

Lakeland or Disneyland – how can we know?

Todd Bentley... if you have never heard of him, you will soon. What is happening in Florida? Is it revival or roadshow? Does it lead to Paradise or perdition? **David Andrew** thinks aloud – with some help from prophets and apostles...

A good friend who, in former years, was involved in legal representation for the Bank of England in currency counterfeit cases, once told me of his amazement at how readily an expert witness could pronounce a note as a forgery. The expert revealed his secret: 'if you are familiar with the genuine article, the forgery is easy to spot!' The wisdom of this is readily transferable to the questions which vex the many believers who frequently phone or email my office about current happenings in Florida's Lakeland. Laud him or loathe him, very soon there will be few Christian households who have not heard of Todd Bentley's offbeat ministry.

It would be simplistic to argue that the questions themselves imply unfamiliarity with the 'original'. Most who have called me so far are in fact, like Ezra, 'well-versed in the Scriptures'. In fact it's precisely because my correspondents know God's Word so thoroughly that they are alert enough to ask questions about reports from Florida (and other parts of the world – because true or false, it's spreading fast). Sadly, many thousands today are vulnerable to deception in proportion to their churches' emphasis on spiritual 'experience' at the expense of a solid grounding in the objective truth of the Bible. Even knowing the truth is no automatic protection. Forgeries only convince when they are nearly perfect! It's obvious that the guardians of our national currency are also familiar with their genuine article, but there remains a case to answer to satisfy the law and to demonstrate that the definition of 'genuine' remains intact. Likewise, we believers can parrot the truth, but it exerts no power in our lives until we have wrestled with its opposite. Are we not commanded to 'contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all entrusted to the saints'?

As I write, I'm careful of twin dangers we face in these times: **deception** and a **spirit of accusation**. This might imply that we end up sitting on the fence, but that is not an option. However, if we must take sides, the condition of our spirit before God is no less important than our zeal for the truth.

Some things are self-evident, though we may not always take – or have – time to think matters through. In our 'post-Christian' era, Britain and the western world in general, are more determinedly hostile to the rule of God and the influence of His Word – and therefore more susceptible to the natural attractions of the humanistic spirit of the age.

Without slight to the sterling efforts of battling God-fearers, the important campaigns of recent decades that have sought, for example, to protect religious freedom and to thwart the homosexual agenda in schools, have slowed, but not halted, the relentless moral collapse of our nations. From TV screens to department stores, images that are now routinely used to sell clothes, cosmetics and cars would have been deemed pornographic and even illegal a few years ago. Comedy is now more, not less, obscene than in former years. Extreme violence, implied in the films and drama of former generations, is now explicit and often gratuitous. Societal degeneration reveals the importance, not the futility, of the Christian moral stand.

However, we also need to hold the sobering thought that 'evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived'.² Jesus Himself prophesied that His return will happen when degenerate human society is 'as it was in the days of Noah'.³

The demonstrable point is that our society is eagerly abandoning the God of Truth and, by default, providing massive opportunity to the 'father of lies'. Likewise, to rebel against the God who alone 'justifies the ungodly' is to embrace the spirit of Satan, the 'accuser of the brethren'. 'We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one'.⁴ As Peter said: 'we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place...'.⁵ It is crucial in these days that we 'buy the truth and do not sell it', but it is equally critical that, in our zeal to expose deception, we are not found doing the Accuser's work for him against fellow believers. My concern is not so much for the prime movers in these mass 'faith' movements, but for our treatment of genuine believers who become the collateral damage when the truth is revealed. The enemy of our souls is just as happy to make enemies of brothers and friends as to make fools of us with his counterfeits.

Accordingly, my intention here is not to 'name and shame' while believers are presently dividing into camps in regard to events in Florida. Although I have spent many hours trying to discover what is actually happening, including viewing media appearances by Todd Bentley, sometimes in company with Patricia King and/or Bob Jones, I have not been to Florida. Many of us will never go there. My purpose in this paper is not to discuss the revival (or 'revival'), but to recognise that it will most likely impinge on most of our lives and ministries sooner or later and when it does, our evaluation will depend, not on how many hours we have sat in Lakeland meetings, but on our familiarity with God's Word. I believe that the 'genuine article' in Holy Scripture can enable us to ask helpful questions and exercise God-fearing discernment.⁶ The questions I venture here (albeit that some are rhetorical and clearly indicate my own position!) are not intended to exhaust the subject but to indicate the Scriptural basis on which we might enquire. It's also worth remembering that the Ephesian church which proved so effective against heretics had a potentially terminal deficit in the love department.⁷ Let's remember this as we enquire...

