

Living a Life
of *fire*

reinhard
bonnke

an autobiograph\

LIVING A LIFE OF FIRE
Autobiography

Reinhard Bonnke
English

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ISBN 978-1-933106-81-6

Edition 2, Printing 2

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Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center [pg. 147]

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Orlando, Florida 32859
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Printed in Singapore
by PH Productions Pte Ltd

Contents

| | | |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-----|
| | Dedication | 7 |
| Part 1 | A divine appointment | 9 |
| | Chapter 1 | 11 |
| | Chapter 2 | 15 |
| | Chapter 3 | 17 |
| | Chapter 4 | 23 |
| Part 2 | Out of Germany | 27 |
| | Chapter 5 | 29 |
| | Chapter 6 | 45 |
| | Chapter 7 | 55 |
| | Chapter 8 | 59 |
| | Chapter 9 | 63 |
| | Chapter 10 | 83 |
| Part 3 | School of the Spirit | 99 |
| | Chapter 11 | 101 |
| | Chapter 12 | 119 |
| | Chapter 13 | 135 |
| | Chapter 14 | 151 |
| | Chapter 15 | 171 |
| | Chapter 16 | 181 |
| Part 4 | Preparation years | 195 |
| | Chapter 17 | 197 |
| | Chapter 18 | 217 |
| | Chapter 19 | 235 |
| | Chapter 20 | 251 |
| | Chapter 21 | 261 |
| | Chapter 22 | 285 |

| | | |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Part 5 | The world's largest tent | 305 |
| | Chapter 23 | 307 |
| | Chapter 24 | 325 |
| | Chapter 25 | 345 |
| | Chapter 26 | 365 |
| | Chapter 27 | 383 |
| Part 6 | The combine harvester | 405 |
| | Chapter 28 | 407 |
| | Chapter 29 | 427 |
| | Chapter 30 | 449 |
| | Chapter 31 | 461 |
| | Chapter 32 | 481 |
| | Chapter 33 | 499 |
| | Chapter 34 | 515 |
| Part 7 | The supernatural harvest | 531 |
| | Chapter 35 | 533 |
| | Chapter 36 | 547 |
| | Chapter 37 | 571 |
| | Chapter 38 | 587 |
| | Chapter 39 | 613 |
| Part 8 | New horizons | 621 |
| | Chapter 40 | 623 |
| | Endnotes | 631 |
| | Christ for all Nations board members | 643 |

Dedication

For Hermann and Meta Bonnke,
true parents in life, and in the Lord.

And for Luis (Ludwig) Graf,
who obediently carried the gospel with the living fire
of the Holy Spirit to East Prussia,
and set the pattern for me to follow.

Part 1

A DIVINE APPOINTMENT

*Which thread should I choose, Lord? There are so many.
They hang before my eyes like strands of silk in a doorway.
Each promising that it will weave the finest tapestry of my life.
But it is not my tapestry. It is not my life.
So again I ask, which thread do I choose?
Which strand will pass through the very eye of the needle?*

Chapter 1

I SIT QUIETLY with an explosion building inside of me. I lean forward to the edge of my seat. My hands explore the cover of my preaching Bible as my foot taps a nervous dance on the platform. Every molecule of my body anticipates what is about to happen. I think you would feel the same if you were in my shoes.

It is a tropical night in Northern Nigeria. We are in the heart of Africa. The air is warm and moist and full of sound. A local gospel group performs a melody of praise accompanied by a snakeskin drum. A chorus of birds, frogs and insects joins them from the surrounding trees. The vast crowd standing in front of me radiates heat and expectancy. Nearly 700,000 tribesmen have walked for many miles to this site. Many of them are Muslims. Their upturned faces draw me like a moth to a flame. 2,400,000 will attend in five nights of preaching. More than 1.4 million will accept Jesus as Savior at the invitations. Follow-up teams will disciple each one.

Anticipation makes my heart race. What about yours? As you begin to read my story, I wonder, are you like me? Does the prospect of seeing the Great Commission of Christ fulfilled drive you day and night? If not, then I pray that the story of my life will light a fire in you. A fire that will change everything. A holy fire that will convince you that nothing is impossible with God.

