

What Charismatic expressions do you Practice / Permit at Substance?

At Substance, we love to keep a level-headed approach to charismatic expression. We don't want to be closed to the Holy Spirit; yet, we also don't want to be spooky and cultic. So, to do this, we all need to learn how to walk a fine line.

So, first off, it's important for you to know up front that I am a total and complete believer in miraculous Christianity. We regularly see dramatic healings at Substance. In fact, a recent mission team of ours recently saw a blind woman receive sight after praying for her. We also recently prayed for a young woman with a large tumor. When the doctor scanned the woman after we prayed for her, he was stunned by the tumor's total and complete disappearance. Her family was also so stunned that they gave their lives to Christ.

You see, the Bible constantly indicates that God's word is to be "confirmed" with signs that accompany it (Mk. 16:20; Acts 14:3). And when we prove that "*the kingdom of heaven is near*" with manifestations from heaven, people realize that Christianity isn't merely a religion, it's an invasion of power.

Even more, it's hard for me to understand why any Christian who advocates a literal resurrection of Jesus Christ could turn around and deny that miracles continue to happen (a.k.a., cessationism). Such a belief seems to undermine the very miraculous nature of our salvation. But, that being said, I realize that many Christians are merely afraid of the spooky and often cultic extremes that many Charismatics or Pentecostals tend to be known for.

So, at Substance, we've attempted to strike a unique balance on this issue. We have a large theological diversity here. Although I believe in unknown tongues, I never force anyone to have this experience. In fact, I wrote a book called *Skeptic's Guide to Tongues and Prophecy* which is a free download. (See my "Backstage Pass" list on our website). Yet, despite this, our church isn't defined by this secondary doctrine. And when I teach on this issue, I purposefully make it comfortable for people to disagree.

Even more, we don't require our people to "perform miracles" in order to be in leadership or give a "public recitation in tongues" before they're able to lead a small group. And, personally, I love that diversity because it creates a healthy theological tension in our church that drives people to seek scripture more.

The Two Theological Extremes: Abstainers and Mystics

But there are many people in the body of Christ today who have an extreme and intolerant view of those who disagree with them on charismatic issues. And this problem isn't a new one. That's why the Apostle Paul regularly attempts to address these two theological extremes. I prefer to call these two groups: (1). The Mystics and (2). the Abstainers.

The Mystics are the super-spooky pentecostals who endlessly do bizarre and often foolish things (and then blame it on the Holy Spirit). The Abstainers are equally extreme in that they are people who believe in miracles, but *only in theory*. Despite their theoretical belief in demons, they never deliver people of them. Despite their belief in resurrection power, they never experience miraculous healings.

So, in 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, Paul gives five commands that are equally distributed towards both sides of this continuum. Paul writes: "*Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt*" (v.19). I.e., You who "abstain" from prophecies need to stop it. This

is a gift. Paul echoed this sentiment to the Corinthians by saying, "*eagerly desire the spiritual gifts especially the gift of prophecy*" (1 Cor. 14:1). Yet, how many churches actually "eagerly desire prophecy". Quite to the contrary, many churches don't even have the word "prophecy" in their vocabulary.

However, Paul also addresses the Mystics by saying: "*Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.*" I.e., Paul was always trying to protect miraculous Christianity from spooks and charlatans who make Christianity into a hyper-spiritual side-show. Quite often in certain revivalist circles, the manifestations themselves end up eclipsing God's passion for the lost. Thus, the power of the Gospel is reduced to a self-centered "miracle-experience."

Spirit-filled, But Not Spooky

So, here's the question we posed to Substance leadership back in the beginning: How can we walk in miraculous power without being spooky? How can we experience the prophetic voice of God without becoming cultic. Certainly, we could begin by simply judging every experience in accordance with scripture. If God tells you to kill your neighbor or have an affair, chances are, it's not God; after all, the Bible says, "do not kill and do not commit adultery."

