

# MEDIA SPOTLIGHT



A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS & SECULAR MEDIA

## SPECIAL REPORT

# HOLY LAUGHTER

## RODNEY HOWARD-BROWNE AND THE TORONTO BLESSING

by Albert James Dager

There are few within the evangelical Christian churches today who have not heard of the phenomenon known as "holy laughter." It has been increasingly manifesting in charismatic churches in the United States, Canada and Great Britain for over two years, and its reach into new churches continues at a rapid pace.

When I first heard of this phenomenon I was disposed to research and write about it. But I felt I should wait awhile and see what would come of it, and what spiritual fruit might be manifested. Now I believe it has had sufficient exposure to justify this report.

### WHAT IS HOLY LAUGHTER

Many churches are reporting spontaneous, uncontrollable laughter erupting from their congregations, even during times of solemn ceremony or messages from the pulpit. Some report uncontrollable weeping, falling to the floor in ecstatic trances, and animal noises such as barking like dogs and roaring like lions. Some stagger and reel like drunken people, unable to walk a straight line. For simplicity's sake, all these have come to be called "holy laughter," since laughter is the pre-eminent phenomenon displayed. In simple terms, it is physical manifestations in the form of virtually any expression attributed to absolute control by the Holy Spirit.

Proponents of these phenomena say they are evidence of a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit in response to the people's desire to see a new sign from God—the latest in manifestations of Holy Ghost power, such as took place at Azusa Street in Los Angeles at the turn of the century. They point to the Welsh Revival, the Cane Ridge Revival in Bourbon County, Kentucky in 1801, and to preachers like Charles Finney, to validate today's holy laughter experience.

Opponents say it is either a manifestation of the flesh, at best, or of demonic spirits at worst. Those who believe it is of God point to changed lives, deeper commitment to faith in Jesus, huge responses to the salvation message, a renewed strength and purpose for ministry, and all sorts of positive results. On the other hand, there are also reports of demonic oppression, suicidal feelings, and loss of faith after the holy laughter experience.



Apostle of holy laughter Rodney Howard-Browne & wife Adonica

Whatever one thinks of holy laughter, it has certainly impressed a number of well-known personalities within the Christian media circuit. There seems to be a strong manifestation especially in word-faith churches, and within the Vineyard movement, as well as charismatic mainline churches such as Episcopalian and Anglican. Individuals who have flocked to holy laughter meetings span every denomination from Baptist to Roman Catholic.

Holy laughter has received the endorsements of Oral and Richard Roberts, Marilyn Hickey, Paul and Jan Crouch, Karl Strader, Larry Tomszak, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, the late John Wimber and many other media luminaries.

While the claim of spontaneity is heard from all sources, the current popularity of the phenomenon can be traced to one man, Rodney Howard-Browne, formerly a pentecostal South African evangelist. The major impetus for the worldwide spread of the movement has come through one church in particular—the Toronto Airport Vineyard, in Toronto, Ontario, famous for "the Toronto Blessing."

### THE TORONTO BLESSING

People have flocked from all over the globe to attend services at the Toronto Airport Vineyard, hoping to experience holy laughter. So impacting has been the influence of this church on the holy laughter phenomenon that Charisma magazine devoted considerable space to the Toronto Blessing in the February, 1995, issue.

### How Did It Start?

On January 20, 1994, what was intended to be the start of several "revival" meetings was held at a small church located in an industrial complex near Pearson International Airport in Toronto. Within one year, it had become what Daina Doucet, writing for Charisma, calls, "a mecca of sorts." Because of the huge crowds seeking a sign from God, the church conducts meetings every night except Mondays. Even the secular media have focused reports on the phenomenon with articles and television documentaries. The focus of all reports is upon the physical manifestations displayed at these meetings. Says Daina Doucet in Charisma:

...Worshippers are overcome by laughing, weeping, groaning, shaking, falling and, to the chagrin of some, noise-making that has been described as "a cross between a jungle and a farmyard."<sup>1</sup>

But of greater significance are the reports of changed lives: healings, restored relationships and increased fervor for God.<sup>2</sup>

Doucet attributes the origins of the Toronto Blessing to Vineyard pastor Randy Clark of St. Louis, Missouri, who had been influenced by Rodney Howard-Browne in late 1993.

...What was intended to be a four-day series of meetings with Clark expanded into months of nightly services that sometimes lasted until 3 a.m.<sup>3</sup>

News of the movement spread, and by April, 1994, curious international visitors were arriving in Toronto. By December, 75,000 people from almost every country of the world had crossed the Airport Vineyard's threshold. Cumulative attendance has been more than 200,000, some 10,000 of them clergy.<sup>4</sup>

It can be honestly stated that, until Clark took what he had received from Howard-Browne to the Toronto Vineyard, Howard-Browne and holy laughter were virtually unheard of. This, in spite of the fact that Howard-Browne claims he first experienced holy laughter in his meetings over thirteen years ago. Although Howard-Browne is now the most visible spokesman for the phenomenon, it has virtually become a Vineyard movement within its own right, spreading to Europe, Asia, Africa and other parts of the world.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of the Toronto Blessing has been especially felt in Great Britain, where it is reported that it has touched every denomination in some way, with estimates that from 2,500 to 4,000 churches have had meetings similar to those of the Airport Vineyard.<sup>6</sup>

Is this hyperbole, or are such tremendous figures for real? Knowing the penchant toward "evangelistic speaking" that is prevalent among charismatics, I have my doubts. But numbers aren't as important as the phenomenon's true spiritual origins and its true spiritual consequences.

### **THE ORIGINS**

Rodney Morgan Howard-Browne, a burly, 6-foot charismatic preacher from South Africa, was born June 12, 1961, in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. He says he committed his life to Christ at age 5, and was filled with the Holy Spirit at age 8. In 1979, while praying for hours seeking a deeper spiritual experience, he challenged God:

"Either You come down here and touch me, or I will come up there and touch You," he prayed in desperation.

Suddenly, his whole body felt like it was on fire. He began to laugh uncontrollably. Then he wept and began to speak in tongues. "I was plugged into heaven's electrical supply," he

later wrote in his book, *The Touch of God*. "And since then my desire has been to go and plug other people in."<sup>7</sup>

For the next ten years Howard-Browne moved about, pastoring for two years at Rhema Church in Johannesburg, South Africa, prior to moving to the United States in 1987. He became an itinerant preacher, with small engagements, throughout the country. It was in April, 1989, while Howard-Browne was preaching in a church near Albany, New York, that the holy laughter outbreak began. Browne claims that he felt a sensation like a heavy blanket coming over him. Soon people began falling out of their seats, some laughing, others crying. From that point on, his reputation began to grow.

He established the Rodney Howard-Browne Evangelistic Association in Louisville, Kentucky. In the spring of 1993, Karl Strader, pastor of Carpenter's Church in Lakeland, Florida, invited him to preach. Scheduled for a one-week appearance, he was carried over for three more weeks.<sup>8</sup>

Since the services were broadcast on radio, many people began showing up at Carpenter's Church to experience what they heard on the air.

It wasn't long before Howard-Browne was appearing on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). It was only shortly afterward that Howard-Browne's influence began to envelope the Toronto Airport Vineyard through the visit by Randy Clark. From that point, it has spread from the Toronto Airport Vineyard to churches throughout the world, primarily through the Vineyard movement.

In the final analysis, then, the present popularity of the holy laughter phenomenon can be traced to this one man, Rodney Howard-Browne, and his influence through radio and television, and his impact upon Randy Clark.

Or can it? Not to be outdone by Rodney Howard-Browne or the Vineyard movement, suddenly we learn from Charles and Frances Hunter (aka "the Happy Hunters") that they were experiencing this phenomenon many, many years ago. It's only in 1994 that they decided to let us know about it in their book, *Holy Laughter*. Frances Hunter states that she fell under the power of the Holy Spirit at a Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship banquet in Houston. She neglects to mention the year, but they were new to the charismatic experience at the time, so it must

have been sometime in the 60s or 70s at the latest. After falling down with Charles she found herself glued to the floor, unable to move. Then she began to erupt into uncontrolled laughter for about one-half hour, after which the Holy Spirit allegedly released her from His grip.<sup>9</sup>

This was just the beginning of holy laughter for the Hunters. Thereafter, it seems that holy laughter manifested itself at their meetings, almost always accompanied by claims of physical healings.<sup>10</sup>

New to the charismatic experience at the time, the Hunters wanted to know what the phenomenon was. They asked their good friend Lester Sumrall what he thought of it:

Dr. Sumrall said, "What you experienced in your service is holy laughter." Then he continued, "Anything that is of God is holy and anything that is holy has power connected to it." Now we began to understand why the unusual healings took place because it was a supernatural move of God and it brought supernatural healing power with it. Hallelujah!<sup>11</sup>

One may wonder why holy laughter was never promoted by the Hunters until after it became popular through Howard-Browne and the Vineyard. The Hunters do mention Howard-Browne, however, and give him credit for imparting to them the gift of holy laughter on a greater scale by the laying on of his hands. But apparently they are the originators and the experts on the phenomenon.

