

REGENT UNIVERSITY

AN EXAMINATION OF METHODS
FOR EVALUATING THE TORONTO BLESSING
AS A WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

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BY

MARTIN DIGNARD

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
DEFINING THE MANIFESTATIONS	2
THE ANTAGONIST POSITION.....	3
Personal Experience.....	4
Support of Scripture.....	4
Church History.....	6
Leadership.....	7
THE SUPPORTING POSITION.....	8
Personal Experience.....	8
Support of Scripture.....	9
Church History.....	10
Fruit of the Experience.....	11
CONCLUSION.....	12
WORKS CITED	14

INTRODUCTION

In 1993, Vineyard pastor Randy Clark prepared to leave ministry from burnout. Before doing so, he felt directed by God to attend a meeting at Rhema Bible College. At this meeting, the evangelist Rodney Howard-Browne spoke. Clark heard that many unusual manifestations followed this ministry—laughing, weeping, shaking, falling on the floor—and these were attributed to the Holy Spirit. At that meeting, Clark encountered many of the manifestations he had heard about, and he felt revived. He began to refer to this as a revival.

After hearing about Clark's experience, John Arnott, pastor of the Toronto Airport Vineyard church, invited Clark to speak at his church. After the sermon, on January 20, 1994, these same manifestations began to take place in the congregation. Hearing about this, people from many denominations all over the world began visiting the Toronto Church. When they returned to their own churches, many of the same phenomena would take place there. Since the initial outpouring, thousands have journeyed to Toronto for a fresh touch of the Holy Spirit. Eventually, the media began to refer to this movement as the 'Toronto blessing.'¹

Since then, this movement has come under suspicion by many parts of the Church because of the unusual manifestations taking place in the services. Some of the leaders claim that these phenomena are intentional acts of the Holy Spirit, but opponents attribute them to the flesh or the devil. Both supporters and opponents refer to many of the same standards for testing the movement: Scripture, Church history, and personal experiences; however, each group addresses these criteria differently, and their theological beliefs provide contradictory answers to the same

¹ John Arnott, *The Father's Blessing* (Orlando: Creation House, 1995), 8. The British press used this term to refer to the revival and accompanying phenomena that were taking place at the Toronto Airport church.

questions. This paper will examine the way these criteria are addressed to determine the methodology of each group and the accuracy of their arguments.

DEFINING THE MANIFESTATIONS

Most objections to the Toronto movement stem from the intensity, extremity, and peculiarity of the manifestations. These can be separated into three groups: laughter and weeping, shaking and falling, and drunken behavior and animal sounds. Some object that the terminology “is not found in the Bible and where it is, it seems to be used rather differently. When novel jargon has to be coined . . . that arouses the suspicion that it has been difficult to describe something in biblical terms, which must in turn raise the question: ‘Is it biblical?’²

Many object to the laughter and weeping because they take place during the sermon: “Many times this laughter . . . will sweep through the entire congregation with no respect to what is being done from the pulpit. Many times laughter has drowned out the preaching, cutting it short or stopping it all together.”³ The main objections to the falling and shaking are the intensity and duration; those who fall may remain down for a significant time—“they feel physically anaesthetized, weighted-down, or, sometimes, weightless, unable to get up, sometimes for hours, even when they try,”⁴—and the shaking can be extreme—“some people will uncontrollably bounce up and down like a ball or jump up and down like a jackhammer. Others will be moved up and around like a puppet.”⁵ Surprisingly, it is the shaking and the falling—not the laughter—

² David Pawson, *Is the ‘Blessing’ Biblical? Thinking Through the Toronto Phenomenon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 1995), 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ Philip J. Richter, “‘God is not a Gentleman!’ The Sociology of the Toronto Blessing,” *The Toronto Blessing - Or is it?* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), 7.

