

Ignited by the Spirit

Since R.T. Kendall was touched by the Holy Spirit in 1955, this former Nazarene has become a beacon of charismatic renewal.

The apostle Paul had his life-changing encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Robert Tillman "R.T." Kendall, one of the most respected Bible teachers in the United States today, says his Damascus Road experience took place in a car in 1955 when he was driving through central Tennessee on the road to Nashville.

That was years before Kendall had embraced the Pentecostal experience. But what happened in that car on a Monday morning changed the young college student forever and prepared him for a worldwide ministry.

Today, Kendall is being used not only to introduce American evangelicals to the charismatic experience but also to bring biblical depth to charismatics who have been known for theological shallowness.

Kendall, who was raised in Kentucky by devout Nazarene parents, was 20 at the time and a student at Trevecca Nazarene College in Nashville, Tennessee. He had been saved as a child and called to preach only the year before. As soon as he expressed his desire to go into ministry, the local Nazarene church in his hometown of Ashland, Kentucky, issued him a preacher's license. Within three months of delivering his first sermon on December 2, 1954, he became a student pastor at the Church of the Nazarene in Palmer, Tennessee, 115 miles from Trevecca.

Normally Kendall stayed in Palmer from Friday to Sunday each week and drove back to school on Sunday nights. But on this occasion he waited until Monday morning to drive back. As he prayed in his car, a heavy burden came on him, and he began to wonder if he was saved. He felt fearful and anxious, he says, and God seemed a thousand miles away.

Two Scriptures came to Kendall's mind in the midst of his travail: "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:30, NKJV) and "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:7). Taking note of these verses, Kendall prayed in earnest: "God, help me, please. Help me to cast my care upon You. Then I can say my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Suddenly the glory of the Lord filled his car, and Kendall became aware that Jesus was praying for Him. Though he couldn't tell what Jesus was saying, he felt such love that he was almost overwhelmed.

Nearly an hour later, the words became intelligible, and he heard Jesus say to the Father, "He wants it." A voice answered back, "He can have it."

In that moment, Kendall says, he felt a surge of warmth and saw the face of Jesus. When the vision ended, the fear and anxiety he initially felt was gone, and he was filled with peace.

Kendall didn't realize it then, but he had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. He wasn't familiar with the term or the experience.

All he knew was that Jesus became more real to him than He had ever been, and his appreciation for and understanding of the Word increased greatly. Four months later, he spoke in tongues.

This experience—certainly not the norm for a Nazarene—radically changed his theology. He was suddenly convinced, he says, that he was eternally saved and chosen from the foundation of the world—that he could not be lost, no matter what he did.

He believed in the sovereignty of God. And in direct opposition to the Nazarene belief that the second work of grace takes away all carnal nature, he became convicted of his own sinfulness.

After his experience, Kendall says, he had a series of visions. Some gave prophetic insight into his future, showing that he would be used throughout the world one day.

“I had a vision of myself preaching in a large place and that I would be what I would now call an international preacher,” he says. “I didn’t see how that could be fulfilled because Nazarenes are just narrow. ... [But] I knew God was going to use me all over the world.”

Kendall continues: “I also had the deep, deep, deep feeling that I would be involved in ... the last-days ministries, where power would come back to the church and the church would have world revival before the end.”

Kendall’s experience led him to adopt a unique label: “Pentecostal Calvinist.” To the dismay of his father, a

staunch Nazarene, Kendall gave up his church in Palmer and left Trevecca at the end of the term in May 1956. A few years later he married, and in 1967 he and his wife, Louise, became Southern Baptists.

The Word and the Spirit

Though no longer bound to the worldview of the Nazarenes, Kendall found it difficult to discover his niche. For several years he alternately pastored churches and worked as a salesman, first of baby equipment and then of life insurance and vacuum cleaners. Discouraged by the turn his life had taken and feeling a need for a seminary degree, he decided in 1970 to go back to school.

Within three years Kendall had earned three degrees, including an M.A. in church history from the University of Louisville and an . (Master of Divinity) from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Then, on September 1, 1973, he left the United States with his wife and two children, T.R. and Melissa, to fulfill his dream of pursuing a doctorate from a British university.

Kendall thought his stay in England would be a short one. His family was homesick, and he had originally planned to take them back to the states as soon as he received his doctorate in philosophy. But while he was at Oxford, he pastored a Southern Baptist church made up of U.S. airmen and their families, and a man named Terence Aldridge, who had ministered at Westminster Chapel a number of times, visited Kendall's church and heard him preach.

Aldridge went back to the Chapel, which had been without a

minister for three years, and recommended to the deacons that they have Kendall preach for them. After consulting with D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, one of their most prestigious former ministers, the deacons took Aldridge's advice. Kendall was shocked when they asked him to stay for six months.