But, the Bible also addresses the need to be wise about when we practice certain gifts like unknown tongues. Paul was pretty extreme about "restricting" the gifts of the Holy Spirit to certain conditions. For example, in regards to unknown tongues, Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 14:23 "*So, if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in will they not say that you are out of your mind?*" I.e., God will hold you accountable for freaking people out.

Unfortunately many Pentecostal churches freak people out all the time. And believe me, when we stand before God, we will give an account for all the people we turned away from God because of our self-centered charismatic expressions.

For example, imagine if you saw a young couple holding a pair of cute newborn babies in their hands. It's amazing how small and delicate God's little creations can be. Now imagine that same couple taking two-inch cubes of steak and shoving it down their throats with their thumbs. If you had any head on your shoulders, you'd immediately see that this is child-abuse. After all, the likelihood of those little babies' surviving is slim and none. Unfortunately, this is what many Pentecostal churches do to God's little ones all across the United States. Quite often, we try to force-feed experiences to people who simply aren't ready for them. (And then we wonder why our churches never grow!) This type of hyper-spiritual behavior is exactly what Paul was speaking about in 1 Cor. 14. Certain gifts are Biblical; but, that doesn't mean that they are appropriate for every audience.

Of course, this doesn't mean we should simply eliminate unknown tongues from our worship services either. After all, it's a Biblical experience. There are over 8 chapters of the Bible that discuss it; so, what kind of pastor would I be if I allowed my congregation members to simply rip those chapters out of their Bibles?

So, before I explain how Substance deals with charismatic issues, I want to share with you a short little illustration:

The Showroom Floor Principle

For example, a friend of mine happened to visit a Rolls Royce dealer in the UK just for fun. (And if you didn't know, these are extremely fancy luxury vehicles). The showroom floor

was absolutely spectacular. The whole area made you feel like you were the most important person in the world.

As my friend sat down inside this brilliant machine the aroma of supple leather wafted up. The dashboard shimmered with classy glory. And the door closed with such firm precision that it seemed like heaven itself had enveloped him. So, putting both hands on the steering wheel my normally frugal friend starting thinking: "This car would certainly change my life!"

Of course, he could never justify spending the money on such a possession; even more, material possessions never seem to satisfy; yet, the whole experience lingered pleasantly on his mind for the rest of his trip.

So, how does all of this pertain to "charismatic expression?" Well, in all my days of buying cars, I never remember seeing a car's oil being changed on a showroom floor. And why is that? It's because the showroom has only one purpose: To help a potential customer realize that they will have a far better life if they have that vehicle.

Does this mean that a dealership "doesn't believe in oil changes?" Not at all. In fact, that same dealership *also* has a parts department as well as a mechanic's shop. Each area has a different function relating to every aspect of a car's complete care. I.e., there is an appropriate place for everything. But common sense leads them to restrict what types of activities are done in what areas.

Of course, the reason I gave you this analogy is because, this is essentially how Substance operates. Much like cars, the maintenance of our souls require numerous different "departments" or experiences. For example, I believe that demons exist and that many people need to be delivered. However, I generally classify this issue as an "oil-change" type of issue. I.e., it's critical for healthy maintenance of the soul; yet, if we have a say in the matter, we're *not* going to do them on the showroom floor (also known as our Sunday morning church service).

So here is how we manage most charismatic issues: I generally categorize pentecostal or charismatic practices into three categories: (1) Cultural Pentecostalism; (2) Mixed Company Pentecostalism; and lastly, (3). Universal Pentecostalism. These three categories affect how we restrict our pentecostal or charismatic practices. So allow me to explain.

Cultural Pentecostalism

Cultural Pentecostalism generally refers to many of the "worship formats" that are common amidst many older pentecostal churches such as: Shofar horns, tambourines, banners and ribbons. I personally don't believe that the Bible mandates we use these exact items. Of course, some people would disagree.

In fact, I recently had someone tell me that: "*If you don't use banners and flags in your worship then, you're not a Biblical church.*" Naturally I started asking him about dozens of other Old Testament tools of worship (like six-stringed lyres). After a minute or two, he realized that he had been incredibly selective about what Old Testament forms he saw as "Biblical."

