

An Evening with Rodney Howard-Browne

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From the Newswatch column of the Christian Research Journal, Winter 1995, page 43. The Editor-in-Chief of the Christian Research Journal is Elliot Miller. Everything was going well in my interview with Rodney Howard-Browne until he tried to get me slain in the Spirit. I met him at a national meeting of charismatic leaders at a retreat center east of Orlando, Florida. Howard-Browne, 33, had driven in from Tampa so these leaders could get a look at him. When Howard-Browne entered he was accompanied by two Pentecostal pastors, one carrying a portable telephone, presumably to answer Howard-Browne's many phone calls. Two of the men wore gold bracelets and all three had on nearly identical suits, shirts, brightly colored ties, and expensive-looking cufflinks. Howard-Browne -- who is six feet tall, built like a football tackle, and wears a perpetually good-humored expression -- had his initials, RMHB, monogrammed on his cuffs. Although a South African, he wore a tie tack of the U.S. presidential seal (with a George Bush signature etched on the back) and cufflinks sporting the words "U.S. Senate" -- acquired, he said, in Washington, D.C. where, he added casually, he spoke to some staff at the Pentagon.

We all sat down. The gentleman with the phone had an annoying habit of drumming his fingers on the table during the interview whenever he got impatient or bored or thought I was asking impertinent questions. They all seemed irked when I asked about anything money-related: the ministry's income, Howard-Browne's salary, and whether there was a board of directors. They refused to give me specific answers, although I did glean that he drove a luxury car. He had just spent close to \$70,000 for his first official audit by the Irvine, Texas firm of Guinn, Smith & Co. and was forming a board of directors. He had taken on 22 paid staff -- some of them family members -- to help him evangelize 120 cities in 33 states. He said the Rodney Howard-Browne Evangelistic Association had given \$500,000 away to missions in 1993.

"I'm surrounding myself with pastors from major ministries around the world," he explained, "and I'm accountable to them." These constituted what he called his "board of advisors," all of whom pastored churches of at least 3,000 members, the kind of circles Howard-Browne aimed to move in.

Howard-Browne began his rise to fame when he arrived in this country in December 1987. Observing the fallout from the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals, he kept a low profile for about 18 months. His ministry took off at an unexpected event at a church north of Albany, New York in April 1989. Howard-Browne was leading a week of revival meetings on the "anointing": what it is and how the presence of God is tangible and can be felt and sensed. He claims that one Tuesday morning he saw the presence of God entering the room, like a cloud.

"Lord, you're ruining my meeting," he complained silently.

"The way your meetings have been going lately, they deserve being ruined," the Lord allegedly retorted.

People began crying, laughing, weeping, and rolling on the floor -- "and," he says, "it hasn't stopped for five years." The phenomenon that has grabbed the most attention at his meetings is "holy laughter," in which congregants are inexplicably convulsed with hilarity, sometimes for hours.

Howard-Browne's watershed moment arrived in the spring of 1993 when Assemblies of God pastor Karl Strader asked him to preach at Carpenter's Home Church in Lakeland, Florida. Although he was only supposed to preach for one week, Howard-Browne stayed for four, because of the vast crowds that filled the 10,000-seat sanctuary to hear the "laughing evangelist" and maybe get struck dumb with laughter themselves. When the services were broadcast on radio, hundreds more showed up.

"People flew in from Africa, Great Britain, South Africa, and Argentina," Strader said. "It was the greatest move of God I've ever seen. It was like something in the history books. I've been in the charismatic movement and participated in the Jesus movement, and I've never seen anything like this."

Since March of 1993, income has risen 30 percent at Carpenter's Home Church, 800 newcomers have joined, and 2,200 persons have been baptized.

"We'd go until 2 a.m.," said Strader. "Rodney'd baptize them six at a time in our pool. Two or three would get totally dead drunk and we'd have to fish them out. Then we stacked them like wet fish on the platform."

Howard-Browne had made the hit parade. That summer, he went to the Jerusalem of American Pentecostalism: Tulsa, where he preached at Kenneth Hagin's Rhema Bible Training Center. Among others, he impressed Richard Roberts, president of Oral Roberts University (ORU), who himself ended up on the floor laughing along with his wife, Lindsay, and mother, Evelyn, during Howard-Browne's meetings. Roberts invited him to conduct ORU's annual fall revival.