1. Is the primary concern of the Holy Spirit the impartation of **power** or the formation of **holy character**? As the Roman centurion recognised in Jesus, authority (power to serve God) comes from being *under* authority (in holy submission to the Father's will). Power need not have its source in holiness,⁸ but holiness will always empower. Jesus warned His disciples against rejoicing that they had power over the enemy (even though God's power working through them was real). They were to rejoice, not in what they could accomplish (which would puff up their pride) but in the unmerited mercy they had received from heaven (which would humble their pride and exalt God). Power has always had vast appeal and this applies more so when the driving spirit of the age is humanistic – exalting man over his God. Does the preaching emphasise the powerlessness of today's church, or the four themes that have characterised true Spirit-led revival throughout history:
 - a. Repentance,
 - b. The centrality of Jesus,

- c. The Word of God and
 - d. The call to holy living?
2. Jesus' ministry attracted multitudes, but never indulged in 'crowd appeal'. He refused to feed the appetite for the sensational – even performing some miracles in private or before a crowd could gather;⁹ He ignored their demands, refused to let them make Him king,¹⁰ and warned His followers against universal popularity.¹¹ Jesus also discouraged some who wanted to follow Him¹² and warned that, compared to the multitudes on the broad road to destruction, only 'few' would follow Him on the narrow path of life.¹³ What is the importance of crowds and numbers to the Florida 'revival'? Todd Bentley has said that, 'it's all about impartation', which implies a drive towards rapid, exponential growth through the indiscriminate laying on of hands – something the apostles expressly cautioned against¹⁴ e.g. they refused the power-hungry Simon Magus and rebuked the spirit by which he sought to be an 'imparter'.¹⁵
 3. The apostles preached Christ crucified, risen, ascended and returning 'as of first importance'. They pleaded with sinners to be 'reconciled to God'. They warned against deceiving spirits and 'doctrines of demons'. They declared the Old Testament 'holy and righteous and good', 'God-breathed and useful for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...'¹⁶. In the message we are hearing:
 - a. Is Jesus central or peripheral?
 - b. Are sinners warned to flee from the coming wrath and called to repentance and faith in the only Saviour?
 - c. What is the stated role of angels in the ministry – is it central or peripheral?
 - d. In the current case, does the Word of God have anything to say about body piercing and tattoos? Are the selected images compatible with the call to holy living?
 - e. How important is the 'laying on of hands' and is the application indiscriminate and universally targeted or cautiously restricted by apostolic guidelines?
 - f. What proportion of the message is personal, anecdotal and impossible either to corroborate or deny and what weight is given to the objective truth of Scripture?
 4. When Paul was taken up into the third heaven, he heard 'inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell' ¹⁷, and was given a 'thorn in the flesh' to protect him from pride in these 'surpassingly great revelations'. We are given no detail about Paul's revelations – instead he preaches Christ at every opportunity. How does this compare with Todd Bentley's messages?
 5. Now some deliberately rhetorical questions:
 - a. Is God the only possible source of miracles and of power?
 - b. Is the devil real – and is he capable of deceiving believers?
 - c. Can years of spiritual drought render us susceptible to a mirage?
 - d. If you wanted to deceive people who are zealous for both truth and unity, might you discourage discernment by dire warnings of divisiveness?
 - e. Is disunity always wrong?

Unless we are in the business of scoring points, we will not rush to heretic hunting nor set ourselves up as 'judges with evil hearts'. King David and the apostle Peter made the same great discovery: 'The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And

He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; For the LORD upholds him with His hand.¹⁸ When Peter became an 'atheist for a day', his collapse was met with divine mercy and restoration. I conclude that none of us is bomb-proof against apostasy. If the time comes to warn the flock of God specifically against Demas who is 'in love with this world' or to reveal by name that 'Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm...', the hands of the clock will have been moved by the Spirit of Grace. Until then, we need to moderate our language in regard to brethren and learn to weep in intercession before we rush to denunciation. May we all keep our eyes fixed on Jesus who alone is 'able to keep us from falling'.

¹ Jude 1:3

² 2 Timothy 3:13

³ Matthew 24:37

⁴ 1 John 5:19

⁵ 2 Peter 1:19

⁶ Hebrews 5:14

⁷ Revelation 2:1-5

⁸ Exodus 7:11

⁹ Mark 9:25

¹⁰ John 6:15

¹¹ Luke 6:26

¹² Luke 9:57-62

¹³ Matthew 7:13-14

¹⁴ 1 Timothy 5:22

¹⁵ Acts 8:18-23

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 12:4

¹⁸ Psalms 37:23-24