

**~Other Speakers A-F: Discernment Research Articles:****A Critical Examination of his Theology and Practice****By Stephen Sizer**

Rodney Howard-Browne has been invited by some of the larger Charismatic churches in London to minister at an event called "Signs and Wonders 95" at Olympia.

Given his status as the "Controversial figure behind the Toronto Blessing" (Alpha, December 1994, p.3), it is important to examine his approach to ministry and theological understanding of this phenomena. There we find many disturbing parallels with other heretical "word-faith" teachers.

The following is an assessment of Rodney Howard-Browne's ministry based on an interview with him contained in Charisma Magazine in August 1994. The conclusions drawn are substantiated from material taken from videos of his ministry at Woodgate Church in Birmingham, England, in June 1994, and Kenneth Copeland's church in August 1994.

Rodney Howard-Browne claims to be the "Holy Ghost bar-tender", the man through whom God has been bringing an end-time revival to many parts of the world since 1989. He is also attributed to be the source of what has come to be known as the "Toronto Blessing".

**A DENIAL OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD**

Howard-Browne clearly assumes he has the kind of relationship with God which enables him to order God about. Describing his "spiritual crisis" in 1979 he prayed, "Either You come down here or I will come up there and touch you." Suddenly he claims "his whole body felt like it was on fire. He began to laugh uncontrollably...I was plugged into heaven's electric supply, and since then my desire has been to go and plug other people in."

"Either you come down here or..." is certainly not the way the Bible instructs us to speak to the Lord God Almighty. In 1989 when he began his ministry in America, people began to fall out of their seats, laughing and crying. "The noise got so loud that Howard-Browne had to interrupt his sermon. "Lord, You're ruining my meeting," the evangelist complained. He says God replied: "The way your meetings have been going lately, they deserve to be ruined. I will move all the time if you allow Me to move."

So Howard-Browne believes his god is not only subservient but also dependent on him "if you allow me to move." This is not the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible.

**A DENIGRATION OF THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Howard-Browne claims to have tapped into "heaven's electric supply" and has apparently "amazed long-time renewal leaders with his knack for dispensing the Spirit's power." He understands his ministry as that of a "bartender" who acts as a "spiritual conduit" in which the presence of the Holy Spirit is defined in terms of a "high-voltage" power current. Such irreverent language is distinctly contrary to the way Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit working through someone.

The article further claims that Howard-Browne's view of spiritual power is similar to certain 1940's preachers such as Norman Vincent Peale and Peter Marshall, who taught that Christians can tap into the Holy Spirit's anointing like a divine current." This view of the Holy Spirit as a "great power" appears remarkably similar to that of Simon Magus the sorcerer (Acts 8:9-25). These "power encounters" of Howard-Browne cause people to shake, fall at his feet and convulse in uncontrollable laughter. "Many people lie on the floor giggling, sometimes for hours after he has touched them on the forehead. Some of them stumble out of their church hours later, as if intoxicated."

In contrast the Scriptures teach that one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit's presence is self-control (Galatians 5:22-23), something distinctly lacking in Howard-Browne's ministry.

**A DISREGARD FOR THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST**

In what is a lengthy and detailed six page assessment of Howard-Browne's ministry there is only one reference to the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is in the context of the claim that "He committed his life to Christ at age 5". In

contrast there are eleven references to the Holy Spirit, and frequent mention of "revival" and "healing" .

For someone who claims to be an evangelist (that is who proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ), such an imbalance is disturbing when the express purpose of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was to "glorify Christ" and make him known. (John 16:14; Acts 1:8). This however does not appear to be the emphasis of Howard-Browne's "evangelistic" ministry.

#### A LACK OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Howard-Browne claims that "the proof that this is a move of God is that when I leave, it doesn't stop". He is merely the "Holy Ghost bartender. I just serve the new wine and invite them to drink." In fact all it "proves" is that there are spiritual forces at work.

Howard-Browne describes, for example, what happened at the Oral Roberts University. "One night I was preaching on hell and laughter just hit the whole place." "The more I told people what hell was like, the more they laughed...." Satan may laugh about hell, but not Jesus. The way Jesus spoke about hell was no laughing matter. There are several other references in the article to solemn liturgies and even sermons being "drowned out" by laughter, making "whatever is being said from the pulpit irrelevant." One advocate admitted that "laughter broke out during the consecratory prayer for the Eucharist (when we remember the body of Christ broken, and his blood shed), normally the most solemn part of the service." Are these the kind of things we should expect from a man who is full of the Holy Spirit, or an evil spirit?

#### THE DISPARAGEMENT OF THE MIND AND CRITICAL FACULTIES

He is also prone to criticise those who question his ministry. "Howard-Browne disparages those who try and 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." "Words have become meaningless in our society," he says, "Signs and wonders are what must capture our attention."

This is in direct contradiction to what the Scriptures teach. For example,

"He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. (Matthew 12:39)

"If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mark 8:38)

"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' " (Luke 16:31)

"The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders," (2 Thes. 2:9)

This uncritical attitude of Rodney Howard-Browne is very dangerous and opens believers to demonic deception. God tells us in the Scriptures very specifically to "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1), to "accurately handle the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15), to understand the will of God through the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2) and "refute" error (Titus 1:9).

