beside me, Dwayne from California, roared like a wounded lion. The woman beside Dwayne started jerking so badly her hands struck her face. People fell like dominoes, collapsing chairs as they plunged to the carpeting. They howled like wolves, brayed like donkeys and—in the case of a young man standing near the sound board—started clucking like a feral chicken. And the tears! Never have I seen people weep so hysterically, as though every hurt they'd ever encountered had risen to the surface and popped like an overheated tar bubble. This was eerie . . . stuff—people were screaming, their bodies jerking unnaturally, their faced contorted with tics.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these strange manifestations, there has been no hesitation on the part of many Christians around the world to engage in similar behavior. Writing in *Christian Research Journal*, Paul Carden noted the influence of The Toronto Blessing in England: “An epidemic of laughter is spreading across the land, flashing like lightning from

church to church. It is the most bizarre thing to happen in the religious life of Britain for some time. Is it a case of 'whom the god's wish to destroy they first make mad'?"<sup>2</sup> Carden's suggestion that Christians may be going mad would be readily and strongly denounced by millions in favor of The Toronto Blessing. They would reply, as Jonathan Edwards did in his day, that this madness has brought great and wonderful renewal to the Christian church throughout the world.

### **Roots of The Toronto Blessing**

When Christians today think about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they agree that this renewal was fundamentally divine in origin. However, even at Pentecost human factors were at work. After all, human beings were the ones who had gathered in the Upper Room on that day. These same people had been disciples of Jesus Christ, and their anointing by the Holy Spirit was preceded by their time with Jesus and his ministry on earth. In the most fundamental sense, then, Pentecost is rooted in the human ministry of the Son of God.

In a similar vein, even the most ardent supporters of The Toronto Blessing realize a human factor is involved in the origin and spread of the fires connected with the Airport Vineyard. The roots of this renewal lie first of all in the ministry of John Wimber, the international leader of the Vineyard. Todd Hunter, now National Coordinator of Vineyard Churches, believes that it is Wimber's international reputation that set the stage for people being willing to come to Vineyard meetings in Toronto.

One of the other major leaders behind The Toronto Blessing is Rodney Howard-Browne. Known as the laughing evangelist, Howard-Browne is from South Africa, but felt the call of God to come to America in 1987. (In a later chapter of this book, we will explore his specific ministry and teaching.) He has played a central role in the origin of The Toronto Blessing. He believes that God has given him a special anointing to renew the church with the power of the Holy Spirit. He actually refers to himself as "The Holy Ghost

Bartender,” in light of his claim that he is giving to the church the “new wine” of the Holy Spirit.

Randy Clark, a Vineyard pastor from St. Louis, heard about Howard-Browne’s incredible impact on some of his friends. So he went to hear Howard-Browne at a revival meeting in Tulsa, Oklahoma. While there, he received the laying on of hands from Rodney Howard-Browne, which brought to Randy a powerful renewal, including the manifestation of Holy Laughter.

In the fall of 1993, John Arnott, the senior pastor of the Toronto Airport Vineyard, was influenced by several people talking about the renewal of the church through Holy Laughter. Arnott had been anointed by the Pentecostal Claudio Freidzon, and he was also greatly impressed by the testimony of Randy Clark about his personal renewal. As a result, he invited Clark to preach at the Airport Vineyard on January 20, 1994. Much to Arnott’s and Clark’s surprise, there was a sudden outpouring of the Holy Spirit that evening. Shortly thereafter a decision was made to extend the renewal to nightly meetings, so that there could be greater participation from other Christians who needed a touch from God.

### **A Typical Evening Service**

Since some of the distortions about The Toronto Blessing are based on inadequate information about what actually happens in Toronto, it is necessary from the outset to get a glimpse of what a typical evening service is like. The shape of these meetings fell into a standard pattern rather early in the renewal, though there is certainly variety, depending on who leads worship and who preaches. Nevertheless, there are four phases of a typical nightly meeting.

