

REINHARD BONNKE: Ripped to Shreds, but Not Defeated

The African witch doctors muttered angrily at the world's biggest revival tent, a modernistic, cream-colored, red-accented, mobile auditorium costing the Reinhard Bonnke Ministries more than \$3 million.

As big as three football fields and seating 34,000, the tent had taken four years to construct. In its two months of use throughout the nations of southern Africa, thousands had been saved, delivered from demons, healed of disease and handicaps, and brought into the joy of the Lord.

A curse, the shamans and voodoo practitioners whispered—a curse on this bastion of light pushing back Africa's centuries of darkness.

We are more powerful than your Jesus, the shamans and voodoo practitioners bragged among the people.

Watch: we will triumph.

Watch.

This white-man's Jesus—which the Republic of South Africa's state religion, the Dutch Reformed Church, uses to keep you in poverty and without a political voice—will be defeated.

Ours is the power.

Watch.

In the early hours of Sunday, May 6, 1984, a freak wind whipped suddenly across the Republic of South Africa's Cape Peninsula. Bonnke's 438-foot-long, 300-foot-wide tent pitched on the Valhalla Park Sports Field outside of Cape Town, was caught in the unexpected tempest.

Ripped by . winds that weathermen were at a loss to explain, the tent's 22 tons of fiber-glass fabric were shredded into 100 large pieces and uncountable tiny remnants littering nearby neighborhoods.

Under the African moon, the tent's 12 seven-story-tall masts stood naked and skeletal against the night sky. Pieces of canopy dangled from the enormous tent's eight miles of steel cable connected to 100 concrete anchors in the ground.

Battered and darkened were \$114,000 worth of interior lights-95 floodlamps which had cost \$1,200 each. Unscathed was the \$4 million worth of 18 6-wheel-drive, all-terrain semi-trucks and trailers used to transport the tent from African country to country.

There was insidious laughter from the darkened sidelines. We have won, the witch doctors taunted.

We have won.

We have won.

Go home, white man, oppressor. You're not welcome here.

Go home.

"We're going to drive the devil right out of Africa from Cape Town to Cairo, in Jesus' precious name," longtime missionary Bonnke had declared at the tent's February 18 dedication at a site between Johannesburg and its sprawling black ghetto, Soweto.

Forty thousand had attended that dedication. Many thousands made decisions for Christ, say officials for his Christ For All Nations.

The shamans and voodoo practitioners had watched silently, jealously. Now-as word spread of the tent's destruction, as rumors grew of the voodoo curse on the tent, as Christian

leaders learned of the witch doctors' growing claims that they had ordered the winds out of the heavens—"We will carry on," announced Bonnke. "We walk on miracles."

"But how?" asked members of the local Cape Town crusade committee.

They had just wrapped up nine months of preparations for the meetings scheduled from May 19 through June 6—the beginning of the harsh South African winter.

How could there be any crusade? It would be too cold to hold it outside and the tent had taken four years to construct. No other tent like it existed. No miracle could help—save a divine restoration of the torn fabric.

How could they go on?

Perhaps former street corner evangelist Bonnke's dreams had been too big.

Maybe he had been unwise, naive—too bold in his shouted defiance of the powers of darkness gripping much of rural Africa.

Perhaps it was time to drop back, ponder strategy and, for now, just cancel the crusade—which could not possibly be held outdoors in the cold.

The devil had won, it seemed.

Perhaps it was time for this 42-year-old missionary from West Germany to go home, or maybe return to his old ministry of playing an accordion on the streets of large cities in south-central Africa?

The son of a Pentecostal pastor from West Germany, Bonnke had felt the call to mission work in Africa at age 10—one year after he accepted Jesus as his Lord. As a youth, public declarations of missionary ambitions brought knowing smiles

from adults and mocking from his peers, but little Reinhard felt he'd heard the Lord's call.

In his teenage years, the urge toward Africa grew stronger. He went to college to study for the ministry—all the time telling professors that he was going to evangelize Africa.

Then, diploma in hand, 25-year-old newlywed Bonnke had finally arrived in Africa in 1967 with support of \$110 a month. He and his new wife, Anni, went first to the tiny mountain kingdom of Lesotho shortly after it received independence from Great Britain.

Years of subtle and not-too-subtle ridicule for his lifelong desire to preach in Africa had humbled him, as had years of asking the Lord “when?”—when would he be permitted to finally go to the Dark Continent?

He was, ingrained with a deep determination not to boast of his great ambitions for the evangelism of Africa, nor to bask in the praise of those who approved of his dream. Bonnke was and still is a self-effacing man who unexpectedly tells listeners of his desire to become “truly led” by the Holy Spirit—that is, led in all things, not just a few.

