

Position Statement on the Charismatic Gifts and ‘Signs and Wonders’

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Introduction

In His infinite wisdom and grace, the Lord has given His Spirit to indwell and empower His people. One of the chief ways in which the Holy Spirit empowers believers is to impart to them special abilities for the purpose of ministry. These divine empowerments are not mere extensions of natural talents or acquired skills, but supernatural capacities for impacting the lives of others in Christ’s name. The *charismata* (plural for the Greek *charisma*, “gift” or “grace gift,” from *charis*, “grace”), or “charismatic gifts” run the gamut of the relatively innocuous enablements of mercy, helps, and teaching, to the dramatic “sign gifts”¹ of healing, miracles, and tongues.

All of the gifts are “supernatural” insofar as they all originate with the Holy Spirit. All are equally valid, and all are indispensable to the Church for ministry. However, it is the more spectacular “sign gifts” that tend to dominate the attention, so we will address them specifically in this document. Because of the controversial nature of these gifts and the potential divisiveness associated with their use and misuse, the Board has adopted the following statement to clarify our understanding of the Bible’s teaching on this matter.

The Place to Begin

The gifts of the Spirit - though divinely given and, therefore, inherently good - are not always used in a way that positively affects the Church. Like the well-intentioned gifts we give our own children, spiritual gifts can be ignored, on the one extreme, or used in destructive ways, on the other. Before the Church was barely two decades old, the Apostle Paul found it necessary to write extensively on their proper (versus improper) use. While 1 Corinthians 13 is often thought of as a remarkable piece of literature extolling the virtues of love, it is actually a treatise on how spiritual gifts are to be exercised in the Church. The teachings contained in this chapter are still valid and can serve as a “launch point” in our own discussion of the gifts, particularly the more demonstrative ones, here at Neighborhood. In this section of Scripture, Paul informs us that:

- Without this humble *agape* love, any use of the gifts is hollow and worthless.

¹ The New Testament does not refer to a subset of the spiritual gifts as “sign gifts,” nor does it clearly distinguish them from the other *charismata*. The term “sign gifts” has been used historically, however, to designate the more demonstrably supernatural endowments, and it is in this sense, for convenience sake, we use the term in this document.

- This *agape* love is demonstrated ultimately by how we treat one another in our day-by-day interactions over the long haul, rather than by a few moments of shared experience on a Sunday morning.

The emphasis that must undergird our discussion and practice of the spiritual gifts, therefore, is this extraordinary *agape* type of love. It stands in stark contrast to the comparatively shallow and ephemeral “love” so pervasive in our world. God’s love is profound, self-sacrificing, and other-exalting. It is the form of love with which God loves us and which He expects us to demonstrate toward others. It has few models from which to learn and requires years of practice to develop. But if we all make this *agape* love our top priority, then the process of our growing together in understanding and properly using spiritual gifts will be a pleasurable, mutually-edifying experience that minimizes conflicts and brings enormous joy to our heavenly Father.

To that worthy end, let’s commit ourselves to love like the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:3) study like the Bereans (Acts 17:11), and, as we seek his face together, expect the Lord to “show [us] great and mighty things which [we] do not know.” (Jeremiah 33:3).

The Gifts in General

1. The gifts of the Spirit, of which nineteen or so are listed in such places as Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 28; Ephesians 4:11, and 1 Peter 4:9-10 are individual expressions of God’s grace (1 Peter 4:10) and given by the Lord to individuals within the church for “the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7).
2. The Bible nowhere suggests that some or all of these gifts might be rescinded sometime after the Apostolic era.² In the absence of such teaching, we must presume that all of the gifts mentioned in Scripture were intended to remain in use until the *Parousia*, or second coming, of our Lord. It is our belief that all of the gifts are available to the church today, including the “sign gifts” (tongues, interpretation, prophesy, words of knowledge and wisdom, miracles, and healings).
3. It appears that every believer receives at least one spiritual gift upon conversion (1 Corinthians 12:7,11). It is also clearly taught in Scripture that believers can receive other spiritual gifts during the course of their lives. The New Testament provides several examples of Christians receiving charismatic endowments subsequent to their conversion experiences (e.g.: the 120 disciples [Acts 2:1-4]; the first Ephesian disciples [Acts 19:1-7], Timothy [2 Timothy 1:6], and evidently

² There are a number of churches, particularly in the Dispensational ranks, that teach that the more overtly supernatural gifts were used by God to authenticate the authority of the early disciples but that, once the New Testament was complete, no further authentication was needed, so these gifts were discontinued. They are known as ‘cessationists’ because of their belief these gifts have ‘ceased.’ They often appeal to 1 Cor 13:9-12 to support this position. We find their arguments unconvincing.

the Corinthians [1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1, 12, 39]).