I see that some in the crowd tonight are crippled. Some lie sick on pallets. Others lean on crutches. Not all will be healed, but some of these crippled will walk. I must tell you, when they walk, I will dance with them across this platform! Wouldn't you? Some are blind, and some of those blind will see. I cannot explain why, but in Muslim areas I see more blind eyes open. I wish everyone could be with me to see it. Chronic pains leave bodies, cancerous growths disappear. These are but a few of the signs that follow the preaching of the good news.

I feel a low vibration. It is almost audible. Generators are purring inside their insulated containers nearby, feeding kilowatts of electricity to our thirsty sound towers and stage lights. We have imported our own power grid to this remote region. We are far beyond the reach of Marriott, Hyatt, Hilton or even Motel 6. Our team has installed a small village of trailer houses to shelter us for the duration. Cell phones are worthless. Satellites keep us connected. Few have even heard of this place. Yet more than a half-million are here tonight!

My throat constricts at the realization of it. Hot tears seek the corners of my eyes. This is joy beyond any I have known.

I smile and tilt my head up, looking into a sky of ancient constellations. I feel the Creator of the Universe smiling down on this corner of the world tonight. I breathe deeply. The smoke of cooking fires paints the breeze and brings me back to earth. I am a thousand miles from anywhere normal, and this is where I feel most at home. We have found another forgotten state where few have heard the way of salvation. I am Reinhard Bonnke, an evangelist. Welcome to my destiny.

Tonight, events will unfold like a well-rehearsed dream. I will be introduced. My eyes will sweep the crowd knowing that we have all come for the same Jesus. My heart will open to the Holy Spirit and in my mind an image will appear. I call it “the shape of the gospel.” It is an outline that I will fill with an explosion of words that pour from my heart without rehearsal.

I must now make a confession. This has become an addiction for me. But it is an addiction I’d gladly share with you. Leading sinners to salvation en masse – or one by one – it is all the same. I eat it, I sleep it, I dream it, I speak it, I write it, I pray it, I weep it, I laugh it. It is my wish to die preaching this gospel. I am like a man starving until I can stand again with a microphone in my hand, looking across a sea of faces, shouting the words of His love into the darkness.

It is huge now. The results are huge. I am on my way to seeing 100 million respond to the gospel. More than 52 million have registered decisions since the year 2000. Without the decades of experience that brought my team to this

harvest, we would be overwhelmed by these numbers. But we are not slowing down, we are erecting more platforms like this one in places you've never heard of. After reading my story I hope and pray that you will join me on each of those future platforms, sharing my excitement. If you are unable to be there in person, then I hope you will be there in prayer, in faith, in spirit.

In truth, I have done nothing alone. God has called me and has been my pilot. The Holy Spirit has been my comforter, my guide, and my power source. As you will read in these pages, He brought to me the perfect wife. He gave us our beautiful children and extended family. And He has provided a team that has grown with me through decades of working together. Beyond that, He has brought thousands to stand with us. They have supported us in prayer and in partnership. Our rewards in Heaven will be equal.

Oh! Excuse me. I have to go now. I have been introduced and there is a microphone in my hand. I stand to my feet and leap forward, ready to preach with the fire that I always feel in my bones. But just before I open my mouth I feel a holy hush descend over me. It washes over the crowd as well, and I drop to my knees in humility and reverence, raising my face to the sky. For in the air above me I sense an invisible crowd that dwarfs the almost 700,000 Nigerians straining to hear my next word. I am speaking of Heaven's cloud of witnesses, a numberless throng upon whose shoulders I am carried. And from that heavenly crowd steps a man, a German evangelist who has gone before me. I know him by reputation. He is in many ways like these Nigerians, overlooked, except by Heaven. His life was sown in weakness and some say in defeat. Yet tonight, every soul born into the Kingdom will also be fruit of his ministry. The very words that I speak first poured from his heart.

Now I can begin.