#### THE ESPOUSAL OF THE "HEALTH AND WEALTH" ERROR

In 1987, when Howard-Browne went to America to continue his ministry he ran out of money and was confronted by a hotel manager who wanted payment for his room. Just in time a friend came to the rescue with an American Express card (the one with no limit). "From then on," Howard-Browne claims, "we've never known want." His over-confident attitude towards prosperity is right in line with the false "Health and Wealth" prosperity gospel.

#### IDENTIFICATION WITH FALSE TEACHERS

Howard-Browne was an associate pastor of Rhema church in Johannesburg, before moving to the United States in 1987, identifying with fellow Rhema Church leader, Kenneth Hagin, a person whose teaching has also

been shown very clearly to be heretical (Hanegraaff :1993; Crenshaw: 1994). Oral Roberts is another "Word-Faith" teacher who espouses similar erroneous theological views.

Howard-Browne is happy however to identify with these people who rely on extra-biblical revelations, and distort the plain teaching of Scripture. For example, Oral Roberts has, according to Duin's article, "proclaimed that Howard-Browne's ministry signalled the arrival of "another level in the Holy Spirit." (p.24). One has to ask where in Scripture are we taught that there are "levels" in the Holy Spirit?

#### COMPARISONS WITH VODOO ACTIVITY

A number of video recordings of Rodney Howard-Browne's ministry have been circulating in Britain. These have caused a good deal of controversy and serious accusations have been made comparing his ministry with voodoo.

"Howard-Browne then began to work on the whole audience, rhythmically pacing up and down in front of the stage, using a strange tongue which was never interpreted. This gradually became a mantra which climaxed in a piercing high-pitched sound which he held for a long time. Watching the video with me was an African pastor and a former missionary. Both immediately said they recognised this as identical with the voodoo call used by witch doctors in summoning up the demons." (Clifford Hill PWM Team Ministries Newsletter, 28 November 1994)

Danny Aguirre, and Warren Smith, writing in the Spiritual Counterfeits Project journal, SCP Newsletter (Fall 1994, Volume 19:2, p.14), make similar comparisons with phenomena associated with Ramakrishna, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, African Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari and Qigong - ancient Chinese practices.

"Indian Guru Bhagvhan Shree Rajneesh was affectionately known by his followers as the "divine drunkard" because he was reputed to have drunk so deeply from the well of the "Divine". As a former follower of Rajneesh I met hundreds of Sannyasins who had flown to India "to drink" from "Bhagwan's wine." When followers were physically touched by Rajneesh, or even if they were merely in his presence, they would often experience feelings of great exhilaration and joy. Disciples of Swami Baba Muktanada would often manifest uncontrollable laughter after receiving Shaktipat (physical contact) from the guru. (p.13)

#### EVIDENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION

Dr Gaius Davies is a Christian and consultant psychiatrist at King's College Hospital, London. He was interviewed at the Carey Minister's Conference in January 1995, following the showing of part of a video of Rodney Howard-Browne's ministry. The substance of his clinical assessment of the video and of the "Toronto Blessing" were published in Reformation Today, (March/April 1995). In that interview, Dr Davies claimed,

"The video shows classic manipulation of the audience, just as at Nuremberg....The audience is repeatedly urged to suspend critical faculties and be open and receptive to a "blessing" . Meanwhile the audience itself is shouting and laughing and crying out for more. This is epidemic hysteria....This can be explained in purely psychological terms. There is no need to invoke the supernatural....The leaders are wicked men to abuse power in this way. The clearest signs of drunkenness in these meetings are that the leaders are drunk with power. There is no sign or care or concern for the people.....At HTB (Holy Trinity, Brompton) I saw individuals with a "pill rolling" action of their hands and others with serious psychological problems. These people were not being helped...They had come with real needs, but were just being manipulated." (pp.13-15)

#### CONCLUSIONS

Howard-Browne through his teaching, brazenly denies the sovereignty of God, denigrates the Holy Spirit, disregards the centrality of the Person of Jesus Christ, despises the use of the mind, and identifies with false teachers. This convinces me that the source of his ministry and the manifestations associated with it are not the work of the Holy Spirit, but some other spirit.

Why then do such people as Rodney Howard-Browne gain such a following? John F. MacArthur has said, in the foreword to Crenshaw's, *Man as God: The Word of Faith Movement*.

"They do it by intimidation, trickery, lies and most powerfully of all, teaching that appeals to the common lusts of humanity. After all, who would not like to believe that health, money, affluence, and success are ours for the claiming? In a culture that is selfish, materialistic, and proud, the Health and Wealth message is bound to be

popular. People with itching ears heap to themselves teachers who make the promises they want to hear. Meanwhile, the tolerance for sound doctrine is dangerously low."

What are the "signs" of the authentic ministry of the Holy Spirit which should guide us in interpreting the "Toronto Blessing"?

"When the Holy Spirit comes to sinful men, he initially brings sorrow. ..There is much more to spirituality than a lifting of the spirits, an entering into the exuberant life, and in extending one's succession of thrilling experiences. Yet in many of the popular neo-Pentecostal societies you will look in vain for anything else. No one who has God's Spirit can walk through our world without deep groanings of sorrow and distress. When the stench of immorality fills his nostrils, the Spirit-filled man cannot be happy, happy, all the day....If the Spirit were to come powerfully [today] it would not be to make men clap their hands for joy but to make them smite their breasts in sorrow....He is not the "Jolly Spirit" but the Holy Spirit." (Chantry. 99-101)

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