Furthermore, Scripture admonishes us to desire spiritual gifts, especially the “greater gifts” that build up His Church (1 Corinthians 12:31), including prophesy (1 Corinthians 14:1), suggesting that such gifts can be given to us at some point after our receiving Christ (since it would be unreasonable for the Bible to exhort us to desire something that is, in fact, unattainable). We conclude from these data two things: first, that we ought to eagerly desire the gifts, particularly those that edify the church; second, that at least some of the gifts can be given to Christians at a point subsequent to their conversions.

4. The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians of their responsibility to remain sensitive to the unbelievers who might be in attendance at their meetings and, in the exercise of their gifts, not adopt practices that would be easily misunderstood and judged as strange by them (1 Corinthians 14:22-25). This principle is particularly applicable in our context given our desire to be a “safe” place for our non-Christian guests to come, experience Christian community, and hear the gospel. We therefore want to be cautious of those practices which might be perceived as confusing, disruptive, and/or offensive. This is what love looks like in this setting.
5. To adopt a policy forbidding the exercise of any legitimate spiritual gifts would be to violate God’s explicit intent (1 Corinthians 14:39), “quench” God’s Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19) and do a great disservice to the church, since all of them are love gifts from the Lord to His bride and necessary for her growth (Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Corinthians 12:26; 14:26). Holy Trinity is His church, purchased with Christ’s blood, and He must - as Head of the church (Colossians 1:18) - be given our heart-felt and unqualified obedience to do whatever He desires in, through, and among us. It is entirely His prerogative, not ours, to determine what His Spirit will do and how He will do it. It is our joyful responsibility to submit to His authority, respond to his promptings, and faithfully execute His will. We, therefore, are committed to a policy of openness regarding the ministry of the Holy Spirit and to exploring new venues for appropriate expressions of the Spirit’s life among us.
6. At the same time, we all must exercise extreme care over the integrity of the body. This is an essential part of the leaders’ Biblical mandate as “overseers” of God’s flock (Acts 20:28- 29). The on-going unity of his church is very near to the heart of Christ (e.g.: John 17:20-23; Ephesians 4:3; Philippians 2:1-2). His Spirit is a spirit of unity, and all Christians are exhorted to maintain this unity “through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

Historically, the question of the charismatic gifts has proven to be peculiarly divisive. Therefore, we must be circumspect in our approach to this potentially volatile subject and insure we adopt practices that are both Biblical and respectful of the licit sensitivities of our fellow Christians. Our Lord taught that a

distinguishing characteristic of his followers would be their love for each other (John 13:34-5). An essential component of true *agape* love is its unselfish nature. It is not “self-seeking” (1 Corinthians 13:5) but instead promotes “the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4). Accordingly, we are committed to demonstrating true, self-sacrificing, *agape* love among us. We will place a high priority on our unity and seek - in all our attitudes and actions - to love one another and respect each other’s ideas, needs, and concerns.

7. In addition, Scripture admonishes us to “not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1). This same text reminds us that there are false prophets in the world eager to lead others astray. Other passages tell us there are demons, or evil spirits, that masquerade as good (2 Corinthians 11:13-15) which are immensely resourceful and have considerable power to mimic God’s power, as the story of Moses before Pharaoh illustrates (Exodus 7:10-12, 20-22; 8:6-7). Furthermore, there are sometimes intense psychological and sociological factors that can influence our behavior and counterfeit genuine works of God.³

Because of these facts, and because we live in an age when people are hungry for the supernatural but often ill-equipped to discern good manifestations from bad, we must take great pains to test all spiritual phenomena against Scripture, church tradition, and empirical “fruit.” We are to “weigh carefully” prophetic declarations and not accept them outright (1 Corinthians 14:29). And, in all things, we are to “hold onto the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

The Primacy of Love

1. God places an inordinately high value on our loving one another. That we love each other as Christ has loved us is, in fact, the sole command imbedded in the inaugural instructions regarding the New Covenant (see John 13:35; 15:12, 17). Love is also a dominant and recurrent theme throughout the New Testament. Jesus tells Peter in John 21:15-17 that He wants us to demonstrate our love for Him through loving and caring for his people. The Apostle John goes so far as to suggest that we cannot claim to love God if we are not practicing love for each other (1 John 4:7-8; 5:20-21). We understand these verses to teach that, whatever else we do in our service to God, we must major on loving others. So, as we interact with each other, we should continually be asking ourselves the question: “what would be the loving thing to do in this situation?”
2. It is instructive that the Apostle Paul devotes an entire chapter to the subject of love right in the midst of his discussion of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians

³ This threefold (divine, demonic, human) distinction between the potential sources of Christian behavior is well documented in the literature on the subject. See, for example, R.P. Spittler, “Glossalalia,” *International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, revised edition, edited by Stanley Burgess (Grand Rapids: Zonervan, 2003), 675.