⁵ Wesley Campbell, *Welcoming a Visitation of the Holy Spirit* (Orlando: Creation House, 1996), 85.

that seem to be the most common manifestations.⁶ The third group contains manifestations of inebriation and animal mimicry. In the former, sober people seem to be under the influence of alcohol, “not dissimilar to a state of inebriation—muddled minds, slurred speech and unsteady gait.”⁷ In the latter, people make animal sounds (barking, roaring, and crowing) or mimic animals (eagles, oxen, and lions). The main objection is that “[it] has allowed the sanctuary and the worship services to become barnyards.”⁸ Supporters consider the manifestations to be prophetic of the four living creatures of Revelations 4:6-8, saying, “It is no coincidence that we have seen people prophetically acting like lions, oxen, eagles and even warriors.”⁹ However, some of the leaders, such as Howard-Browne, reject the animal manifestations: “We don’t have any barking or roaring in our meetings . . . If you bark like a dog, we’ll give you dog food. If you roar like a lion, we’ll put you in the zoo.”¹⁰

THE ANTAGONIST POSITION

The antagonists of the Toronto movement often rely upon Scripture, Church history, and personal opinion to invalidate the movement as a genuine work of the Holy Spirit. For this position, David Swanson’s booklet¹¹ will be examined. This booklet is indicative of many arguments against the Toronto movement, and reviewing it will reveal Swanson’s approach to Scripture and Church history and will indicate any theological bias affecting his methodology.

⁶ Margaret M. Poloma, “Inspecting the Fruit of the ‘Toronto Blessing’: A Sociological Perspective,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society For Pentecostal Studies* 20.1 (Spring 1998): 52.

⁷ Pawson, 44.

⁸ Richard J. Smith, “A Consideration of the Toronto Blessing,” *Didaskalia* 11.1 (Fall 1999): 26.

⁹ Arnott, 178.

¹⁰ James A. Beverly, “Toronto’s Mixed Blessing,” *Christianity Today* 39 (September 11, 1995): 27.

¹¹ David S. Swanson, *Next Stop Toronto – is it of God?* (Edinburgh: Rutherford Hosue, 1997).

Personal Experience

Swanson begins by describing his own experience at a Toronto-style meeting. After declaring that he went with an open mind and heart, he explains how uncomfortable he felt during the service. From the start, his language indicates a negative opinion of the service: “The meeting began with praise and the singing of the new popular worship songs. After some considerable time, one of the team rose and introduced his colleagues”—the phrase ‘considerable time’ suggests impatience—and when the manifestations began, he says,

I became greatly disturbed in my spirit. . . . I could think of no logical reason for what was happening and began to feel that I was watching a staged floor-show by Paul Mackenna, the famous hypnotist.¹²

His language reveals a negative opinion that could be a significant factor in his evaluation.

Support of Scripture

Swanson begins his examination of Scripture by stating that emphasizing only one biblical truth is dangerous, and a balance is necessary in order to avoid extremism and error:

Our ideals are a result of our particular theological bias. If we lapse into extremism of any kind, our viewpoint is going to be lop-sided and we are going to practise lop-sided Christianity. We must always maintain the balance of truth and avoid the danger of going off at a tangent.¹³

In the next sentence, however, he condemns the movement based on his own eschatology:

Many people have taken the doctrine of eschatology . . . and built it into a theology of triumphalism *which is not supported anywhere in Scripture*. . . . This is an extreme version of what is called post-millennialism . . . Unfortunately *Scripture does not seem to teach this*. . . . *Biblical teaching clearly shows* that the nearer the Second Coming of Christ, the greater will be the apostasy culminating in the appearance of the anti-Christ . . . [which is] *clear biblical teaching* [emphasis mine].¹⁴

¹² Ibid., 8, 9.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12, 13.

After continuing to defend his eschatology, he concludes, “the Toronto movement endorses the unbiblical teaching of the triumphalistic restorationist,” and “this is what makes the movement suspect.”¹⁵ Swanson shows his bias by equating his theology of eschatology with “clear biblical teaching” of Scripture although scripture can support different positions.

Swanson states that “each time God has sent revival, the preaching and teaching of His Word has been central, as can be seen by reading any accounts of them . . . [but] leaders of this movement put more emphasis on visions and prophetic utterances than upon the Bible, however much they may deny it.”¹⁶ These statements are subjective, not theological. Also, “they deny it” may indicate the issue is different definitions of ‘emphasizing Scripture.’

Swanson also states that “laying on of hands was never used in the old revivals and the Holy Spirit moved independently and sovereignly as always. . . . nowhere in the New Testament is there any instruction to lay hands on people so that they receive a manifestation of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ He does not discuss Mark 16:18, Acts 8:17-19, Acts 19:6, Acts 28:8, and 1 Timothy 4:14. This seems to reveal a bias in his theology against charismatic practices.