But wait! We have another person whose claim to holy laughter precedes that of the Hunters. Derek Prince, writing in *Charisma*, states:

I believe the Holy Spirit at times produces in people prolonged, exuberant and apparently causeless laughter. I have to believe it, because that is how I was saved more than 50 years ago.<sup>12</sup>

### **An Earlier Precedent?**

The holy laughter purveyors tell us that this is really nothing new, but has always been a part of revival. For example, *Charisma* magazine quotes Jonathan Edwards, "pioneer of the First Great Awakening in the 1730s":

"It was very wonderful to see how a person's affections were sometimes moved—when

God did, as it were, suddenly open their eyes and let into their minds a sense of the greatness of His grace. Their joyful surprise has caused their hearts to leap, so that they have been ready to break forth into laughter and tears, often at the same time, issuing like a flood, and intermingling a loud weeping. Sometimes they have not been able to forbear crying out with a loud voice."<sup>13</sup>

One who is convicted of sin may well laugh or cry after he has felt release from the condemnation and control of sin, which comes with confession and repentance. But there is no evidence he will bark like a dog or make other animal noises. These manifestations have historically been attributed to demonic spirits, not to the Holy Spirit.

Although today's holy laughter proponents like to point to Jonathan Edwards as validation for their practices, history doesn't line up with their claims. Evangelical historian Richard Lovelace of Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts is quoted in *Charisma*:

Although the current laughter phenomenon is new to Lovelace, he says Peter Cartwright, a 19th-century Methodist circuit rider and star of the Second Great Awakening, would have favored it.

"But Jonathan Edwards and the Puritans would not have agreed," he adds. "They had a saying that when the sun shines on the swamp, the mist rises. Human nature is full of gross impurities, possibly demonic in nature, that comes out when the gospel comes in. In my own reading on the frontier revivals, that's what you had going."

Obviously, Howard-Browne does not view "holy laughter" as demonic, and he refuses to quibble over interpretations of revival history. Finding this laughter in the Second Great Awakening is a nonissue to him. "Whether it was there or not, it's happening right now," he says.<sup>14</sup>

If Howard-Browne doesn't wish to quibble over interpretations of revival history, then why does he bring it up by citing revival history?

...the evangelist cites certain instances of unrestrained hilarity in the history of American

religion. The "indescribable joy" described by Charles Finney, he says, was actually laughter.

Howard-Browne cites the famous 1801 Cane Ridge Revival in Bourbon County, Kentucky, as a foreshadowing of what he is seeing in 1994.<sup>15</sup>

If it's a "nonissue," it should not be an issue in attempting to justify holy laughter. Yet it is an issue.

As an aside, the *Charisma* writer should not have said, "Finding this laughter in the Second Great Awakening is a nonissue..." She should have said "Not finding this laughter..." As it was stated, she implies that it was found in the Second Great Awakening.

There is no true historical precedent for what is occurring today with Rodney Howard-Browne, or at the Vineyard and other holy laughter meetings. And even if there were a true historical precedent, it would mean, at best, that whatever is motivating today's holy laughter participants motivated someone before. So what? There is no biblical precedent.

Ah, but there is a biblical precedent, the holy laughter proponents would say. It was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as recorded in the Book of Acts.

To this I would reply that that outpouring resulted in the Lord's disciples preaching the Gospel unto repentance, with the Holy Spirit giving them utterance in specific languages that the visitors from other nations could hear and understand. This is a far cry from what is occurring under the alleged ministry of the holy laughter preachers.

### IS IT OF GOD?

By what standard do the proponents of holy laughter judge whether the phenomenon is of God or not?

Do they cite Scripture properly? Do they minister with unfailing signs and wonders as did Jesus' apostles? No. Rather, they base their judgment upon perceived results, and whether or not it catches on. Says Howard-Browne:

"The proof that this is a move of God is that when I leave, it doesn't stop." <sup>16</sup>

Howard-Browne disparages those who try to apply a theological test to his methods. Why? Because they cannot stand a theological test. Any valid theological test must be based on the clear teaching of Scripture, and holy laughter doesn't measure up.

The only measure the holy laughter people want to apply is that which is based on outward results to their liking:

Since last March [1994], Howard-Browne has been back to Carpenter's Church three times. The church has added 800 new members, and its income is up 30 percent, according to [pastor Karl] Strader.

"I've been here 28 years, and there's never been anything like this," he adds. "We've had 2,200 people baptized. We'd go until almost 2 a.m., Rodney baptizing them six at a time in our pool. That's why we think we've had revival."

Strader invited Ron Clarke, pastor of Living Water Church in Tampa, Florida, to one of the meetings. He was reluctant at first, but then he found himself lying on the floor, laughing uncontrollably....

Clarke is still laughing today. In one year, membership at his church has grown from 800 to 1,500, and the congregation recently bought a new building. Clarke says conversions, baptisms in the Holy Spirit and healings have soared.<sup>17</sup>

So revival has come not through the preaching of the Gospel, but through allegedly uncontrollable laughter. Strange that Scripture doesn't record any such event.

The apostles did perform signs and wonders, but the Gospel was always clearly delineated and repentance was called for. Seldom if ever is this the case with holy laughter.

### Validation By Results

The Hunters claim that the purpose of holy laughter is to effect healing. They offer testimony after testimony of people healed at their services after experiencing holy laughter. They also point to changed lives as do those in the Toronto Blessing and the Rodney Howard-Browne camps.

People began to testify of wonderful changes in their lives. Many displayed a new hunger for God and a new zeal to see Him glorified. Bad relationships were healed, and weak marriages were wonderfully strengthened. Formerly depressed people were changed beyond recognition.<sup>18</sup>

Church leaders also point to the spiritual fruit produced in people's lives. Overall, they report, participants are experiencing a deeper relationship with God. Repentance is often manifested on both a personal and a congregational level. People yield to forgiveness, relationships are healed, and families are restored....

Their initial experiences often led to other results: the healing of long-standing emotional hurts, a growing love for the Lord and an increased desire to read His Word and to pray. Reports abound with testimonies of physical healings and stories of non believers being overcome by the power of God.<sup>19</sup>

God may indeed be at work in individual lives. But results are subjective. Will they last? Are they emotionally based or a true work of the Holy Spirit?

Cults point to results of changed lives for the better to validate their beliefs and practices. Should we not be critical of those beliefs and practices?

For that matter, the same results claimed by the holy laughter people can be found among non-Charismatics without benefit of the experiences. It may be asked, "Who is the more spiritually mature—those whose lives are changed by willful obedience to God's Word, or those who cannot or will not change unless they experience what they believe is a supernatural manifestation in their lives? I believe Scripture would point to the former.

Are the conversions genuine? Is God using holy laughter? That, we'll leave to the Lord. He can and will use many things to get people's attention. This does not validate the thing He uses, however. It is not uncommon that Satan means things for evil, but God uses it for good.

I know people who first began to get interested in a walk with God while attending the Crystal Cathedral. Today they recognize Robert Schuller's faulty theology and wouldn't attend there again. But they acknowledge that, even in their ignorance, God was using the little light they received to move on to true faith.

Let's not confuse God's grace with man's foolishness. Nor should we justify man's foolishness because of God's grace. And let's not confuse results with truth.

Yet regardless of whether or not healings and changed lives accompany holy laughter, people are feeling something; they are experiencing something that convinces them that God is manifesting Himself to them in a unique way. But is it of God? Or is it demonic? Or is it merely the flesh? Can it possibly be that all three sources are being manifested at the same time?

Even the proponents of holy laughter believe that not all manifestations are of God. While falling short of attributing them to demons, they do acknowledge that sometimes the flesh gets involved:

For Pentecostals or charismatics, such manifestations as fainting, weeping or laughing aren't completely foreign. More problematic, however, are the animal sounds—particularly the barking or roaring that has been reported in meetings in Toronto, London and elsewhere.

Opinions vary widely on the origin of these animal sounds. Many reject them as demonic. Others contend that they are simply a fleshly response to the Holy Spirit. In the British magazine Alpha, Toronto Vineyard pastor Marc Dupont suggests that the noises could be from God. He tells of praying for Gidon Chui, a Vancouver-based Chinese Pentecostal pastor.

"He began to roar like a lion," Dupont relates, noting that normally he would have assumed Chui needed deliverance from a demon spirit. But he believed Chui's unusual vocal expression heralded a sign from God.

"This symbolic, prophetic act signifies that the Lion of Judah will triumph," Dupont explains.<sup>20</sup>

Are we to assume that those who bark like a dog are heralding the triumph of Christ in some other form? Dogs are unclean animals (as are lions). Can we imagine Jesus or any of the apostles barking like dogs or roaring like lions? Yet who was more filled with the Holy Spirit than they?

How can these facts be overlooked? I believe the late John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard, offered a clue:

John Wimber takes a rather neutral approach to the more bizarre manifestations. "There's nothing in Scripture that sup-

ports these kinds of phenomena that I can see, and I can't think of anything throughout the church age that would," Wimber writes. "So I feel no obligation to try to explain it. It's just phenomena. It's just people responding to God."<sup>21</sup>

What an amazing statement. His Vineyard movement virtually exploded with this thing; it has exported it to the ends of the earth; and he felt no obligation to try to explain it, even though, by his own admission, it has no precedent in Scripture or in Church history. How does this measure up to Scripture's exhortation that we must test the spirits to see if they are of God or not?

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. (I John 4:1)

It will be argued that the test is whether or not one confesses that Jesus Christ came in the flesh (verses 2-3). And this, certainly, the proponents of holy laughter would lay claim to.

In the light of history, we must understand that at the time John wrote those words, there was no one who would claim that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh other than those who were His true disciples. By the same token, no one could say "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:3).

No one can deny that, today, many deceivers claim that Jesus has come in the flesh; they even use the expression "Jesus is Lord." The Mormons, the pope, the Jehovah's Witnesses, virtually all pseudo-Christian cults and false teachers who come in the name of Christ will testify to these truths. This is evidence that we are in the last days (Matthew 24). While there have been false prophets through the ages, the last days are seeing a proliferation of false prophets coming with lying signs and wonders. Therefore, the test today is whether or not something is in agreement with God's Word.

