

What was the 'Toronto Blessing' and how far do you consider it to be a genuine work of the Holy Spirit? On what grounds do you hold your view?

In this essay we consider the extent to which the Toronto Blessing (defined in Section I below) can be considered an authentic work of the Holy Spirit – an evaluation which is only possible once criteria have been established to test such phenomena against. Section II looks at some proposed methods of testing, and explores the validity of such tests. Once an appropriate approach has been identified, Section III will use that method to answer the question of how authentically Spirit-inspired the Toronto Blessing is.

Section I

The Toronto Blessing was – and some would argue continues to be¹ – a religious phenomenon characterised by charismatic experiences such as uncontrollable laughing or crying, prophecy, shaking, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), sometimes making strange (even bestial) noises, and being 'slain in the Spirit,' whereby an ecstatic or intense awareness of God's presence is felt, usually accompanied by falling or fainting. Despite attempts by some antagonists to relabel it the 'Toronto Experience,' the name Toronto Blessing has been near-universally applied since the movement reached Britain in May 1994, having started in the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church that January. The Senior Pastor of this church, John Arnott, had recently been affected by two Pentecostal experiences: attending an event led by the South African evangelist, Rodney Howard Browne; and later meeting the Head of the Pentecostal Assemblies of God in Argentina, Claudio Freidzon.² A pastor named Randy Clark had been 'anointed' by Rodney Howard Browne, and Arnott invited Clark³ to his church in January 1994. That month, the Blessing broke out.⁴

Although the characteristics of the Toronto Blessing have been agreed on at a superficial level, there has been fierce debate about the spiritual nature of those characteristics; that debate has been polarised, to a large extent according to existing religious persuasion.⁵ It is important to note that 'Toronto Blessing' is in fact an umbrella term, covering a range of phenomena in diverse contexts, and any definition should be flexible enough to recognise such diversity. Likewise, it is important to acknowledge that different fields may interpret the Toronto Blessing differently, using sociological, psychological, or other non-religious frameworks.⁶

By 1997 it was reported that media interest had died down and the movement itself was "quietening down," (Pinnell 1997, 1) and by 1998 some were already referring to it in the past tense. Martin (2000, 16) reports that by 2000, some 2.5 million people had attended the source of the Toronto Blessing, and many of these visitors did so even after the church was asked to leave the Vineyard movement.⁷ Whilst similar spiritual phenomena have been reported

¹ In the course of researching this essay, I spoke to a number of people who maintained that the Toronto Blessing was still an active movement in the UK, citing churches in Oxford and Sheffield, for example, where such phenomena occur (and distinctively from other charismatic experiences). The website of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, as it is now named, still invites people to "receive more from God... allow Him to work deeper in your life" (TACF 2005a) by encouraging them to spend time "soaking in the wonderful, life-changing presence of the Holy Spirit" (TACF 2005b).

² These events took place in June 1993 and November 1993 respectively, and have been well documented in Chevreau (1994).

³ One of the sociologically interesting characteristics of the Toronto Blessing movement is the suggestion that it is somehow 'passed on' from one church leader to another, especially via touch or anointing. Whether this matches the description of Acts 8:17-18, "Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands..." can be speculation only.

⁴ John Arnott's preferred designation is "The Father's Blessing," with the geographical origin being an irrelevance.

⁵ Not long after Arnott had claimed "what we are seeing is a nameless and faceless moving of the Spirit" (Chevreau 1994, vii), a FIEC-commissioned report concluded that this was a "charismatic fad" characterised by "pandemonium" (and we must wonder whether this was a very deliberate choice of word), Jebb (1995, 11 and 9).

⁶ For a combination of different approaches to understanding the Toronto Blessing, Porter and Richter (1995) is a good starting point, with sections written by a sociologist, theologian, psychiatrist, church historian and church musician. For an in-depth sociological study of the movement by one of its advocates, see any of the relevant publications by Margaret Poloma (1996, 1999 and elsewhere).

