LEGACY CHURCH

Spiritual Gifts

A Position Paper of Legacy Church

Introduction

The Holy Spirit does not come to the believer empty-handed. When He takes up residence in a person at the moment of salvation, He brings gifts, specific capacities for service, given to every believer without exception, distributed according to His own sovereign wisdom, and intended for one purpose above all others: the building up of the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are not achievements, not rewards for spiritual maturity, and not signs of divine favoritism. They are the Spirit's toolbox, placed in the hands of ordinary people so that the extraordinary work of forming a community of Christlikeness can go forward.

Few topics in contemporary Christianity have generated more confusion than this one. On one side, some traditions have effectively removed the gifts from active expectation, teaching that the more dramatic manifestations ceased with the apostolic age and that the church today operates without them. On the other side, some movements have so elevated certain gifts that they have become markers of spiritual status, sources of division, and measures of maturity that Scripture never assigns to them. Both errors are pastoral problems with real consequences for the people of God.

Legacy Church is continuationist. We believe the Holy Spirit continues to distribute gifts to His people today, as He wills, for the common good of the church. We hold this conviction with equal commitment to the governing principles Scripture places around the gifts: love is supreme, order is required, and the edification of the body is the standard by which every expression of gift is measured.

This paper addresses the broad theology of spiritual gifts. We have produced separate, more detailed papers on the specific gifts of tongues, prophecy, and healing, which are among the most debated. What follows here is the foundation on which those discussions rest.

I

Old Testament Foundations

The Spirit's gifts to His people are not a New Testament innovation. The Old Testament consistently portrays the Spirit of God equipping specific individuals with specific capacities for specific tasks, always in service of something larger than themselves.

Bezalel is filled with the Spirit of God with "ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze" for the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 31:3-4). The Spirit rushes upon the judges to empower them for military deliverance. The Spirit descends on the prophets to enable them to receive and declare the word of God. He falls on the seventy elders in Numbers 11, and they prophesy, because Moses's burden of leadership is too great for one man and God distributes it among many. The pattern is consistent: the Spirit equips whoever He wills with whatever is needed for the community of God's people to flourish.

What the Old Testament also makes clear is that these gifts are not ends in themselves. Bezalel's craftsmanship serves the tabernacle, which serves the worship of God and the dwelling of His presence among His people. The judges' strength serves the deliverance of Israel. The prophets' words serve the covenant faithfulness of the nation. The gifts are always instrumental. They are given for something and they are evaluated by whether that something is accomplished.

The Old Testament also anticipates a future expansion of the Spirit's gifting. Joel's prophecy that the Spirit will be poured out on all flesh, that sons and daughters will prophesy, that old men will dream dreams and young men will see visions (Joel 2:28-29), points toward a new covenant reality in which the Spirit's gifts are distributed broadly rather than selectively. What was exceptional in the old covenant, a prophet here, a judge there, becomes the norm in the new: every believer is indwelt, and each is equipped.

II

New Testament Understanding

The Diversity of Gifts

The New Testament presents several lists of spiritual gifts, and they are notably varied. Romans 12:6-8 includes prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and mercy. First Corinthians 12:8-10 adds wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Ephesians 4:11 describes the gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher given specifically for the equipping of the saints. First Peter 4:10-11 organizes gifts broadly around speaking and serving.

These lists are not identical, and they are almost certainly not exhaustive. The New Testament is giving representative categories, not a comprehensive taxonomy. What they share is a single underlying conviction: the Spirit distributes gifts in diversity, to different people, in different measure, for the same ultimate purpose. No one person has all the gifts, and no one gift is given to all people. The diversity is intentional. It creates mutual dependence. It makes the body function as a body rather than as a collection of self-sufficient individuals.

The Purpose of Gifts: The Common Good

Paul's governing statement about the gifts is deceptively simple: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Not for personal enrichment. Not as evidence of spiritual achievement. Not as a platform for recognition. For the common good. The gifts of the Spirit are communal by design. They are given to one person for the benefit of many. A gift exercised only for the sake of the one who has it has missed the point entirely.