The operative words in I John 4:1-3, then, are, "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God."

Today especially—regardless of one's confession of faith—it is imperative that we always try (test) the spirits. And how do we try the spirits? Luke gives us an example in Acts 17:11, in speaking of the Jews at Berea:

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that



they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

The Bereans did not merely accept what the apostles told them, even though their words were anointed by the Holy Spirit. They searched the Scriptures to see if what they were told was true. If a teaching or a manifestation cannot bear the scrutiny of Scripture, then it must be rejected.

Proper exegesis does not permit the misapplying of God's Word in attempts to bolster acceptance of any teaching or phenomenon. The Scriptures must be applied properly and in context in order to justify acceptance by believers.

Since, by John Wimber's own admission, "there's nothing in Scripture that supports these kinds of phenomena," they must be classified as unbiblical or, at best, extra-biblical. Let us assume the best—that they are extra-biblical. That being the case, the proponents should take care not to insist that those who do not enter into them or accept them as genuine manifestations of the Holy Spirit are missing out on God's move, or are unspiritual, or are "closed to the Holy Spirit." At least they should be willing to give people time to test this thing. But are these phenomena being presented in this manner?

### **Get Out Of Your Mind**

Charles and Frances Hunter tell us not to test it, but to go whole-hog:

Could this be the way God is bringing us into the final great revival before the return of Jesus? Whether it is or not, we can feel the Holy Spirit moving - and we're going right along with Him! Don't stick your toe in to test the water! Don't wait! Jump all the way into this flowing river!<sup>22</sup>

Really? Just jump in? Don't test it? Don't wait? This is contrary to Scripture; it is the same tactic used by cultists to intimidate candidates to follow their way. Don't use your mind:

We always need to be completely open to the move of the Holy Spirit and never be so closed that we cannot see that God might be doing something so fresh and new today that there is no way our finite minds can understand it! Let's just enjoy it and not try to figure out God.<sup>23</sup>

The Hunters' language indicates that they themselves aren't all that positive about this thing. They use the phrase, "whether or not," and "God might be doing something." Yet they insist that we not test what they are promoting. This is characteristic of most of the major proponents of holy laughter, including Rodney Howard-Browne:

Howard-Browne disparages those who try to apply a theological test to his methods.

"You can't understand what God is doing in these meetings with an analytical mind," he says. "The only way you're going to understand what God is doing is with your heart."<sup>24</sup>

But the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked—even the heart of the born again believer in Jesus. This is why Scripture exhorts us to examine ourselves and to judge ourselves. Our self-life is still part of the unredeemed flesh.

Scripture warns us repeatedly not only not to trust our hearts, but to keep a sound mind and to test everything that comes in the name of Christ. When lauding the Bereans for searching after truth, Luke tells us that they "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Readiness of mind is important to discerning truth from error. Those who tell us not to use our minds are not to be trusted. No true minister of God would tell us such a thing

Something doesn't add up here. Nor does it add up that Terry Virgo, a Columbia, Missouri, pastor, would heartily endorse this movement on one hand, and on the other say that it must be proven true from Scripture:

Moving into the supernatural does not mean you kiss your brain goodbye. What we experience may be amazing—outside our normal realm—but we should be able to articulate from Scripture the precedent and the purpose for what is happening.<sup>25</sup>

But there is no precedent or purpose found in Scripture for what is happening in the holy laughter movement.

We find many similar mixed signals from the holy laughter proponents, even within the same forum of discussion. For example, Mona Johnian, writing in the February, 1995, *Charisma*, implies dire consequences for those

who do not enter into the flow of this new thing:

The question we as believers must answer is this: Will we flow with the plans and purposes of God for this hour or will we hinder revival?

I'm concerned that many are in danger of creating a false comfort zone for themselves. By the position they're taking, they are saying: "I'm not sure about this present move. I'm just going to wait and see what happens." But Jesus said, "He who is not with Me is against Me" (Matt. 12:30, NKJV).

Pentecost was not—and is not—an option. God considers us to be either for or against what He is doing at any given time.<sup>26</sup>

Because someone doesn't blindly accept an extra-biblical teaching or practice doesn't place him in the camp of Christ's enemies. We can still be for Him. It is presumption to say that we will be against Him just because we don't go with the flow.

Some have said that we cannot judge these phenomena without being there with an open spirit. But if truth or error can only be judged by experience, what purpose do the Spirit of God and the Word of God serve? To observe any religious thing with an open spirit precludes judgment. We would do better to observe everything with a spirit attuned to the Holy Spirit, testing everything by God's Word. In fact, Derek Prince, while endorsing this movement, says:

It is appropriate to approach unusual manifestations with caution, but not with blank, negative skepticism. After all, the fact that an experience is unconventional—or even extraordinary—does not necessarily mean that it is not from God.<sup>27</sup>

Testing by God's Word, of course, is not blind skepticism. Nor is coming to the conclusion to reject extra-biblical phenomena.

Charisma publisher Steven Strang goes even further in urging caution. After experiencing being "slain in the Spirit" at the Toronto Airport Vineyard, he would still not endorse the holy laughter phenomenon personally, even though he has published several glowing accounts of it by others:

Am I endorsing what I saw and experienced in Toronto? No, because I still don't understand much of it. Similar manifestations have occurred in past revivals; but I believe an experience should also be established in the Word of God.

Furthermore, I'm concerned. First, I'm concerned that such a move of God has the potential to create a new group of "spiritual elite"—with those who have experienced strange manifestations wearing them like a badge of spirituality.

Second, I'm concerned that the manifestations themselves could become so important that people who don't receive them through the power of the Holy Spirit will fake them—as Simon the magician wanted to do as in Acts 8.

Finally, I'm concerned that a new denomination of shriekers, twitchers and laughers could spring up. Impossible, you say? Well, remember the Shakers and Quakers—religious sects named after the phenomenon for which they were known.<sup>28</sup>

Strang's perceptions are valid. He went to Toronto; he experienced something there himself; yet he is reticent to endorse it because it cannot be validated by God's Word. And no one who knows anything about Charisma would doubt Strang's charismatic fervor.

He does say that he senses that what is happening is a part of what God is doing because it's happening worldwide. But so is Islam happening worldwide. His final advice, though, we can all agree with:

...let's pray for wisdom and discernment—and the grace to do as Paul instructs: "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).<sup>29</sup>

### **BLASPHEMING THE HOLY SPIRIT?**

No doubt those who reject phenomena like this as being of God will be accused of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. The experience-oriented religionists point to Matthew 12:31-32 to claim that those who attribute to Satan or to the flesh what they believe is the work of the Holy Spirit, has blasphemed against the Holy Spirit.

This is a serious accusation. Those who blaspheme against the Holy Spirit are eternally condemned; according to

Jesus' own words, they will not be forgiven in this world or in the next. This should cause us to be careful in making any assessment of supernatural (or seemingly supernatural) phenomena. Certainly we must guard our hearts to be sure we are not resisting the grace of God from impure motives.

The fear that comes upon many who are uncomfortable with these things, yet who lack understanding or discernment to be able to make a judgment, causes them to freeze at the thought of challenging the proponents. This has been the problem in the churches these days; many pastors are too cowardly to speak against something so bizarre, from fear that they may be blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Others become prideful in their acceptance of anything—their non-judgmentalism—which keeps them in touch with everything going on.

Lester Sumrall says it this way:

"The reason I have been in every move of God is because I have never criticized any ministry or work of God!"<sup>30</sup>

Well, of course! Someone who will not criticize even the most blatantly unscriptural claims to truth and to God's hand at work will find himself involved in every alleged "move of God." This is the true ecumenical spirit that pervades the alleged supernatural manifestations at work today.

If we are confident in our relationship with the Lord based upon unre-served trust in His written Word, we need not fear blaspheming the Holy Spirit. The Lord will keep us in check or will reveal to us what is of Himself. There are many in the churches whose testimonies are pure—whose walks are pure—whose hearts are right before the Lord—who do not accept holy laughter being of God. They are not fighting the Holy Spirit out of spite, as did the religionists of Jesus' day who accused Him of casting out devils by the prince of devils. There is no jealousy toward these people and their alleged Holy Spirit ministry. But there is concern that what is transpiring finds no genuine support in Scripture, but does find a fertile field among gullible Christians whose discernment is woefully lacking.

Truth produces guilt of sin. It is not a sin to test the claims of these people; it is not a sin not to laugh when they prompt us to laugh; it is not a sin to reject any subjective, extra-biblical or unbiblical work. Therefore, we should have no guilt for rejecting any of these phenomena.

Those who are in the Faith will not be brought under condemnation by anything or anyone except those things that are clearly delineated in God's Word. Everything else is subject to acceptance or rejection.

Frankly, if someone wants to believe that the Holy Spirit has infused them with laughter, who are we to judge them for it? But they should keep it to themselves rather than broadcast it as something God wants all His people to accept. While refusing to accept judgment for their unbiblical practices, they judge as unspiritual, ungodly, mean spirited, and even blasphemers of the Holy Spirit, those who reject those practices. They have no room to speak of intolerance if they do not tolerate scrutiny and correction from God's Word.