Only three months into the trial period, the deacons asked Kendall if they could vote on him to be the permanent senior minister. Kendall agreed, but privately he and his wife decided that even if he were offered the lifetime position, they would remain for no more than a year. They had no idea when Kendall began his ministry at Westminster Chapel on February 1, 1977, that they would end up staying 25 years.

A gifted expository preacher, Kendall was well-received at the Chapel, just as his illustrious predecessors G. Campbell Morgan and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones had been. The members of the traditional Congregational church, established in 1841, were accustomed to Kendall's style of verse-by-verse exegesis of the Word, and for the first five years, they had no complaints. But none of them were prepared for the changes their minister began to introduce.

Kendall had a goal in mind, and he was determined to pursue it. "The greatest need of the hour is for the Word and the Spirit to come together," Kendall says. "Westminster Chapel was a Word church. I wanted to make it a Word-Spirit church."

Ultimately, Kendall achieved his goal. But he almost lost his job in the process.

His first step was to invite Arthur Blessitt, the man who carried a cross around the world, to minister at the Chapel.

After Blessitt's initial appearance at a Friday night Bible study in 1982, Kendall invited him back to preach on six consecutive Sunday evenings.

Kendall later wrote about this in his book *The Pursuit of His Glory* (Charisma House): "Arthur's six-week visit to the Chapel was like the earthquake that rolled the stone away on Easter morning. Inviting him was truly the best decision I made during our twenty-five years. It set us free, broke us loose from doing things as they had always been done."

The results were cataclysmic for the reformed congregation. "Blessitt turned the church upside down," Kendall says. "We started giving altar calls, which we had never done at the Chapel. ... Got us out on the streets witnessing. We starting singing choruses."

Kendall admits that having Blessitt was risky. "Had we gone back to business as usual after Arthur was there I would have been forgiven. But I said: 'We can't go back to business as usual. We've got to keep this up.'"

So he gave an altar call for the rest of his time at Westminster Chapel. He kept the nontraditional choruses. And on the first Saturday of June 1982, he began a street-witnessing program.

"For 20 years there was never a Saturday when I wasn't personally out in the streets witnessing," Kendall says. "And that offended a lot of people. They believed it was beneath the minister of Westminster Chapel to do that sort of thing."

Kendall was aware that Blessitt's visit had caused some

members to leave the Chapel. But he was not prepared for the reaction of his deacons, who tried to get the church to vote him out in early 1985. Their plan backfired, however, and church members voted the disgruntled deacons out instead.

A Foundation for Revival

After this painful experience, Kendall almost vowed never to invite another controversial speaker to the Chapel. But before his tenure ended on February 1, 2002, he had hosted some of the most controversial names in contemporary Christendom, including charismatic prophet Paul Cain and South African revivalist Rodney Howard-Browne. Both these men had a huge impact on Kendall and his congregation.

Cain opened Kendall to the prophetic realm, which was a new dimension for the former Nazarene. Cain also helped him realize the need to bring the Word and the Spirit together, and their shared vision led them to hold their first Word and Spirit Conference in London in 1992.

Perhaps most important, Cain publicly endorsed the Toronto Blessing revival movement—which Kendall originally opposed. This paved the way for a radical visitation from God.

That visitation came indirectly through Howard-Browne, who came to the Chapel vestry in December 1994 with his wife, Adonica, at Kendall's request to pray for Kendall's wife. Louise had been suffering for several years from an acute cough that kept her awake four nights out of seven. She was healed when the Howard-Brownes laid hands on her.

But Louise needed more than physical healing. Perhaps as a

result of the cough or of being homesick, Kendall says, she was afflicted by a deep depression. Howard-Browne suggested that she take a three-week vacation in the United States and spend the first week at his camp meeting in Lakeland, Florida.

Louise made the trip, and on the second night of the camp meeting her depression lifted. The testimony she gave of her healing when she returned to England "did more than any other thing to prepare Westminster Chapel for the Toronto Blessing," Kendall says. The people knew how ill she had been, and when they saw how God had touched her in Howard-Browne's meeting, their hearts were opened to the Holy Spirit.

In October 1995 a group of young people from the Chapel, led by the Kendalls' son, T.R., went to hear Howard-Browne preach at a church in Leatherhead, Surrey. At one point in the service, Howard-Browne called all of them to the front for prayer. More than half the 15 youth fell to the floor, some laughing uncontrollably, Kendall says.

The next Sunday evening, on October 22, Kendall asked the young people to give their testimonies at the Chapel and offered to have them pray in the church lounge for anyone who wanted prayer. "It seemed that the entire church came back!" Kendall later wrote. "Call it Toronto Blessing or whatever, but it began in Westminster Chapel that evening."

From that time on, healing services and prayer ministry were held regularly at the Chapel. And after Charles Carrin, an American evangelist whose ministry is characterized by Pentecostal manifestations, had preached there in October 2000, Kendall felt as if he had accomplished his goal: He had helped Westminster become a Spirit church as well as a Word church. He saw the beginnings of what Carrin called "a romance

of reformed theology with renewal power.”