Such talk can be baffling, considering just what the Lord has allowed Bonnke to do in the last five years. But there were no enormous successes in the first years of his African ministry.

During early years, Bonnke had no church nor pulpit. His only gospel tool was an accordion which he played to attract African crowds at city bus stops and street corners. Once a “congregation” gathered, he preached to them.

“There were seven happy years where God blessed everything on a small scale,” remembers Bonnke. But then he became restless, envisioning setting all of Africa aflame for Jesus Christ.

How could he do it? In 1974, as Bonnke walked along a city

street one day with his accordion, praying silently, "Power flooded my whole being," he recalls. "It was as if I heard a voice clearly say, 'Do you want me to give you \$1 million?'"

Bonnke remembers the brief moment in which he fantasized evangelizing the whole African continent with what he considered then to be a vast sum. Tears suddenly filled his eyes and he raised his arms to the Lord.

"Not \$1 million," he responded. "Give me one million souls. One million souls less in hell and one million more in heaven. That shall be the purpose of my life."

Overnight his ministry began to grow. His monthly support increased. He began starting small churches and assisting them as they built buildings. He helped start a Bible college and establish a printing house that soon was putting out a monthly Christian newspaper with circulation larger than any other secular or religious publication in the small country.

"The work grew and grew," Bonnke remembers, "until one day the Lord said, 'I want you to move into the whole of Africa.'"

He and Anni and their three young children felt guided by the Lord in 1977 to move to Johannesburg, South Africa. There they waited.

"How am I to tackle the whole of Africa?" Bonnke asked the Lord.

This time there was no answer.

The Lord would not respond for two years—not until 1979. While Bonnke waited, he continued preaching, and even started up a radio ministry, broadcasting the gospel throughout Africa.

Then, while on a street-preaching trip in Gaborone, the capitol of Botswana, the Lord finally spoke to him about how he was to reach all of Africa.

"God seems to get hold of me on the streets," quips Bonnke.

The Lord directed Bonnke's attention to the National Stadium and instructed him to rent the stadium and the local hall. Bonnke balked, then said, "Lord, I always wanted to preach in a stadium, but when I do people never turn out. But if you say so, I will. It is finished. I will."

A local church—which numbered 40 members—disbelieved his claims of divine guidance. When he asked for their cooperation, he was asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Mr. Nobody," he answered frankly. "But God spoke to me and told me to rent the largest hall in town and then the National Stadium."

The small church's members and pastor were unimpressed—as were believers in other denominations in the city. So Bonnke continued alone, realizing he would have to depend solely on the Lord. "I'll do the preaching and You bring in the people," he prayed. "Just comfort my worried heart and let the first meeting be filled."

When no more than 100 attended that first night in the 800-seat town hall, "I was naturally disappointed," he remembers. "But after 10 minutes of preaching, a 'volcano' exploded and it has never stopped. Without my preaching upon divine healing, people jumped up from their seats shouting, 'I've been healed! I'm healed!'"

As Bonnke lay hands on them, row after row fell to the floor. "I knew then why the Lord sent only 100. We needed the floor space."

Within days the town hall was packed to capacity with people sitting two to a chair. Bonnke knew that it was time to move to the National Stadium. Soon he was preaching to 10,000 people.

"Into my life the growth came like a mighty bang. It went from minimum to maximum," says Bonnke. Only weeks before, he admits, "to me 50 strangers in a meeting meant revival."

By the seventh night of meetings in the National Stadium, attendance had reached 40,000.

In the last five years, Bonnke's ministry has continued to see enormous crowds, miracles and power. During a recent crusade in Livingston, Zambia, 11,600 registered decisions for Christ.

But more is coming, says Bonnke. The bulk of revival—"raising the spiritual dead en masse"—is soon to spread worldwide, he says.

It will come only through humility, fasting and prayerful intercession, he says.

The pronoun "I" rarely surfaces as he talks about his ministry—instead it's "we." He commends his co-workers' teamwork and says that although God has placed him at the helm of the ministry, "much more glory flows to the Lord when a ministry is not concentrated on one man." Thus, his 90-member staff has a high profile in crusades—in leading singing, in teaching, in praying with those who come to the altar and with counseling new converts.

Fasting and intercessory prayer are important parts of the ministry, says Bonnke. Without his practicing both, the ministry would not see the Lord obliterating the principalities and powers arrayed against them in African crusades. "This battle can only be won on our knees and fasting," says Bonnke. "No one can rely on mental resources."

In God nothing decreases, only increases, provided you keep on His trail. I want to see whole countries filled with the glory of God." However, he notes what he sees as a vital need to remain humble amid what appears to be enormous success.