### **JOY! JOY! JOY!**

What is it that these holy laughter proponents want us to enter into without reservation? Obviously it entails laughter, but not always. Nor is laughter the end in itself. It is the joy of the Lord, they claim, that the laughter testifies to. As the Hunters say:

There is a powerful new wind of the Holy Spirit blowing, but it's lots more than a rushing mighty wind! There's an energizing, forceful sound that's coming with this new wind of the Spirit and it is the exciting sound of joy, joy, joy, joy! Not only an inward joy, but it's bringing a vocal joy, a holy laughter, right along with it. It's energetically stirring us to higher levels with God!<sup>31</sup>

We're told by the holy laughter purveyors that God wants to bless His people because He loves us so much. No matter that the churches are in a chaotic mess of unbelief, false doctrine, self-pride, broken marriages, adultery, ecumenical fervor and toleration of sin and of different gospels. God just wants to bless us; He wants us to be happy.

While Scripture warns us that the last days would see a great falling away from the purity of the Faith, the holy laughter crowd is telling us that the last days are seeing a revival.

While Scripture warns us that there would be false teachers abounding in great numbers in the last days, the charismatics and others tell us that the false teachers are those who warn against false teachers.

While Scripture warns us that judgment must come upon the house of God before it comes upon the world, the happy crowd tells us that there is no judgment coming upon the Church—only blessings; we should be filled with joy, not sorrow, at the prospect of the Church's condition today.

Certainly we can understand how such a deception can come about. Recall how Howard-Browne sought a special touch from God:

"Either You come down here and touch me, or I will come up there and touch You," he prayed in desperation.<sup>32</sup>

The arrogance to demand anything from God reveals an attitude of self-love. This is common among charismatics who place more stock in alleged signs and wonders than they do in God's written Word. This is reflected in Howard-Browne's demand that if God didn't do something for him he would ascend into heaven and touch God. Sound familiar?

Now, I don't believe Howard-Browne believed he could actually ascend into heaven and touch God, even at 18-years-of-age. I can accept that he was merely challenging God with extreme language. Yet even this is effrontery against the holiness of our mighty, sovereign God. Such an attitude may well prompt God to send something—but it won't be something a true believer would want. And while we may all on occasion be guilty of challenging God, it isn't something we should broadcast as an acceptable practice.

Because men do not love the truth (God's Word)—because they use unbiblical means to approach Him—He will send a strong delusion so that they would believe a lie (II Thessalonians 2:11). By every test based on God's Word, holy laughter is outwardly a blessing to those who follow after the flesh—but it is a strong delusion.

### **INTIMIDATION**

Not only do the major proponents of holy laughter tell us not to use our minds—not to bother testing these things—some denigrate those who do not readily fall under their spell. Howard-Browne calls those who do not enter into his move "ugly," "sad," and other choice words that do not reflect the humility and kind spirit of a true minister of God. This is intimidation at the basic level. While everyone around you is losing their minds, you feel out

of place—conspicuous, unholy, unrighteous, guilty—because you don't feel the bubbling up of holy laughter.

Claims of his wide-eyed fans to the contrary, Howard-Browne does intimidate verbally. On several occasions I've witnessed him "slay people in the Spirit," and if they didn't begin to laugh he would place his foot on their stomach and tell them to laugh. Some he would kick as they lay there, and accuse them of not yielding to the Holy Spirit. He would keep at it until they would obviously begin to force some kind of laugh out of themselves.

Since Rodney Howard-Browne is the catalyst for the holy laughter phenomenon's popularity today (most purveyors tracing their anointing either directly or indirectly to him), we felt it expedient to concentrate primarily on his methodology. From the root springs the tree. Rodney Howard-Browne is the root of the holy laughter movement.

### **HOWARD-BROWNE'S TEACHINGS**

Reading Howard-Browne's book, *The Touch of God*, I had to agree with much of what he teaches. His primary focus in the book as well as in his preaching is on the anointing of God—what the anointing is, the responsibilities that come with it, as well as the dangers and pitfalls. His call is for holiness of life and seeking after God with all one's heart.

On the subject of God's anointing, Howard-Browne states that the anointing is not a formula but a relationship with Jesus.

The problem, Howard-Browne says, is that the early church had the substance and the modern church has the formula. God's power, he says, should be tangible and evident in our lives. This, I must agree, is a problem in today's churches. For the most part, either they are chasing after signs and wonders for their own sake, or they are chasing after human potential schemes such as 12-step programs and four temperament personality testing for spiritual giftedness. This is all confusion.

Howard-Browne takes a dim view of the extreme deliverance methods that incorporate railing against the devil rather than prayer. He likens it to a spiritual Nintendo game, accusing many of living in a fantasy world of spiritual warfare. One statement alludes to spiritual warfare novels that have set the tone for their readers' prayer lives.

Interestingly, Howard-Browne has many indicting things to say about cer-

tain self-proclaimed prophets and apostles. He calls them "charismatic gurus," who always give vague prophecies, or apostles who want to rule over others no matter how few. His solution is to be led by the Spirit of God—to be like Jesus who said that He could do nothing except what He saw the Father do. Good stuff.

In the process of teaching some valid truths, Howard-Browne reveals inside knowledge of how some alleged men of God operate. Without offering names he lets us know that things are not always as they seem on the outside.

He states that some ministers actually buy large crusades in third-world countries, offering one dollar per head, because it looks good on television (and in their full-color brochures). It can move people in affluent countries to contribute to their cause if they can offer visual evidence that they can assemble a quarter of a million people to hear them preach. \$250,000 invested can result in millions in return. This is quite a revelation.

I should caution that not all evangelists to third-world countries operate this way. We know of some worthy ministries in that area. One should use wisdom in determining whom they support.

Howard-Browne has harsh words for mail-order ministries that send trinkets in the mail promising God's anointing for those who use them as a point of contact. As an aside, I found that interesting in view of Oral Roberts's fund-raising methods and the fact that Howard-Browne unashamedly states that Roberts laid hands on him. The point-of contact and "seed faith" methods are Oral Roberts traditions. Still, Howard-Browne's teaching on how ministers should handle money is good.

If God cannot trust us with unrighteous mammon—money—which represents power and glory, how can He trust us with the true riches of heaven? No wonder the Church does not see the power of God displayed as it was seen in the book of Acts.<sup>33</sup>

Well now, that's just the point of why we write what we do. The Church expects God to be working overtime in blessing us with His gifts and miracles. Yet the corporate Body of Christ is steeped in mismanagement at the top and a laissez-faire attitude throughout its ranks. Few really want to be held accountable to God's narrow standard for their lives.



It's in the area of accountability that I must disagree with Howard-Browne—particularly when it comes to exposing those who teach error. He believes that it is wrong to criticize anyone who claims to be a man of God. He has harsh words for those who call these men to accountability:

It's amazing how it's always the ones who are doing nothing for God who know how it should be done. There are ministries that start off exposing the cults but then turn on the Body of Christ like cannibals. They build their ministries off the failings of God's servants.<sup>34</sup>

Ouch. But I offer no excuse. Satan works within the Church as well as without. The most dangerous teachers are those who have the confidence of the people by preaching biblical truth while adding unbiblical and extra-biblical error. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

The important thing in exposing error is to not judge the hearts of those teaching error. We must, in a spirit of humility—yet with all boldness—deal with the issues they bring up. In doing so, it is necessary to exercise the one gift of the Spirit few in the churches care to concern themselves with today: the gift of discernment.

Discernment is more often recognizing error based upon knowledge and understanding of God's Word. It is not merely some mystical sensory perception of demonic spirits. In any case, one's discernment must be based upon rightly dividing the Word of Truth. God's Word is still the bottom line for judging all beliefs and practices.

Amazingly, Howard-Browne is full of criticism of others who take advantage of the Body of Christ. He just doesn't name them. But he must have them in mind when he writes about them. So what's the difference? Is he not judging them in his heart? His indictment is that they have no integrity:

There is a lack of integrity in the ministry today. I believe if we would be used of God on a continual basis, we need to develop character in the area of integrity.

We live in a day when men have very little integrity, not only in the world but also in the Church. The scripture says, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart" (Psalm 24:3,4).

It is sad to think that in the Church today there is a lack of integrity. People say what they want and then forget completely what they said. Some even deny that they said or promised anything.<sup>35</sup>

Yet while Howard-Browne laments the lack of integrity in the ministry, he can be found sharing the platform with such men. How can a true man of God share the platform with a teacher who insists that we should think of ourselves as equal to God, and teaches that it wasn't Jesus' death on the cross that saves us, but his suffering in hell. This is a denial of the blood of Christ. It lacks integrity not in the realm of money, but in the realm of biblical truth.

How can a true man of God share the platform with men who pronounce curses upon people that don't give financially to their cause, telling them God will abandon them; they will suffer divorce; they will suffer financial hardship. Yet that is the message of the word-faith people with whom Howard-Browne associates.

How can a true man of God have hands laid on him by someone who consistently says that the Lord told him to do something and it will be blessed, when time after time it doesn't come to pass and God's blessing is not evident. In the process, millions of dollars of the faithful are squandered on the promise of God's faithfulness.

It pains me that one who can teach so beautifully in many areas can himself go against his own words. Howard-Browne insists that men of God must have integrity. He claims, "I don't do anything in my meetings other than allow the Holy Spirit to come and have free reign."<sup>36</sup> Yet this, I believe, will be proven false as we observe how he conducts his meetings.

Let's suspend judgment on whether or not God wants to fill us with joy in the manner that the holy laughter teachers say. How is that joy being manifested in the meetings?

#### **A HOWARD-BROWNE SERVICE**

In order to get the flavor of a Howard-Browne service, we offer a condensed version of one such service. This description is taken from a video tape of a meeting held at Carpenter's Home Church and aired on TBN. The events were exactly as we portray them, and are not notably different than any other of his meetings we've viewed. We will offer some comment along the way.