Chapter 2

As I BEGIN the story of God's work in my life, I am flooded with wonderful possibilities. Too many to ignore. So, I narrow my search. I think specifically of origins. Not of His calling and His many directions to me along the way. Nor of the road that led to Africa and a harvest of souls beyond my wildest dreams. No, I first look back to Ostpreussen, to a time and place that is no more.

As I look there I feel a mysterious weight in a place near my heart. *What is this weight?* I ask. And then I know. I know that I know. It is the debt I owe to a man who died years before I was born.

How easily I might forget him. He is unknown. His life and ministry uncelebrated. If I remain silent no one will think of his name in connection to mine. But I would know. And I must not fail to tell his story. Each time I step onto a platform and look across a sea of faces eager to hear the gospel, I feel his gaze upon me from heaven's cloud of witnesses. I could not stand ablaze with the Holy Spirit today if this forgotten brother had not carried the flame to the Bonnke family so long ago.



LUDWIG GRAF

I examine the weight that I feel, and I think it must be like the debt a great oak tree owes to the acorn from which it sprang. Or the debt of a giant spruce to the seed that fluttered to the ground and died that it might one day stand tall as a watchtower above the German forest. Yes, this is the debt that I feel. It is the weight of a debt I owe to a man named Luis Graf.

ONE DAY, when I was still a very young man, I studied a chart of our German family tree. It was then I discovered the general ungodliness of our clan. I became amazed that my grandfather and my father stood out as men of faith

in a spiritually barren landscape. I turned to my father, who was a Pentecostal preacher, and asked, “How did God break into the Bonnke family?”

My father’s answer has marked my life and ministry to this day. He told me the story of Luis Graf coming to our village in 1922, 18 years before I was born. Luis was a German-born gunsmith who had immigrated to America as a young man. There, he had amassed a personal fortune through hard work and self-discipline. Following retirement, he returned to his homeland in the power of the Holy Spirit, after experiencing a life-changing baptism with speaking in tongues.

The longer I live the more I see the divine connections between myself and Luis, though I never met the man. So, as I prepare to repeat my father’s story, will you please indulge me as I go beyond his words? I will share details that I have only recently learned about this servant of God.

The story of Luis Graf is more than a personal narrative. It is part of the history of an entire movement of which I am a second-generation preacher. The movement of which I speak is the Pentecostal Movement that began on the Day of Pentecost, blazed anew at the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles in 1906, and then exploded across the entire world. Today it is the greatest modern force in Christendom, with more than 600,000,000 adherents in our time. To understand the story of Luis Graf, for me, is to understand this great movement more perfectly, and to see my place within it.

For these reasons I have done more than research. I have let myself enter a time machine. I have gone to a bygone era where I have entered the skin of another evangelist, probing his feelings and thoughts during a time and a place that are not my own. And I have been rewarded. I have come away believing that surely his story passes through the very eye of the needle. It is the first thread in the tapestry of God’s work in my life.

Chapter 3

AN ARMY OF CLOUDS marched across the sky, dressed in shades of dismal gray. It was early spring in 1922, and the grip of a long winter was not ready to release the East Prussian landscape. A fine new Mercedes touring car eased along a carriage track through the forest. Its engine pattered like the cadence of a military drummer. Mud splattered its silver-white finish as it passed beneath the trees.

The car entered a large clearing. Across a field of deeply furrowed earth a farmer turned to stare. He leaned on his hoe beneath a cap of thick natural wool, his collar turned against the wind. The expression on his face was grim and hostile.

In this German enclave on the Baltic Sea an automobile was a rare sight after World War I. Russian armies had destroyed roads, factories, and cities before being driven back by the Prussian Army. The Great War and its subsequent inflation had depleted not only the bank accounts of the German people; it had gutted their very souls. More than 3,000,000 of Germany's best had perished in four years of fighting. The wounds of war were fresh and bleeding.

The Mercedes driver beneath his jaunty aviator's cap and goggles knew this full well. He was a German-born American recently returned to his homeland after the Great War. He understood that this poor farmer had nothing in common with someone who could afford to ride the countryside in a fancy touring car.