"The moment a person accepts the praises of men, the decline begins. Although you can't stop people from viewing you in a heroic way, you must never accept it in your heart."

Despite the lack of vision in local congregations before his first crusade, Bonnke says there is a vital necessity of working with existing congregations in cities where crusades are to be held.

Before each crusade, the preparation team arrives in the city and forms a committee from local church members who, in turn, furnish potential counselors. Individuals are trained and tested before official registration as counselors.

At the crusade's conclusion, converts are assigned to the local churches.

"We have only the nets, so we must use other people's boats," is one of Bonnke's frequent explanations. The boat principle has exceeded its bounds at times. One 10-day crusade in 1977 resulted in the formation of 20 new churches.

However, Bonnke repeats that he prefers to work with existing churches rather than becoming involved in church planting. He is usually received better in charismatic and Pentecostal churches, he says.

"We don't exclude any church group," he says. "Wherever we go, the door is open. I preach the gospel without compromise. And I don't apologize for what God has written in His Word. I proclaim it."

"You cannot divide people by the color of their skins at the foot of the cross. Jesus came to do the opposite." Thus, he ignores race when working with fellow Christians or inviting them to participate in the ministry. "We share the platform as a team—black, brown and white—and people sense we respect and love each other."

Such openness is rare in the racially segregated Republic of South Africa, where Bonnke does a great deal of his ministry. There, whites govern but are in an extreme minority. Some extremists within the state church, the Dutch Reformed faith, teach that blacks are inferior and cursed by God to be whites' servants.

Even the whites are divided in South Africa—between English-speakers descended from British settlers and Afrikaans-speakers largely descended from Dutch immigrants. The society is further separated by a large East Indian population, which is also denied full citizenship and rights by the whites. The blacks are divided by centuries-old tribal differences and cultures.

In any crusade, Bonnke may encounter the need for up to four translators turning his sermon into listeners' native tongues.

Centuries-old voodoo and witchcraft also offer challenges unique to Africa. Bonnke scoffs at the idea that Africans are atheists by nature. Gods and idols, he contends, were a way of life long before Christianity arrived on the continent. But instead of being a stumbling block, such openness to supernatural power has been an open door for the Bonnke team.

Signs and wonders abound in Bonnke's ministry, but he emphasizes that the gospel of salvation remains first and foremost in his messages. Miracles are just God's way of advertising in a continent infested with the occult, witchcraft and fear of bewitchment, he says.

It is not uncommon for 40-50 demon-possessed people to surface in a single service, he says. He sees this as a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. "When the Holy Spirit sweeps in, evil spirits come out," he says. "And to the African people, it is the miracle of miracles to see such individuals freed by the Holy Spirit."

He says he has not been called to be the teacher of all, but

he does confess his desire to help any evangelists who want to learn from his successes. He says the Lord clearly laid it on his heart to start a mobile school of evangelism for on-the-spot training. In each country where the team conducts a crusade, approximately 50 young men with potential will be taught and disciplined, then enlisted in the ministry during the crusade. It is hoped that such quick apprenticeships will help develop longings in the young leaders' hearts to see the lost saved.

He admonishes American Christians to put aside self-edification and reach out to win others to Jesus. In his estimation, over-fed and under-worked Christians do not create a healthy balance.

Although he preaches with boldness, he admits a shyness when it comes to raising money.

"Nobody can say I came to him and pled for money," he says. "I state the case and give it to God."

Such a low-key effort was effective as he raised \$5 million for his tent.

For example, when the fabric for the tent was first ordered, he needed \$750,000, but had only \$350,000. After signing the contract, he received a telephone call demanding another \$150,000 within two weeks or the deal would be cancelled.

"I thought this was unfair and went to prayer," he remembers. "I was praying, praying, praying. As the days ticked by, I prayed louder. Faith doesn't panic, but your own faith walks on catastrophes. Every morning I said louder, 'Lord, Lord, Lorrerrrrrrd.'"

Two days before the deadline, the telephone rang while the Bonnke family was seated around the breakfast table. When Bonnke answered the phone, a man said, "I can't sleep at night." When asked why, the man replied, "The last three to

four nights, I close my eyes and see your face. I hear a voice saying, 'Pastor Bonnke urgently needs money.'"

Bonnke replied, "God knows that is so."

When the man began pressing him for the exact amount needed, Bonnke hesitated in specifying an amount, but at the caller's insistence finally told him, "\$150,000." The caller promised that amount would be transferred to the ministry's account that very day.

And it was.

As the tent neared completion, Bonnke needed 18 specially-built, 6-wheel-drive trucks to transport it—enormous trucks that would not get stuck in mud roads and which could take off cross-country when there were no roads.