13). This fact suggests that we all need to be willing to limit our freedoms in using our gifts out of love for our brothers and sisters. For example, if the Lord has given you the gift of tongues and you are praying with friends whom you know to be uncomfortable with that gift, you should abstain from using it in their presence out of respect for their sensitivities. This would be an appropriate application of the principle Paul lays out in Romans 14:14-16 about abstaining from even legitimate activities which might cause fellow Christians distress.

Elsewhere, Paul makes it clear that the exercise of our gifts is subject to our personal control (1 Corinthians 14:32). Thus, we cannot argue that we had to take a particular action (prophesy, speak in tongues, etc.) because the Spirit has prompted us. We always have a choice about how to respond to the Spirit's stirrings, and if our responses are controlled by our commitment to love and not offend our fellow believers, then the Spirit will not be "grieved" or "quenched," but honored. In vv. 1-3 of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul makes it clear that no gift is so great or indispensable that it supersedes the obligation to love our brothers and sisters in a considerate, sensitive way.

3. In I Cor 13:4-8, Paul lists sixteen identifying characteristics of love. A brief examination of these different facets of *agape* reveals how they are germane to the discussion on spiritual gifts. For example, those who possess less auspicious gifts such as mercy or service, and who might be inclined to be jealous of those with more spectacular gifts, are reminded that "love...does not envy...is not self-seeking... is not easily angered.... does not rejoice in evil." On the other hand, those who possess the more overtly supernatural gifts of prophesy, healings, or miracles are admonished to not "boast" of their giftings or be "proud" of their ministries, but be "patient" and "kind" toward others, never "rude" in the way they exercise their stewardships.

Paul had previously taught that all of the gifts are necessary for the proper functioning of the body (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). Even those that are not highly regarded are, wrote Paul, "indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor" (vv. 22b-23a). This leaves no room for an attitude that tends to "rank" some gifts higher than others. There are no "first class" gifts that only the spiritual elite possess. Paul denounces such arrogance (see v. 21-24). To be sure, certain gifts are of greater helpfulness in certain settings than others, as Paul also makes clear (for example, in 1 Corinthians 14:1-25, where Paul argues that prophesy is "greater" than tongues within the context of public worship services because of the former's innately superior capacity to edify a body of believers). But this does not mean that these gifts are inherently superior to others, any more than, borrowing from Paul's body analogy in 1 Corinthians 12:14-20, one's hand is superior to one's liver: both are essential to the body; both have their respective roles to play.

If we all heed Paul's instructions - if, in the exercise of our gifts, we seek one another's good rather than the satisfaction of our own emotional or ego needs and

learn to truly value and respect each other's giftings - then we will eliminate potential conflicts and ensure that our use of our endowments pleases God and builds up His Church.

4. To summarize: we will promote, as our highest value, the commitment to love the Lord whole-heartedly and one another unselfishly. And as we continue to grow in our understanding and exercise of the spiritual gifts, we will seek to abstain from any attitudes or behaviors that do not fit the Biblical description of *agape* love⁴.