In reference to those who practice ‘laying on of hands,’ he says,

Some may ask how so many are receiving the ‘power of the Spirit’ through the laying on of hands if we are not meant to do this. . . . How it is known that they are receiving the ‘power of the Holy Spirit’ and not the power of some other spirit. This very phenomenon is the most worrying aspect of the Toronto experience . . .¹⁸

His ‘biblical’ objections to the movement really stem from his post-millennial eschatology, his definition of emphasizing Scripture, and his preferences on how prayer is practiced.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., 18, 19.

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

Church History

Jonathan Edwards, the leader of the Great Awakening, is cited in most discussions of the Toronto movement. Swanson begins by stating that “a closer look at the accounts given by Edwards shows that they bear little resemblance to the Toronto experience,” and he refers to a statement made by Edwards, which is often used to support the Toronto manifestations:

We know that [the Holy Spirit] uses an unknowably great variety of methods within his own self-imposed limits. We ought not limit God where He has not limited Himself. Therefore it is not reasonable to determine that a work is not of God’s Holy Spirit because of the extraordinary degree to which people’s minds are influenced.

and then accuses the Toronto leaders of purposely omitting the rest of Edwards’ statement:

If they seem to have an extraordinary conviction of the dreadful nature of sin, and a very uncommon sense of the misery of a Christless condition—or extraordinary views of the certainty and glory of divine things, and are proportionably moved with very extraordinary affections of fear and sorrow, desire, love or joy.¹⁹

He concludes, “Edwards is referring to the distinguishing works of the Holy Spirit under the ‘Preaching of the Word of God.’”²⁰ He omits that some manifestations were experienced by Edwards’ wife over several days while she conversed with friends, made breakfast, or ate dinner.²¹ Swanson says, “neither Edwards’ nor any of the many other books about revivals that I have read made much reference to outbursts of giggling. . . . such outbursts were considered suspect.”²² However, Edwards wrote, “it was very wonderful to see how a person’s affections were sometimes moved . . . ready to break forth into laughter, tears often at the same time.”²³

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 23.

²¹ Guy Chevreau, *Catch the Fire* (HarperCollins Publishers Ltd: Toronto, 1994), 75-83. Chevreau mentions that Edwards’ wife supposedly fell face-first into her plate one evening while eating dinner.

²² Swanson, 24.

²³ Chevreau, 93.

Leadership

Swanson lists Arnott, Hinn, and Howard-Browne as the main leaders of the Toronto movement; however, Hinn is not usually associated with the movement, and Clark, who preached when the manifestations began, is only mentioned in passing. He begins by saying,

The most earnest of believers can become fanatics and every revival has had its ‘scallywags’ who have unfortunately brought disrepute to a genuine work of God. However, for the most part, God has been pleased to use individuals of sound judgement and godliness in any major work, individuals like Whitfield, Wesley, Daniel Rowland, Jonathan Edwards and D. L. Moody, to name but a few, who despite their shortcomings were people thoroughly grounded in the scriptural fundamentals of the Christian faith.²⁴

He suggests a revival can have ‘scallywags,’ but leaders must be respectable; however, he does not identify who makes that judgment. Also, some of his ‘leaders’ were rejected by the churches of their day: Wesley was locked out of the Anglican church, Whitefield was barred from the Congregational Church, and the Great Awakening was “The Great Clamour.”²⁵

After saying, “certain leading figures . . . seem not to be ‘sound in the faith’ to judge from their teachings and practices,” he judges Arnott for being at a meeting led by Hinn in Argentina in 1993, for giving prophecies that support the movement, and for claiming that the Spirit revealed to him the meaning of Matthew 11:16-19—the ‘dirge’ was God calling the Church to repentance, and when it didn’t respond, he sent the ‘flute’—joy and laughter.²⁶

Although he says the movement began at a meeting in 1993 when Hinn prayed for Arnott, the 1993 meeting Arnott attended in Argentina was led by Claudio Friedzon, an Assembly of God leader.²⁷ He does not give any example of a prophecy given by Arnott, so this argument cannot be evaluated. Concerning the third objection, he makes the following statement:

²⁴ Swanson, 14.

²⁵ Arnott, 63.

²⁶ Swanson, 14, 15.

²⁷ Arnott, 58.

