



Thousands Flock to Revival in Search of Miracles

Controversial Canadian Minister Says He Can Cure the Sick and Weary

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UPDATE: After this story aired on "Nightline," Fresh Fire Ministries released a statement announcing that preacher Todd Bentley would be taking time off "to refresh and to rest" after having spent four months in Lakeland, Fla., leading revival meetings. Their Lakeland broadcasts on GOD TV were put on hold. Bentley returned on July 18 and has resumed broadcasting from Lakeland.

A middle-aged woman suffering from ovarian cancer shakes back and forth, speaking in tongues.

A young child with spina bifida and splints on his legs tears them off and bolts across the stage. He cries as he declares that his legs have strength like never before.

"The boy's been healed," says the preacher as thousands cheer him on.

Meanwhile, Bill Wise sits quietly with one arm raised to the sky, the other tightly clutching his 2-year-old daughter, who was born with her bladder and colon outside of her body.

He prays for a miracle.

Todd Bentley, a tattooed Canadian, stands with a microphone in one hand and the other stretched out to this electrified crowd of nearly 10,000.

"Bam!" He yells. "Bam, bam, bam!"

Several people onstage with him collapse to the ground.

Bentley has led a rapidly growing throng of people from all over the world in a religious revival that has transformed the small city of Lakeland, Fla., into the center of an international phenomenon.

Wise flew from Seattle with his daughter, Caelyn, in hopes that Bentley would be able to help his child where modern medicine has failed.

Like so many here, Wise believes Bentley has a special connection with God.

"He is very close with the Lord," Wise said. "He has actively and passionately pursued God. My daughter needs a miracle."

Tens of thousands of others like Wise are making a pilgrimage to this small city in central Florida in hopes of

finding a miracle.

Spreading the Word

Thanks to the Internet and satellite television, word of the revival spread quickly around the world to people like Jim Carter, who came to Lakeland from Anaheim, Calif., with his wife and daughter.

"We've been watching on the Internet since it started, basically," he said. "We just wanted to come down and first-hand experience."

Carter added, "We just want more of God, more of his presence and to see God change our country and bring America back to God."

From the looks of it, Carter's daughter, Tanya, is a typical American teenager. But she is deaf.

"She was onstage last night around 11 o'clock," Carter said. "Todd prayed for her, and she said she actually felt fire and heat in her right ear."

"The crowd just keeps growing," said Bentley. "We're drawing anywhere from five to ten thousand people a night, and up to 70 percent of the crowd is brand new every night," he said. "And they're coming from all over the world, more than 130 nations, from every background."

A Dark Past

With his arms, legs and chest covered in tattoos and his lip pierced with a stud, Bentley is not the image of an evangelist most people have in mind.

Born in British Columbia, Canada, Bentley said he led a rough life before finding God.

He says his mom raised him on welfare, parading a succession of boyfriends through the house. When he saw his dad, even as boy, Bentley said it was to get drunk together and do drugs.

"You know it's a cycle of destructive abuse. Alcoholism, drugs, drinking at 11, I got involved in all kinds of criminal activity and ended up in prison before I was 15," he said.

At 15, Bentley was incarcerated for sexual abuse, a crime he committed when he was 13 against a younger boy.

Bentley, however, doesn't shy away from talking about his past and takes responsibility for his crimes.

"I'm very open about my past. I've written a book and it's in my autobiography," he said. "I served time in prison for my crime."

"I'd break into vehicles, I'd steal, as I got older, I'd take your pot, I'd take your drugs. I got involved with people who were affiliated with gangs and bikers."

At 18, Bentley said he found God, something he neither expected nor anticipated.

"God found me in my drug dealer's trailer and spoke to me in an audible voice," he said. "I was instantly

delivered from drug and alcohol addiction, I never had one craving, not one withdrawal symptom, I was transformed from that man to the man that I am today."

"I see myself, you know, as a sinner saved by grace the same way the tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners were saved in the Bible," Bentley said.

It's not clear if the tens of thousands who are coming to Lakeland know all about Bentley's past, but they do know that he makes a virtue of repenting and embracing the Lord.

A Town Reacts

Amidst the frenetic passion of the revival not everyone is embracing the movement with open arms.

Ellen Simms owns a small store on Main Street, and though she has seen an increase in business over the past few weeks, the whole movement makes her uncomfortable.

"Miracles may happen, but this is such theater that it bothers me," she said while sitting behind the counter of her store in downtown Lakeland. "I'm not buying it."

Others are even more skeptical.

"They're just using this as a gimmick to make money," said June Cochran, who has been in a wheelchair all her life due to cerebral palsy.

Cochran said that people from the revival have lobbied her to attend the revival so that she can be "cured." She's a deeply religious person but she is offended by the tone of Bentley's revival.

"At first I didn't know how to respond, but they're not hearing what they're saying. They're saying that there is something wrong with us and that if we do not have our self-esteem already built up, it tears us down even more. Like we're not even worthy to be here."

Rev. Jeff White, a pastor at a local Missionary church in Lakeland, heard so much talk about Todd Bentley and the revival tent that he wanted to see it for himself.

He struggled with what he saw.

"I've had to fight skepticism and cynicism because I truly believe that God heals. I really believe his powers are real and it is today," White said. "I can't say that my spirit enters in and joins in with some of the things we've seen here tonight."

Bentley said he expects skepticism and embraces it.

"I would encourage the skeptic, come to a meeting, sit in a meeting for two days, see what happens to you," he said. "I'll pray for a skeptic. I'm not afraid of skeptics, I expect skeptics."

The Healing Touch?

When asked to present evidence of the healings, Bentley promised to give "Nightline" the names and medical

records of three followers who would talk openly about his miracles. He never delivered. Instead, his staff gave "Nightline" a binder filled with what he says are inspiring miracles, but with scant hard evidence. It offered incomplete contact information, a few pages of incomplete medical records, and the doctors' names were crossed out.

When pressed further, Bentley provided the name of a woman in California who had a large tumor in her uterus that shrank after she saw Bentley.

Her husband, however, told "Nightline" that it could be a coincidence because she was still undergoing medical treatment. He said she was too tired to talk to us at the time but added that she was regaining her strength day by day.

The husband did provide some of his wife's medical records from a clinic in Tijuana, Mexico, where she went for cancer treatment after being turned away by American hospitals. They, however, insisted on obscuring the clinic's name and the names of the doctors.

Not a single claim of Bentley's healing powers could be independently verified.

Bentley, however, remains positive.

"I believe God is real and he's showing himself to his people," he said. "Yes, I believe the prayer of faith will save the sick."

Bentley's revival is filled with wheelchairs and crutches, with people of faith and people desperate for salvation through faith.

One of them is Bill Wise. He patiently tended his desperately ill baby daughter throughout the long night's revival. He listened for a call from Bentley offering a cure for his child's condition. But it never came.

Yet Wise defiantly refuses to lose faith.

"Even if we don't see any change, in the immediate run here, sometimes prayer is cumulative," Wise said.

This piece has been updated with a clarification that was necessary because of an editing error.

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