

How to Be Charismatic Without Being Crazy

A third-generation Pentecostal's take on staying Spirit-filled without the hype. 

My roots in the charismatic-Pentecostal movement go very deep. My grandpa and grandma both became ordained ministers in the Assemblies of God (AG) following radical encounters with God. They dedicated themselves to preaching the gospel and planting churches across rural Oklahoma and Southern California.

My father, Hubert, became a traveling evangelist with the AG while still in high school. He and my mother pastored churches together in Colorado, Missouri and Texas. Dad served as a missionary in India after my mom's death in 1991.

My family's faith was naturally passed down to me. To say we were raised in church would be an understatement—often we actually lived in the church building for lack of a proper parsonage.

As a child, I received Jesus as my Savior, was “baptized in the Holy Spirit” and received my “prayer language,” as it's known among charismatics. It is something I still treasure and use to this day.

When I was 14, I was diagnosed with a kidney disease called glomerulonephritis. By the time I was 17, my kidneys were working at less than 50 percent capacity. I believed that I was healed in response to a simple prayer with my parents in their car, riding home from the specialist the day before a transplant decision was to be made. We asked for the tests to be rerun, and the results showed no indication of the disease. I've never had another problem. I know God as my healer.

I had another encounter with the Holy Spirit at age 23. By

then I was married and the pastor of a small church in rural Illinois. We were discouraged and feeling way over our heads. I was invited to a small gathering of ministry friends in Atlanta, and during an individual prayer time I was overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence. Somehow God assured me I was empowered and equipped to do the ministry He had called us to. Ministry for me has never been the same since.

Our formative years of ministry were influenced heavily by John Wimber and the Vineyard movement, and the writings of Jack Hayford, Peter Wagner and Paul Yonggi Cho. Each made deposits into my life and ministry that continue to bear good fruit.

I began to sense that God's heart for me was to spend my ministry targeting unchurched people with the gospel, helping them become fully devoted followers of Christ. Many of my friends questioned how you could be "seeker-sensitive" and "Spirit-filled" at the same time. I never saw a dissonance between the two and still don't. To be Spirit-filled is to be even more in tune with the lostness of those apart from God *and* to be sensitive to their issues. The word *seeker* should never be seen in a negative light regarding ministry in the church. "Spirit-led" and "seeker-sensitive" are not either-or but both-and. One without the other leads to imbalanced ministry. Being seeker-sensitive just means we're thinking more about our neighbors than ourselves.

When Practice Makes Imperfect

While I am eternally grateful for the movement that shaped me, over time I have become more and more disillusioned with some practices within the charismatic-Pentecostal world. Three things have raised questions in my mind:

1) An inconsistency between claims and results. A few years ago several of us went to Chicago to see a healing evangelist conduct his crusade. One of our members (a wonderful woman) used a walker because of her battle with Lou Gehrig's disease.

She was anticipating that God might touch her that night.

In the course of events, the evangelist brought her onstage and pronounced her healed. He took her walker and used it to “chase” her around the stage, to the roars of the crowd. I knew she could walk reasonably well without it and found myself cringing at the use of my friend to work up “faith” among the faithful. He asked if he could keep her walker since she wouldn’t need it any longer.

On the ride home I did some serious soul searching. God does heal, but why did I feel so bad about what I’d just seen? Why had my friend been used in such a crude fashion? I didn’t have any good answers. A few days later I bought my friend a new walker.

2) An inability to justify extravagant lifestyles of faith stars. This is admittedly a slippery slope to navigate; one man’s excess is another man’s moderation. We are each responsible to God for our standard of living, and it’s easy to slip into a rule-keeping, pharisaical standard as a way to keep score on how others steward God’s blessings. That said, it would be easy to argue that the cause of Christ has been hurt by the extravagant flaunting of a prosperity gospel, for which the primary beneficiary is the one preaching.

3) An overemphasis on the bizarre or gimmicky shortcuts to faith. I have to be honest—when I’ve read about the latest angel sightings, gold dust sprinklings, teeth fillings and crazy revival antics, it’s felt more like *National Enquirer* material than New Testament experience. I desperately want to protect a childlike naiveté toward the moving of God among us, but sometimes I feel as if we are being sold spiritual snake oil because of our desperation to experience the power and presence of God.

Asking the Question

How then can we be charismatic without being crazy? Let’s look

at Acts 15. The church then also faced a major question that needed to be addressed. The answer would determine the very impact and scope of the Holy Spirit's ministry among them.

Here's what was happening: Paul and Barnabas were experiencing revival among an unexpected group of people. To this point the Holy Spirit's work had been limited mostly to the Jewish community, but now God was pouring out His Spirit on gentiles. Paul and Barnabas told the non-Jewish believers that the good news applied to them as well. Unfortunately, not everyone was excited by this: "And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1).

