

LIFE AFTER LAKELAND: Sorting Out the Confusion

-by J. Lee Grady (Editor, Charisma Magazine)

Todd Bentley's announcement that his marriage is ending has thrown our movement into a tailspin and questions need to be answered.

It was not supposed to end like this.

Evangelist Todd Bentley had heralded the Lakeland revival as the greatest Pentecostal outpouring since Azusa Street. From his stage in a gigantic tent in Florida, Bentley preached to thousands, bringing many of them to the stage for prayer. Many claimed to be healed of deafness, blindness, heart problems, depression and dozens of other conditions in the Lakeland services, which ran for more than 100 consecutive nights. Bentley announced confidently that dozens of people had been raised from the dead during the revival.

But this week, a few days after the Canadian preacher announced the end of his visits to Lakeland, he told his staff that his marriage is ending. Without blaming the pace of the revival for Bentley's personal problems, his board released a public statement saying that he and his wife, Shonnah, are separating. The news shocked Bentley's adoring fans and saddened those who have questioned his credibility since the Lakeland movement erupted in early April.

I'm sad. I'm disappointed. And I'm angry. Here are few of my many, many questions about this fiasco:

Why did so many people flock to Lakeland from around the world to rally behind an evangelist who had serious credibility issues from the beginning?

To put it bluntly, we're just plain gullible.

From the first week of the Lakeland revival, many discerning Christians raised questions about Bentley's beliefs and practices. They felt uneasy when he said he talked to an angel in his hotel room. They sensed something amiss when he wore a T-shirt with a skeleton on it. They wondered why a man of God would cover himself with tattoos. They were horrified when they heard him describe how he tackled a man and knocked his tooth out during prayer.

But among those who jumped on the Lakeland bandwagon, discernment was discouraged. They were expected to swallow and follow. The message was clear: "This is God. Don't question." So before we could all say, "Sheeka Boomba" (as Bentley often prayed from his pulpit), many people went home, prayed for people and shoved them to the floor with reckless abandon, Bentley-style.

I blame this lack of discernment, partly, on raw zeal for God. We're spiritual hungry, which can be a good thing. But sometimes, hungry people will eat anything.

Many of us would rather watch a noisy demonstration of miracles, signs and wonders than have a quiet Bible study. Yet we are faced today with the sad reality that our untempered zeal is a sign of immaturity. Our adolescent craving for the wild and crazy makes us do stupid things. It's way past time for us to grow up.

Why didn't anyone in Lakeland denounce the favorable comments Bentley made about William Branham? This one baffles me. Branham embraced horrible deception near the end of his ministry... and his strange doctrines are still embraced by a cult-like following today.

Why didn't anyone correct this error from the pulpit? Godly leaders are supposed to protect the sheep from heresy, not spoon feed deception to them. Only God knows how far this poison traveled from Lakeland to take root elsewhere. May God forgive us for allowing His Word to be so flippantly contaminated.

A prominent Pentecostal evangelist called me this week after Bentley's news hit the fan. He said to me: "I'm now convinced that a large segment of the charismatic church will follow the anti-Christ when he shows up because they have no discernment." Ouch. Hopefully we'll learn our lesson this time and apply the necessary caution when an imposter shows up.

Why did God TV tell people that "any criticism of Todd Bentley is demonic"?

This ridiculous statement was actually made on one of God TV's pre-shows. In fact, the network's hosts also warned listeners that if they listened to criticism of Bentley, they could lose their healings. This is cultic manipulation at its worst.

The Bible tells us that the Bereans were noble believers because they studied the Scriptures daily “to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11, NASB). Yet in the case of Lakeland, honest intellectual inquiry was viewed as a sign of weakness. People were expected to jump first and then open their eyes.

Just because we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit does not mean we check our brains at the church door. We are commanded to test the spirits. Jesus wants us to love Him with our hearts and our minds.

Because of the Lakeland scandal, there may be large numbers of people who feel they've been burned by Bentley. Some may give up on church and join the growing ranks of bitter, disenfranchised Christians. Others may suffer total spiritual shipwreck. This could have been avoided if leaders had been more vocal about their objections and urged people to evaluate spiritual experiences through the filter of God's Word.

Why did a group of respected ministers lay hands on Bentley on June 23 and publicly ordain him? Did they know of his personal problems? This controversial ceremony was organized by Peter Wagner, who felt that one of Bentley's greatest needs was proper spiritual covering. He asked California pastors Che Ahn and Bill Johnson, along with Canadian pastor John Arnott, to lay hands on Bentley and bring him under their care.

Bentley certainly needs such covering. No one in ministry today should be out on their own, living in isolation without checks, balances and wise counsel. It was commendable that Wagner reached out to Bentley and that Bentley acknowledged his need for spiritual fathers by agreeing to submit to the process. The question remains, however, whether it was wise to commend Bentley during a televised commissioning service that at times seemed more like a king's coronation.

In hindsight, we can all see that it would have been better to take Bentley into a back room and talk about his personal issues. The Bible tells us that ordination of a minister is a sober responsibility. Paul wrote: “Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others” (1 Tim. 5:22). We might be tempted to rush the process, but the apostle warned against fast-tracking ordination and he said that those who commission a minister who is not ready for the job will bear some of the blame for his failures.

I trust that Wagner, Ahn, Johnson and Arnott didn't know of Bentley's problems before they ordained him. I am sure they are saddened by the events of this week and are reaching out to Bentley and his wife to promote healing and restoration. But I believe that they, along with Bentley and the owners of God TV, owe the body of Christ a forthright, public apology for thrusting Bentley's ministry into the spotlight prematurely. (Perhaps such an apology should be aired on God TV.)

Can anything good come out of this?

That depends on how people respond. If the men assigned to oversee Bentley offer loving but firm correction, and if Bentley responds humbly to the process by stepping out of ministry for a season of rehabilitation, we could witness a healthy case of church discipline play out the way it is supposed to. If all those who were so eager to promote Bentley now rush just as fast to repent for their errors in judgment, then the rest of us could breathe a huge sigh of relief and the credibility of our movement could be restored.

I still believe that God desires to visit our nation in supernatural power. I know He wants to heal multitudes, and I will continue praying for a healing revival to sweep across the United States. But we must contend for the genuine, not an imitation. True revival will be accompanied by brokenness, humility, reverence and repentance not the arrogance, showmanship and empty hype that often was on display in Lakeland.

We are weathering an unprecedented season of moral failure and spiritual compromise in our nation today. I urge everyone in the charismatic world to pray for Bentley; his wife, Shonnah; his three young children; Bentley's ministry staff; and the men and women who serve as his counselors and advisers. Let's pray that God will turn this embarrassing debacle into an opportunity for miraculous restoration. ~SOURCE: <http://www.charismanews.com/>