

THE SPIRIT AND THE GIFTS: THE SHARED VALUE OF CONTINUATIONIST PNEUMATOLOGY

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We believe the Holy Spirit desires to continually fill each believer with increased power for Christian life and witness, including the giving of His supernatural gifts for the building up of the church and for various works of ministry in the world.

When my kids were young, they sometimes listened to an audio Bible at bedtime. The book of Acts was one of their favorites to hear. It is the story of the early church, and it is absolutely thrilling. There is massive revival, signs and wonders, earthquakes, jailbreaks, riots, miracles and healings, church members who fall dead because they lied to the Spirit, angels, enemies, heroes, murders, shipwrecks, snakebites, the dead raised to life, and more. All of this is packed into 28 chapters.

The longer I have been a Christian, the more I have fallen in love with the book of Acts. I've learned that it's more than great stories. This is where we see the fulfillment of God's promise to send his Spirit. This is where we see a New Covenant community of men and women receiving power from on high, experiencing life in the Spirit, and participating in the advance of the gospel.

Luke writes the story of the early church in a way that highlights the redemptive-historical significance of the Spirit's coming. He also tells the story in a way that deliberately highlights the experiential and repeatable aspects of the work of the Spirit. The promise of the Spirit is not exhausted at Pentecost. Christ still pours out his Spirit, flooding and filling the church with his power and presence.

D.A. Carson says, "The Spirit does not simply inaugurate the new age and then disappear; rather, he *characterizes* the new age."¹ And, "The coming of the Spirit is not associated merely with the *dawning* of the new age but with its *presence*, not merely with Pentecost but with the entire period from Pentecost to the return of Jesus the Messiah."² John Murray says, "If Pentecost is not repeated, neither is it retracted. This is the era of the Holy Spirit."³

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It is an inestimable privilege to live in the era of the Holy Spirit. We are weak in ourselves, but the Spirit of God is our strength. We are prone to weariness, but the Spirit revives us. The Lord is eager to fill his people with his Spirit, empowering us for life and witness. And in Sovereign Grace Churches, we are eager to pursue God's active presence in all its fullness. "The Spirit

and the gifts are ours," as the Reformers sang, and this blessing ought to inform our theology and our practice.

Our Continuationist Convictions

Among the Seven Shared Values of Sovereign Grace Churches, we include our conviction that the Holy Spirit desires to continually fill each believer with increased power, including the giving of supernatural gifts for the building up of the church.

By including this conviction among our shared values, we are not implying that cessationist churches are unhealthy. On the contrary, we thank God for the witness and example of many gospel-centered, Spirit-filled cessationist

1. D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), 151.

2. *Ibid.*, 155.

3. John Murray, quoted in *Reformation & Revival*, Volume 3, Number 2 (Spring 1994), 84.

churches and have learned much from them. Theologian Max Turner has pointed out that many churches that deny the validity of tongues, prophecy, and healing are still deeply spiritual churches. And, Turner says, the gifts and manifestations of the Spirit that continuationists and cessationists have in common are more numerous and more significant than the ones on which we disagree.⁴

This conviction is included among our shared values because we see the benefit in churches partnering together with a shared understanding and practice of pneumatology and because we believe God desires churches to benefit from the fullness of the Spirit's activity today.

Scripture does not teach that a certain category of spiritual gift is restricted to the early church. On the contrary, in 1 Corinthians 1:7-8 Paul thanks God that the church is "not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ." The gifts are ours until Christ returns. 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 teaches that the spiritual gifts of prophecy and tongues will not pass away until "the perfect comes," at the return of Christ when he comes to consummate the kingdom.

The commands of the New Testament remain for the church today: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them" (Rom. 12:6). "Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts" (1 Cor. 14:1). "Earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:39). "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies" (1 Thess. 5:19-20). Just as God desired churches in Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, and elsewhere to experience the gifts of the Spirit as an important aspect of their life together, so he desires the same for us. The goal of these gifts is not temporary, but an enduring one that remains until Christ returns: Spiritual gifts are given for the church's edification (1 Cor. 12:7, 14:3). So long as local churches stand in need of edification, they also stand in need of the full range of spiritual gifts.