The Baptism or Filling With the Holy Spirit

1. The Old Testament prophets anticipated the time of the New Covenant when the Lord would pour out His Spirit on His people, enduing them with discernable power and supernatural gifts (e.g.: Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 36:24-27; Joel 2:28-32). Under the terms of the Old Covenant, God's Spirit evidently worked to a limited degree in all who trusted in Him (otherwise they would have been forever "dead" in sins and incapable of faith – cf. Ephesians 2:1-4; Romans 8:5-9). However, the Spirit apparently "filled" only a select few, principally prophets and other leaders, and then only on a temporary basis (refer, for example, to the case of the 70 elders in Numbers 11:25-29 and Saul in 1 Samuel 10:6-13; 16:14). Typically, these "fillings" resulted in prophetic utterances or extraordinary strength or ability in service to God. So, the Old Testament predictions regarding both the permanence ("I will put my Spirit in you" - Ezekiel 36:27) and the scope ("I will pour out my Spirit on all people... sons... daughters..." etc. - Joel 2:28) of God's outpouring of His Spirit in the last days was wonderful news indeed. Now God's presence would manifestly indwell and empower for supernatural service all of His people - not just a few!
2. John the Baptist, the last of the Old Covenant prophets - who was himself "filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth" (Luke 1:15) - taught that Jesus was the one who would fulfill the Old Testament promises by baptizing his followers "with the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). Prior to His death, our Lord made it clear he intended to fulfill these various promises following His ascension to the Father (e.g.: John 14:15-17; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). Earlier, He had given certain of His followers "power and authority" to perform miracles on His behalf such as healing diseases and exorcising demons (the twelve in Luke 9:1 and the seventy in 10:17-19). Now He urged them to hold off doing ministry until they received the "gift" promised by the Father - a baptism of

⁴ It is important to point out that *agape* love is multidimensional in its expression. A careful examination of Scripture reveals that *agape* is not coterminous with mere kindness or gentleness, but is far more extensive. *Agape* can be bold and emphatic when necessary (cf. 1 Thess 5:14). The key seems to be need of the moment. When a person is living in denial of their sin, for example, the most loving thing we can do is to get in his face and warn him about the possible consequences of his behavior (cf. Matt 16:21-28; 18:15-20; 23:1-39). So, when we use the term "love" we mean a robust, full-bodied commitment to the welfare of another, not an acquiescence to sin or a passive tolerance of unbiblical behavior or attitudes.

his Spirit. They were to “wait” until they received supernatural power. Only then would they be adequately equipped to “witness” in His name (Acts 1:4-5, 8).

3. The Holy Spirit “filled” (Acts 2:4) or “baptized” (Acts 1:5) these followers of Christ about ten days later, at Pentecost. Immediately, they were given the ability to speak in tongues (in this case, known languages – Acts 2:3-11) and prophesy (v. 11). Certain ones among them were also empowered to heal the sick (Acts 3:1-10), preach with boldness (Acts 4:31), perform wonders and miraculous signs (Acts 2:43), exorcise demons (Acts 5:16), be supernaturally transported from one place to another (Acts 8:38-40), even raise the dead (Acts 9:36-41). Jesus had clearly made good on His promise to give His followers supernatural power to witness on His behalf through the baptism with the Holy Spirit. What He had said in John 14:12 was coming to pass: “...anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”
4. In subsequent chapters, the book of Acts records additional “fillings” by the Spirit, sometimes involving the same people (cf.: Acts 4:31), sometimes others (e.g.: the Samaritans [Acts 8:12-17], the Gentiles [Acts 10:44-46], and the Ephesians [Acts 19:1-7]). Twice, the promise of the “filling” is recorded, but not the actual experience (the Jerusalem converts in Acts 2:38-41 and Paul in Acts 9:17). Additionally, there are several references to individuals and groups of people who appear to be in a state of being “filled with” or “full of” the Holy Spirit, including Peter (Acts 4:8), the Seven (Acts 6:3), Stephen (Acts 6:5; 7:55), Paul (Acts 13:9), Barnabas (Acts 11:22-24), and the Asian disciples (Acts 13:51-52). In some of these cases the “filling” is demonstrated by verbal gifts such as tongues, prophesy, and/or powerful preaching, but not always so.

We conclude from these data that a believer is baptized by the Spirit only once, at his/her conversion but may be filled multiple times over the course of his/her life. For certain individuals, these fillings will be accompanied by the impartation or use of supernatural gifts, but not always.

5. Today, the “gift” from the Father is the birthright of every believer. As the Apostle Peter instructed the people of his day: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38, 39). As this verse suggests, each Christian receives the Holy Spirit when he/she trusts Jesus Christ for salvation (cf. Galatians 3:2, 5). At conversion, each believer is “born of the Spirit” (John 3:5-6), renewed (Titus 3:5-6), anointed (2 Corinthians 1:21), sealed (2 Cor 1:22) and indwelt by the Spirit (Romans 8:5-11) and baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). So, the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential to our salvation: no Holy Spirit, no salvation. In Paul’s words: “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Rom 8:9b).

6. But our conversion is not the end-all of our Christian experience. Salvation is a multidimensional process. It begins with our conversion, but throughout our lives there are significant advances, breakthroughs, and growth-points that shape and mature us spiritually and empower us for ministry in His Kingdom. The Holy Spirit is intimately and vitally involved in each of these. This being the case, every Christian should continually long for more of the Holy Spirit's grace and power in his/her life. We should earnestly desire to be filled with his presence, accessing His power, illumined by his revelation, and equipped with His gifts to better serve the body of Christ (see, for example, Ephesians 1:17; 5:17-18; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:12-17; 12:1-2; Galatians 5:16-25).