⁷ On 13 December 1995, the Association of Vineyard Churches withdrew its endorsement of Toronto Airport Vineyard, with the following criticism: "we cannot... endorse, encourage, offer theological justification or biblical proof-texting for any exotic practices that are extra-biblical... it is our conviction that these manifestations should not be promoted, placed on stage, nor used as the basis for theologizing that leads to new teaching," cited in Richards (1997, 2). The division was a painful one,

throughout history, advocates of the Toronto Blessing believe that something new has happened.

Section II

More than one theologian has lamented the difficulty of discerning spiritual phenomena: Fee (1997, 172) has noted “a lack of certainty as to the criteria for discernment, as well as a lack of clarity as to how it is to be done” and Jonathan Edwards concluded that “Scripture nowhere gives us any such rule [on whether something of spiritual value has occurred]” (in White 1988, 82). This area is one of discomfort for many theologians, who find themselves “hampered by the experiential nature of the phenomena” (Richards 1997, 9). Despite these difficulties, we can explore the following types of test: (a) functional/theological, i.e. does the Toronto Blessing accord with our understanding of the Trinity, especially the Holy Spirit; (b) experiential – what can be held to be true based on contact with the Toronto Blessing itself; (c) historical – can similar occurrences throughout history shed light on what is happening; and (d) Biblical – are there specific guidelines in the Bible which can help our discernment.

(a) Functional/Theological

Our understanding of the Toronto Blessing should be informed by our understanding of what the Holy Spirit actually does. Whilst this is a complex issue, some functions can be identified. Metzger and Coogan find the following: the Holy Spirit extends the range of Jesus’ teaching to the world; advances Christians’ understanding of truth; and is centred on the work and person of Jesus. The mission of the Holy Spirit is identical to that of Christ, except for its more “subjective, or interior, aspect” (1993, 288). To this rather limited theological conception, we can add McGrath’s (1997, 287) assertion that the Holy Spirit plays an important role in individual and corporate Christian life; and the “‘making real’ of God in personal and corporate worship” (Ibid., 288) as well as a moralising influence. To accept that the Toronto Blessing is a work of the Spirit, we would need assurance that its manifestations facilitate some or all of the above functions – and abnegate none of them.

(b) Experiential

The very nature of the Toronto Blessing means that it is a *felt* experience – and many critics have decried the fact that recipients are told not to think about what is happening to them, but just ‘receive’.⁸ There is a complex relationship between what is happening to a recipient, how they interpret that phenomenon, and the context it occurs in. It is not surprising, therefore, that some have sought to explain the Toronto Blessing in terms of psychological or sociological phenomena; or as a reflection of the power relationships within each context.

There is great difficulty in separating deeply religious or spiritual experiences from psychological ones, and perhaps we too readily separate the two forms since, as Richards (1997, 17) has argued, “even if the phenomena are caused by psychological factors, these can be used by God to create a new awareness of the closeness of the transcendental.” However, this writer believes there to be a crucial difference between a phenomenon which has its origins within a person’s own subconscious, and one which is divine: God may speak through our psyche or subconscious, but his revelations are not a product *of them*.

Even if Chevreau (1994, 63) is correct to claim that Paul’s understanding and expectation of the Holy Spirit was “always experiential,” we run into difficulties trying to prove that our experiences were the same as his, or those of the Apostles at Pentecost: it is both anachronistic and presumptuous to describe such experiences using our modern expressions of being “zapped, wowed, awed” (Chevreau 1994, 64).⁹

especially since Arnott had believed he had the backing of the AVC’s head, John Wimber. In June 1998, the rift was publicly healed in a special joint-congregation unity service.

⁸ Jebb (1995, 21) notes that some potential recipients of what he terms the “Toronto Experience” have been told “Don’t try to use your mind to understand this. Just receive,” a practice which he concludes is “completely contrary to New Testament teaching.”

⁹ There is also the issue as to whether we can add the same level of significance to, or Spirit-led understanding of, our own spiritual experiences, as the Apostles did to theirs.