This is why Paul's extended discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14 is bracketed by the great love chapter. First Corinthians 13 is not a detour from the gifts discussion. It is the center of it. Paul is saying, with structural force, that gifts exercised without love are noise. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). The gifts are servants of love. When they stop serving love and start serving the ego of the one who has them, they have become their opposite.

The same logic governs Ephesians 4, where Paul describes the purpose of the gifts given to the church through its leadership: "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12-13). The destination is corporate maturity. The gifts are the means. They are not the destination.

Gifts and Fruit: The Right Order

One of the most important distinctions Scripture makes is between the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. The fruit, described in Galatians 5:22-23 as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, is the mark of the Spirit's transforming work in the life of every believer. The gifts are the Spirit's equipping of specific believers for specific service. Both are genuine works of the Spirit. But they are not equal in their significance as measures of spiritual health.

Jesus is explicit on this point. He does not say that false prophets will be exposed by their lack of gifts. He says they will be known by their fruit (Matthew 7:16-20). The gifts can be counterfeited, or they can coexist with deeply disordered character. In Matthew 7:22-23, people will come to Jesus claiming to have prophesied, cast out demons, and done mighty works in His name, and He will say He never knew them. These are gifts. They are not proof of relationship. Fruit, the slower and less spectacular work of character formed over time in the ordinary disciplines of the Christian life, is the more reliable evidence of what is real.

A spirituality that places gifts above fruit has the order backwards. Gifts are given to serve the body. Fruit is the evidence that the Spirit is at work in the individual. We should earnestly desire the gifts and judge spiritual maturity by the fruit.

Order and Edification

Paul's extended instructions in 1 Corinthians 14 make clear that the exercise of spiritual gifts in the gathered community is not meant to be unregulated. "Let all things be done for building up" (1 Corinthians 14:26) is the governing principle. "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33) is the theological ground. Order in the use of gifts is not quenching the Spirit. It is honoring Him by practicing what He Himself mandated. Unregulated spiritual enthusiasm was a problem in the first century, and the Spirit's response through Paul was not to affirm it but to govern it.

The New Testament presents spiritual gifts as diverse, distributed to all believers, given for the common good, governed by love, ordered by wisdom, and always subordinate to the goal of building up the body of Christ toward maturity in Him.

III

Early Church (First 300 Years)

The early church operated in an environment of evident spiritual vitality, in which the gifts described in the New Testament were understood as normal features of the church's life. At the same time, the early fathers consistently located the gifts within a framework of doctrinal accountability, pastoral oversight, and love for the body.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD)

writes in his *Dialogue with Trypho* that "prophetical gifts remain with us, even to the present time," and that various gifts could be observed in the Christian communities of his day. His point is apologetic as well as descriptive: the Spirit's activity in the church is evidence of the truth of the gospel and the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises. But Justin's discussion of the gifts is always oriented outward, toward witness, and never inward, toward individual spiritual elevation.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202 AD)

gives one of the most comprehensive early accounts of the gifts in *Against Heresies*, affirming that healings, prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the discernment of spirits were all present in the churches of his time. Crucially, however, Irenaeus frames all of these within the apostolic rule of faith. The gifts are genuine and their presence is welcome, but they carry no authority independent of Scripture and the apostolic tradition. A gift that contradicts the teaching of the apostles is to be rejected regardless of how impressive it appears.

Origen (c. 185-254 AD)

acknowledged that miraculous gifts were more commonly reported in the church's earlier period and somewhat less frequent in his own day, but he did not draw the cessationist conclusion from this observation. For Origen, the Spirit continues to act, and the gifts continue to serve the church's mission. The variation in their frequency reflects the sovereign freedom of the Spirit rather than the withdrawal of the gifts.

The Montanist crisis of the second century, discussed more fully in our position paper on prophecy, was the early church's clearest confrontation with ungoverned spiritual enthusiasm. The movement's claim that ongoing ecstatic revelation superseded apostolic teaching was rejected, but the rejection was not of the gifts themselves. It was of the heretical framework in which they were being exercised. The mainstream church continued to affirm the gifts. It simply refused to allow any gift to stand above Scripture and the apostolic community's discernment.

