

Same old scam?

Even some Pentecostals are skeptical of Todd Bentley's tent revival

by RUSTY LEONARD & WARREN COLE SMITH

Canadian Todd Bentley doesn't look much like a minister. The 32-year-old has body piercings and tattoos on his arms and neck, and he often dresses in black.

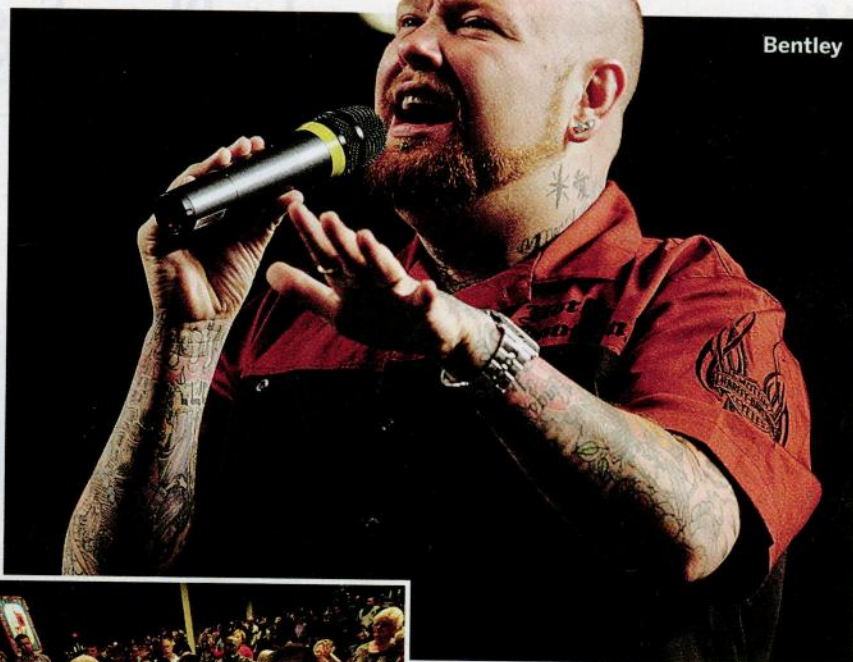
But a minister of the gospel he is, or claims to be—and those claims have become the real story of a series of meetings Bentley is holding in Lakeland, Fla.

Bentley's British Columbia-based Fresh Fire Ministries arrived in Lakeland on April 2 for five days of revival meetings at a local church. These services would be broadcast on God TV, a satellite network with a worldwide viewership.

The services were different in another way, Bentley claims: God showed up in a powerful way. A New York public relations firm was quickly hired to send out press releases claiming "documented healings," and God TV relentlessly plugged its broadcasts of the services.

The services, now held in a huge air-conditioned tent, have gone on for months now, and as many as 10,000 people a night are coming. Bentley claims hundreds of people have been healed of everything from deafness to infertility—though he did admit that in the latter case we wouldn't know for sure until the women actually got pregnant. As for the other cases, WORLD made repeated requests for documentation of healings, but claims of "privacy issues" were the only response.

A visit to one of Bentley's services suggests that he is learning how to turn the big crowds into big money. ATM machines have been set up, providing attendees with ready cash for the offering plate and book purchases. The offering is now a significant part of the service, taking as long as 30 minutes. Bentley has not released financial information, saying he is "too busy keeping up with what God is doing" to pull the information together.



Bentley



More than 150,000 people have attended the meetings, and at least 1.2 million more (according to God TV estimates) have watched on television. Even accepting Fresh Fire's estimate of an average donation of \$3 to \$5 per person, it's easy to see how

donations could end up in the millions.

Christian critics wonder if Bentley's theology can be reconciled with Scripture. Michael Horton's book, *The Agony of Deceit*, documents fraud among televangelists. He told WORLD, "I have not yet encountered a 'faith healer' who failed to preach a different gospel than the one that we find clearly presented in the New Testament."

Even those sympathetic to Pentecostal theology are apprehensive. Mark Balmer, pastor of the 8,000-person Calvary Church in nearby Melbourne, Fla., received so many questions about Bentley that he spoke out. He told WORLD he believes "in all the gifts for today, including healing." He also asserted: "We are not heresy hunters." He nonetheless told his congregation "not to attend any of this counterfeit revival."

Charisma magazine is normally a cheerleader for Pentecostal preachers, but editor Lee Grady told WORLD: "Charismatic and Pentecostal leaders are divided over its legitimacy." Grady said a "council of national-level leaders" convened by C. Peter Wagner, president of Global Harvest Ministries and former professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary, will address these concerns in a meeting later this summer.

Until then, though, crowds remain strong, and Bentley said he got a "word from God" to keep the services—and the book sales—going through at least the end of June. —WITH REPORTING BY MIKE KUCKEL IN LAKE LAND, FLA.

SMELLING A SCAM

How can you tell if a ministry's claims are too good to be true?

- 1 Ask for financial information. An inability or unwillingness to make such disclosures should be a warning sign.
- 2 Is there an emphasis on money? Passing the plate is one thing. Passing it multiple times in a service, or dwelling on money issues, should raise questions.
- 3 Ask for proof of claims of healing. Reputable ministries are not defensive when asked for proof of their claims. They don't make claims they can't prove.
- 4 Seek wise counsel. Before following the latest Christian celebrity preacher, check with your pastor or others you trust.

—SOURCES: MINISTRYWATCH.COM, CALVARY CHURCH MELBOURNE