(c) Historical

Interestingly, both proponents and opponents of the Toronto Blessing have appealed to the historical record to justify their positions, with events surrounding the ministry of Jonathan Edwards receiving particular attention, as well as that of Wesley, early Quakers, and Calvin. There seems to be two aspects of such appeals: (i) accreditation by association, the implication being that because a well-regarded Christian was connected with a spiritual phenomenon, their opinion (either for or against) is highly significant; and (ii) that any testing criteria they laid down have authority within the church today. I believe both of these arguments to be somewhat flawed.

Although reference to Edwards, Wesley etc., can be instructive in maintaining both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, there is no true authority in their writings and practices – other than that which is based on Scripture. In which case, the appeal should be made directly to Scripture, rather than by proxy. Secondly, even if we were to accept such role modelling, we must recognise the limitations of doing so. We cannot be certain that (i) any spiritual manifestations today are the same manifestations as those seen historically;¹⁰ or (ii) that any apparently spiritual phenomena have the same origin as historical phenomena.

(d) Biblical

Although some broad theological points were considered in Section (a) above, there are also specific Biblical texts which have been used to justify, or oppose (or both!) what is happening under the name of the Toronto Blessing. Given the significance of the Bible to the Christian faith, it is not surprising that most of the debate surrounding the Toronto Blessing has centred on what Scripture says about such phenomena.¹¹ Indeed, the Bible itself tells us that spiritual phenomena should be “tested.”¹²

There are, however, limitations to how easily we can test spiritual phenomena against Scripture: do we only accept phenomena recorded in the Bible, or do we only reject things proscribed in the Bible? – this is a key issue since the Toronto Blessing appears to fall in the ground between the two. Can we establish criteria based on identical Biblical experiences, or must the criteria be based on broader (but still Biblical) principles, such as those relating to identification of prophecies and correct teaching?

In the absence of explicit and directly comparable criteria, we have no option other than to work with the most appropriate guidelines and general principles from the Bible. Doing so, we should heed Porter’s warning that there is a key difference between something being ‘in the Bible’ and actually being ‘biblical’:

There are all kinds of phenomena that may resemble phenomena in the Bible, but they may not be called ‘biblical’ just because of what is perceived to be a resemblance... the superficial similarities say nothing about whether the practices are biblical. They must be evaluated on the basis of a number of criteria, not appearance or similarity alone. (S. Porter in Porter and Richter 1995, 41).

Given that “All scripture is *God-breathed* and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correct and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16), the scriptural test is a higher form than either historical or even theological testing (which are both derivative), or the experiential (which is too subjective). This is not to say that these other tests cannot shed light on the Toronto Blessing, merely that in appraising it, the Biblical test must be supreme.¹³ In Section III below, therefore, we consider what specific criteria can constitute Biblical testing.

Section III

I identify here five criteria for Biblically assessing the extent to which the Toronto Blessing is genuinely a work of the Holy Spirit:

¹⁰ Such as during the Great Awakening.

¹¹ It is worth noting that, although evangelicals recognise the Bible as supreme in authority as a revelation from God, many charismatics and Pentecostals would argue that other revelations – prophetic or Spirit-inspired – have similar authority.

¹² Various translated as “sifted,” “weighed,” “judged,” and “thought over.”

¹³ As Chester (2005, 31) concisely summarises, “we cannot talk of the Spirit’s work apart from the Word of God.”

Criterion 1: A Spirit-inspired phenomenon will bear fruit.

Matthew records Jesus saying “By their fruit you will recognise them,” in the context of false teachers;¹⁴ in his letter to the, Paul identifies “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22), and there is a strong Biblical theme of harvests and fruit showing whether something is of God (and blessed by Him).¹⁵ In some ways, “Gamaliel’s test” is an extreme form of this argument: if it is from God, not only will fruit be born, but no-one will be able to prevent it.¹⁶ In this context, the fruit would be such things as renewed joy for Christ, an increase in evangelistic passion, a greater desire to serve God, etc. There is considerable evidence that such fruit has been produced, and in thousands of people.¹⁷

Criterion 2: A Spirit-inspired phenomenon will edify the church.