The early church affirmed the ongoing presence of spiritual gifts while insisting that all gifts operate within the bounds of apostolic teaching, pastoral accountability, and love for the body. The gifts were never treated as independent authorities or as measures of spiritual superiority.

IV

The Reformers

The Reformers' position on spiritual gifts was shaped by two things: their deep commitment to the authority of Scripture and their pastoral concern about the enthusiasm movements that were proliferating around them, claiming direct revelation from the Spirit while often departing from biblical teaching. Their caution was not skepticism toward the Spirit but discernment toward those who claimed to speak for Him.

Both Luther and Calvin leaned toward what would later be called cessationism regarding the more dramatic gifts, arguing that the miraculous signs had served the specific purpose of confirming the gospel in its initial proclamation and were not intended as permanent features of the church's life. Calvin writes in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 14 that the gift of tongues and certain other gifts were given for the "infancy of the Church" and were less necessary once the church had been established and the Scriptures completed.

However, neither Reformer denied the ongoing work of the Spirit in the church. They affirmed the gifts of teaching, preaching, leadership, mercy, and service as genuine Spirit-given capacities essential to the church's health in every age. Their cessationism was targeted at specific gifts they saw being abused by enthusiasm movements, not at the broader category of Spirit-empowered ministry.

The Reformers' instinct, that the Spirit works through ordinary means rather than extraordinary manifestation as the norm, has shaped Reformed and Presbyterian traditions ever since. It is a valuable corrective to excess. But as a comprehensive account of the Spirit's gifts, it leaves significant portions of Scripture's teaching underweighted, particularly Paul's commands to earnestly desire the gifts and not to quench the Spirit.

V

Mainstream Western Christianity

The twentieth century brought the question of spiritual gifts to the center of Western Christianity in an unprecedented way. The Pentecostal movement beginning in the early 1900s, followed by the Charismatic Renewal of the 1960s and 1970s, reintroduced the more dramatic gifts to broad swaths of Protestant and Catholic Christianity that had functionally set them aside. The result was both renewal and controversy, genuine fruit alongside genuine excess, and a church landscape that remains sharply divided on the question today.

Cessationism holds that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit, primarily tongues, prophecy, healing, and miracles, ceased with the death of the apostles or the completion of the New Testament canon. The gifts served a specific foundational purpose, and that purpose having been accomplished, they are no longer distributed. Many Reformed, Presbyterian, and Baptist traditions hold this view. At its best, cessationism produces churches with strong biblical literacy and doctrinal stability. At its worst, it produces a Christianity that is theologically sound but experientially thin, that reads about the Spirit in the text without expecting to encounter Him in the present.

Continuationism holds that all the gifts described in the New Testament continue to be distributed by the Spirit today, as He wills, for the common good of the church. This is the position of the majority of the global church, including Pentecostal, Charismatic, and many evangelical traditions. At its best, continuationism produces churches alive to the Spirit's activity, expectant in prayer, and open to God acting in ways that exceed natural explanation. At its worst, it produces an atmosphere of spiritual pressure, where gifts become measures of maturity, the dramatic is elevated over the faithful, and experiences are not adequately tested against Scripture.

The New Testament's own approach neither ignores the gifts nor elevates them above their proper function. It eagerly desires them, carefully governs them, and relentlessly subordinates them to love and the building up of the body. This is the path Legacy Church seeks to walk.

VI

Key Scriptures on Spiritual Gifts

> 1 Corinthians 12:4-7
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> *"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

> 1 Corinthians 12:11
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> *"All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills."*

> 1 Corinthians 13:1-3
>
> *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."*

> 1 Corinthians 14:1
>
> *"Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts."*

> 1 Corinthians 14:26
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> *"What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up."*

> Ephesians 4:11-13
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> *"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."*

> Romans 12:6-8
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> *"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."*

> 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21
>
> *"Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good."*

> 1 Peter 4:10-11
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> *"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace... in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ."*

VII

Legacy Church Position

At Legacy Church, we believe the gifts of the Spirit continue today, practiced with biblical wisdom and unity. We are continuationists. We affirm that the same Spirit who distributed gifts to the first-century church distributes them to the church in every age, as He wills, for the common good. We do not believe the New Testament gives adequate grounds for declaring any category of gift permanently withdrawn, and we do not wish to place limits on the Spirit's activity that Scripture does not place.

