

# God Can Use Nobodies

Todd Bentley doesn't claim to be special. But heads turn when people realize that this 26-year-old Canadian—who nearly died of a drug overdose a few years ago—will lead 12 evangelistic crusades this year.

Nearly giddy with anticipation, he'd barrel down the wooden stairs into his basement apartment, his work boots clomping loudly as he'd skip two and three steps at a time. Another workday over. Another immersion in prayer about to begin.

Muddled from an afternoon of cleaning gutters, he'd flip on a light switch and immediately lay on the carpeted floor, his arms reaching upward as he called out in prayer, inviting the presence of the Holy Spirit. He wouldn't take time to shower or to eat.

Instead, an 18-year-old Todd Bentley, so hungry for an encounter with God, would sometimes lay throughout the night, praying and reading his Bible. He'd read the Gospels, from Matthew to John, in one sitting.

For three months, he prayed and read Scripture four to 12 hours a day. Today, he calls this his "soaking season." And so began a remarkable transformation of a drug addict—who at age 17 lay in the back of an ambulance, clinging to life after his third overdose in two years—and thief, who once stole 24 cars in one night.

"Honestly, I never thought he'd live past his teens," says David Bentley, Todd's father.

Now, at 26, Todd Bentley—the impish-looking man with the

spiked, bleached-blond hair and gold-looped earrings—is an evangelist from Canada who travels the world healing the deaf, blind and lame as he shares the hope and promises of Jesus. At soccer stadiums packed with as many as 100,000 people in Ecuador, India and Mexico earlier this year, the crippled climbed out of wheelchairs and walked.

One woman, who hadn't walked in 14 years and was near death, bolted from the wheelbarrow she was brought in and ran across the platform. Nineteen people had their hearing restored at one meeting. Blind eyes were opened. Withered legs were healed.

For an upcoming outreach in Africa, Bentley told pastors they needed to have tents set up for the dead.

"It blows my mind," says Art Beckwith, a longtime pastor in Pharr, Texas, who has accompanied Bentley on crusades in Mexico. "He's 26 years old. I'm 61 years old, and he has a lot more revelation than I do.

"I've seen miracles. My wife was healed from a brain tumor. But I've never seen miracles to this magnitude. I believe God is working to restore a healing revival."

### **Addicted to His Presence**

It's been a rapid ascent from drug addict to evangelist. Dramatically saved at 17 by the testimony of a converted drug addict, Bentley first shared his conversion story at a businessmen's luncheon a month after becoming a Christian.

Fridays were spent in the streets of Vancouver, British Columbia, sharing his life-changing experience with drug addicts and seeing them saved as he'd prophesied over them, telling them about their pasts. From the start, he was drawn to preaching.

"As I walked, I'd talk to the trees like they were a congregation," Bentley says. "I'd preach. I felt a calling from God to go into the ministry from the start. But I'd say: 'Oh, that's ego. That's me.' Who was I? A drug addict."

Without the traditional trappings—a degree and training from theological school or a pastoral apprenticeship—Bentley will do 12 international crusades this year. Eight years ago, he lay unconscious in an emergency room after ingesting a bag of hallucinogenic mushrooms and taking amphetamines as a chaser. Doctors told him after pumping his stomach he was minutes from death.

Four years ago, he was working in a lumber mill, pulling timber off the green chain. He dropped out of school in the eighth grade when he was sentenced to 14 months in jail for assault.

Today, Bentley, with his ministry in just its fourth year, preaches 30 to 50 times a month, speaking in stadiums filled with as many as 100,000 people and in Bible-study groups of a few hundred. This fall, he'll hold five-day crusades in Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda and South Africa, healing the sick where ever he goes. His ministry, Fresh Fire Ministries, sells 10,000 to 30,000 teaching tapes a month.

Even Bentley can't believe how fast the ministry has grown. At

first, his meetings drew only small turnouts. But as the miracles drew media attention from newspapers and Christian television, the word spread about this young evangelist.

“I know Todd is only 26, but I believe he’s part of a new breed, a forerunner,” says Jill Austin, a longtime evangelist who occasionally teams with Bentley for conferences. “I believe he’s a prophetic signpost. When people see him, they go, ‘If he can do it, I can do it.’ Todd’s heart is to equip and to train.”

That’s not a slick marketing motto Bentley is trying to pass on. It’s not an image grabber to boost sales or fill conferences. Without question, Bentley shares the spotlight.

He doesn’t see his outreach team as rivals. On his staff of 18, many of them, including his father, share in what they call “transferable anointing.”

“I want what Todd has,” says his father David, a former alcoholic who was saved last year through his son’s ministry.

“I see the healings, and I want that. I prayed for a lady who was in a wheelchair, and she walked. I believe the word of Jesus, and the miracles help spread that word.”

Also part of this healing team is Jim Drown, who had a painful tumor on his left leg disappear after prayer at one of Todd Bentley’s crusades. For hours, Drown and Bentley prayed for the sick as long lines of people waited for a healing touch at crusades in South America.

Drown, a self-made millionaire whose paint contracting businesses are some of the largest in Atlanta, has flown to South America to put on crusades without Bentley, healing the sick and sharing the salvation message. This “book of Acts experience,” as Drown calls it, is spreading.