The Lord provided the trucks through means that can only be called miraculous.

Such vehicles are not manufactured in Africa. Their cost was estimated at \$4 million. They couldn't be ordered without Bonnke showing that he could pay for them.

Unknown to Bonnke, Libyan revolutionary dictator Colonel Moammar Khadafy felt that he needed such a fleet—\$4 million worth of top-of-the-line Magirus Dentz all-terrain semi-trucks and trailers.

Khadafy, who has supported terrorism and subversion throughout Africa, as well as in North Ireland, Central America and the Middle East, is disliked by most Western countries. Libya has in recent years been hit with trade embargoes and military equipment bans as democratic governments have attempted to contain his violent influences.

So he has had to resort to intrigue, under-the-table deals and third-party purchasing agents to get much of what he needs—such as a fleet of specially-designed trucks from West

Germany.

This time, however, it was Khadafy who was subverted. His deal fell apart and the West German government learned that it was he who had ordered the fleet. The manufacturer put the trucks on the market at less than half price: \$1.5 million.

Bonnke raised the money.

Suddenly he had the special transportation necessary to take his revival tent across Africa.

Then on May 6, the tent was destroyed and it appeared that the forces of evil had overcome this puny agent of the Lord of the Universe.

Bonnke suddenly had no tent.

It seemed that \$5 million had been wasted on folly. Voodoo practitioners were publicly detailing how they had called upon evil spirits to ravage the tent and disrupt the Christian crusades.

Then the word of the Lord spoke comforting words through a crusade organizing committee member:

“My glory shall be a canopy that covers the people and the praises of my people shall be the pillars.”

My glory.

My glory shall be a canopy.

No tent would be necessary.

My glory shall be a canopy ... and the praises of my people shall be the pillars.

Filled with sudden enthusiasm, the local organizers said they would hold the crusade amid the debris of the great tent—using the intact chairs and platform and sound system and what

lighting that had survived.

And the local churches would enter into praise and intercession in order to bring about the prophecy.

But there remained serious worries. The scheduled dates of the crusade, May 19-June 6, are quite cold—and unsuited to an outdoor crusade.

Thus, the Lord's promised, supernatural canopy would be vital.

Taking their place as the prophesied "pillars," thousands of Christians throughout Africa began to pray, praise and intercede for fair weather and high temperatures.

Doubt hit when a winter storm hit the week before the crusade, uprooting trees and destroying homes. But amid the rain and cold, the praise and intercession continued.

The rain stopped just before the opening afternoon service, Saturday, May 19. With the warming sun breaking through, attendance hit 20,000.

By the scheduled end of the meetings, 50,000 were gathering for the morning and evening praise, worship, healing and preaching. The crusade was extended an additional three days. Over 70,000 came to the final night's services..

More than 29,000 registered decisions for Christ in the meetings.

"Had the tent remained intact," observes Bonnke, "it would have been too small to accommodate all those people."

David du Plessis, often called "Mr. Pentecost," is a native South African. He attended the crusade.

"There were thousands upon thousands of healings," he reports. "The miracles did not take place in a healing line, but as Bonnke preached, people were touched by the power of the Holy

Spirit. They were set free and healed.

“It was the greatest revival that has taken place in the history of Cape Town.”

Each night, criminals and gang members pledged their hearts to Jesus, their eyes filled with tears. Weapons of crime and violence became exhibits of deliverance, according to local newspaper reports.

Other reports pictured the preaching platform on Tuesday, May 29, as resembling a hospital workshop where wheelchairs are left for repairs. The power of God was released and men and women left their wheelchairs, while others handed over their crutches and began to dance with joy.

Will the tent be rebuilt?

Yes, says Bonnke, who says it is still needed for the Africa-wide crusades underway. Fortunately, it was insured.

Why did the Lord permit it to be so ravaged by what seemed to be nothing but a hell-sent wind?

To glorify God, says Bonnke. To show who really has victory, even in the face of seeming defeat.

The enormous crowds and good weather were undeniable testimony of who had won the struggle. There were reports that the witchdoctors were praying for more bad weather.

But this time, the church was humbled and praying.

And it was no battle at all.

Why did the Lord permit the tent to be destroyed?

To call His people to prayer and intercession, says Bonnke. Too often we complacently take God's mercies for granted. To be truly overcomers, we must never forget Who is in charge and who is our Protector and Provider.

The destruction of the tent gave Christians an opportunity to see how trust belongs solely in the Lord, not in man-made structures. He offered sufficient protection from the winter's storms—far better than any flimsy tent.

“My glory shall be a canopy that covers the people and the praises of my people shall be the pillars,” the Lord promised.

And it was so.

And there was victory.

Amid the ruins.