(You can be sure of one thing: Nothing will stop a revival faster than requiring adult-male circumcision!)

This teaching about circumcision brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute with these leaders. As a result, "They determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question" (v. 2).

Why was this question so important? Was it just about circumcision? No, it was about the future of the church. It was about whether the church would continue to be a fringe group of Judaism or break out of the box and become a movement that would change Jews and gentiles over the entire world.

The real question was, How Jewish do you have to be in order to be a Christ follower? This was huge. The future was riding on the answer.

Seeking the Answer

I believe we are faced with similar circumstances. While God's work among us has been significant, I believe we are on the edge of greater breakthroughs. Our answers to the questions facing us will determine the breadth and scope of how God's Spirit will be able to work among us.

Let's look at principles in Acts 15 that helped the early church avert a detour from the destiny God had for them.

First, they didn't allow a small group of people to hijack the vision of the church. It happens all the time—in a church, in the marketplace or in a neighborhood association a small, highly organized, vocal group can dictate the direction of the movement.

Seacoast Church began with three distinct groups of people with three very different views of how God should move in the life of the church. One view involved the music, one involved the gifts of the Spirit, one involved liturgy.

Each group was made up of well-meaning people who had experienced God's power and presence in a unique way at a previous church. They were hoping their experiences would be duplicated at Seacoast. I told each of them as graciously as I could what the vision for our church was—and felt hollow as I watched many of them exit our church, not to return.

In Acts 15, the group consisted of some well-meaning men from Judea. In effect, they were saying: "Hey, it's great that seekers are being saved, but *this* is the way we've always seen God work. You need to do it that way too."

The early church averted the detour by not allowing a few vocal critics to hijack the vision of the church.

Second, they weren't afraid of a healthy debate. The apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue (see Acts 15:6-21). Sometimes we can short-circuit a healthy process simply because we are afraid of the questions. Questions aren't necessarily a bad thing. They can help give clarity to the issue and shape the future.

Recently, I was asked to participate in a meeting with some denominational officials who were trying to determine why younger ministers were leaving their fellowship. During the

discussion, I asked what I thought would be a clarifying question. I realized by the looks on the faces of those at the table I had raised a “we can’t go there” topic. As long as there are such issues, you can never make progress toward a healthy future.

In the charismatic-Pentecostal practice, what are the sacred cows? What are the issues that need to be talked about but can’t be because ... well, just because?

Maybe it’s the initial evidence of Spirit baptism (i.e., how do you know you are Spirit-filled?). Maybe it’s how the gifts are demonstrated in public gatherings. (At Seacoast we decided we don’t have to do everything we know how to do every time we get together. Just because something didn’t happen or wasn’t expected doesn’t mean God wasn’t among us.) Or maybe it’s how we do altar calls, what really constitutes revival, or anything else we’re nervous talking about.

People want the power and presence of God—that’s a constant. What most people *think* they want are the practices, which are fluid and secondary. When we can’t debate the practices, we may be destined to die with them. Never forget, the best thing to do with a dead horse is dismount.

Third, the early church decided to keep the “tent” big. After a lively discussion in which some Christian Pharisees pleaded to make gentiles toe the Jewish line, Paul and Barnabas shared their testimonies, and Peter told of a vision he had before the Spirit was poured out on a gentile family, James (Jesus’ brother) gave the definitive word: “I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God” (v. 19).

Enjoying the Result

“Easy” is not a dirty word. Why do we think it’s more spiritual to make it difficult for seekers? To quote Albert Einstein, “When the solutions are simple, God is at work.”

James continued: “[Instead] we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (vv. 20-21).

Essentially, James said: “Let’s not allow a small group of vocal critics to erect artificial barriers, making it hard for seekers to experience God. And let’s be unafraid to ask the tough questions that help shape the vision. And let’s keep the ‘essential list’ short, so as many people as possible can enjoy what we have come to treasure.”

What was the result? “So when [Paul and Barnabas] were sent off, they came down to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement” (vv. 30-31).

These were crucial decisions because they allowed a fledgling movement to move beyond the constraints of a uniquely Jewish culture. They ultimately made an impact on the gentile world with a gospel that made its way down through the centuries to a small town in Oklahoma where it changed the destiny of my family. And for that I will forever be ever grateful.

Greg Surrat *is the founding pastor of Seacoast Church, which is recognized for its innovation in church growth and development, and which combines a highly participatory worship with a heart for missional evangelism. Seacoast currently holds 29 weekend worship experiences in 13 separate locations.*