Rodney Howard-Browne begins by exhorting the audience not to accept just anything that comes along in the name of the Lord. He ridicules those who have fallen into ritualistic formalism, and gives examples of people operating in the flesh.

Whatever is done as mere symbolism and out of mere ritual and tradition is nothing more than a religious noose that's going to choke you and rob you of the joy of serving Jesus.

No argument there. In fact, much of what Howard-Browne had to say can be validated by God's Word. This isn't to say he was teaching from Scripture; I've seldom seen him do that; he may on occasion.

He cautions people about laying hands on others if they don't have the anointing, and about having hands laid on them by just anyone:

I encourage people to lay hands on. But some churches go overboard and just have it as a free-for-all, and you've got empty hands being laid on empty heads, and that's why—you can't just call any donkey out that's not anointed of God to come and put his hand on somebody's head to encourage that person. If they've got no anointing they've got no business putting their hands on somebody's head.

He continues that there's no reason to have empty hands laid on you because you're not going to get anything. But then he goes on to say that whenever he has had hands laid on him, he didn't care who the person was; he just expected God to do something and he's never been disappointed.

Well, which is it? Can expectancy on the part of a recipient force God's hand to move through the hands of one who is not anointed? Where is chapter and verse for this? And why would he not take his own advice?

This is just one example of the illogical mentality behind much of the charismatic fervor today.

When it comes to free-for-all laying on of hands, that's just what the Vineyard churches practice. Everybody is encouraged to lay hands on the person next to them. That's one reason I left the Vineyard movement after being in it for about a year and a half. I was appalled by the haphazard laying on of hands. There was no way I was going to have some stranger lay hands on me.



Yet Howard-Browne endorses the Vineyard movement while ridiculing the very thing they practice. Again, which is it?

He also ridicules those who advertise their school of the prophets, rightly stating that one cannot go to school to learn to be a prophet.

Overall, there wasn't much to find fault with in his preaching time, although, again, Scripture was seldom cited. It was more of a time for establishing that he could be trusted because he tore down the false assumptions of other unnamed teachers.

During this time a few hoots and laughs can be heard emanating from the audience, but there is still relative order. After some fairly good teaching on the anointing and the gifts of the Spirit, Howard-Browne calls a pastor forward who, the night before, had said he was ready to check himself into a mental clinic. Promising a double dose of the Holy Spirit this night, Howard-Browne lays his hand on the man, who promptly falls to the floor.

Howard-Browne then puts one foot on the man's stomach and pronounces that he will go forth forever changed. This sets the stage for working his audience into laughter, and disproves the claims that he does not provoke laughing responses.

Someone said, "Why'd you put your foot on him?" Because I didn't feel like bending down and putting my hand on him.

The audience erupts in laughter; from this point on things begin to roll.

Bending over the man he says, "Go ahead; let that bubble out your belly." The man laughs a little harder.

"More!"

Harder laughing.

"More!"

The man tries harder yet.

"More!"

He begins to force a laugh that sounds like cackling.

"More!"

The man kicks his legs up and pedals his feet, laughing, "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!"

Howard-Browne states, "That's called Holy Ghost aerobics."

The audience loves it.

He then approaches the man's wife. Having fallen, she prays somewhat quietly. Howard-Browne tells her not to pray, exhorting her to laugh.

One person after another is called out to receive his anointing. Those who do not laugh he prompts to do so. Most take quite a bit of prompting.

One man lies there, also praying quietly. This is how Howard-Browne addresses him:

Stop praying now and let the joy bubble out your belly.

Joy. Joy. Joy. Don't pray! Laugh!

The audience laughs as Howard-Browne goes from person to person prodding them to laugh. He kicks one man in the foot:

You need to let that joy bubble out your belly! Stop praying, let the joy bubble out.

I said stop praying; let the joy bubble out your belly!

Let the joy bubble out your belly.

Going on to another:

You, too. Let the joy bubble out your belly.

On to another:

You, too. Let that joy bubble out your belly.

And to another:

You too. Let the joy bubble out your belly! It's not a prayer meeting! Joy! Joy! Joy!

The audience is loving it all the more.

If I seem to be belaboring the point, it's to demonstrate that, contrary to claims that holy laughter is spontaneous and uncontrollable, it is more often induced through coercion. Going back to the first man he had kicked in the foot, Howard-Browne chides him:

Why didn't you listen to the preacher? Why didn't you listen to the preacher?

I said laugh!

The man is coerced. He erupts into an obviously strained attempt to laugh under this intimidation. So much for the claims that the laughter is uncontrollable and spontaneous.

Then comes Howard-Browne's ridicule of those who do not wish to enter into his laugh parade. Making a dour face he continues:

Some people say, "I don't want that joy brother Rodney. [His face becomes even more dour.] I'm happy just like I am. My great grandfather was sad. My grandfather was sad. My father was sad. And when he died—just before he died—he looked at me and said, 'Son, will you carry on the family tradition?' And I said, 'Yes, dad.'"

Hoots and hollering erupt from the audience as they join in laughing to derision those who don't enter in.

After some more banter calling people "ugly things" who aren't open to the Holy Spirit (read open to falling down and laughing), Howard-Browne slaps on the side of the head a man sitting on the front pew. The man falls over onto the pew, shaking his legs and hands in the air.

The audience continues to roll with laughter.

Another man comes forward, goes down under Howard-Browne's touch and begins to pray. Says Howard-Browne:

Get out of the praying mode and get into that rejoicing mode! Pray when you go home!

Lord, have mercy! I mean, if their prayers had been working they wouldn't have had to come up here in the first place.

More laughter from the audience.

He begins a dissertation on the laying on of hands, pointing out that you can bless people by laying on of hands, you can heal them, and you can pass on the anointing to them.

In the same manner popularized by Benny Hinn, Howard-Browne waves his hands and people fall over.

He begins to quote Peter in Acts 2: "These are not drunk as you suppose..." He lays his hand on a lady in the front pew, causing her to shriek repeatedly, shaking her hands as if she had palsy. He points out that she is a pastor's wife. In fact, most of the front-row pews are filled with pastors and their wives.

As he repeats, "These are not drunk as you suppose," "the drunkard" begins his routine:

While sitting in his pew a man throws his head back and laughs heartily, kicking one leg up in the air. Suddenly he bolts from his seat and does a locomotive-action shuffle in a tight circle. Then he faces Howard-Browne, kicks one leg out in front and does a prat-fall. Another man jumps out of his seat, does the same sort of locomotion shuffle, arms flailing wildly, and falls on the floor. Shortly afterward the first man gets up and staggers around with a mock drunken smile on his face, salutes Howard-Browne and plops down in the pew again. It is obviously contrived, but Howard-Browne and the audience eat it up.

Things continue in the same vein for the rest of the evening.

## **DRUNK IN THE SPIRITS**

Rodney Howard-Browne likes to call himself a “Holy Ghost bartender” who dispenses the “new wine” of charismatic fervor.<sup>37</sup> In an earlier meeting than the one we’ve described above, he teaches that, if there is drunkenness in the physical realm there must be drunkenness in the spiritual realm, also. To prove this illogical assumption he quotes Acts 2 to suggest that the disciples at Pentecost were acting like drunkards.

Suddenly a man from the second row stands up. He’s wearing slacks and a sport coat opened to reveal suspenders. He hooks his thumbs in his suspenders, throws his head back and in stereotypical pantomime of a comedic drunk (a la Foster Brooks or Jackie Gleason), adopts a smirk. Peering down his nose, he looks with half-closed eyes at the audience as he sways back and forth. He then plops himself in his pew and nods as if he’s drunk, smiling at Howard-Browne, who enjoys it tremendously. Loud guffaws abound.

This was the same “drunkard” who acted out in the meeting we described in detail. I don’t know if he’s a prop for Howard-Browne or just likes to follow him around. In any case, this first act, too, was contrived.

Cannot Howard-Browne discern that this man is merely seeking attention—that he is not truly “drunk in the Spirit,” as Howard-Browne claims?

And what is being “drunk in the Spirit?” Scripture makes no mention of this. The proponents of holy laughter cite Acts 2 to suggest that acting drunk by the Holy Spirit is valid. But does Acts 2 really imply that such a thing is of God? Let’s see what Acts 2 really says, and break it down in context:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place....

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.

Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.

And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?

And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? ...

And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this?

Others mocking said, These men are full of new wine.

But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words:

For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day.

But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel.

Verses 1-12 clearly teach that the disciples came forth from the upper room under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and began to preach the Gospel in the languages of those present from various nations. Although the hearers discerned their own language, they also heard all the other languages being spoken at the same time. The mockers (verse 13), did not listen to the message, but heard what seemed to them like a lot of babbling. Thus, they accused the disciples of being drunk.

Verses 14-34 record Peter’s dissertation to the crowd, exhorting them to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and to repent of their sins. Verses 35-47 record the results of that plea.

While the disciples were accused of being drunk, they were not staggering about in the manner characteristic of those “intoxicated” by holy laughter; they were accused of being drunk because, while some heard their own languages, they also heard other languages. Nor did all the people accuse them, but the mockers. It was a phenomenon they did not understand, and to them it seemed for the most part like babbling. Peter set them straight and many of them repented of their sins and were born again by the Spirit of God.

Furthermore, Acts 3 and 4 record that the disciples’ activities after Pentecost resulted in persecution by the religious establishment. Today’s religious establishment isn’t beating the holy laughter people—it is embracing them.