It seems unlikely that a holy God would call His people to repentance and, when they refused to listen, would send them joy and laughter. . . . I hardly think that He is prepared to overlook His people's rebelliousness.²⁸

His assumption is heavily based upon his own personal beliefs, and it does not disprove Arnott's interpretation. His objection to Hinn is that "he has adopted the infamous 'Faith, Health and Prosperity' teaching of Copeland and Hagin," and his objection to Howard-Browne is based on what he heard second-hand from Tony Pearce, a Pentecostal leader.²⁹

THE SUPPORTING POSITION

The leading proponent of the Toronto movement is Arnott, author of *The Father's Blessing*. He also uses Scripture, Church history, and human experience to validate this movement. Because of his involvement in the movement, his interpretation of Scripture and perspective may also be biased. Reviewing his book will reveal the accuracy of this position.

Personal Experience

Arnott and his wife had been pastors of the Toronto Airport church for several years. A large portion of their time was spent in counseling and ministering to hurting people in their church, and they became desperate for a better way to help people:

Our focus was on the people, the troubles and the healings needed instead of the Lord. To us, it became as though the devil was too big and the Lord was too small. Our solutions for helping people centered around dealing with the darkness, trying to cast the demons out and heal life's hurts instead of receiving more of the Holy Spirit's presence and power as a main emphasis.³⁰

In desperation, they went to a meeting in Toronto in fall of 1992 where Hinn spoke. During the teaching, they felt inspired to seek the anointing at church: "It didn't matter what

²⁸ Swanson, 15.

²⁹ Ibid., 15, 16.

³⁰ Arnott, 57.

their denominational background was. If I heard they were anointed by the Spirit and used by God, I wanted them to come because maybe we could learn something from them.”³¹ The concern here is whether desperation was minimizing their discernment. He does not describe how they or others defined ‘anointed.’ Another result of this meeting was their decision to give their entire mornings to worship, prayer, and Bible study. In November 1993, they went to the Argentina meeting, and while praying for the anointing, Friedzon told him to “Take it!” and Arnott “received by faith.”³² Two months later, the movement began.

Support of Scripture

Arnott also uses Scripture for evaluating the movement; however, when it does not address a specific experience, he looks to the overall message of the Bible: “Yet as we see the Spirit of God doing more and more, we may see some things that no chapter and verse in the Bible specifically describes. Why? God did not intend to describe every act He would ever do in the Bible.”³³ If something is not mentioned in scripture, it is evaluated by the overall message of the Gospel and God’s character—with Scripture being the final authority:

The Bible is a record of people’s *experiences* with God. Theology is the reflection on these experiences. The theology that Scripture reveals and establishes is essential. But we also need person experiences with God . . . every phenomenon we accept as from God must conform to God’s character and His ways. . . . I’m convinced the bulk of what we are seeing in this current renewal is from God.³⁴

Using this as a basis, he responds to the objection that things are not being done ‘decently and in order’ (1 Corinthians 14:40), he says, “The Holy Spirit reserves the right to fall on the people, even during the preaching of the Word. He did this to Peter in Cornelius’ house (Acts

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 58.

³³ Ibid., 61.

³⁴ Ibid., 62.

10:44). Because of our fears or pride, we want to be in charge,” and he asks, “Who is in control? . . . Whose understanding of ‘decently and in order’ should we use—yours, ours, or God’s?”³⁵

These are valid questions for those who raise this objection.

Church History

Arnott regards Church history as the second criteria for evaluating the movement. After referring to Chevreau’s book on the writings of Jonathan Edwards, he states,

George Whitefield, the great Methodist revivalist in the 1700s, was barred from preaching in any Congregational Church . . . because of the seemingly disorderly uproar that accompanied his meetings. . . . When he preached, people fell, they laughed, they rolled, they shouted. They had manifestations similar to those we see, and a lot of folk did not understand.’³⁶

Unfortunately, he does not cite where this information is from; however, the following is cited from Philip Doddridge’s account of Whitefield’s preaching: “From the stoutest man to the tenderest child, shake and tremble and a few fall down as dead. Nor does this happen only when men of warm address alarm them with the terrors of the law, but when the most deliberate preacher speaks of redeeming love.”³⁷ Though there is support for his position that many of the Toronto manifestations have been seen in other revivals and were viewed positively, they were not the focus of the preaching and teaching, and they may not have been as frequent as they are in the Toronto movement. In this case, he seems to be ascribing more importance to manifestations than is warranted.

³⁵ Ibid., 73, 74.

³⁶ Ibid., 64.

