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New Blessing or Old Heresy?

PAUL O’GORMAN

The recent article on the Toronto Blessing has aroused considerable interest and provoked the following response from one of our readers, who has encountered its effects in his parish. The Rev Paul O’Gorman shares his thoughts on Toronto with us in this Issue. If other readers have something to add, we would be glad to hear from them as well!

During the past months I have witnessed and experienced the confusion, division and pain caused by extreme charismatic teaching and influence on local church fellowships. I am at last putting pen to paper in a considered response.

Over the last thirty years or so the church has been greatly affected by so-called ‘movements’ by the Holy Spirit, the most influential being the ‘healing movement’ and the ‘tongues movement’. Now it seems we have the ‘Toronto Blessing movement’.

Jo Gardner and Rachel Tingle dealt very helpfully with many aspects of the ‘Toronto phenomenon’ and I do not intend to repeat their observations. It is my contention that such manifestations are very unlikely to be movements of the Holy Spirit and that we should treat with great caution all invitations to become involved. Such movements are fertile seedbeds for the growth of heresy and have been responsible for leading many believers away from the truth as handed down by the Apostles through the Word of God.

What follows should not be seen as personal vilification of individuals who, I believe, have been blinded by Satan, but simply a warning of the dangers of being led away from the truth. We are, of course, not dealing with a single line of thought or isolated piece of erroneous theology, but with a hotchpotch, an eclectic mix of error.

I am vicar of a small church in an urban priority area of Hastings. Through the so-called ‘Toronto Blessing’ we have suffered the loss of key leaders and valued members of our congregation. Most have gone to a local King’s Church that has embraced Toronto as a move of the Holy Spirit. I have to say that ‘small is beautiful’. We are, now the dust has settled, a struggling fellowship of young in the faith believers, united in our desire to reach the community for Jesus. But what pain we had to

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experience before those who were brain-washed by the teaching of Toronto prophets felt they had to leave. The parting words of one member so smitten were very revealing. She told me 'We don't want or need to keep on repenting. We've done all that, now we want to be refreshed'. Notice the egocentric thinking in what she said. It reveals a confused lack of understanding of biblical truth.

The claim has been made many times that the 'Toronto phenomenon' is a foretaste of revival, but revival of what? True spiritual revival throughout the history of the church has never been separated from deep and continuing repentance, for sin separates us from the one holy God who is the source of all revival, spiritual refreshment and blessing.

It is very easy to preach error without realising it. Oratory not disciplined by orthodoxy leads to heresy. In an interdenominational gathering I attended recently, a much respected preacher tried to persuade the gathering that they needed to 'ask for more of the Holy Spirit'. Surely he was asking for the impossible? The command of God 'not to be drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit' (Eph 5:18) was not Paul urging Christians at Ephesus to ask for more of the Holy Spirit, but a command for them to allow the Holy Spirit to have more of them. As John Stott put it many years ago 'We have the Spirit but does the Spirit have us?'. We cannot have more or less of the Spirit of God. We either have him or we do not; but he can have more of us!

Ecclesiastes claims 'there is nothing new under the sun'. Toronto represents a mix of ancient and attractive heresy. Taught in an appropriate context, it has a powerful effect on believers who have grown tired of what they see as greyness, blandness and lifelessness within the church. Such people have sought a fresh experience of God, but have been lured away by exciting phenomena which have been made to appear as the answer to all their longings.

Toronto is a mix of Gnosticism, Pelagianism, mysticism and even Arianism. Of Gnosticism through claims of special spiritual enlightenment in the form of bogus prophetic insight and dubious words of knowledge. Of Pelagianism through an emphasis on self-effort in finding and maintaining peace, joy and fulfilment in daily life (a recipe for mental breakdown and spiritual collapse if ever there were one). Of mysticism by an emphasis on subjective experience denying the objectivity of God's Word. Of Arianism through an over emphasis on one member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, at the expense of the others, thus denying the fullness of the deity of each member.

Worship has been described as a valuable indicator of a congregation's grasp of biblical truth. Often those who attend these meetings are primarily seeking assurance. They are taught, in effect, that if they follow a set of rules, they will receive all that God wants them to have. They must listen, submit, yield, surrender and open their minds and hearts and the Holy Spirit will come in like a flood and wash them clean.