What is more, we should carefully avoid any behaviors or attitudes that "grieve" His Spirit or "quench" His intended work in us (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Our relationship with the Lord through His Spirit should be constantly growing and changing. We should not be surprised or threatened by deep and dramatic experiences with His Spirit.

On the other hand, we must not idolize these experiences nor seek them as ends in themselves. Instead, we should regard them as part of the dynamic quality of our ongoing love relationship with the Lord and maintain a humble, childlike attitude that welcomes Him to do whatever He chooses in and through us. One thing we can definitely count on: as we grow in our ability to "keep in step with" (Galatians 5:25) and continually be filled with His Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) the result will be a winsome, Christ-like demeanor that is increasingly obvious to others (Galatians 5:16-25).

Brief Descriptions of the "Sign Gifts"

1. TONGUES. The gift of tongues is the supernatural ability to communicate in a language unknown to the speaker. These languages might be rational human languages, as was the case at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-18). Or they might be experiences of nonrational ecstatic speech, which appears to be what Paul was describing in 1 Corinthians 14.
2. INTERPRETATION. This is the divine enablement to translate, into a host language, the content of a message given in tongues. All who have the gift of tongues and desire to use it in a public setting are admonished to pray also for the gift of interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:13). Paul forbade the *public* use of tongues apart from this gift (1 Corinthians 14:28).
3. PROPHECY. This is the divine enablement to declare God's truth with power and clarity for correction, repentance or edification. It includes both forth-telling and, at times, foretelling. Aside from tongues, no other sign gift receives as much detailed attention in the New Testament. Paul's regulations in 1 Corinthians 14:29-33 specified that in the Corinthian church meetings, two to three prophets

should speak, one at a time, while others carefully considered the content of the utterances. If a revelation came to someone who was seated, the first speaker should stop and allow the second to then speak. Paul's concern was that the meetings be orderly and conceived with maximum corporate benefit (and minimum individual distractions) in mind.

4. **WORD OF KNOWLEDGE.** This term is mentioned by name just once in Scripture (1 Corinthians 12:8) and is never defined. For this reason it is impossible to precisely determine its function. We therefore think it best not to be dogmatic concerning its nature. Some understand it to simply be a divinely empowered ability to accumulate and analyze information effectively, perhaps as an adjunct to a teaching gift. If this is correct, Solomon (Ecclesiastes 1:16) and Paul (2 Corinthians 11:6) might be Biblical prototypes of those who received it. Others understand it to be the capacity to receive supernaturally revealed knowledge which otherwise could not be known. This seems to us to be the most plausible explanation of the gift. If this is correct, Scriptural examples might include Jesus' knowledge of the Samaritan woman's past (John 4:18) and the need to pay the Temple tax (Matthew 17:24-27) and Paul's knowledge that he would never see the Ephesian elders again (Acts 20:25). Whatever position we take on the matter personally, let's be careful - given the scarcity of Biblical data - not to be dogmatic or argumentative, but irenic and mature. Paul advised the Roman church that, on nonessential divisive issues: "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" yet not pass judgment on those who think differently (Romans 14:5, 10, 13). We recommend the same approach on this matter.
5. **WORD OF WISDOM.** This gift suffers from the same ambiguity as the one just described, being another *hapax legomenon* (a term mentioned just once in a body of literature). It is listed in 1 Corinthians 12:8 and not defined. Again, this fact should rule out dogmatic assertions regarding its function. Some scholars believe it is simply a timely word characterized by wisdom. Most likely, however, a "word of wisdom" is the divine enablement to know the mind of the Spirit in a given situation and to speak in such a way that God's wisdom is especially manifest. Possible Biblical examples might include Jesus' answer to the religious leaders about the woman caught in adultery (John 8:7) and paying taxes to Caesar (Luke 20:20-25), and James' decision at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:19-21).
6. **HEALINGS.** The divine enablement to be God's instrument to cure illnesses and restore people to emotional and physical health. Ample examples occur throughout Scripture, particularly in the gospel accounts and the Acts narratives. For more information about our understanding of this gift and guidelines for its use, see the document: "Position Statement on Healing and the Believer's Authority in Christ."
7. **MIRACLES.** The divine enablement to be God's instrument to perform exceptional works in the natural realm. Throughout Acts, this gift seems to have

been particularly useful in authenticating the validity of the gospel, and it might be used in a similar way today. Scriptural examples of its use include Jesus' various nature miracles, Peter's judgment of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-12), Stephen's miracles (Acts 6:8), Philip's Samaritan ministry (Acts 8:5-8), and Paul's judgment of Elymas (Acts 13:8-12).

