

What I Learned From My Cessationist Church

This may come as a shock to some people, but for the last two years my wife and I have been attending a church in Chicago that, for the most part, doesn't believe that the gifts of the Spirit are for today. I know it might seem weird for the guy who made *Holy Ghost* to attend a church like this, but for the sake of time let's just say that God made it pretty clear this is where He wanted us to go for a season, and I'm quite glad He did. I learned a lot, and it gave me a different perspective on the wider body of Christ.

Here are just a few things my non-charismatic church taught me:

The body of Christ is made up of a LOT of people who are hungry for Jesus.

Perhaps more than anything, my wife and I were surrounded by people who, while they were often leery of the "things of the Spirit," were passionately in love with Jesus. They had been changed by God, were in love with God, and wanted others to know Him as well. There was a tangible hunger in many of the people we met for more of Jesus, and they were happy to take "experiencing" God in whatever way they were instructed. I can find God in the Bible? OK then, I'm going to memorize as much of the Bible that I can. I need to live out my faith through acts of service? Alrighty then, I'm going to serve with gusto. And as they walked in humble obedience, they experienced God and experienced change in their lives.

While I still believe that many cessationist teachers and pastors are severely limiting the gospel (some might say they're downright neutering the gospel), it became abundantly clear to my wife and me that we were surrounded by people who

really wanted as much of Christ as they could possibly get. While their experiences may have been different from mine, and while many of them still struggled with feeling that there simply has to be “more than this,” a good many of them were walking miracles of God working and transforming them through whatever they were willing to offer Him.

The Word of God is an important guidepost for life—especially in relation to the things of the Spirit.

I know a lot of charismatics believe that church should be filled with experience, which for the most part I agree with. But at the same time, sometimes caution is needed. Just as cessationist teaching can get top-heavy on focusing too much on principles and disciplines, so can charismatics get carried away with focusing on the experience. God told us to love Him with all our hearts (passionately), minds (intellectually), and souls (He is to be our everything). Any time we focus on one of these over the other, we are no longer operating in balance with what God has called us to. Both excesses are wrong.

To this end, the Bible is our best guide to what is from the Lord and what is either from the enemy or from our own flesh. We don't discount the impressions, prophetic words and whispers of the Holy Spirit that we think we are hearing, but we also have to test everything against Scripture. The Bible is like a holy barometer. Obviously (as I pointed out in my film *Holy Ghost*) this can be taken too far into creating a god out of Scripture, but devaluing Scripture is just as bad as turning it into an idol. Either way, you're left with something devoid of God's Spirit, no matter what label you slap on it.

Sin is not something to be glib about.

One of the favorite expressions of charismatics (myself included) is that God is in a good mood. He's a happy God, as

opposed to the glum, angry, distant God bandied about by old time religion. While I believe that the nature of God is indeed one of joy (He is, after all, the most loving Person in the Universe), He has also made it abundantly clear that He is abhorred with and, yes, angered by sin.

While I wholeheartedly believe that God's grace through Jesus covers all my sins, I also wholeheartedly reject the idea that sin is no longer that big of a deal to God anymore because of Jesus' sacrifice. This is obviously a much bigger topic than I can get into here (entire books have been written about the fairly controversial topic of "hyper-grace"), my point in this short space is simply to point out that unfortunately many charismatics have delegated the idea of sin to the shadows. While we talk about what God can do to, for and through us, we often forget that He also wants a spotless bride. Repentance isn't a one-time act, but a continual act of turning from my flesh, from my mistakes (because trust me, I still make plenty of mistakes!), and handing my life and my actions back to God. Yes, I know He has already forgiven me, but a relationship isn't built on how much I can get away with and still not feel bad about what I've done. If I act in defiance of His will for my life, I know it grieves Him, just as my children doing awful things to each other grieves me—even though I forgive them before, during and after they are horrible. I still don't WANT them to do bad things, just as God still doesn't want us to sin "so that grace may abound."

The excesses of the charismatic movement are real, and they are a problem.

We met many fellow Christians at church who, once they found out who I was, were more than happy to open up and tell me where they were coming from. They weren't trying to fight with me or argue with me, they just wanted to be honest. And the honest truth was that a good many of them used to attend charismatic churches and were so grieved, confused and hurt by many of the excesses there that they wanted to be in a safer

environment that provided stability, and one that lessened the chance that they would be wounded by excessive silliness.

When you are constantly in fellowship with a certain style of Christianity, you tend to forget what other styles are like. As I've continued to speak and be a guest at a wide variety of charismatic churches over the last two years, I've seen first hand what a lot of my conservative brothers and sisters are more than a little leery about. Whether it's over-excited "ecstatic" worship that is so disruptive it pulls others out of their own worship experience; over-promising on what God is going to deliver that evening; over-hyping things; presumption that God is going to work in a certain way at a certain time; or unchecked "words from God" that don't line up with Scripture (or at the very least don't go tested at all); the charismatic movement has created an entire niche of fleshly activity that rivals anything a cessationist church can create in controlled, vapid, "religious" services that many charismatics rail against.

My friend Bill Johnson recently quipped that his church "has a high tolerance for uniqueness—which may be the understatement of the year," and I have to admit that I, too, share his sentiment and am willing to tolerate a whole bunch of different, unique and sometimes even bizarre Christian expressions. But there comes a point when the expressions and (even worse) the pursuit of the gifts over the Giver reveal an idol in the hearts of men that God simply doesn't want. While the Holy Spirit is full of grace and He will move even when some of his children might be mucking up the waters with their flesh and spiritual issues, our personal freedom is often negated by the damage we cause by not caring enough about those around us.

No matter which camp you fall into, you will be surrounded by problems, problematic people and problematic behavior.

I make movies that attempt to show what is possible when we

choose to live a radical life for God, and over the years I've learned that the Christianity of my youth was greatly lacking in all the things God had for me. Quite often, charismatics take their understanding of the "more" of God to mean that they are in some ways more "Christian" than their conservative brothers and sisters. We sometimes get tricked into thinking that if only our conservative church would get on board the Spirit train, then a lot of the issues within the church would be swept away. Unfortunately, this is decidedly not the case.

I have gotten an inside look at a wide variety of charismatic churches and leaders over the years, and can tell you unequivocally that most of them are just as messed up and messy as any conservative, "dead" church. There are still the power struggles, personal kingdom-building, sniping, gossip and backbiting that you'll find in any church around the world. The hope has always been that allowing the Spirit into the building to lead and guide is a foolproof way to guard against a lot of this stuff, but the reality is that no matter who you are, charismatic or conservative, you must still deal with your flesh, with other people who are at different stages of their spiritual journey, and you're always going to have family issues that, quite frankly, are messy. This isn't an indictment on the ineffectiveness of the power of Christ, but rather shows how very much we all need Him every day, and in every aspect of our lives.

Over two years I heard many stories of radical salvation that didn't come from a sign or a wonder, that didn't involve someone falling down, and didn't come from someone approaching a stranger on the street to pray for them. While I obviously love those kinds of stories (and the medium of film in a sense demands them) it is easy to get caught up in thinking that the only meaningful salvations come from the Spirit moving through power-filled encounters. Ultimately, it's the gospel that matters. If these two years have taught me anything, it's that Jesus will use whatever we give Him as long as it is presented

in love. Because love is the tip of the spear for the kingdom of God, and breakthrough, ultimately, rides on the wings of a loving King.

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