In no way can Acts 2 be construed to mean that the disciples were acting like drunkards—certainly not like the stereotypical comedic drunkard. Nor can it or Ephesians 5:18 be construed to mean that the Holy Spirit would cause us to lose our sensibilities.

## **MISAPPLYING SCRIPTURE**

The misapplication of Scripture by the holy laughter people is not limited to Acts 2. In listening to Howard-Browne and others, there is hardly a Scripture citation that isn’t twisted to mean what they want it to mean in order to validate their peculiar experience. This, if nothing else, should be ample warning for caution if not downright rejection of these experiences.

As with Acts 2, the holy laughter people like to quote Ephesians 5:18 to prove their claim that being filled with the Holy Spirit may result in one acting like a drunkard. This misapplication is evident to anyone who takes the time to read Ephesians 5:18 in context:

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord;

Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ;

Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. (Eph 5:18-21)

The meaning of being filled with the Spirit within the context of the body is demonstrated in verses 19-21. These activities do not reflect a mindless stupor; rather they reflect a holy attitude of worship and edification.

What is taking place in these meetings is pure exhibitionism played out for a group of spiritual voyeurs. I liken it to spiritual pornography; it titillates in an ungodly manner. People who go for it can’t get enough. Eventually their hunger grows for more bizarre stuff.

It wasn’t enough to believe that they spoke in tongues; now they have to bark like dogs in the Spirit, roar like lions in the Spirit, cackle like chickens in the Spirit, and stagger like drunks in the Spirit. What will be the next “move of the Spirit?” I shudder to think.

This exhibitionism may also be classified as pure experientialism—a group therapy session engaging laughter as a catharsis in place of the primal scream. Does it work? Outwardly, yes. People feel better. They feel happier. Anyone who’s had a good laugh feels better afterward. I’ve felt better after watching a good comedy. As one man at the meeting (a psychologist) said, as he lay on the floor laughing, “Laughing doeth good like a medicine.” This was a misquote of Proverbs 17:22:

A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones.

There is a difference between a merry heart and laughter. Laughter can be good or bad, depending upon the circumstances. A merry heart reflects the joy of the Lord in all circumstances that are appropriate. Just as there are proper times to laugh, there are proper times to weep.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:...

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4)

What transpires at these meetings is not proper laughter. It is coerced in the name of the Holy Spirit. Scripture warns against improper laughter:

Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. (Ecclesiastes 7:3-4)

For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 7:6)

Proper laughter and rejoicing in the Lord is certainly acceptable to the believer in Christ. But laughing to derision those who do not agree with you; coercing people to laugh; claiming an anointing from the Holy Spirit on such laughter—this is sin. It is evidence that one is in the house of fools.

### **PREDISPOSITION**

In spite of the obvious coercion involved, we are told that this laughter is "uncontrollable" and "spontaneous."

There are no natural explanations for how this disarming South African can get so many people laughing so hard. He rarely tells jokes; in fact, he keeps a straight face during most of his meetings.<sup>38</sup>

Yes, Howard-Browne rarely cracks a smile. Yes, he holds a straight face. He rarely tells jokes, true—if we're talking about jokes that include a setup, a plot and a punch line. But he does utilize witticisms in his preaching, designed to invoke laughter. This, often at the expense of those who do not enter into the "flow" of what he's doing. A good actor can easily keep a straight face while going through a comedy routine.

And in spite of glowing reports of masses falling down in fits of uncontrollable laughter, many faces can be seen with no merriment on them, or with mere smiles. The scenario we've described hardly suggests that much of the laughter is uncontrollable when Howard-Browne has to prompt one after another to "let the joy bubble out your belly."

A clue as to why so many fall under the spell may be found in this statement from one of the Charisma reports on Howard-Browne:

But his appeal is evident. It lies in his utter lack of slick evangelism. His simple style and genuine desire to unleash spiritual revival in America have caught the attention of charismatics who are eager to see signs and wonders.<sup>39</sup>

It becomes obvious that many of the people who attend these meetings are predisposed to laugh. They already know the reputation of the holy laughter preacher and that's what they're seeking when they arrive. They are "eager to see signs and wonders." They have come from miles around and they are not going to be disappointed.

Yet not all the laughter is contrived. Some of it is very genuine. People do laugh at others who laugh. Laughter is contagious. If someone begins to laugh uncontrollably in our presence our natural tendency is to laugh also.

In view of Howard-Browne's methods of inducing laughter, it's obvious that much of the laughter is not from contagion but from coercion; it is contrived. If such an obvious contrivance is lost upon Howard-Browne, who is supposed to be ministering this thing, how are others to know what is of God and what is of the flesh? If it is acceptable to Howard-Browne or other proponents of holy laughter, even when it is obviously of the flesh, should we not at least be suspicious of these proponents' motives? If not of their motives, certainly their discernment. In either case, their credibility as ministers of the true spiritual gifts is in question. If they are operating with wrong motives or if they are unable to discern the flesh at work, they are unqualified to lead God's people.

Their followers may leave feeling better about themselves; they may even have experienced a change in their attitude toward God, or toward their mate, or toward their enemies. But, again, we cannot confuse God's grace in using error with validation of the error.

### **SHOW TIME!**

Much of the holy laughter delusion smacks of show biz. It's played out like a circus act with the lead characters vying for starring roles. Even the language used to record Howard-Browne's rise to fame reveals a show business mentality:

Howard-Browne's reputation grew during the next four years, and he established the Rodney Howard-Browne Evangelistic Association in Louisville, Kentucky. In the spring of 1993 his big break came when Assemblies of God pastor Karl Strader invited him to preach in Lakeland, Florida, at Carpenter's Home Church.<sup>40</sup>

His "big break?" This suggests that the ministry is for the benefit of the minister. God's servants don't get "big breaks." They get big trouble. Their reputations are not enhanced unless they are tickling people's ears. The vast majority of those who follow after signs and wonders are not disposed to hear the hard Word of God. They want feel-good religion. And that's what they get with the holy laughter teaching, as attested to by this statement in Charisma:

The difference was the laughter. No matter what Howard-Browne did or said, hundreds who attended the daily sessions always ended up on the sanctuary floor in helpless laughter. When the services were broadcast on radio, more curious seekers showed up to join the fun.<sup>41</sup>

"Curious seekers?" "Fun?"

Since when does our holy God play to the benefit of curiosity seekers' amusement? Since when has the holy Faith been turned into an occasion for "fun?" Jesus was a man of sorrows. He sorrowed over the sins of the world. He would sorrow over "curious seekers" today; He would sorrow over the spectacle that has been made of His Church to the derision of those outside.

There are those in the Body of Christ who are sorrowing over these things. While so many who hear of this experience called holy laughter flock to receive gratification of their flesh, there is a small number who are genuinely sorrowing over those people's captivity to this latest fad. They have fallen prey to a delusion that causes them to think that, because they fall down and laugh they have gotten a dose of holiness.



There is seldom any true teaching from God's Word in these meetings. And when there is it is interrupted by laughter. It makes God's Word of no effect. As a writer for Charisma, says:

No one doubts that having vast numbers of listeners convulsed in laughter can make whatever is being said from the pulpit irrelevant.<sup>42</sup>

What an indictment from one who lauds this side show! "Irrelevant" is an apt word to demonstrate how God's Word has little place among the holy laughter crowd. But since when did God ordain that His Word should ever become irrelevant?

In essence, it is making the Word of no effect, which is what Jesus accused the religious leaders of doing through their tradition and other such things:

Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye. (Mark 7:13)

Interruptions of God's Word, even if taught by false teachers, is not a sign of the Holy Spirit at work. At worst it is a sign of demonic spirits at work. At best it is a sign of irreverence on the part of those who do the interrupting.

Rather than accept such interruptions as a sign from God, a true minister of the Word would rebuke those who would do such a thing. A true disciple of the Lord Jesus would continue in His Word:

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (John 8:31-32)

The truth—God's Word—is what makes us free, not experiences (especially extra-biblical experiences like holy laughter as claimed by its proponents). In fact, the holy laughter proponents demonstrate a rather low view of Scripture.

### **A LOW VIEW OF SCRIPTURE**

Hugh E. "Bud" Williams, rector of an Episcopal church in Lakeland, Florida, received the "anointing" from Howard-Browne in a meeting held at Carpenter's Home Church.

...After two meetings he was not impressed; during the third, Howard-Browne called him and three others out into the aisle and simply said, "Be filled!"

"Boom! Down I went in the Spirit," Williams says, "and I started laughing. I laughed so hard for 20 minutes, my throat was sore the next day. I've been charismatic for 14 years, but I had dried out and grown tired. This refreshed me personally and changed my marriage."

So why would God use laughter to bring spiritual renewal? Williams says many people today need more than words—they need a demonstration of God's power. "Words have become meaningless in our society," he says. "Signs and wonders are what must recapture our attention."<sup>43</sup>

Does faith come from signs and wonders? Not according to God's Word.

So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Romans 10:17)

Man's words may be meaningless, but God's Word is never meaningless. Was Williams speaking about man's words or God's Word? If man's words, we must agree with him. But then why extol experience over man's words? Why not extol Scripture instead? It seems apparent that he was speaking of Scripture as mere "words."

Scripture records that those who seek signs from God are not content with His Word. Multitudes flocked to Jesus for miracles, and in spite of His demonstrations of God's power they crucified Him when His words became too difficult for them to hear.

But he answered and said unto them, An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. (Matthew 12:39)

The Good News of the resurrection should be sufficient to minister joy to the hearts of those truly surrendered to God. But just as the resurrection did not satisfy the Jews of Jesus' day, it doesn't satisfy many Christians today. To get joy (read "fun"), they must turn to extra-biblical activities.