8. DISCERNMENT OF SPIRITS. This is another gift that is difficult to define with precision, but it appears to be the divine enablement to distinguish between good and evil spirits (truth and error, God's activity and Satan's) and to identify deception in character and relationships. Scriptures related to the use of discernment might include John 2:23-25, Acts 8:18-23, 1 Corinthians 14:29, Hebrews 5:14, and 1 John 4:1-3.

Evaluating "Exotic" Phenomena

1. Throughout church history, particularly during times of enhanced spiritual receptivity such as religious "revivals," strange phenomena have taken place among God's people. This is still the case today. These include aberrant physiological manifestations (shaking, quivering, falling down, groaning, swooning, etc.) and inexplicable environmental phenomena (wind, gold dust, feathers, gold fillings, etc.). Pentecost is perhaps prototypical in this regard, with its "violent wind," "tongues of fire," and inebriation-like human responses (Acts 2:1-13). What are we to make of such exotic manifestations? How do we discern whether they are from God or some other source? Do we accept them uncritically? Do we reject them outright? ⁵
2. The Lord commands us to not accept spiritual claims or experiences uncritically. Jesus warned His disciples to be "wise as serpents" (Matt 10:16), an emphasis underscored by other New Testament writers (1 Cor 16:13; 1 Tim 3:2, 11; 2 Tim 4:5; 1 Pet 5:8). In His words to the seven churches in Revelation, the Lord rebukes two of them for not dealing decisively with aberrant teachings and behavior and commends a third for doing so (Rev 2:14-15; 20-25; 2:2). And, as noted earlier, John and Paul both exhorted their hearers to critically evaluate all truth claims, prophetic messages, and spiritual activity (1 John 4:1; 1 Cor 14:29; 1

⁵ While exceeding the scope of the present paper, it should be noted that these phenomena sometimes have biblical parallels and sometimes, not. There is a minority view within the Christian tradition that insists Church practice only include those things *explicitly* taught in Scripture. This includes churches that align with certain Zwinglian, pietist, and Restorationist models of Church praxis. For these churches, things like stained glass, organ music, and praise choruses (as well as physiological phenomena not explicitly found in Scripture) are disallowed. The overwhelming majority of Christians, however (whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant) teach that God is spectacularly and inveterately creative and is not bound to merely repeat what He has done in the past (cf. Isa 43:19; Rev 21:1). On this view, then, the Church has the freedom to engage in God-honoring practices that are not *explicitly prohibited* by Scripture either by precept or example. At Neighborhood Church, we fall within this larger interpretive stream and teach that, when it comes to abiblical practices (things not found in Scripture; as opposed to unbiblical practices: things prohibited by Scripture), we have the freedom to use them for godly ends, but with this freedom comes the responsibility to insure they honor the Lord and build up His Church by bearing good fruit.

Thess 5:21-22).

3. The reason for this emphasis is simple: not every spiritual phenomenon originates with God. We face a formidable enemy who counterfeits God's activity with compelling imitative power (Matt 24:24-25; 2 Cor 11:13-15; cf. Exodus 7:10-12, 20-22; 8:6-7). And our "flesh" (our psychosocial selves) can respond in ways that impersonate the Spirit's activity. Thus, every phenomenon must be assessed in an effort to determine whether it originates from our "flesh," the enemy, or the Holy Spirit.
4. How do we do this? By praying for discernment and measuring all phenomena against a balanced and responsible interpretation of Scripture, a critical understanding of what the Church has historically taught, and an objective evaluation of the short and long-term "fruit." While church leaders are uniquely responsible for the welfare of the church, all Christians are accountable for their beliefs and practices and are therefore responsible to employ this kind of balanced approach to assessing phenomena.
5. Much harm has been done to the Church and its witness to the world by an uncritical endorsement and/or a naïve theologizing of unusual phenomena. Irresponsible gullibility has resulted in confusion, hurt, and divisions within the faith community and a distorted witness to the world. Therefore, we must exercise prudence and "due diligence" before making causal attributions, refraining from labeling something as being "from God" before we have prayed, searched the Scriptures, and examined the empirical "fruit."
6. What is entailed in evaluating the fruit of an event or ongoing phenomenon?⁶ We should ask the following types of questions: does this activity result in its participants having a greater love for the Lord, His Word, and His Church? Does it produce in people a greater love for others? Does it prompt a yearning for holiness and greater intimacy with God? Does it result in attitudes of humility, repentance, and reverence? Does it lead to greater missional engagement: enhanced love for non-Christians and a willingness to reach out to them? Are the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23) in evidence? Does it promote God's glory or distract His people? The answers to these questions will seldom be univocal. But taken together, combined with prayer, study, and wise counsel, they will provide clues as to whether a particular phenomenon is indicative of divine, demonic, or "fleshly" activity.
7. "Slaying in the Spirit" offers a good case study. The phenomenon involves a loss