Still, the driver's heart remained tender toward the German people as he drove from one end of this war-torn land to the other. He gave a friendly wave to this farmer, hoping to at least spread some goodwill. Sadly, the man turned back to his hoeing as if he'd received an insult.

The driver turned his attention back to the road. It disappeared over a ridge ahead of him at the far end of the clearing. At that vanishing point, he saw great arms of sailcloth turning against the horizon. As his car topped the ridge,

he could see that the flailing arms belonged to a large windmill working to extract power from the sky. At the base of the windmill sat a flour mill. Beside the flour mill, a large stucco bakery with white smoke rising from brick oven stacks.

The driver salivated. He had a kilometer to cover yet, but he could already taste the tortes, strudels, and hausbrot taken warm from the ovens. He might even stop to stock up on salted pretzels for the road. These, he recalled from childhood, were always folded carefully in a triad representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. He chuckled to himself. *I'm not in America anymore. I'm in the land where religion has twisted Scripture into a pretzel.*

As he came closer he could see a small village of a dozen or so houses. They lined both sides of the road on the far side of the bakery where the forest bordered the clearing. He figured this small village would provide a welcome stop for a cold traveler who had lost his way. He imagined a warm fire. Perhaps he would pay for a bed for the night. The day was far spent.

He slowed the car and stopped near the bakery door, pulling the hand brake and cutting the engine. Immediately the aroma of fresh bread blessed his senses. He removed his driving gloves and opened the car door. Stepping out, he pulled off his goggles and leather cap. He stood for a while brushing flecks of mud from his cheeks and chin.

Globs of mire fell to the ground from the car's wooden spokes and pneumatic rubber tires. The stylized elegance of the Mercedes' fenders swept away from the main body of the vehicle like the wings of a swan in flight. But this swan had been grounded by the primitive roads of East Prussia.

A number of villagers stepped curiously from their houses to peek at the new arrival and his fancy automobile. The driver wore a fleece-lined leather coat with leather pants and boots. He was cleanly shaven, a distinguished-looking gentleman with wispy gray hair containing stubborn streaks of brown. A man perhaps in his fifties or sixties.

Meanwhile, a perfectly bald man with a full handlebar mustache emerged from the bakery wiping his hands on his apron. He watched the driver, who had now removed his neck scarf and was using it to wipe mud from the door panel. As he worked at it, a hand-painted sign on the metal surface could be seen emerging from beneath the mess. It read: *Jesus is coming soon. Are you ready?* The driver turned, noticing the baker for the first time.

“A good day to you, sir,” he said, extending his hand with an energetic smile. “I am Luis Graf, a servant of God.”

The baker slowly wiped his hands on his apron before taking Luis’ hand. He spoke in a cautious tone.

“I am Gerhard, and we are all Lutherans here.”

“Lutherans will do. Lutherans need Jesus. I was baptized Lutheran myself, but I have since met the Lord and received the second Pentecost. Have you received the second Pentecost?”

The man shook his head. He had no reason to know of such a thing.

“Well, I must tell you about that, because there is nothing more important to the times in which we live, my friend. But first ... I was on my way to Königsberg, and it appears I have lost my way. Can you tell me what village I have found?”

“This is Trunz.”

“Trunz. I’m not sure I’ve heard of it.” He chuckled good-naturedly. “I’m more lost than I knew. But that’s not a problem. I am sure the Lord has led me here to preach the gospel. Hallelujah!”

“I told you we are Lutherans,” the man replied coldly.

In the meantime, a young man on a bicycle had ridden up and was now inspecting the Mercedes with awe and curiosity. Luis felt a trembling excitement in his chest. He often felt this vibration when the Holy Spirit spoke to his heart. A still small voice told him that bondages would soon be broken in this place. He nodded to the baker.

“I can see that my preaching here will have to wait until you have been made ready to hear it. These are the last days, Gerhard. Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Tell me, is anyone sick in this village?”

“Sick? Are you a doctor, too?”

“No, I am a preacher. But I represent the Great Physician. Let me ask you something, Gerhard. If I pray for someone who is sick and you see them healed, will you believe that I have been sent here to preach the gospel? Will you listen to me?”