(1) The service begins with an hour or more of chorus singing. This praise and worship time is led by a worship team under the supervision of Jeremy Sinnott, whose background is in the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches, one of the larger Baptist groups in Canada. During this hour there may be an occasional hymn. Even during the singing there will be various manifestations or examples of ecstatic behavior. Hundreds of people will lift up

their hands in praise to God, while others will dance. There may also be rounds of Holy Laughter or other more unusual manifestations, such as shaking, roaring like a lion, or loud shouting and screaming.

(2) The next phase of worship consists of testimony time. John Arnott or other Vineyard leaders invite people to the front to share what God has been doing in their lives. The testimony time is often the most dramatic moment in worship, since people recount powerful stories of renewal, healing, and conversion. During the reporting of the testimony, the specific individual may manifest certain signs, and usually at the end of their testimony, they are asked if they want to receive more from the Holy Spirit. The Vineyard leaders then pray for the person, who is often then “slain in the Spirit.”

(3) The third component of a typical evening celebration is the preaching time, which can last anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour. About five times in the first year of the renewal, the preaching was stopped abruptly; on a couple other occasions there was no preaching at all. Sometimes the preaching is drowned out by the sounds of Holy Laughter, though this is not the usual occurrence. The quality of preaching varies, depending on the speaker, the individual’s style of delivery, and the extent of focus on the biblical text. By and large, the messages focus on spiritual renewal, and they often involve lengthy storytelling and accounts of how the renewal is spreading to other parts of the world.

(4) The first three phases of worship normally take up to two and a half hours. At the end of the sermon an invitation is given for personal salvation, followed by the general invitation to experience the renewing touch of the Holy Spirit. At this point, people are invited to come forward to receive ministry time, or they may be asked to go to other parts of the church to wait for ministry team members to anoint them and pray for them. This last part of the evening meeting is the longest part. Usually it begins about 10:00 P.M. and can last from two to four hours, though it usually does not go much later than 12:30 or 1:00 A.M.

People are regularly told not to receive prayer from just anyone. This rule came about because there were several incidents where people came to the evening worship and took it upon themselves to pray for others without the consent of the Vineyard leadership. Sometimes the prayers offered were inappropriate, other times there were false prophetic words given to individuals, and a few times there were accounts of inappropriate touching of others. In light of these problems, the Vineyard leadership instituted a policy of having the recognized ministry team members wear special badges, and they advise people in the congregation not to receive prayer from an unauthorized person. There have actually been a couple of reports of people from witchcraft groups infiltrating these meetings, though these have not been substantiated.

Since the ministry time is obviously the most controversial aspect of the Toronto Vineyard meetings, a further word is in order about describing what occurs. Most people on a given night go forward to receive prayer. They are asked to stand in orderly fashion and to wait for someone to come to them. Occasionally people display Spirit manifestations before someone prays for them, though usually the manifestations accompany or follow prayer from someone on the ministry team. It would be wrong to say that the ministry time—or, as it is often referred to, “carpet time”—involves complete disorder. But it would also be wrong to imply that this phase of worship amounts to what you would see at a typical non-charismatic church! In fact, even many Pentecostals find their perspectives stretched as they attend Vineyard meetings and see different manifestations displayed during carpet time.

### **Snapshots of The Toronto Blessing**

Since I live in Toronto and have had the opportunity to attend many Vineyard meetings, I thought it would be appropriate to give some indication of the range of realities faced in The Toronto Blessing. I will provide a panoramic picture of various scenes from my own involvement, in order to give some insight into the movement for those unable to attend the Airport Vineyard. I am fully aware

that I write as an outsider and that one gets a different set of pictures by reading Guy Chevreau's *Catch the Fire* or Dave Roberts' *The Toronto Blessing*. However, I think the following selection of snapshots represents a balanced picture of what it is like to investigate and address this famous renewal.

One night in June, 1994, I was sitting on the platform at the original Airport Vineyard site talking with John Wimber. I asked him if the phenomena that went on in the evening worship were new to him. "Not at all," he replied. "I have seen everything before in other Vineyard services around the world."