³⁷ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield. The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, Vol. 2 (Westchester: Cornerstone Books, 1980), 128; quoted in Eric E. Wright, *Strange Fire? Assessing the Vineyard Movement and the Toronto Blessing* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1996), 116.

Fruit of the Experience

Scripture and Church history are the main criteria for evaluating the movement, but the resultant fruit is Arnott's motivation: "The greatest revelation I hear night after night is that God has come to people by the power of the Holy Spirit and revealed His love to them personally . . . Joel 2:28 is being fulfilled before our eyes."³⁸ His goal is that people would both experience more of God's love and power and also give it away:

We tell people all the time, 'You cannot give away what you have not first received.' You need to soak in this and let the Lord make a deposit deep within your inner being. . . . allow Him to flow out of you in words and acts of life and blessing."³⁹

He supports the movement because he connects the manifestations with changed lives:

First, they are refreshed and healed and fall in love with Jesus again. This often then transitions into a phase of empowering for ministry. . . . our capacity to receive from God is tremendously increased. Before, only a few would receive something deep in the Spirit. Now many receive a high-powered spiritual experience.⁴⁰

To the objection that this 'spiritual experience' may not be of the Holy Spirit, Arnott says,

If you ask for the Holy Spirit, you won't get a demon. If you fall down and shake and rattle and roll after you ask for the Holy Spirit, have you then received an unholy spirit? No. You received what you asked for according to Luke 11—the Holy Spirit. How do you know that you will not get a counterfeit? . . . Do you know that your heavenly Father loves you? Do you know what kind of a wonderful Father He is? Well then, why would you think that if you asked Him for something good, He would allow Satan to give you a counterfeit? . . . It's simply a matter of trusting God.⁴¹

Margaret Poloma, a sociologist who has researched the Toronto movement over a span of years, has substantiated a positive impact associated with the movement, saying that "spiritual healing is perceived to be one of the unmistakable fruits of the renewal," and that "positive changes in the respondent's relationship to God as a result of participation in the renewal appear

³⁸ Arnott, 23.

³⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 98, 99.

⁴¹ Ibid., 111.

to be nearly universal.”⁴² She has also concluded that the manifestations are indicative of a deeper work of the Holy Spirit:

The manifestations (but not any particular manifestation) also contributed to explaining higher levels of spiritual healing, in that those who reported a wider range of manifestations scored higher on spiritual healing. . . . it is clear to us that he is using the prayers of nameless and faceless prayer team volunteers, the controversial manifestations, and intense emotional experiences to bring people closer to himself.⁴³

CONCLUSION

Both antagonists and supporters of the Toronto movement emphasize conformity with Scripture; while the former reject the manifestations because they are not prescribed in the Bible and do not have identical examples in scripture, the latter accept the manifestations because they are not proscribed in the Bible and are supported by the intention of Scripture. Both groups rely upon Church history—especially Jonathan Edwards’ writings—but there is great disagreement on the interpretation of those writings: antagonists say the manifestations were rare and considered suspect while supporters say they were common and approved. Both positions seem to allow personal bias to affect those historical accounts. Antagonists appeal to personal opinion and logic, certain that God would not use bizarre manifestations to complete a work in people; supporters appeal to the testimonies of positive experiences and fruit, sure that it is God’s Spirit working in their midst. There is some objective support that many who have experienced the manifestations in their own lives have experienced a greater intimacy with God and a greater empowerment.

With any movement, experience, or teaching, Christians tend to disqualify things they are not comfortable with, and since they do not want to be uncomfortable with God’s work, they

⁴² Poloma, 58.

⁴³ Ibid., 60.

need to disqualify it. Conversely, Christians have a tendency to affirm what they are comfortable with, and since they do not want to be comfortable with something that is fleshly or demonic, they find reasons to validate it. All Christians need to evaluate things by Scripture, Church history, character, and fruit—but the evaluation must be done honestly. Scripture prescribes and proscribes things, but it also leaves room for things to be evaluated by the way it lines up with the overall message of the Gospel and with God’s character; Church history has heroes, villains, crusades, and revivals, so it must be viewed carefully and honestly—not just to support a single belief; the character of those who lead is important, but the leader and the message are not the same thing—for even the high priest who condemned Jesus to death prophesied correctly about the need for that sacrifice; and the fruit of any experience is important—but it can be dependent upon values, emotions, and interpretation, so it needs to be carefully approved. Sound judgment requires that truth will be valued more than denominational traditions or being right.

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