Is this the teaching of Christ and his Apostles? For example, will peace be ours through what we do? Is not the peace of which the Bible speaks that which we have with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, something declared as a fact through what has already been accomplished on the cross? We do not get peace by having the right feelings: peace is ours because of what has already been done for us in Jesus.

However, the greatest concern for the Church must surely be the humanistic Pelagianism of Toronto. This charge would no doubt be vigorously denied by its exponents, but facts speak for themselves. The very invitation given to believers to 'come and experience Toronto for yourself and enjoy it. Take it away with you and pass it on for others to enjoy' is a call to embrace a humanistic, egocentric form of Christianity.

The 'feel-good' emphasis of the movement is diametrically opposed to the call to 'suffer for Christ' and 'take up your cross and follow him'. We should echo the words of Jesus 'Not my will but thine be done'. What I believe we are seeing is a subtle manifestation of the New Age movement, which elevates feelings at the expense of truth. 'If it feels right it must be right' seems to be the message that comes across. Many Christians have voiced concern over the National Lottery, but expectations aroused through Toronto are not unlike the hopes aroused by the Scratchcard, or the chance of guessing the winning combination with the Lottery itself. Something is offered that everyone has a chance of receiving. But can God be manipulated in this way?

As I reflect upon current happenings, I am drawn to Jesus' prophetic words in Matthew 24:24. In the last days 'false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect – if that were possible'.

In 2 Timothy 4:3-5 Paul gives firm and clear warnings to Timothy:

the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine: instead to suit their own desires they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But

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you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardships, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

The question is, are the 'elect' being deceived today? If so, which elect and by whom?

There is a lot of hero worship going on in Christian circles and heroes demand unquestioning loyalty and acceptance that what they say is truth. I am amazed by the number of Christian leaders, not necessarily known for their charismatic credentials, men the community of faith look up to, who have sometimes written great works of Christian teaching and theology, who have been leading lights in the evangelical world, and have all but embraced Toronto. I read recently of one man, deeply respected for his courage, wisdom and sound teaching, who attended just one of these meetings and now believes that the Toronto phenomenon is of God; even though some of the behaviour exhibited at such gatherings is of the devil or the flesh. There is a powerful force at work that is more than capable of turning minds and 'deceiving even the elect'.

The understandable reaction of many ordinary Christians, who have relied on strong, faithful biblical leadership and guidance, is now to say 'I don't know what to believe'. Is not the sowing of seeds of doubt one of the devil's favourite tactics? And doubt is best sown in the minds of those who have power and influence over others – the leaders.

What then are we to do, knowing the danger of attributing a work of God to the devil? I personally am encouraging others to have nothing to do with the 'Toronto experience' because I fail to see how it can be of God. Have fellowship with fellow disciples of course, even if they have been enticed by Toronto teaching, but do not be drawn or persuaded to attend their special gatherings on the pretext that you cannot comment on it unless you have yourself experienced it. It is like saying you cannot be an authority on poison unless you have swallowed some. I believe that there should be a spiritual health warning against such meetings.

If we desire the right path we need have no fear, because then we will not be satisfied with less than the truth and will search the Scriptures to find it. The time *has* come when men will not put up with sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3). Those who want to experience miracles, who want to know peace, joy, excitement and hope should reflect more fully upon what Christ has done for them by his life, death and resurrection.

Ephesians 2:1-10 says it all. It is this declaration which is the source of real joy and peace, not that which is manufactured by man for mass audiences, susceptible to mass hysteria and hypnosis. It is a sobering

thought that most of the behaviour exhibited at Toronto type gatherings can be induced by hypnotists in the entertainment business and magicians such as Paul Daniels. They *can* make an audience bark like dogs, roar like lions, laugh uncontrollably or fall on the floor. But they *cannot* lead them to 'the truth which sets people free'.

I therefore believe that you cannot embrace 'Toronto' and its offshoots and be true to the Word of God. It is old heresy dressed up as new blessing. Which truly glorifies Jesus, to feel good by having an exciting experience or to obey God's Word?

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