You see, in the New Testament, someone challenged Christ about the legitimacy of his worship style (read Jn.4:20ff). Jesus responded by telling her that worship formats and tools are irrelevant: "*Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship in spirit and in truth*" (Jn. 4:23). I.e., It's not about your formats and tools. It's about the *heart* of worship. You see: worship formats evolve. Instruments change. Pageantry changes. But, as long as we worship God with abandoned hearts, "*they are the kind of worshippers the father seeks*" (Jn.4:23b).

Of course, I'm not theologically against shofar horns. In fact, if they bless you, then blow away to your heart's content. However, keep in mind, there are thousands of precious lost visitors who feel totally alienated when they walk into churches like this.

As a kid, my mom desperately tried bringing us to a church like this. Raising hands was scary enough; and, getting snapped in the face by a rogue ribboner was also pretty weird; but, overall, in my mind, it looked like an Old Testament freak-fest. In fact, I was so weirded out by this experience that it took me years before I felt comfortable going back into a church. I was one of those people Paul mentioned in 1 Cor. 14... "*when people come in, will they not say 'You are out of your mind.'*"

Looking back, it's really sad for me because my heart was truly open to the things of God; and, if that church would have been more aware of people like myself, I know that I could have found Christ at a much earlier age. Of course I'm not blaming my decisions on that church; however, that church certainly didn't help.

For example, Babies are cute. But I don't want to prematurely deliver one at 23 weeks just so that I can cuddle it. Not only would that be self-centered; but, it would be detrimental to the birth process of that baby. In the same way, many churches perform "charismatic abortions." We want to do our own deep little worship experience so badly that we're willing to ignore the spiritual birth process of those around us who are less capable of processing the experience.

But one thing is for sure: God is not going to keep entrusting us with his lost little lambs when we're idolatrously obsessed with our self-centered charismatic experiences. Therefore, because our Sunday morning services are our "showroom floor", we don't allow any banners, tambourines, etc., unless they are specifically organized by our worship pastor.

We will allow such expressions at worship events that are exclusively designed for worship and intercession. But on Sunday mornings, we believe in prioritizing the one lost sheep over the ninety-nine righteous sheep (Luke 15:7). But what about other charismatic practices?

Mixed Company Pentecostal

Other charismatic practices fall into category two: "*Mixed Company Pentecostal.*" For example, there are certain jokes I can crack with my best friends that would be inappropriate to share from the pulpit on Sunday morning. Of course, coarse joking is never appropriate; but, there are also certain jokes that could easily be mis-interpreted in "mixed company." My motives may be pure; but, if there are visitors who don't understand me or my shared context with my close friends, they may interpret my jokes in a completely different light. So, I need to be mindful when I'm sharing certain jokes in "mixed company."

Similar to this, there are "mixed company movies." For example, I love the "Passion of the Christ;" yet, it's still rated "R". And if my five year old daughter saw how graphic it is, she'd have nightmares for weeks. You see, the movie is "O.K."; but, in mixed audiences, I must be discerning about when I play it. Of course, the same is true with charismatic issues.

In the Bible, Paul clearly deems unknown tongues to be a "mixed company" type of issue (see 1 Cor. 14:23). I.e., You can do it... provided it's not around "those who are ignorant or who do not understand." Of course, there are certain moments where such tongues are appropriate (like in Acts chapter 2); however, as a general rule, Paul says, "be silent" when you're in mixed company.

Universal Pentecostal

However, there are certain charismatic practices which fall into category three, *Universal Pentecostalism*. I.e., no matter who you are, the experience makes sense.

For example, praying for healing is almost a universally acceptable practice. If a non-Christian visitor sees a church praying for someone's healing, chances are, they aren't going to feel weird about it (unless it's done in a totally bizarre way). Even more, when an unbeliever sees a miracle take place, they'll exclaim: "God is among you."

