

430 What really matters – belonging

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.^{Rom 12:2}

The Greek apparently means, ‘go on being transformed’ – not a one-off event – and I now see that changing my mind on various issues is what has really deepened my faith. My view has become *less prescriptive* on each topic: penal substitution, OT violence, ‘going to heaven’ (thanks, NTW!), male-only leadership and gay marriage.

Alongside these changes of mind has been a growing realisation of the massive importance of ‘community’ – we all desperately need to belong (hence my title). Loneliness is a massive curse, today.^[308,420] While Christians are great at offering community and combatting loneliness, sadly we tend to attach *conditions*: ‘To **really** belong, you have to believe such and such.’

One friend recently asked whether I spoke in tongues.^[429] I don’t, and the response was, ‘So you don’t have the Holy Spirit.’ This view is part of what’s known as ‘neo-pentecostalism’.

Interestingly, as a student, I was taught that tongues was **only** given for use in the early church (the ‘cessationist’ view). Then, come the charismatic movement, Sue and I attended a healing meeting, where her asthma disappeared, totally. Funnily enough, as she didn’t want to ‘*Come up to the front!*’, it was me who prayed for her – and the asthma went! Later, we realised that Sue’s confidence had also grown massively and she was able to lead big church meetings. Had she received the Holy Spirit? Dunno!

In support of the neo-pentecostalist view, my friend explained that their church is very large (thousands); full of young people and great music; it’s very strong on social action; and it has loads of testimonies of miracles. I guess their sense of belonging must be huge, and if people really feel they belong, they contribute – brilliant!

But what if I go to that church and I *don’t* receive ‘the gift’? Especially, what about young people, for whom the pressure to conform is so strong? With their friends, they will gladly ‘*Come up to the front!*’ but what if they (repeatedly) don’t receive that gift? Add teenage hormones, and you have the potential for serious personal damage.

Both cessationism and neo-pentecostalism may have a biblical basis, but the latter has miracles. Yes, but so did I, in my small cult. I received healing more than once, and Ray’s prophetic gift was amazing. And those miracles were my *direct experience*, not just other people’s testimonies, so I ‘belonged’! But actually I had fallen into serious dependence. Thankfully, I finally realised what was going on – was that the Holy Spirit’s work? Dunno!

The sense of belonging I now feel is just brilliant, but we must all let the Holy Spirit continually renew our minds. Especially, check out any **prescriptive** beliefs that your leaders say are ‘what the Bible teaches’. And while miracles may support a view, they don’t prove it. Finally, if that view causes personal damage, please take extra special care.^[428]