Slowly, the baker began to smile and nod.

“Yes. Yes, I would listen.” The baker knew something that Luis could not have known. Everyone in Trunz knew there was someone horribly sick there. And Gerhard was smiling because this naïve American was about to leave the village in utter defeat. He would never have to endure listening to his gospel sermon. “In fact there is someone sick here,” he said. “Someone very sick. Listen.” He pointed toward the village and then cupped his hands behind his ears.

Luis did the same. At first he could hear nothing but the sighing of the wind driving the arms of the windmill above him. Then, after a few moments he heard it.

“AaaaaaAAAAAAArrgh!!”

He felt the hair rise at the back of his neck. The sound came from the far end of the village. It was something he might have imagined on a moonless night in the darkest wood. Perhaps a sound of demonic origin.

His first instinct was to leap into his car and accelerate toward another village. But he held his ground, rebuking the impulse of spiritual cowardice. The cry could be nothing if not the voice of a man. A sick man. Suffering as a man would suffer on a torturer's bench.

“Who is that?”

“His name is August Bonnke,” Gerhard replied quietly. “He is the *Müllermeister* here. He owns this mill and bakery and is the leading man in Trunz. A great man who has been struck down by a terrible disease. Gout or rheumatism or some such thing. No one knows what it truly is. He has suffered for years, and the doctors can do nothing. He cries out in pain night and day.”

“AaaaaaAAAAAAAAArrgh!”

The terrible cry sounded again, but this time Luis heard it through ears of compassion. The elements of pain, desperation, and rage coming from the man in the house at the far end of the village were sounds translated in his heart by the Holy Spirit. Here was a soul trapped by Satan. A soul Christ had died to set free. Here was a desperate cry to God for deliverance. The kind of cry that would not be held back by pride or stoicism or German will power. This was the kind of cry God never refused. Luis immediately understood that God had arranged for him to become lost on his way to Königsberg for this divine appointment in Trunz.

“I would like very much to pray for Herr Bonnke,” Luis said. “Do you think he would allow me to pray for him?”

The baker shrugged. He turned and called to the young man who was still enthralled with the automobile. “Hermann, come here.”

The young man picked up his bicycle and walked it to where both men stood. “Yes, Gerhard.”

“Hermann, tell your father that a preacher is here to pray for him.”

Hermann looked in puzzlement from one man to the other, obviously surprised, not understanding what was going on. The baker turned again to Luis. “What kind of preacher should we say that you are, Reverend Graf? A Lutheran? A Catholic? Evangelical?”

Luis thought for a moment. “Have you heard of Azusa Street? The revival in America? In Los Angeles?”

Gerhard and the young man shook their heads. They had never heard of it.

“It does not matter. Tell Herr Bonnke that I am a man filled with the Holy Ghost. When I pray for him it will not be like when a priest prays for him. I will pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, and his body will be healed. Tell him that.”

The baker turned to young Hermann and nodded that he should go and tell his father these things. The young man jumped on his bicycle and began to ride quickly toward the house at the far end of the village.

THAT YOUNG MAN on the bicycle was Hermann Bonnke, my father, just 17 years of age at the time. The sick man, August Bonnke, was my grandfather.

The Bonnke clan lived in an isolated area of Germany called *Ostpreussen*, or East Prussia. Our enclave had been created by international treaty at the end of World War I. It had been artificially cut off from the rest of Germany, and it faced the Baltic States and the Russian Empire to the east. Along our western border something called a “Polish Corridor” extended from modern Poland to the port city of Danzig on the Baltic Sea. Today, Ostpreussen no longer exists. Following World War II, all Germans were ethnically cleansed from this region.

In this isolated, cold, damp, and forested land in the spring of 1922, however, the flaming torch of the Holy Spirit would soon be passed. Luis Graf carried that fire, the fire of Pentecost that would eventually consume my life.