Similarly, prophetic words of knowledge can be amazing to see. There have been times where God supernaturally gives me amazingly specific information about certain people who are in the audience. Sometimes I even get the sense that God would have me stop the service to do ministry to these individuals. (However, I will warn that some prophetic experiences can also be "mixed-company.")

Thus, *universal* pentecostal experiences are those which are easily accessible to everyone. They generally fit in very easily with the purpose and heart of a "show-room floor." Thus, on Sunday mornings, we are always open to operating in these types of experiences.

So allow me to summarize like this: There are some charismatic experiences that require little or no explanation. When they happen the miracle is generally evident to all. However, there are other experiences (like personally edifying unknown tongues) that require a little contextualization and explanation. Because of this, we generally limit these and a few other prophetic expressions to our worship nights, small groups, and non-public leadership meetings.

We realize that on any given Sunday, there are hundreds of skeptical loved ones that people have vulnerably invited. One statistical study found that one of the top five fears that keep unchurched people away is the fear of weird, invasive or boring worship experiences. So, for this reason, we've chosen to also limit "cultural pentecostalism" to small groups unless purposefully planned by our worship team.

The Bigger Picture

But here is the whole point of this stratification: As churches grow bigger, so does the diversity of people within them. Since Bible times, people have debated worship formats. And that's O.K. because, all of us experience God in a slightly different way.

For example, if I was to ask you: "*What is the Ultimate worship format?*" Every last one of you would come up with a slightly different opinion on songs, on instruments, on styles, on service length, on quantity of altar ministry, on quantity of prophetic, etc.

To make matters worse, everyone has a different definition of "deep". To some, "deep" means one-hour messages on the book of Leviticus... to others, deep means 3 hour altar ministry experiences. And, for many people, it's not enough that a church offers deeper opportunities. After all, many Christians aren't satisfied until you manifest *their concept* of "deep" smack dab in the middle of the Sunday morning experience. Then, quite often, Christians make matters worse by "spiritualizing" their worship experience as "the best." (i.e., if you were truly spiritual, you would do church exactly like this). But, I believe that every church needs to figure out the purpose of a Sunday morning service for themselves.

So at Substance, we settle the issue by offering all sorts of diverse worship experiences. Whatever itch you have, we probably have something that scratches it. However, on Sunday mornings, we always tell people: Nobody gets what they want except God and the people he wants to reach. If you want a specific worship experience, you're free to do that *all week long*, or

in our small groups, or on our worship nights. But on Sunday mornings, as Paul said, "*Let's us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. 20 Do not destroy the work of God [over debatable things]*" (Romans 14:20).

So, if you're looking for the church where they are "all shofars all the time," then Substance will be a very frustrating place for you. However, when you see the sheer quantity of people giving their lives to Christ in tear-filled moments, I don't think you'll care as much.

At Substance, we've been averaging around 70 new members a month. Most of those people are brand new to the body of Christ. Many of them have some pretty radical conversion stories. Thus, Substance is a lot like a high-volume bloody emergency room. Every week we are giving someone CPR; therefore, we don't have time to stand around and bicker about worship formats (or whether sister so and so got to play with her tambourine).

Over the years, I've noticed that most of the people who find time to whimper about worship formats are the ones who are clueless about the person bleeding out on the emergency table. When you're giving people C.P.R., you just don't care much about the color of the paint on the wall.

And I share this because: We have a lot of long-term Christians with a lot of different opinions on worship. But when you just finished saving a person's life, there are certain things you just don't care about as much (like worship forms). I.e., You suddenly realize that church isn't all about YOU anymore; but, it's about prodigal sons and daughters who are returning home every week.

Don't get me wrong: We want to seek the Holy Spirit. We need to hear his prophetic voice. We want to worship with intensity. And we need to do this in a way that's grounded in scripture. But, what better way to worship than to value God's "one lost sheep." And if we've got to restrict some of our charismatic expressions on Sunday mornings to do this, then so be it. It's a small price to pay knowing that eternity is being changed forever (Dan 12:2-3).