⁶ In a famous response to this question, the great American theologian, pastor, missionary and educator, Jonathan Edwards gave an address at the Yale College commencement in 1741, at the height of the Great Awakening. "The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God" is an exposition of 1 John 4:1-8 and delineates five tests of whether a movement or revival is genuine: 1) It exalts Jesus Christ as savior and Lord, 2) It attacks sin and the powers of darkness, 3) It exalts the holy Scriptures, 4) It promotes truth and sound doctrine, and 5) It results in a greater love for God and others.

of bodily strength and falling to the ground, often backwards. It is not mentioned in the Bible either by description or by name.

Scripture records at least three instances of people losing their physical strength when confronted with a vision of either the resurrected Christ (Paul in Acts 9:3-8 and John in Revelation 1:17) or an angel (Daniel in Daniel 10:8-17). Additionally, there is the case of the soldiers falling to the ground before Jesus described in John 18:1-6. Each of these is a perfectly understandable response when sinful people encounter the power and glory of our Lord or one of his messengers. In each case, the reaction was spontaneous and unsolicited: all these men were flattened by an overwhelming sense of the Lord's awesomeness, not by any human means.

The history of the Christian Church records similar occurrences of people being overcome by God's manifest presence, sometimes en masse, particularly in times of revival. Unfortunately, this same history contains accounts of religious figures who elicit similar responses from their followers through the use of suggestion and other psychological means.

In the twentieth century, certain Pentecostal and charismatic leaders developed a stylized practice they call "being slain in the Spirit" in which individuals fall to the ground, sometimes on their own, sometimes in response to a push on the forehead, a command, or some non-verbal cue by a pastor or evangelist.

While not wanting to preclude the possibility of God working in such settings, these practices can easily give the appearance of psychological manipulation and thus rob God of the glory and call into question the credibility of His ministers.

Further, the "fruit" of these experiences is often short-lived, resulting in an emotional catharsis without lasting character change. This is not always so: sometimes significant "break-throughs" take place in which a Christian experiences deliverance from a besetting sin, a new love for God, or a call to greater missional engagement.

For all these reasons, we will evaluate these cases individually, postponing judgment until fruit can be assessed. At the same time, we will not engage in practices that might appear contrived, nor will we coach or coax people to fall down. We invite the Lord to amaze us with His presence, and if He desires to elicit a particular response from us, He certainly has the means to procure it without our assistance. Finally, because the term "slaying in the Spirit" is ill-defined and loaded with negative connotations for many Neighborhood attendees, we urge that it not be used. If a Christian falls while being overwhelmed by God's presence, let's call it that, rather than use terminology that is cryptic and easily misunderstood.

8. "Slaying in the Spirit" also affords us a good opportunity to make one final point.

As a church, we avoid formulaic or stylized approaches to using the gifts. Often, churches that identify with a particular sub-stream of the Christian tradition develop characteristic ways of ministering. So, whether a person is praying for the demonized, praying for healing, speaking in tongues, or giving prophetic words, it is easy to determine the person's ecclesial "family of origin:" Vineyard, Bethel, classical Pentecostal, etc.

We place a high value on authenticity and being naturally supernatural. And we believe God to be a God of infinite creativity, who appears to revel in variety (for example, Jesus rarely healed two people in precisely the same way). So, we do not prescribe one way of doing ministry. We want to avoid any practices that are strongly identified with any particular ecclesial subculture. And we want to live natural, authentic lives in collaboration with God's Holy Spirit, trusting Him to minister through us in ways that are appropriate to our individual selves and our corporate identity.