"At the close of the first service, Rodney Howard-Browne asked who wanted hands laid on them to be prayed over for a new 'baptism of joy,'" Roberts remembered. They lined up, students and faculty, up and down the aisles, all over the building. By the time Howard-Browne had laid hands on each one, most of the crowd was on the floor. Many more had not been prayed for, so Howard-Browne continued out the building, up and down lines of seekers on the outside lawn. By the time he was done, some 4,000 persons had been prayed over, Roberts estimates.

"My little nine-year-old daughter Jordan came to the first night service and Rodney laid hands on her," said Richard Roberts. "She fell to the ground and laughed for an hour and 45 minutes. When we tried putting her to bed, she fell out laughing. We finally had to put her in the bathtub."

The attraction of it all lies in what Roberts terms "Holy Ghost joy," whereby depressed, defeated Christians are transformed into happy people. Over three decades have passed since the dawn of the charismatic movement, and the "holy laughter" phenomenon may merely represent peoples' desperation for something new. Baby boomers are notorious for going to great lengths to alleviate their inner pain. Howard-Browne understands this quite well. He calls this joy the "anesthetic of the Holy Spirit."

Deeply impressed, Oral Roberts proclaimed Howard-Browne's ministry as the beginning of "another level in the Holy Spirit." Turning to Rodney, he prophesied over the evangelist, adding, "We can never pay you for what you've done for

us" -- then sent him off with a \$25,000 honorarium. (Howard-Browne, in turn, gave \$11,900 from his offerings to ORU.) The elder Roberts then prophesied over him, but the sounds of students hysterically laughing nearly drowned him out. Not everyone thinks the laughing phenomenon is good. Edith Blumhofer, who holds a doctorate from Harvard in American religious history and directs the Institute for the Study of American Evangelism in Wheaton, Illinois, says "holy laughter" has precedent among Pentecostals, but it has never received such widespread attention.

"My personal opinion is that it's a fad," she said. "I don't think it is significant for American Christianity in general." Apologists for the "holy laughter" phenomenon tend to pick and choose their way among incidents in Pentecostal history to make it look like laughter has respectable precedent, she said, adding that silence has as much precedent among Pentecostals as does laughter.

"I don't see any theological warrant for it," she mused. "In fact, I don't think it's theological at all. I think it's psychological." Howard-Browne scoffed at criticism that he's merely using the power of suggestion to get people to roll on the floor. "I tell them never to preach salvation, because they're suggesting people get saved," he said. "I'll guarantee anybody, I'll give them a congregation of 1,000 people and tell them to get up and suggest all they want and see what will happen." One of the other pastors cut in on the interview to say he read the story of Ananias and Sapphira to his church the other night and everyone ended up on the floor laughing.

"One night I was preaching on hell," Howard-Browne said, continuing, "and it just hit the whole place. The more I told people what hell was like, the more they laughed, and when I gave an altar call, they came forward by the hundreds to get saved."

"Then," I replied, "as to what you're preaching on, it's almost irrelevant what you're saying."

He nodded.

Our conversation switched to Howard-Browne's reading of American church history, a key element in his apologetic. Howard-Browne insists that "holy laughter" happened during the Great Awakening in the 1740s and the Second Awakening in the early 1800s. It is true that the 18,000-25,000 participants in the famous Cane Ridge Revival in Bourbon County, Kentucky in 1801 jerked, fell to the ground, danced, barked -- and laughed. (They also did other things, leading some to comment that more souls were conceived during the revival than were saved.)

Howard-Browne reels off the names of famous American evangelists Charles Finney, Peter Cartwright, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards to bolster his case, even though Edwards disliked the bizarre phenomena -- which he called "religious affections" -- intensely.

"Jonathan Edwards, in his book *A Treatise on Religious Affections*, said that involuntary stuff is no evidence of grace and does you no good," said Richard Lovelace, an evangelical historian at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts.