A study of church history testifies to the continuity of spiritual gifts. From the early church fathers, on through Augustine, to the middle ages, and into the Reformation and beyond, many testify to the presence of miraculous gifts. These gifts did not die with the apostles but have continued for hundreds of years.

4. Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts*, (Peabody, Ma: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 164.

Spiritual gifts are to be received with thankful hearts. Our *Statement of Faith* celebrates the gifts of the Spirit this way:

Christ loves the church, his body, and provides for its health and growth through the Holy Spirit. In addition to giving new life, the Spirit sovereignly bestows gifts on every believer. Spiritual gifts are those abilities and expressions of God's power given by his grace for the glory of Christ and the building up of the church. The variety of these gifts—some permanent and some occasional, some more natural and some more remarkable—reflects the diversity of the members of Christ's body and demonstrates our need for one another. The gifts are not to be exercised with apprehension, pride, or disorder, but with faith, love, and order, and always in submission to the authority of Scripture as the final revelation of God.

So long as local churches stand in need of edification, they also stand in need of the full range of spiritual gifts.

With the exception of those among the apostles who were commissioned as eyewitnesses of Christ and made recipients of normative revelation, the full range of spiritual gifts remain at work in the church and are given for the good of the church and its witness to the world. We are therefore to earnestly desire and practice them until Christ returns.⁵

A Gospel-Centered Pneumatology

The gifts of the Spirit are a great blessing, but spiritual gifts are not the sum total of a biblical pneumatology. In fact, the most important aspect of our doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not the continuation of spiritual gifts but the work of the Spirit in drawing sinners to Christ and his cross.

C.J. Mahaney says, "The primary role of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the Savior and to testify to the gospel. Our pneumatology must never take precedence over—and in fact, cannot be understood apart from—the gospel of Jesus Christ."⁶ It is the Spirit of God who opened our eyes to see the Savior.

5. *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*, "The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit."

6. C.J. Mahaney, "The Pastor and The Trinity," in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 403.

He convicts us of sin and cleanses us. "The Spirit transforms hearts by the miracle of regeneration and indwells all believers in abundant, new covenant measure."⁷

Too often in the Christian life, we think the Spirit is only at work in truly miraculous ways if specific spiritual gifts are in operation. The mistake of the church in Corinth was to equate spirituality with seemingly spectacular gifts and thinking the Spirit is active most powerfully through those gifts. Paul reminds them that the Spirit leads us to Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), and the primary evidence of the Spirit's work in our lives is love (1 Cor. 13).

The Spirit works broadly in our lives, and we ought to celebrate the Spirit's work wherever it appears. "The Spirit...illuminates God's Word to his people, assures them of God's love, comforts them with his presence, intercedes on their behalf, and sanctifies them in conformity to the image of Christ."⁸ Do you see the Spirit of God at work around you in the church?

The Spirit works broadly in our lives, and we ought to celebrate the Spirit's work wherever it appears.

Consider the elderly man who continues to grow in gratitude and joy, the single woman who shows hospitality and sacrificially serves others, the man whose prophetic gifts have ministered to dozens of people in the church and beyond, the couple that has experienced the loss of a child and clings to Christ in the midst of profound grief, the family that continues to give generously when finances are tight, the man who consistently prays for those in his small group with great faith. In all these ways and many more, the Spirit of God continues his activity today.

In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is referenced in giving courage in opposition, power in preaching, and wisdom in problem-solving. The Spirit is involved in creating fellowship, sending out church planters and missionaries, appointing leaders, breaking down ethnic and cultural barriers, convicting of sin, and spreading the gospel, all for the glory of Christ.

7. *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*, "The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit."

8. *Ibid.*

The Filling of the Spirit

We also observe in Acts that the most common way to describe spiritual empowering is the language of the Spirit's filling. "Full of the Spirit" accents an abiding condition, while "filled with the Spirit" points to a repeatable, experiential event. Commenting on Acts 6:3 and the selection of men who are "full of the Spirit and of wisdom," Max Turner says,

Luke does not believe all Christians to be 'full of the Spirit': this metaphor is used precisely to distinguish those whose lives are particularly marked by the work of the Spirit from ordinary Christians. And in Lukan terms the criterion for judging whether it is appropriate to speak of someone as 'full of the Spirit' is whether the community of Christians felt the impact of the Spirit through that person's life and saw the Spirit's graces and gifts regularly expressed through him or her.⁹

We want the church to feel the impact of the Spirit through our lives. We want people to see the Spirit's graces and gifts regularly expressed through us. God loves when his people are full of the Spirit.