Shortly before Kendall retired from the Chapel in 2002 with the idea of returning to the United States “to be a recluse and to fish 25 hours a day,” God spoke to him and told him, “Your ministry in America will be to charismatics.” Kendall was shocked; he felt much more qualified—and more inclined—to reach evangelicals.

But others have told him that the mandate makes perfect sense in view of the lack of theological depth and knowledge of the Word among charismatics. They say God wants to use him to bridge the gap between the two groups.

Although the Kendalls now live in Key Largo, Florida—known as a vacation spot—the veteran preacher says he’s never been busier. He travels extensively, particularly in England and the United States, and is seeing the fulfillment of the prophetic vision he had as a young man regarding international ministry.

In the last few years he has visited the Middle East three times and shared the gospel with Yasser Arafat, the 74-year-old head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Kendall also continues to write books and host conferences.

After 50 years in ministry, Kendall, who turns 70 next month, holds on to the hope that revival is on the way and that he will be a part of what God does in the last days.

“I believe we are on the brink of a great awakening that will result in signs, wonders and miracles,” he told Charisma. “It won’t be the kind of thing that’s taken by faith or that has a

natural explanation; it will be the lame walking, the blind seeing. That's what is needed more than anything in the world: genuine revival."

Words of the Spirit

Since he wrote his first book in 1978, R.T. Kendall has offered readers a steady flow of insightful Bible teaching.

R.T. Kendall is no fledgling author. From the time he began his first sermon series at Westminster Chapel in 1977, print versions of his teachings have been in demand. He has written more than 40 books since British publisher Hodder & Stoughton approached him about publishing his series on Jonah in 1978.

Alternately represented through the years by various publishers, including Zondervan and Morning Star Publications, the world-renowned theologian now publishes a number of his books through Charisma House. Five titles have been released to date—The Word and the Spirit, The Sensitivity of the Spirit, Total Forgiveness, The Anointing and In Pursuit of His Glory—with three new titles scheduled to be released each year beginning in 2005. The Total Forgiveness Experience and The Thorn in the Flesh will be published later this year.

Kendall is best known for his teaching on forgiveness based on the life of Joseph—which challenges believers to completely forgive those who have wronged them, whatever the nature of the offense. Born out of a personal experience that nearly destroyed him, his book on this subject, Kendall believes, "is by far the one that has the greatest potential to heal the human heart." He regularly receives letters from readers, including many married couples, telling him how reading the

book changed their lives.

Many high-profile leaders have been influenced as well. Oral Roberts said the book helped him “reach the point I’ve always hungered for—to totally forgive everyone who has ever tried to hurt me and destroy my ministry.”

Probably the most famous person to find solace in Kendall’s writings was former televangelist Jim Bakker, who read *God Meant It for Good* while he was in prison for fraud. (Published in England, the book became the basis for *Total Forgiveness*.) In Bakker’s confessional biography, *I Was Wrong*, he said of Kendall’s message: “It was like a wake-up call from God. Along with the Bible, this book ... became my handbook while in prison.”

Bakker said Kendall’s book showed him he must not only forgive those who hurt him but also pray for them “and want the best for them.” Phil Shaw, an Assemblies of God pastor who frequently visited Bakker in prison, said he saw a “phenomenal” change in Bakker after he read the book.

With sales of more than 100,000 since its release in 2002, *Total Forgiveness* is Kendall’s most successful book in the United States. His most recent release, *In Pursuit of His Glory*, was published in 2004 to commemorate his 50th year of ministry. It chronicles his 25 years at Westminster Chapel and highlights his success in converting the traditional Congregational church from what he calls a “Word church” to a “Word-Spirit church.”

Kendall’s emphasis on the marriage of the Word and the Spirit runs like a thread through his other books as well. In *The*

Sensitivity of the Spirit, he writes about our need to adjust to the Holy Spirit rather than expecting Him to adjust to us when we run ahead of His plans for our lives.

In *The Anointing* he describes what can happen to the believer who tries to remain in yesterday's anointing or jump ahead of tomorrow's. Using the biblical examples of Saul, Samuel and David, he shows how the anointing functions in yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's man or woman and why it is important to remain in the ever-changing flow of God's Spirit.

Our ability to do this will help bring the spiritual balance he desires to see in the body of Christ, the author believes. Says Kendall: "It is my belief that tomorrow's anointing will result in the long-awaited combination, which was prophesied by Smith Wigglesworth in 1947, of the Word and the Spirit. I long for that day."

Maureen D. Eha is associate editor of *Charisma* and *SpiritLed Woman*. She has written profiles of several notable Christian leaders including Beth Moore and Anne Graham Lotz. For more about R.T. Kendall, log on to [rtkendall.com](#).