### **BRAINWASHING**

Those who know anything about brainwashing techniques and the ability to induce altered states of consciousness in mass meetings will recognize that, often, these techniques are utilized in hyper-charismatic services.

Dick Sutphen, a professional hypnotist, conducts seminars on persuasion and brainwashing techniques. His purpose is not to teach his listeners how to subvert other's minds, but to educate on how government, the military, cults and religious groups utilize certain techniques to induce control and gain converts to their particular causes.

He points out that many who use these techniques are not necessarily aware that they are using them. They may well have learned them from watching others use them successfully. In any case, the bottom line is control; the intent may be perfectly altruistic; it may be beneficent in the mind of the controller. But the fact remains that people are being controlled, often with the belief that the Holy Spirit is doing a work in them.

Sutphen is not a believer in Christ. In fact, he is anti-Christ and a New Ager. But his logic and knowledge cannot be argued with. This is because he is not addressing the Faith or holy laughter; he is addressing a subject that he knows: brainwashing.

Sutphen believes that religion is valid, but that manipulation in the name of God is not. I feel a few observations from his perspective of expertise may be of interest to the brethren:

So, to begin, I want to state the most basic of all facts about brainwashing: IN THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF MAN, NO ONE HAS EVER BEEN BRAINWASHED AND REALIZED, OR BELIEVED, THAT HE HAD BEEN BRAINWASHED. Those who have been brainwashed will usually passionately defend their manipulators, claiming they have simply been "shown the light," or have been transformed in miraculous ways. (emphasis Sutphen's)<sup>44</sup>

Sutphen gives an example of how manipulators set their marks up. The first step is to give information that the listeners will agree with. This gets them in the frame of mind to trust the speaker. Once trust has been instilled, they are open to suggestion:

...Assume for a moment that you are watching a politician give a speech. First, he might generate what is called a "YES SET." These are statements that will cause listeners to agree; they might even unknowingly nod their heads in agreement. Next come the TRUISMS. These are

usually facts that could be debated but, once the politician has his audience agree, the odds are in the politician's favor that the audience won't stop to think for themselves, thus continuing to agree. Last comes the SUGGESTION. This is what the politician wants you to do and, since you have been agreeing all along, you could be persuaded to accept the suggestion. (Emphasis Sutphen's)<sup>45</sup>

In the same manner, false teachers will preach from God's Word, sharing obvious truths. That's phase one—the "yes set." As well they will share what may be considered deep insights—ideas that are debatable but not necessarily untrue. These are the "truisms." Then comes the suggestion. It is generally toward the end of the evening—sometimes after two or three hours or more—that the false teaching or inducement toward activity will be implemented. This is exactly what I have witnessed in the holy laughter movement, not to mention the charismatic movement (particularly the word-faith movement) in general.

Sutphen points out that different entities may use different techniques—the military may use some techniques that the government, dealing with civilians, may not use. Religionists and cultists will use still other techniques. Most techniques involve taking the subjects through stages or phases of conversion. Says Sutphen:

With the progression through each phase, the degree of conversion becomes more effective and complete. The ways to achieve conversion are many and varied, but the usual first step in religious or political brainwashing is to work on the emotions of an individual or group until they reach an abnormal level of anger, fear, excitement, or nervous tension.

The progressive result of this mental condition is to impair judgment and increase suggestibility. The more this condition can be maintained or intensified, the more it compounds. Once catharsis, or the first brain phase, is reached, the complete mental takeover becomes easier. Existing mental programming can be replaced with new patterns of thinking and behavior.<sup>46</sup>

Most people who attend the hyper-charismatic meetings that result in pandemonium and out-of-order behavior are normal, everyday folks. They may be professional people, hold responsible jobs and have a genuine love for God. Many are normally "dignified" or "reserved." But they come with a sense of expectancy to receive something from the touch of the preacher—something they are inclined to believe they can't receive from God on their own. They believe that God has placed a special anointing on the preacher, probably because they have been induced with a clergy-laity mentality that is the norm for most churches. Because they are so normal—even possessing a reserved personality—they can't believe that they can be brainwashed or manipulated. But the manner in which excitement and fervor builds in some meetings catches them off guard. They are susceptible to suggestion—even the suggestion that they have been healed. To not be healed often generates feelings of guilt, an emotion that is easily exploited by the preacher. About alleged spiritual healing, Sutphen states:

For some, the healing may be permanent. For many, it will last four days to a week, which is, incidentally, how long a hypnotic suggestion given to a somnambulist subject will usually last. Even if the healing doesn't last, if they come back every week, the power of suggestion may continually override the problem—or sometimes, sadly, it can mask a physical problem which could prove to be very detrimental to the individual in the long run.

I'm not saying that legitimate healings do not take place. They do. Maybe the individual was ready to let go of the negativity that caused the problem in the first place; maybe it was the work of God. Yet I contend that it can be explained with existing knowledge of brain/mind function.<sup>47</sup>

I'm sorry to say that Sutphen is correct in his assessment. NewAgers testify of healings by laying on of hands, too. And the scenarios are all too common among those who claim to have healing ministries in the Church: short-term healings; people neglecting proper health care because they believe they've been healed when they haven't been; even death from diseases whose symptoms disappeared.

The preacher will tell those whose healings didn't last that it was because they "let go" of the healing. They didn't have enough faith to maintain it.

Does this mean I do not believe that God heals? By no means. I've witnessed His healing power; I've witnessed and experienced His life-changing power. The difference between God's work and the work of the flesh is that God's work will always be validated by His written Word. And God doesn't play games with us. If He heals us by His sovereign will, we will be healed, period. The all-too-neglected biblical method for healing is to have genuine elders of the assembly pray for those who are sick:

Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:

And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. (James 5:14-15)

The problem is not in the power of God, or in the faith of the believer; it is that the wrong people are being looked to for healing or other blessings from God. Most pastors and elders are not qualified to minister in the roles they've usurped. Thus, their attempts to claim this scriptural promise fail. As a result, pastors often encourage those who need ministry to attend the meetings of some popular preacher who claims to possess the anointing of God.

Yet the popular preachers that ride the Christian media circuit are even less qualified. Their false prophecies, immoral lives and love of filthy lucre predispose them to fail. Or, they may effect false healings that do not last unless the people continue to return for more ministry. Yet even with this, God may, by His own volition, choose to heal someone who seeks His touch, even through ignorance or naivete.

### **TOWARD THE NEW AGE?**

What we are witnessing in new evangelicalism and the charismatic movement is a subjective approach to God's Word. If something seems to work it is accepted even if it cannot be validated by Scripture. Since it cannot be validated it is assumed to be a new work of God. Those who reject it on the basis of its unbiblical or extra-biblical character are regarded as faithless when, in fact, they are faithless toward the subjective religious philosophy of the "new thing"—not toward God.

This subjectivity is necessary if Satan is going to meld humanity into a one-world religion. As the masses open themselves up to beliefs and practices that are not validated by Scripture, they leave themselves open to deception of the highest order, often presented in the name of Jesus.

The first step toward melding Christians into the New Age religion is not dissimilar to brainwashing techniques. The "yes set" is to get us to agree that all denominations share a common belief system. This is the motivating force behind the ecumenical movement sponsored by the Vatican and the major players in new evangelism and the charismatic movement.

The "truisms" will be that we also share common beliefs and values with aberrant Christian cults and monotheistic religions such as cabalistic Judaism and Islam.

The "suggestion" will be that we have a common spiritual bond with all of mankind. This suggestion will be implemented through the observation of signs and wonders construed to be of God. And if God can honor the faith of non-Christians, who are we to dissent from unity with them?

Anyone who thinks he is above falling into this snare is hopelessly naive. In fact, he is an excellent candidate for deception.

I don't believe it is merely coincidental that holy laughter has found its place among the mystically inclined whose beliefs lean toward New Age philosophy. Leanne Payne, a disciple of inner healing guru, the late Agnes Sanford, has also indulged in holy laughter. Her experience is recorded in Karen Mains's *Lonely No More*. Mains speaks of her son Joel's conflicts with his father David, and how they both attended a conference conducted under the auspices of the School for Pastoral Care at the Wheaton Graduate Center. They both went forward for prayer, David receiving ministry first.

Finally, Joel received prayer. As he began to return to his seat, Leanne Payne, the director of the conference and of the Pastoral Care Ministry, called quietly to him. She had not been functioning as a prayer minister on the floor but had remained on the platform. David watched as Leanne, a fixture in our lives for years and someone who loves Joel, leaned from her standing position and took Joel's wrists....

Leanne was wearing a lava-liere mike. After a few moments, David heard her laughing. Joel was now standing chest-high to the platform, his shoulders shaking, not with sobs but with a holy hilarity. "Oh, please. Please," said Leanne into her lapel mike. "Don't be disturbed. This is just the gift of holy laughter, and I have received it from this young man."

The two of them were incapable of stopping. Leanne, a woman of great spiritual power and dignity, actually had to be helped to her seat. Joel's head and torso flopped to the platform floor in laughter. He pounded his fist. The merriment sparked, caught, and rose communally in the auditorium, because laughter is catching. A song started. Attendees (many of them ordained clergy from all confessions) moved into the aisles. A time of laughing had come, a time to dance. Joy breached all the waters of pain and disappointment and splashed them with its anointing. Gladness wreathed the souls of the conferees.<sup>48</sup>

Leanne Payne blends New Age mysticism, Jungian psychology and Christian philosophy. Her ministry team is headed primarily by women who share this integrationist methodology. To Payne, all sin is linked to lack of self-acceptance and failure to recognize God's affirmation of oneself. Of course, this is a simple explanation of her more involved theology.