“All my life I had wanted to be part of a New Testament church,” Drown says. “I’ve been a Christian for 30 years, but I had given up on churches. It was all words. What Todd has taught me more than anything is the need for a hunger to seek God.”

Bentley instills what Drown calls a “righteous jealousy.”

“This is a healing revival,” Drown says. “If you want it, here it is. I’m a living testament to that.”

Drown remembers praying for a man whose legs were like pencils, shriveled by polio. He needed help just to come forward for prayer. Drown says when he laid his hands on the man “he grew legs.”

“All of a sudden he had control over his legs,” Drown says. “He could walk. There was absolutely no wobble. His baggy pants filled out. It was absolutely amazing.”

Drown says hundreds of people became Christians at that service.

“Todd’s heart is to give it away,” Austin says. “He wants you to know you can pray for the sick. You can bring salvation. You can bring deliverance. He’s not jealously guarding his

gift. He's wanting to give it away. I believe God is going to raise up many men and many women of many ages and will move in signs and wonders."

### **'Come, Holy Spirit'**

It was midnight. A long line of people with upraised hands awaited Bentley's touch of prayer at a five-day conference in Abbotsford, British Columbia. Sweat poured from Bentley's brow. There was an electric anticipation as about 1,200 people pressed into prayer, waiting on the Holy Spirit.

For the previous three hours, Bentley had preached about being in God's presence. Nonstop he paced back and forth on the platform, continually switching the microphone from hand to hand, gesturing the free arm as he spoke.

His words came in a rapid-fire pace, rising and falling in volume. He occasionally referred to his notes, often reciting long passages of Scripture. There was no sign of him slowing down.

"I don't know where he gets his energy," says Shonnah Bentley, Todd's wife. "But he seems to be able to juggle it all. We're just trying to be faithful."

Fresh Fire Ministries had rented a deserted grocery store for a five-day conference about prophecy. Pastors, church leaders and people who had been healed at Bentley's meetings earlier were all part of the conference that went past midnight each night. Because of the miracles and Bentley's prophetic gift, the ministry is quickly becoming known worldwide.

Yet the success has made Bentley the object of ridicule by some, while others pursue him as they would a celebrity, with both groups appearing to have little or no effect on Bentley. He remains, as his pastor says, “a humble man not impressed with himself.” The criticism is based more on style than content.

“Everyone expects an evangelist to look like Billy Graham,” says Ken Greter, Bentley’s pastor in Abbotsford. “You know, to see a guy dressed the way he is you might wonder about him. But that’s his generation.”

Bentley certainly doesn’t come in the typical evangelist package. Rather than suits, he’ll wear a blue, long-sleeved shirt and black vest and black jeans, topped with yellow-tinted sun glasses and hoop earrings.

“What I find amazing about Todd is his humility,” says Greter, pastor of Abbotsford City Fellowship, a nondenominational church. “He doesn’t have a rebellious bone in his body. You want him to wear a tie, fine. He’ll wear a tie. He submits to that.”

Bentley lives in a modest, three-bedroom home in Abbotsford with his wife and three children, ages 5, 3 and 1. He drives a 3-year-old van, defers to an advisory board and meets at least once a month with Greter, staying grounded.

“It’s not about money,” Greter says. “It’s not about getting rich. It’s about sharing something that has changed his life. He is passionate about salvation. That is where Todd’s heart is.”

“People think I’m a little too radical,” Bentley says. “They think I should be more conservative. They don’t understand why I don’t come in a more acceptable package. Some people don’t like my personality. They think I’m too loud.”

The criticism is of his style. A Midwest Lutheran minister who invited Bentley to his church was put off by Bentley’s delivery and gave him a cold shoulder at his home after a service. But most places where Bentley talks—whether they’re Catholic, Episcopalian or Pentecostal—ask him back. He’s spreading a message of healing.

“In the ’40s and ’50s, God released His sovereign move of signs and wonders,” Austin says. “I believe Todd is a forerunner to that. He’s telling everyone we’re all in this together. There’s going to be a whole army. It’s not going to be just one person.”

## **Busted by the Bible**

Bentley’s beginning in the ministry started with a loud knock at the backdoor of his run-down home on the British Columbia coast. As a 17-year-old addict, Bentley thought it was a drug bust. But instead of the police, in burst a huge bearded man with a white Bible under his arm. The man, a former addict and a friend of Bentley’s drug dealer, charged right up to Bentley.

“And this guy begins to give me the fieriest hell-and-damnation sermon you’ve ever heard,” Bentley says. “Finally, I shout back at him: ‘Enough! I don’t want to hear any more!’”

The burly man continued.

"I don't want to hear any more of this," Bentley screamed. There was silence. And the white Bible plopped into Bentley's lap.

"Close your eyes, open the Bible and put your finger under a word and read it," the man instructed.

Both curious and anxious to get rid of this nuisance, Bentley did what he was told. Opening his eyes, Bentley looked at the words under his finger and read, "Listen now."

Bentley froze.

"The fear of God came over me," Bentley says. "It spoke to something inside of me, and I was born the spot."