Summary

Our understanding of the spiritual gifts may be summarized as follows:

1. We are convinced that, individually and corporately, we desperately need the *charismata*, or gifts of the Spirit, in order to do God's work. As Paul argues in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, God's work is spiritual in nature and calls for spiritual, not worldly, tools. "Unless the Lord builds [his] house," in his way, we will find ourselves "laboring in vain" (Psalm 127:1a). As a church, we are committed to the Biblical principle that everyone at Neighborhood is a "minister," endowed with specific Spirit-given giftings to build up the body (see Ephesians 4:11-13). All of these must be employed if we are to flourish the way God intends. We have a compelling mission: to tell and demonstrate to others the incomparable news of God's grace in Christ and the in-breaking of His kingdom, and to help develop them in their faith. This extraordinary calling requires extraordinary abilities if we're to be successful. Thus, we are determined to continue placing a high value on spiritual gifts and to maintaining a Biblical commitment as we put them to use. We are also intent on taking a balanced approach to the gifts, resisting the temptation to place an inordinate emphasis on the more spectacular ones, but esteeming all of them as equally necessary and important.
2. It is our goal to be, and increasingly become, a Biblical church. Our understanding of the Biblical data suggests that the *charismata* were intended not just for the first century Church, but for our own day as well. It is not our goal to become a Pentecostal church. Pentecostals have their own history, traditions, and theological tenets unique to that movement. Because of our commitment to follow the Bible and consensual Christian tradition rather than any narrow ecclesial sub-stream, we will remain open to God's leading and faithful to Scripture as we explore ways for the gifts to be expressed here at Holy Trinity - within an

atmosphere of *agape* love - to promote His glory, build up His Church, and advance His kingdom.

3. We will use enormous care as we continue to grow in this area. Because controversy over the gifts of the Spirit has, historically, engendered so much divisiveness and acrimony, contrary to their God-ordained purpose, we will, out of love for one another, patiently instruct and gently guide the church toward an increasingly Biblical theology and practice. Our goal is for the entire body to grow together in our understanding and our experience of the gifts, and this will take careful teaching and training over time.
4. We will remain vigilant to safeguard the church against counterfeit spiritual experiences and emotional excesses. We will be careful to test the fruits of our experiences and refrain from blindly accepting phenomena simply because they appear to be from God. We will attempt to deal with error quickly and Biblically, and maintain order in our public gatherings while remaining open to the Spirit's spontaneous and sometimes unexpected ways of doing things (Acts 4:31; 1 Cor 14:30).
5. We will thus remain committed to a two-pronged strategy in our approach to using spiritual gifts: we will be open to whatever God wants to do among us, however he chooses to do it, without pre-judging the activity. And we will responsibly "test the spirits" to insure Biblical fidelity and spiritual authenticity.

Concluding Thoughts

It is inexpressibly sad that what the Lord intended for great blessing so often results in untold heartache. The very gifts he showers on his people become the source of hurt and confusion when, on the one hand, they are not recognized and valued as His gifts, or, on the other, they are used unbiblically or unlovingly.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Instead, we can determine we will plead for God's continual resourcing, steward His endowments, and responsibly use His gifts to accomplish His aim of making disciples. We can be mature enough to allow for latitude in our individual understanding and practice. We can celebrate, rather than be threatened by, our differences and together praise our generous and provident Father who dispenses His gifts with such unfailing wisdom. We can be and do these things by trusting in His grace to increase our knowledge of His ways and our love for each other.

To this end we commend to you this Position Statement and pray that God will use it to allay fears, establish guidelines, build up his church, and - in every way - bring honor and praise to himself!

Additional Reading

Note: The inclusion of these books does not constitute a blanket endorsement of everything they teach. They are included here because they are, on balance, believed to contain a great deal of information that can further inform our understanding of spiritual gifts. But like the Christians in Berea (Acts 17.10-12), we must carefully compare all truth claims against the canon of scripture. With that caveat, then, we think you will find the following books helpful.

Banister, Doug. *The Word and Power Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

King, Paul. *Genuine Gold: The Cautiously Charismatic Story of the Early Christian and Missionary Alliance*. Tulsa: Word and Spirit Press, 2007.

Kraft, Charles H. *I Give You Authority*. Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1997.

———. *Christianity with Power*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005.

Deere, Jack. *Surprised by the Voice of God*. Zondervan, 1998.

———. *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.

Nathan, Rich and Ken Wilson. *Empowered Evangelicals: Bringing Together the Best of the Evangelical and Charismatic Worlds*. Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 1995.

Wimber, John and Kevin Springer. *Power Evangelism*. Ventura: Regal, 2009.

———. *Power Healing*. New York: HarperOne, 1991.