One afternoon I was out at the Airport Vineyard to do an interview with John Arnott. As I walked into the main sanctuary of the church, I noticed a group of teenagers over in the corner praying together. It occurred to me that whatever criticisms one might have of *The Toronto Blessing*, the fact that teenagers were gathered together during their school break for prayer indicated that something was right about this renewal.

Another evening I took my son, Derek, to a worship service with me. When a friend of mine asked me if I would like to have prayer, Derek simply took the question to mean whether or not I would agree to have this friend pray for me in his devotions at a later time. When Derek discovered that I was going to stand for prayer right at that moment, he was scared that I was going to fall over or act like an animal. Later my son told me that the "catcher" behind me was blowing on my shirt.

On another occasion, late during the ministry time, I noticed a man and two women reaching out and touching one another with fresh jolts of "Spirit-power." Every touch of hands increased the laughter and spasms in their bodies. Finally, in what is viewed as a great outburst of *Spirit-power*, the man fell off his chair, and his head hit the concrete with a loud thud. It did not seem to bother him, however, for he continued laughing.

I traveled to Oakville to visit Guy Chevreau. Guy and I had spent time together in doctoral work at the Toronto School of Theology. I was excited to hear about the tremendous personal renewal

that has come to him and his wife, Janis. Though I disagree with some of the arguments in his book *Catch the Fire*, The Toronto Blessing has been strengthened by the intellectual leadership he has brought to the teaching ministry of the Airport Vineyard.

The Airport Vineyard has struggles like any church. Several members have talked to me about some serious hurts they have experienced when they were dealt with rather abruptly and without due process. The differences and issues were not handled carefully in love.

At one meeting I went to the front to say hello to Mike Bickle, a Vineyard pastor from Kansas City. He gave me a hug, and we talked for a few minutes. When I tried to work my way back to be with my wife and friends, there was no room to move to the other side of the large auditorium because of so many bodies in front of me. The only possible route was to go in front of a woman waving her arms wildly in a forward direction. I could be in danger of getting hurt if I stepped in her path. It then occurred to me that if the Holy Spirit was behind her actions, I was in no danger, since the Holy Spirit does not desire harm for people. Furthermore, Christian patterns of behavior indicate that we do not hurt our fellow human beings. So I moved in faith in front of the woman and said, "Excuse me," and her arms shifted the other direction to allow me to pass!

On the first anniversary of The Toronto Blessing, the service lasted until about 2:30 A.M.. At 1:45 A.M., one of the Vineyard ministry team members came over to me and said that Randy Clark would be willing to give me an interview. He was able to get away from the crowds at about 2:30 A.M. Even later in the hotel lobby people came up to him to ask for prayer. He mentioned to me the next night that the mission impulse out of the The Toronto Blessing would be enormous.

Word has spread throughout the Christian community in Canada that The Toronto Blessing has been endorsed by David Mainse, the host of *100 Huntley Street*, a well-known Christian television show in Canada. He spoke at the Airport Vineyard in March, 1995, and

was open about his spiritual life. He is now receiving strong criticism for his support of this renewal.

One night I went to the Airport Vineyard with my daughter, Andrea. We were both astonished at one of the episodes at the evening meeting. A pastor from Oregon was pouring out his heart about his emotional and spiritual pain. Near the end of his testimony, a man in the congregation began a loud round of holy laughter. It was disheartening to see the way the Oregon pastor's testimony was drowned out by the Holy Laughter, and he was visibly hurt by the quenching of his voice.

After writing a one-page column that raised concerns about The Toronto Blessing, I was disappointed to be warned that I was on dangerous ground by daring to question this great movement of God. This brought back to my mind memories of the divine threats raised against critics of the Kansas City prophets. These kind of warnings are a signal of insecurity more than of prophetic power.