Chapter 4

LUIS GRAF ENTERED August Bonnke's household like a blazing lantern in a dismal cavern. Cobwebs of religious doubt and stagnation were swept aside as he moved toward the bed where the *Müllermeister*, "the best man in Trunz," lay writhing in agony. He proclaimed liberty to the downtrodden, healing to the sick, and salvation to the poor needy sinner – Lutheran or otherwise.

He announced that the Holy Spirit had been sent for a demonstration of the power of God that could make all things new. Divine healings were signs and wonders to confirm the preaching of the gospel. He took the sick man by the hand and commanded that he rise and be made whole in the name of Jesus.

August felt a jolt of heaven's power surge through his body. He leapt from his sickbed and stood trembling like a criminal around whom the walls of a prison had just fallen. He looked at his arms and legs as if iron chains had just been struck from them. He felt his once swollen and inflamed joints, and they were renewed to a supple and youthful state. His wife, Marie, who had been at his bedside for years, began to weep.

He began to walk, then to run, then to leap, then to shout. He grabbed his wife and embraced her with tears running freely down his face. A moment ago he had been unable to endure the slightest touch on his skin. Now, he was a man set free of pain. He was free indeed. He could embrace life again. And embrace it he did! A new life of health and vigor had been given to a man condemned by an evil and tormenting disease. August Bonnke would never be the same and would never, until the day he died, fail to testify of what God had done for him that day in Trunz.

IN 1922, LUIS GRAF did not see the great harvest he had hoped to see after the dramatic healing of August Bonnke. Spiritually, Germany was hard and bitter soil. Just two accepted Christ as Savior that day; August and his grateful wife, Marie. Luis led them in the sinner's prayer. Then he laid his hands on them,

and they received the gift of the Holy Ghost with speaking in tongues. The torch of Pentecost had been passed.

Two years later, Luis was invited to return for meetings at the local Pentecostal fellowship in nearby Königsberg. My grandparents traveled faithfully from Trunz to those meetings, which continued for four months. Attendance outgrew the church building. A city hall was hired, seating 800. Soon that was abandoned in favor of a stable at the fairgrounds holding 2,000. In all, 4,000 people were saved in the Königsberg meetings. This was an unusually large harvest in those days.

Hermann Dittert, a lifelong friend of our family and one who attended those meetings with my grandparents, later wrote, “Luis Graf was an evangelistic lawnmower.”

I found this quote only recently, and it is fascinating to compare this “lawnmower” description to the one I began using as our crusades in Africa became too large for any stadium to hold. Meeting in the open air with standing room only, we began to see crowds with more than 100,000 in attendance. Within a few years we registered conversions in the millions of souls. I could feel an evangelistic paradigm shift taking place, and I said, “We have entered the age of the combine harvester.”

I reflect now on the difference between a lawnmower and a combine harvester. It shows, I think, the difference between the era of Luis Graf and that of Reinhard Bonnke. In the 1920s the lawnmower was becoming a common tool. Through the following decades, the combine harvester was developed for the massive agricultural operations we see today. These two symbols also reflect a difference in faith horizons. In the 1920s, the Pentecostals of Germany were so marginalized from the mainstream of religious life that they only dared to see the harvest field as a lawn to be mowed. Today my team dares to envision an entire continent coming to Christ.

A great highway is built along the route of the pioneers who first blazed the trail. The spiritual trail blazed by Luis Graf in Trunz laid down a pattern

for my life and ministry a generation later. Even more, that congregation of Pentecostal believers in Königsberg provided the rich soil of fellowship that nurtured the faith of my grandparents, and later, my parents, Hermann and Meta Bonnke.

Two years after the Königsberg meetings, at the age of 65, Luis sensed in his spirit that he should retire from all speaking engagements. The duration of his evangelistic effort was quite short. Merely four years.

This remains a mystery to me. Nor can I relate to it. I am celebrating 50 years in active ministry and am more passionate to preach the gospel than ever. I cannot imagine retirement. But in 1926, Luis Graf took that step and the evangelistic lawnmower fell silent.



Hermann & Meta engaged 1932

Nine years later, Adolf Hitler rose to power in the economic and political chaos that was Germany. As the world rushed toward the holocaust of World War II, Luis was called home to eternity at the age of 74.