At the same time, we hold this conviction with a set of governing commitments that shape how we think about and practice the gifts. These are not restrictions designed to suppress the Spirit. They are the very boundaries the Spirit Himself established in Scripture. To honor them is to honor Him.

Every Believer Has a Gift

The Spirit gives gifts to every member of the body, not only to leaders or to the visibly gifted. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). No member of this church is without a Spirit-given capacity for service. Part of our calling as a community is to help every person identify and develop what the Spirit has given them, so that the body is built up through all of its parts working properly.

Gifts Are for the Body, Not the Individual

Every spiritual gift is communal by design. It is given to one person for the benefit of many. A gift exercised primarily for one's own benefit, for personal experience, for the building of a platform, or for the earning of respect has been redirected away from its purpose. We ask that every expression of gift in our community be oriented toward a simple question: is this building up the body of Christ?

Love Is Supreme

1 Corinthians 13 is not an interruption of the gifts discussion. It is its governing center. Love is not merely one quality a gift-bearer should possess alongside their gift. Love is the environment in which every gift is meant to operate, and without which every gift becomes something less than itself. We will pursue the gifts, and we will pursue love more. Any exercise of gift that produces pride, division, or harm to the body has failed at the most basic test, regardless of how impressive it appears.

Fruit Is the Measure of Maturity, Not Gifts

We reject the use of spiritual gifts as markers of spiritual maturity or closeness to God. The gifts are distributed by the Spirit as He wills, not as rewards for faithfulness. A person may be richly gifted and spiritually immature. A person may be bearing deep, lasting fruit and exercising a gift that receives little public attention. We judge maturity by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, not by impressiveness of gifting.

All Things Must Be Done for Building Up

"Let all things be done for building up" (1 Corinthians 14:26) is the standard we apply to every expression of gift in our gathered life. God is not a God of confusion but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). We welcome the Spirit's activity and we insist on order, not because order is an end in itself, but because confusion does not serve the people the gifts are meant to serve.

Test Everything

Paul commands us not to quench the Spirit and not to despise prophecies, but equally commands us to test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). These commands belong together. Openness without discernment is not faith. It is credulity. We welcome what the Spirit is doing and we test it against Scripture, weigh it in community, and submit it to pastoral oversight. Anything that cannot bear that scrutiny should not be allowed to shape the life of the church.

No Gift Creates a Spiritual Elite

We refuse to create hierarchies of spirituality based on gift. Those who speak in tongues are not more spiritual than those who do not. Those who have gifts of leadership or teaching are not closer to God than those whose gifts are service and mercy. The body needs every member, and every member needs every other. The gifts create mutual dependence, not graduated ranks. We will work actively against any culture in our church in which certain gifts are treated as marks of superior standing.

Specific Gifts

Legacy Church has produced separate, more detailed position papers on the specific gifts of tongues, prophecy, and healing, which are among the most discussed and debated in the contemporary church. Those papers address the biblical, historical, and practical dimensions of each gift in greater depth. We commend them to anyone seeking a more thorough treatment of those specific subjects.

What applies to each of those gifts, and to every other gift the Spirit distributes, is the framework this paper has established. The gifts continue. They are given for the common good. They are governed by love. They are tested by Scripture. They build up the body. And they are never the measure of a person's standing before God, which rests entirely on the grace of Christ received through faith.

Our Commitment

We will not quench the Spirit by creating an environment where His gifts are unwelcome. We will not despise what He is doing by refusing to take the gifts seriously. And we will not elevate the gifts beyond what Scripture warrants, using them as a basis for division, pride, or the creation of a two-tier Christianity.

We will pursue love. We will earnestly desire the gifts. We will test everything. We will hold fast to what is good. And in all of it, we will seek the one thing Paul says the gifts are given for: the building up of the body of Christ, until we all arrive at mature manhood, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

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