His desire for drugs and alcohol left immediately. He never went through withdrawal. A month later, someone handed him Benny Hinn's book Good Morning Holy Spirit.

"I didn't know anything about Benny," Bentley says. "I said I wanted to know the Holy Spirit just like what Benny talked about in his book.

"I said if Benny spent eight hours, I was going to spend 12. At first, it was an immature competition. I didn't know who Benny was. I just said I want this kind of anointing. I said, 'Come, Holy Spirit.'"

What followed was a three-month period during which Bentley

spent four to 12 hours a day in prayer and Bible reading. He would cry out for the Holy Spirit to come.

“And the Holy Spirit fell on me,” he says. “There’d be hours of trembling, hours of weeping. There was an electrical presence in my room.”

Sharing a house with a Christian friend and living in the basement, Bentley paid \$100 a month for rent. He’d work two days a week. The rest of the time he spent seeking God. During this time, Bentley had remarkable spiritual encounters.

“That was almost like his Bible school,” Greter says. “I call it the ‘School of the Holy Spirit’ for his life.”

“Jesus said those who diligently seek Him will find Him,” Bentley says. “I felt the Holy Spirit say: ‘You want this? Here I am.’ I don’t say this to boast, but I was hungry.”

That hunger was born out of a childhood filled with loneliness. The future wasn’t always so bright.

Bentley, an only child, was born in 1976 near Vancouver, British Columbia, where he lived three years with his parents before they divorced. His mother, totally deaf by the time Bentley was 5, raised her son alone, and his father dropped out of their lives.

By the time Bentley was 11, he was sneaking rum from his mother’s cabinets, drinking until he passed out. By the time he was 14, he was behind bars, arrested for assault. After getting out of jail, he bounced from foster home to foster

home, eventually landing in the streets.

By the time he was 17, he was in an ambulance, overdosed on drugs for the third time. Father and son reunited when Bentley moved to Vancouver Island in his teens, but the influence led only to more drugs and alcohol.

What's amazing about Bentley is not so much what he's become—an evangelist. But what he's not—dead.

Now wherever he goes, the former drug addict shares the same message.

"This is for you," Bentley tells listeners about his life-changing experience. "It is for everyone who presses in."

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Gail Wood is a veteran journalist whose stories have appeared in Charisma. He lives in Olympia, Washington.

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### A Fresh Fire From Canada

**Hundreds of people say they have been healed in meetings where Todd Bentley has preached.**

Each day Bonnie Gerig lived in pain. The \$1,200 she spent a year on medication helped control the muscle and joint aches that forced her to quit her job, but it didn't eliminate them. There is no cure for fibromyalgia.

On the evening her family went to church to hear Todd Bentley

speak, Gerig decided to stay home because her pain was too intense. But as her family got into the car to go to the meeting in Lebanon, Oregon, a determined Gerig said: "I'm going. I'm not staying home."

It was the decision that changed her life.

Before preaching, Bentley asked for all of the people in the audience to stand who had arthritis pain. Gerig was one of 30 who stood. Then Bentley prayed.

"Honestly, I felt as he prayed something bent me over completely in half," Gerig says. "Then all of a sudden the pain was gone. It was awesome."

Gerig's voice broke as she retold her story. But then it was back, strong and clear.

"I feel like I have my life back," Gerig says. "I know God touched me. I know I've been healed. Todd was just the instrument. I'm thankful."

After seeing her doctor several times a month, a couple of months passed before she saw him again. He told her the illness was only in remission. Gerig didn't buy the coincidence spin.

Miracles such as Gerig's have been common in Bentley's 4-year-old ministry. Besides the healings, Bentley is also sensitive to the move of the Holy Spirit in a prophetic way.

At any point in his services, he'll describe in detail a person, telling his or her age, ailment and circumstances surrounding the illness. And then he'll ask that person to come forward for prayer.

He did that for Rhonda Pitts, mother of a 16-year-old who had injured her spinal cord in a car accident. Five surgeries couldn't take away Tiffany Espinoza's chronic pain. At a service in Amarillo, Texas, Bentley asked for a teenage girl whose back had been injured in a car wreck to come forward to receive a healing.

A woman came forward, but Bentley said she wasn't the one. Another woman came forward. Again Bentley said she wasn't the one.

Then Bentley said the girl was home, but her parents were there at the service. "I turned to my husband and said, 'That's Tiffany,'" Pitts says. "We didn't think Todd had been talking about her because she wasn't there."

Pitts and her husband went forward to receive prayer for their daughter. They called her after the service. "She said she felt this fire ripping up and down her body," Pitts says. "She said she was instantly healed."

At a conference in Abbotsford, British Columbia, he asked for a woman to come forward for prayer who had a pelvis injury caused by a difficult childbirth that had occurred 15 years before. He said the woman's daughter, now a teenager, was struggling with injuries suffered in a car accident. A woman with those problems came forward for prayer.

“Todd is creating a holy hunger,” Pitts says. “He says if God did it for him, He’ll do it for you. I’ll tell you I am changed. I am on fire. I know what I’ve got, and I know how to spread it.”