What are the results of being filled with the Spirit? "The filling of the Spirit brings to God's people a deeper knowledge of Christ, an increased desire for holiness, a stronger commitment to unity and love, a greater fruitfulness in ministry, and a deeper gratitude for our salvation."¹⁰

The Spirit filling us with power also includes the giving of gifts. Spiritual gifts are specific expressions of the grace and kindness of God that come to us through the power of the Holy Spirit and are given for the edification of the saints. We need these gifts to manifest the presence of God (1 Cor. 12:7), to remind us of our dependence upon each other (Rom. 12:3-8), and to build unity in the church (Eph. 4:12-13).

Despite certain abuses of spiritual gifts, they continue to be a valuable part of the Christian life—so much so that we are commanded to "eagerly pursue" them (1 Cor 12:31; 14:1). Prophecy, tongues, and healing are perhaps among the more neglected gifts today. Even to a church fascinated with the more "spectacular" gifts, Paul commended prophecy as a gift given by God for the edification and encouragement of the church. New Testament prophecy

9. Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 169.

10. *Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith*, "The Empowering Ministry of the Spirit."

does not provide normative revelation, nor is it infallible, but must be tested by the authority of Scripture (1 Thess. 5:19-20). Scripture also assumes the continuation of the gifts of tongues, which Paul himself personally valued (1 Cor 14:18). The gift of tongues is speech directed to God in a language unknown to the speaker. Its primary use is private and is only to be used publicly if accompanied by interpretation, which is also a spiritual gift. And like prophecy, when used publicly, it is not to be utilized for self-display or in a disorderly manner, but only for the edification of others. While some gifts have been neglected, we should guard against elevating these above other gifts that appear more ordinary. As Paul stresses, each gift is from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-7), is to be valued, and is to be used for the glory of God and the good of others. 1 Corinthians 12-14 should be carefully studied by all who desire to view and pursue spiritual gifts in a manner pleasing to God.¹¹

God's Manifest Presence

The charismatic movement of past decades is certainly vulnerable to criticism. In light of its excesses, we intentionally prefer the language of continuationism. And yet, Sovereign Grace churches have benefitted from the charismatic movement's embrace and pursuit of the gifts. We are expectant, and we long for God to manifest his presence more fully in the church.

Listen to Max Turner again: We are ever in danger of attempting to tame and to institutionalize the Spirit. By contrast, the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements have correctly perceived that, by and large, the activities of the Spirit in Luke-Acts are a matter of immediate perception; the self-manifesting presence of God. Activities are characterized as of the Spirit largely when they break out beyond merely human possibilities.¹²

This has been our desire throughout our history, and by God's grace, this will characterize us long into the future: a longing for the self-manifesting presence of God. We believe the church today is desperate for a move of the Spirit. We want to see God act in our lives and churches in a way that breaks out beyond merely human possibilities, all to the glory of Christ, the strengthening of his church, and the progress of the gospel.

Isn't that what we see in the book of Acts? Isn't that what we see through

11. For a valuable Continuationist treatment of 1 Corinthians 12-14, see Jeff T. Purswell's chapter in *Scripture and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Wayne Grudem*, entitled "The Spirit and the Church: Priorities from 1 Corinthians 12-14." For a book-length treatment, see D.A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit*.

12. Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 157.

history? And so, we pray for revival. "Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence" (Isa. 64:1). We pursue God's activity and rely on his power. We continually seek to be filled with the Spirit. We long for the graces and gifts of the Spirit to abound in our lives. We remember that we live in the era of the Holy Spirit.

And so we pray, Come, Spirit of God, and fill us once more with your presence. Fill us with joy and wonder in the gospel all our days, and use us to advance the glory of Christ in all the earth.

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