"Some critics said it was just mass hysteria. These folks also found out that if they rebuked these phenomena in the name of Jesus, there were less of them. Cartwright took the position that the more these things happened, the more active the Spirit is. But Jonathan Edwards and other Puritans would not have agreed. They had a saying that when the sun shines on the swamp, the mist rises. Human nature is full of gross impurities, possibly demonic in nature, that come out when the Gospel goes in."

In other words, laughter was a phenomenon of revival but not necessarily a manifestation of the Spirit. When Howard-Browne was told that some church historians could not find laughter occupying a major place in American revivalism -- "I don't care! I don't care who they are," he burst out. "They haven't read church history. Charles Finney in his memoirs talks about being hit with indescribable joy when he took out his pocket handkerchief and stuck it over his head."

"But that might not be laughter," I interjected.

"Well, joy has a voice, and it's laughter," he replied. Howard-Browne appeared to have read selectively, mainly material that could give legitimacy to the current movement. However, he had never read books by the late J. Edwin Orr, the preeminent historian of revivals around the world.

Howard-Browne takes no credit for the Vineyard-driven "Toronto blessing" phenomenon (see companion article) and claims to be unable to analyze the current movement at all. "You really cannot understand what God is doing in these meetings with an analytical mind," he said. "It's not a move of man, it's a move of God. The mind is never going to understand what God's doing....The only way you're going to understand what God's doing is with your heart."

Despite this contention, Howard-Browne was willing to take questions later on that evening from the group of charismatic leaders, who he addressed as "men of God" even though there were women in the group. Few had anything substantial to ask him.

"America needs a major move of God. Otherwise," he added, "we'll have racial conflict in this country that will make South Africa look like a holiday." The cordless phone rang, jarring everyone's concentration. One of the Pentecostal pastors answered it, said the caller was none other than Howard-Browne's wife, then fell on the floor laughing.

This set the stage for the rest of the meeting, as Howard-Browne began explaining how "holy laughter" has set his ministry apart. "I'm just the Holy Ghost bartender," he informed us. "I just serve the new wine and tell them to come drink."

Laughter, he explained, "bubbles up" from the same place the gift of tongues comes from. It was all in some deep spiritual reservoir that needed to be tapped the same way.

Howard-Browne then began pumping us up to do just that. He led us in a song with these words: "I am drunk, I am drunk. Every day of my life I am drunk. I've been drinking down at Joel's place every night and every day. I am drunk on the new wine."

Then he asked us all to lift our hands and "let that river of joy come out of your belly."

The right side of the room began laughing. A Catholic nun was howling with laughter. Another person wept. One pastor from Ohio was red-faced from laughing so hard, and then dropped to the ground. Howard-Browne began to laugh, too, encouraging the rest of us to get with the program. The left side of the room stayed silent, except for an occasional giggle

at the bizarre behavior of those on the right side. Finally, Howard-Browne took matters into his own hands by praying over one of the younger men on the left side, pointing his finger at the man like a gun.

"Fill! Fill! Fill!" he said, and down the man went. Howard-Browne then interviewed him.

"How do you feel...?" the evangelist asked.

"Overwhelming peace," the man replied.

This brought up the majority of leaders in the room to be individually prayed over. About a dozen hung back, pressing themselves against the walls; some left the room.

"There is a thin line between a move of the Spirit and manipulation," the Episcopal priest next to me murmured, "and we've just crossed that line."

Unexpectedly, it was my turn. After laying 20-30 people out on the floor, Howard-Browne and his two friends asked if I'd like to be prayed over. I was in a quandary; should a reporter maintain an objective distance, or "enter in" to the experience?

I finally assented and the three men gathered around me. Howard-Browne instructed me to lift my hands. I knew enough about these things to know that lifting your hands puts you off balance enough that, if someone smacks you on the forehead, you tend to fall over. I folded my hands near my waist.

Undaunted, the three men prayed over me, one or the other saying he could feel joy rising up in me like a bubble that I only needed to "release," apparently by laughing. I felt nothing. Then Howard-Browne instructed me to begin praying loudly -- in tongues. I guessed this was to "help out" the Holy Spirit, so I compromised by praying very softly. The three men asked me to pray louder.

This was becoming a farce. I looked at Howard-Browne and he looked at me.

"Sorry," I said, and walked away, not laughing at all.

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