One time while participating in an afternoon worship at the Vineyard, I decided to go for prayer and anointing, believing that there would be nothing intrinsically wrong with having fellow Christians pray for me at the Airport Vineyard. However, the behavior of people around me was so wild and chaotic that I simply could not bring my mind to feel comfortable about prayer in such a context.

Another time I felt a real openness to stand in a long line and wait for prayer from John Arnott. John did not know at that time who I was, and I approached this opportunity with real openness. I asked the Holy Spirit to do whatever he wanted to do in my life. When John laid his hands on me, I felt nothing strange and experienced no manifestations. The woman beside me had been slain in the Spirit with dramatic power, and she actually reached out and grabbed my arm just as John Arnott was praying for me. I thought that maybe one of my friends had sneaked up behind me to try to give me some help in the Spirit, but it was the woman reaching out as she crashed to the floor.

One night during the ministry time a teenage girl was broken and weeping with deep passion, obviously distraught about some things in her life. She was on the floor being embraced by an older woman, who was cradling her in her arms and comforting her with the love of Jesus Christ. There are too few churches where teenagers and senior citizens embrace each other in deep moments of spiritual and emotional renewal.

The evening Mike Bickle preached, twice during his powerful sermon he had an awareness of his own sin and how deeply the church has failed in its mission of obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ. During those two moments Mike cried publicly. This was a moving and touching moment.

On the anniversary night Randy Clark told a story about Hudson Taylor receiving a vision in the middle of a service, in which the Lord revealed to him the outbreak of the two world wars in this century. I doubted that was true, for that kind of revelation is untypical of prophetic material in the Old Testament. Later, John Arnott brought someone up from the audience who knew a lot about Hudson Taylor's life, and John asked this man to inform Randy that his story was probably inaccurate. Randy was open to the correction. John Arnott's care for the truth is admirable.

One evening when my son joined me for another meeting, we closely watched a group of teenagers under the power of the Holy Spirit. What disappointed both of us was the obviously contrived nature of their ministry time. True, not all of the teenagers are faking. However, there is a danger in the expectation that manifestations must be a regular part of a Christian's life. To watch a teenage girl stagger around with a Coke in one hand while obviously trying to imitate the adults in the service was a sad sight.

One of my friends talked with me at one of the meetings, commenting on how much he had learned from Atlantic Baptist College in Moncton, New Brunswick, where I used to teach. He was appreciative of the doctrinal and biblical learning he had gained there. However, he also told me that there was a danger in the Baptist tradition of having T-bone steak served on ice. This is obviously a

provocative way of warning those of us in noncharismatic traditions that our doctrine must be matched with inner fire.

One day an informed observer mentioned to me that people come to Toronto with no money to pay for a hotel room after the nightly meeting is over. Many of these people are put up in homes of the local Vineyard members, or they choose to sleep in the church all night, sometimes in the conviction that this experience alone will bring God's power within their lives.

One of my friends told me that one evening when he was receiving prayer, much to his surprise, he was slain in the Spirit. He remembers being astounded by the power that overcame him, causing him to fall backwards on the floor. He was even worried that he had said some inappropriate words while falling to the ground. One of the reasons we should be open to the authenticity of the experience of being slain in the Spirit is that it has happened to people who do not expect it to happen and are not really eager for it to come upon them. However, as they open themselves up to pray, they believe the Holy Spirit has chosen this venue for personal and spiritual renewal.

On the first anniversary night, four thousand believers sang "Holy, Holy, Holy" in a wonderful moment of celebration and worship. Critics of The Toronto Blessing must constantly remember that it is the people of God who are coming to Toronto and are raising their voices in praise to the heavenly Father.

One night at the Vineyard, a television crew was making a documentary for European television. One of the people being interviewed was a psychologist from England who favored The Toronto Blessing. He told the television crew that he knew of no one coming to the Airport Vineyard who had a negative emotional or psychological reaction. However, there are more than a few people who have been deeply upset and wounded by some of the negative aspects of this renewal.

