

Build a Bridge

One night in 1976 I sat on a bench near the parking lot of my Southern Baptist church in Atlanta and asked Jesus to fill me with the Holy Spirit. I didn't have a clue what I was getting myself into. All I wanted was an encounter with God. What I got, besides the gift of speaking in tongues, was the boldness to share my faith.

I also got myself into a lot of trouble!

Nobody told me that all this new charismatic stuff was so divisive. After reading the book of Acts and some verses in the Gospel of Mark and 1 Corinthians, I was convinced that God wants Christians to cast out demons, heal the sick, raise the dead and use spiritual gifts to preach the gospel. But after I got zapped with Pentecostal power, some of my Baptist friends informed me that supernatural phenomena ceased after the first century apostles died.

That didn't sound like a credible explanation. Besides that, my miracle didn't cease!

I found myself in more hot water when I got to college that fall and started fellowshiping with a group of charismatic students—all of whom had been filled with the Spirit during the summer. We were instantly branded fanatics. One religious group started rumors that we were a cult. Others were offended because they assumed we felt we were spiritually superior.

I was in anguish over the division that developed among Christians on my campus. Some of us had been close friends,

but our awkward

doctrinal differences forced us to become superficial. We soon instituted our own form of religious segregation.

I didn't realize it at the time, but what was happening at my college in the late 1970s was reflective of what has happened in the church during the last 30 years or so. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit divided us into two camps. We charismatics tend to view our noncharismatic brothers and sisters as have-nots. Meanwhile, noncharismatics view us as gullible and doctrinally unbalanced—not to mention too loud!

I think we've lived on opposite sides of the playground for too long. Does it have to stay this way until Jesus returns?

My Bible says the church is "one body" (Eph. 4:4), not a "charismatic body" and an "evangelical body." There are two things we can do to repair the breach.

Speaking from my side of this divide, we charismatics must clean up our act. One reason noncharismatics don't want to be identified with us is that we are genuinely weird at times. Some of the things displayed on Christian television (and even on a few pages of Charisma) make Pentecostalism look like a circus freak show. We owe our brethren an apology for suggesting that the Holy Spirit's power can be hyped up, thrown around or bought with a credit card.

Meanwhile, our noncharismatic brethren must dismantle antiquated religious mind-sets that quench the Spirit. The doctrine of cessationism (which says miracles stopped after the book of Acts was written) should be given a decent burial. Many conservative seminaries have already stopped teaching it

because their professors have seen God do too many miracles in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

I want to see those miracles in North America. Is God waiting for His fractured church to heal its divisions before He sends another wave of the Spirit?