

## Holy Laughter and the Toronto Blessing: An Investigative Report

By James A. Beverley

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
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## **Holy Laughter and the Toronto Blessing: An Investigative Report** By James A. Beverley Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2508816 in Books
- Published on: 1995-07-16
- Released on: 1995-07-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 5.59" h x .47" w x 8.31" l, .56 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 184 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### From the Back Cover

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#### About the Author

James A. Beverley is Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, California and a Professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Canada. He is a contributing editor to Christianity Today magazine, and a frequent contributor to Faith Today and Charisma magazines. He has specialized for twenty years in the study of modern religious movements. He is the author of many books including Holy Laughter and the Toronto Blessing. Jim and Gloria have two adult children. SPANISH BIO: James A. Beverley es director asociado del Instituto 'Para el Estudio de la Religion Americana' en Santa Barbara, California y profesor en el Seminario Tyndale en Toronto, Canada. Contribuye como editor en la revista El cristianismo hoy, La fe hoy y Carisma. Por veinte anos se ha especializado en el estudio de los movimientos religiosos modernos. Es autor de varios titulos incluyendo, Risa Santa, Bendicion de Toronto. Jim y Gloria, su esposa, tienen dos hijos adultos.

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One The Holy Spirit Has Landed In the London newspaper the Sunday Telegraph of June 19, 1994, its several million readers were told that "British Airways flight 092 took off from Toronto Airport on Thursday evening just as the Holy Spirit was landing on a small building 100 yards from the end of the runway." This widely-circulated quotation refers to what has become known around the world as "The Toronto Blessing." This is an apt description of the way millions of Christians now regard the ministry connected with the Airport Vineyard in Toronto. There is widespread belief throughout the charismatic and Pentecostal world that something powerful and amazing is happening in one of Canada's leading cities. Marc Dupont, the prophet of the Airport Vineyard, has suggested that Toronto may have been the choice for this latest renewal of the Holy Spirit because of its cosmopolitan significance. One study suggests that Toronto is the most ethnically diverse city on this planet. Thus, just as Pentecost initiated the renewal of the church to the diverse nations of the world in the first century, so The Toronto Blessing is bringing renewal to a vast number of nations and peoples in the last years of the twentieth century. Regardless of what one may think of the claim that the Holy Spirit lands regularly at the Airport Vineyard near Toronto's Pearson International Airport, there is no doubt that The Toronto Blessing represents one of the most interesting and amazing stories in recent years. Since January 20, 1994, there have been meetings at the Airport Vineyard every night of the week except Monday. Several different airlines offer a discount to people who fly to Toronto to attend the evening worship services. Major hotels in the west end of the city provide discounts to those who want to be in the city for The Toronto Blessing. Already four books have been published on the topic, in addition to hundreds of articles and magazine stories. This amazing story has also been covered by Canadian, American, and international television crews. It is also well known that The Toronto Blessing has not received a favorable review from all Christians. Controversy has surfaced in individual churches and throughout entire

denominations. As will be explained later, some severe allegations have been leveled against the basic integrity of this latest phase of the Vineyard. Much of that controversy has centered around the strange manifestations that have taken place in the nightly meetings. Two chapters in this book will deal in detail with this aspect of The Toronto Blessing. Journalist Robert Hough did a story on the Airport Vineyard for Toronto Life Magazine. His account gives a picture of part of an evening meeting: The man sitting beside me, Dwayne from California, roared like a wounded lion. The woman beside Dwayne started jerking so badly her hands struck her face. People fell like dominoes, collapsing chairs as they plunged to the carpeting. They howled like wolves, brayed like donkeys and in the case of a young man standing near the sound board started clucking like a feral chicken. And the tears! Never have I seen people weep so hysterically, as though every hurt they'd ever encountered had risen to the surface and popped like an overheated tar bubble. This was eerie stuff people were screaming, their bodies jerking unnaturally, their faces contorted with tics.<sup>1</sup> Despite these strange manifestations, there has been no hesitation on the part of many Christians around the world to engage in similar behavior. Writing in Christian Research Journal, Paul Carden noted the influence of The Toronto Blessing in England: "An epidemic of laughter is spreading across the land, flashing like lightning from church to church. It is the most bizarre thing to happen in the religious life of Britain for some time. Is it a case of 'whom the god's wish to destroy they first make mad'?" Carden's suggestion that Christians may be going mad would be readily and strongly denounced by millions in favor of The Toronto Blessing. They would reply, as Jonathan Edwards did in his day, that this madness has brought great and wonderful renewal to the Christian church throughout the world. Roots of The Toronto Blessing When Christians today think about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they agree that this renewal was fundamentally divine in origin. However, even at Pentecost human factors were at work. After all, human beings were the ones who had gathered in the Upper Room on that day. These same people had been disciples of Jesus Christ, and their anointing by the Holy Spirit was preceded by their time with Jesus and his ministry on earth. In the most fundamental sense, then, Pentecost is rooted in the human ministry of the Son of God. In a similar vein, even the most ardent supporters of The Toronto Blessing realize a human factor is involved in the origin and spread of the fires connected with the Airport Vineyard. The roots of this renewal lie first of all in the ministry of John Wimber, the international leader of the Vineyard. Todd Hunter, now National Coordinator of Vineyard Churches, believes that it is Wimber's international reputation that set the stage for people being willing to come to Vineyard meetings in Toronto. One of the other major leaders behind The Toronto Blessing is Rodney Howard-Browne. Known as the laughing evangelist, Howard-Browne is from South Africa, but felt the call of God to come to America in 1987. (In a later chapter of this book, we will explore his specific ministry and teaching.) He has played a central role in the origin of The Toronto Blessing. He believes that God has given him a special anointing to renew the church with the power of the Holy Spirit. He actually refers to himself as "The Holy Ghost Bartender," in light of his claim that he is giving to the church the "new wine" of the Holy Spirit.

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