One of my colleagues at the Ontario Theological Seminary, where I now teach, told me of a close friend of his who, during an evening service at the Airport Vineyard, had been won back to the



Lord after a lengthy period of rebellion. This person rededicated his life to the gospel and now has a renewed call to Christian ministry.

One young woman came to my office to talk about what the meetings meant for her. She had gone to the meeting one night purely out of curiosity and was not open for prayer. However, she did receive prayer after her initial hesitation, and to her surprise she found herself laughing and then weeping in deep emotional and spiritual renewal. She reports with some surprise that she has been delivered from deep channels of fear and anxiety that had plagued her life for years.

### **Five Interpretations of The Toronto Blessing**

Whenever I teach on a particular topic in my course work, I like to inform students of various options for interpretation. These perspectives can then be kept in mind as the evidence is weighed and various issues are settled in the process of analysis. With that in mind, I would like to close this first chapter by presenting some of the different perspectives on The Toronto Blessing.

From my reading of the immense literature on this current renewal, there appear to me to be at least five different interpretations. The two most extreme interpretations adopt an eschatological or prophetic interpretation—the one positive and the other negative. We should remember something that will be noted in the next chapter, that the middle position between extremes is not necessarily the right interpretation. In other words, truth is not always in the middle, though that often may be the case. We will consider the various perspectives from the positive to the negative.

(1) The most optimistic interpretation is the view that The Toronto Blessing represents a renewal that is prophetic in significance. This renewal is part of God's will in bringing the church to its final preparation for the return of Jesus Christ. In the March/April, 1995 issue of *Spread the Fire*, for example, it is mentioned that David Yonggi Cho, the famous Korean pastor, has prophesied that the last outpouring of the Holy Spirit before the Lord

returns will begin in Canada. This incredible statement is being used to refer to The Toronto Blessing.

(2) It is true that The Toronto Blessing is a great renewal, but it should not be interpreted as having eschatological significance in any other way than any church or any part of the body of Christ has eschatological significance in being part of the kingdom of God. According to this view, The Toronto Blessing is acknowledged primarily as a supernatural and miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit. In its cover story on The Toronto Blessing, for example, *Charisma* magazine alludes to this renewal as being similar in nature to the beginnings of Pentecostalism at Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906. Parallels have also been drawn between the renewal at the Airport Vineyard and the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

(3) A third interpretation uses the phrase “mixed blessings” to describe the Toronto renewal. Simply put, the renewal connected with Rodney Howard-Browne and the Vineyard offers a mixture of good and bad, of positive and negative. This option does not center on the obvious point that in any church there is a mixture of the flesh and Spirit. Rather, it makes a much bolder claim, that this renewal has some wonderful aspects, but it also has some dangerous and harmful aspects.

(4) In a more critical position, many believe that The Toronto Blessing is fundamentally a negative reality. This renewal is not in keeping with the authentic revivals of church history, and its weaknesses are so great that Christians worldwide must be warned against it. In other words, The Toronto Blessing is no blessing at all! Some discernment is needed to understand this position. Its advocates are not suggesting that there is nothing right about the Airport Vineyard and Rodney Howard-Browne. But they claim that their criticisms are so serious that it is not God’s will for a Christian to be involved with Howard-Browne or the alleged renewal in and through the Airport Vineyard.

(5) The final interpretation is the most negative. It is rooted, like the first one, in a prophetic or eschatological understanding. Accord-

ing to those who take this view, The Toronto Blessing is part of the work of the Antichrist to bring about world apostasy and the creation of a one-world church under satanic delusion. In other words, a few critics believe that the ministry of Rodney Howard-Browne and the renewal at the Airport Vineyard is not a work of God; rather, it is a mighty delusion brought on the church to create ultimate loyalty to the evil one.

It should be obvious from the vast gulf represented between the opposing perspectives of The Toronto Blessing that it would be difficult to work through a process whereby all Christians could come to a consensus on what this renewal constitutes. However, it is a task of any analyst to pay attention to the different interpretations and to keep these in mind as the material is studied, as people are interviewed, and as all of the issues are examined in the light of the Bible.