As Fee¹⁸ and others note, gifts of the Spirit are predominantly given for the edification of the church, both in the sense of each worshipping community, and the church body as a whole. 1 Corinthians 12-14 considers how spiritual gifts can edify the church, and in Romans 14:19, Paul exhorts his readers to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.”

It is debatable how much the Toronto Blessing edifies the church. Even though it has been manifested in corporate situations, it is typically an individual experience, and some have suggested that the Toronto Blessing is therefore merely a religious expression of the individualistic *zeitgeist*.¹⁹ Such a conclusion is unwarranted, however, given that spiritual experiences do exist on a predominantly personal level. There is nothing contradictory in the belief that a church can be edified *collectively* through *individual* giftings; the question is whether this has occurred. The answer is probably mixed, in that many have benefited from a personal spiritual experience, but have not always responded in a way which edifies their church. Others, however, have been, and this must lead us to conclude that edification through the Spirit is not automatic, but relies on individual believers responding appropriately. By this criterion, then, it is possible that the Toronto Blessing *is* Spirit-inspired (although at times frustrated by spiritually immature responses).

Criterion 3: A Spirit-inspired phenomenon points to Christ.

Given that one of the characteristics of the Holy Spirit is being centred on the work and person of Jesus,²⁰ we should ask whether the Toronto Blessing *is* pointing people to Christ. Again, the answer is mixed: anecdotally, many who experience the Toronto Blessing describe a renewed love for Christ; however, there have been outbreaks which interrupt sermons proclaiming Christ as Lord, and instances where ‘spiritual seekers’ visiting Toronto receive the Blessing before, apparently, encountering Christ.

Criterion 4: A Spirit-inspired phenomenon is not dependent on man.

Hanegraaff says that the Toronto Blessing is “the unintended psychological manipulation of gullible and desperate believers” (in Beverley 1995, 24) and, elsewhere, the word *hysteria* has

¹⁴ Matthew 7:15-18 “Watch out for false prophets... By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.”

¹⁵ Examples include the withered fig tree (Mark 11:12-25), the parables of the sower, the growing seed and the mustard seed (Mark 4:1-20,26-29,30-34), the fields being ripe for harvesting (John 4:34-38), the parable of the vineyard tenants (Luke 20:9-16), etc.

¹⁶ Peter and other Apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin for questioning. A Pharisee named Gamaliel persuades the Sanhedrin that “if it [the teaching and miracles of the Apostles] is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God,” Acts 5:39.

¹⁷ On this theme of bearing fruit, Nodding rightly says “It is not manifestation that is most important, it is transformation” (in Boulton 1995, 34). In 2000, Arnott claimed that, as evidence of fruit, new ministries have started, people have been called into the ministry, churches have been planted, many have been converted, many healed (Seager 2000, 30). Michael Green, however, believed “The outcome... generally to be a deep love for Jesus, and other people, coupled with a profound sense of joy” (in Boulton 1995, 12), outcomes which are much more inward.

¹⁸ Fee (1997, ix and, further on 162) asserts that, for Paul, spiritual gifts “were intended for the building of the people in the present as they await the consummation... These are things of the gathered community.”

¹⁹ Wendy Porter, a Christian psychiatrist, wonders whether “In a generation of ‘me’-centredness,... the church may have fallen prey to... the exaltation of the individual over the exaltation of Christ” (Porter and Richter 1995, 128).