Is it merely coincidental that her disciple, Karen Mains, wrote of this holy laughter experience in 1993, essentially the same time Rodney Howard-Browne's notoriety and the Toronto blessing began? And is it merely coincidental that a phenomenon similar to holy laughter is found in the New Age movement at exactly the same time?

Barbara Marx Hubbard is the founder of the Foundation for Conscious Evolution, and a leader at the frontier of social and spiritual change for the New Age. At the same time holy laughter began to ripple through the churches, she wrote as one channeling the thoughts of God. The instruction given was to expect planetary transformation and a quantum leap in evolutionary personal transformation through uncontrollable joy. Says "God":

It is not that you must wait for some master from without. You all have the same master from within. That master is me, your Higher Self, the Christ within each of you who is, right now, hearing the same voice, seeing the same vision of the future, despite all differences of language and culture.

This voice is not of human origin. It comes from the Mind of God. It speaks in all tongues the same words: Love God above all else, your neighbor as yourself, and yourself as a co-creator. And all shall be given to you....

An uncontrollable joy will ripple though the thinking layer of Earth. The co-creative systems, which are lying psychologically dormant in humanity will be activated. From within, all sensitive persons will feel the joy of the force, flooding their systems with love and attraction. It will be as irresistible as sex. It is suprasex, the innate capacity to unite to create the next step of evolution....

As this joy flashes through the nervous systems of the most sensitive peoples on Earth, it will create a psycho-magnetic field of empathy, which will align the next wave of people in synchrony, everywhere on Earth.<sup>49</sup>

In 1984, Hubbard alluded to this joy in her book, *Happy Birth Day Planet Earth*, calling it the "planetary smile."<sup>50</sup>

This uncontrollable joy of which Hubbard speaks will transcend all barriers to unity. False signs and wonders will likewise break down those barriers to unity. And what does Mark 13:22 say?

For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce, if it were possible, even the elect.

We can expect the holy laughter people to defend their practice as being of God, while these others are counterfeits. But holy laughter as we know it today came lately. All attempts to link it to Scripture or early revival history are without merit. Its real precedent is coincidental to New Age philosophy. Does God mimic something Satan originates? Or is He taken off guard by Satan? I think not. Else He would be guilty of causing confusion among His people. And God is not the author of confusion. (I Corinthians 14:33).



## REORDERED THINKING

What is transpiring in the Church is similar to what is transpiring in the world. In conditioning men's minds to accept a globalist mentality, the New Age change agents call for unity in diversity with no judgment—no concern for what others believe or practice. If it doesn't fit for us, well we just have a different truth. Let's focus on our common objectives.

But we're not dealing with one human philosophy vs. another human philosophy. We're dealing with all of man's philosophies vs. God's Word. The world's rules don't apply here.

This worldly assessment of truth is behind criticism of those who expose error in the Body of Christ: just because we don't understand it we shouldn't be critical of it; it doesn't matter if it cannot be supported by Scripture; God may be doing a new thing we don't understand; we just don't have the same truth that the popular preacher has.

This can be intimidating to those who don't know Scripture. But those who do know Scripture have a responsibility to expose those who are in error. And it doesn't matter if they are 99.99% correct in their teachings. If the .01% error is sufficient to lead someone astray it must be challenged.

To demonstrate how the Church's thinking is parallel to the world's thinking in subjective terms, we might look at the current government education system and how it breaks down objective values in order to substitute new, subjective values. This is done in order to create a globalist population that is easily controlled. If someone doesn't have an absolute set of values he can be exploited for the benefit of the hierarchy, whether political or religious.

The breakdown in absolutes is accomplished through the reordering of thinking skills. Modern education relies heavily on Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy which places knowledge of facts and comprehension on the bottom of the order in thinking skills.

Bloom is considered by the education elite to be the foremost expert on change agent strategy. The object of Bloom's reordering of thinking skills is to replace the biblical model for thinking objectively with a new model rooted in subjective intuitive thought. This is the basis of witchcraft.

The following chart demonstrates that objective understanding is considered to be lower on the scale than subjective and intuitive reasoning.

## BENJAMIN BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

### THINKING SKILLS

EVALUATION	
SYNTHESIS	Higher
ANALYSIS	Order
APPLICATION	
COMPREHENSION	Lower
	Order

Berit Kjos, an expert on the education system and New Age philosophy, points out that one of the methods for bringing in the new global values is the removal of facts—the removal of logical thinking—so that people can't argue back from a basis of understanding. They will not have an objective framework from which to draw conclusions. Therefore, the education system is free to bring in all kinds of models for the new global spirituality from earth-centered cultures around the world. Those cultures are basically pantheistic and polytheistic. What we are seeing is a rise in animistic religions because the biblical ethic and value system has been not only discarded, but forbidden to be discussed.<sup>51</sup>

Is this not similar to what is happening in the churches today? Attempts to hold teachers accountable to God's Word are met with derision even by those who insist that they believe that God's Word must form the basis for judging all things. We learn quickly that their exhortation to biblical integrity is merely a ploy to disarm their critics and deceive their listeners.

God's Word is valued, yes; but it is placed on the lower order of thinking skills. What is more important is intuitive "Holy Spirit" power.

Bloom's "higher order" thinking skills do have value; but they have no genuine value unless they are held accountable to the objective truths and facts that reside in knowledge and comprehension. By the same token, what is said to be of the Holy Spirit has value only if it is held accountable to, and is validated by, the objective truths that reside in God's Word.

Modern education places a lower value on objective conclusions; everything becomes relative. Appeals to emotion replace clear, concise teaching and instruction from facts.<sup>52</sup>

By the same token, the trend in the modern Church is to disregard objec-

tive assessments of alleged signs and wonders; everything becomes relative. Appeals to emotion replace clear, concise teaching and instruction from God's Word.

People can only react against these deceptions if they have a solid biblical basis upon which to judge, and which motivates them to react against those deceptions. Most Christians lack a solid biblical basis upon which to judge. And they are fearful of reacting. Under the rules established by the religious hierarchy you cannot judge or challenge these subjective teachings and practices. To do so brings the religious leaders' judgment that you have "touched God's anointed," or have blasphemed the Holy Spirit, thus risking God's wrath.

Thus, too, you cannot judge anyone else's belief system, whether Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, apostate Judaism, or anything that produces palpable spiritual benefit or satisfaction.

To the subjective religionists, objective assessment of their teachings equals judgmentalism. And judgmentalism stirs God's anger. Fear and intimidation is very much a part of this subjective religion.

What is ridiculed most is any suggestion that the subjective religion is leading its adherents toward induction into the coming one-world New Age religious system. How dare anyone suggest that the major players within modern Christianity could fall into that trap and lead others as well. Yet the major move today among virtually all the well-known Christian leaders is toward ecumenism. They have already stated their disdain for those who warn against unity with the papacy.

They have chosen to overlook serious biblical error in order to forge a united front against certain evils such as abortion, crime, pornography, and such. It's because they do not perceive heresy as any big deal that they can overlook much of the same error in the Protestant churches. And where there can be found agreement with New Age philosophy which works for a world wherein love and peace abide, we will soon find more Christian leaders joining hands with New Age prophets.

Borrowing from Berit Kjos's chart (next page) on the new emphasis in education, we can see another parallel in the Church's march toward New Age religion. This chart is helpful not only for analyzing modern education, but for assessing current teaching trends in the churches, based on a new paradigm.

## THE NEW EMPHASIS IN EDUCATION & CHRISTIANITY

OLD PARADIGM	NEW PARADIGM
BIBLICAL TRUTH	PAGAN MYTHS
FACTS	EXPERIENCE
OBSERVATION	CREATIVE IMAGINATION
LOGIC	SPECULATION
SCIENCE	PSEUDO SCIENCE
HISTORY	SELECTED STORIES
REALITY	FANTASY
OBJECTIVE THINKING	SUBJECTIVE FEELINGS

A paradigm is a world view, or basis for judgment. John Wimber stated that the old Christian paradigm is passé; it must give way to the new. The new paradigm focuses on alleged signs and wonders—power evangelism which incorporates subjective experiences, inner healing techniques, psychological theory, and other unbiblical elements. These are all based on pagan myths, not on God's Word. What does this mean but that Scripture must be understood from a new paradigm incorporating a subjective point of view?

The inroads of psychological theory on one hand, and the claims to supernatural power on the other hand, compel us to consult the old paradigm—God's Word as the only objective basis for judgment. Otherwise we will find ourselves floundering in a wasteland of subjective religious theory, following after human reason, and being blown about by every wind of doctrine.

### CONCLUSION

The only defenses we have against spiritual deceptions arising today are a holy life, a solid grounding in God's Word and a refusal to accept anything as being from Him that is not validated in His Word. We should heed John 4:23:

But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

Many wish to worship God in the Spirit, and this is fine; but they neglect the second requirement: that we worship Him in truth. His Word is truth (John 17:17). The two cannot be separated, for God's work is by His Word.

His Word says that all things in the Church must be done decently and in order (I Cor. 14:40.) Women (let alone men) flopping on the floor and hooting or making animal sounds is not decent. Holy laughter is not orderly.

It doesn't matter how unspiritual we are perceived to be by those who go whole-hog after alleged supernatural phenomena. We must stand firmly for the integrity of God's Word, even when they cast us out of the synagogues and put us to death, believing they are doing God a service.

The day is coming and is now here when we will have to count the true cost of following Jesus. ❖

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