²⁰ Carson agrees that “certainly, the Spirit’s purposes are Christocentric,” (1987, 155). This is affirmed by John 16:12-16, where Jesus tells of the forthcoming “Spirit of Truth [who will] guide you into all truth” (v.13) and “will bring glory to me” (v.14). This is the Counsellor (Paraclete) who “will testify,” Jesus said, “about me” (John 15:26).

been used. A genuine work of the Holy Spirit does not rely on the personality of church leader, style of worship, the psychological profile of believers or other human prerequisites.²¹ If the Toronto Blessing appears only where these conditions are met, the argument could be made that it is (albeit unwittingly) a human construct. The Toronto Blessing sometimes struggles to meet this criterion; but this is a reflection of the wide range of experiences labelled as Toronto Blessings.

Criterion 5: A Spirit-inspired phenomenon withstands testing (including by Scripture).

Although each of the above criteria involve testing, there is a deeper level of spiritual discernment which can shed light on spiritual phenomena.²² God helps his people discern truth from lies, and good from evil – spiritual discernment is itself a gift of the Spirit.²³ Many commentators stress that spiritual discernment obviously involves examination of the content of what is being said (or what is happening). To this we add Stott's (1988, 155-162) concern that the character of those involved must also face scrutiny²⁴ (it is the *false prophet*, after all, who Jesus warns against). Thiselton (2000, 969) helpfully stresses that discernment should be done corporately, by the church as a whole,²⁵ and Johnson (1993: 93) interprets Paul's instructions in the sense of continuous testing, rather than a one-off procedure.²⁶ Spiritual phenomena must face such corporate, continuous testing, but it is difficult to conclude whether or not the Toronto Blessing has passed this test, given that opinion on it was largely divided on denominational grounds.

Conclusion

It is difficult to definitively judge how far the Toronto Blessing is a genuine work of the Holy Spirit, due to considerations detailed above. However, by adopting Biblical tests, it is possible to be confident in the assertion that many instances of the Toronto Blessing have served God's purposes – such as edification of the church, or growth in awareness of Christ – and have been accompanied by spiritual fruit. On this basis, it is possible to say that, on these (but not all) occasions, the Holy Spirit is at work, rather than other spiritual forces – after all, “the devil is not in the habit of bringing people to Christ, promoting faith, sanctification, unity and evangelical doctrine, as has often occurred” (Blomberg 1994, 254). We reject historical tests as extraneous, and find experiential tests subjective and inconclusive; the higher test is whether the Toronto Blessing conforms with Scripture, and we find that this has often been the case. We should not be credulous, but neither should we “put out the Spirit's fire.”²⁷

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²¹ This point is repeatedly made in Scripture, e.g. Acts 17:24-25: “God... is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.”

²² The following Biblical passages are typically cited to stress the importance of testing:

(a) 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 “Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. *Test everything*. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.” (b) 1 John 4:1f “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but *test the spirits* to see whether they are from God...” (c) more extensive passages in 1 Corinthians 2:10-15, Ch.12 and Ch.14. In addition to these widely referenced passages, it is worth noting that (d) in Romans 12:2, Paul links “the renewing of your mind” with being “able to *test and approve* what God's will is” which, in a broader sense, could be interpreted to include receipt or rejection of spiritual phenomena.

²³ As Bittlinger (1967, 45) observes from 1 Corinthians 2:6-7, “The gift of discerning spirits gives to the church and its members the ability to distinguish between divine, human and demonic powers.”

²⁴ And by this Stott means *both* the character of those claiming to ‘give’ spiritual gifts or revelations, *and* those receiving them.

²⁵ In the context of 1 Corinthians 12, Thiselton (2000, 969) warns against “individualizing and even trivializing Paul's more corporate and strategic concerns about discerning the ways of the Spirit.”

²⁶ Referring to the 1 John 4 verses on testing, Johnson insists on a translation which communicates the *continuousness* of this testing.

²⁷ One should not infer from this conclusion, however, that such experiences are either essential or normative – some sixteen years before the Toronto Blessing began, Moule (1978, 84) was warning that glossolalia and other charismatic experiences “too easily come to be regarded as the sole or main criterion of genuine Christian experiences, and those who have not exhibited them come to be rated as inferior, second-class Christians.”

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