

We Believe in the Holy Spirit

LESSON
THREE

IN THE CHURCH



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We Believe in the Holy Spirit

Lesson Three

In the Church

INTRODUCTION

On the last night the Lord Jesus spent with his disciples before his crucifixion, he talked with them about many things. One of his main goals that night was to prepare them for the future — not just for his arrest and death, but also for when he ascended to heaven. And one of the most amazing things he told them was that they would be better off once he was gone. Can you imagine speaking with Jesus face to face, and having him tell you that? It almost sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? That is, until you hear the reason why. You see, once the Lord Jesus was gone, God's Holy Spirit would come to them. The Spirit would enable them to fulfill their roles in the founding of Christ's church. And he would empower the church to build God's kingdom throughout the world.

This is our third lesson in the series *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*. We've entitled this lesson "In the Church," because we'll be focusing on the Holy Spirit's work within the community of God's covenant people.

In a prior lesson, we explored the Holy Spirit's providential work in the world at large. Before the days of Abraham, God dealt with all human beings in the same way. But in this lesson, we'll look at the providential work he does within just a segment of humanity. Beginning with Abraham, God entered into a special relationship with a distinct group of people. And he created a covenant to govern this relationship. From Abraham onward, God has always had a special covenant people. And we call this covenant people "the church."

Most people are familiar with the New Testament church. But although many modern translations don't reflect this, Scripture also refers to ancient Israel — Abraham's descendants — as "the church." The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, uses the Greek term *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) to designate the "assembly" or "congregation" of Israel. This is the same word commonly translated "church" in the New Testament. The Septuagint uses this term as a name for Israel in places like Deuteronomy 9:10, and 31:30; Judges 20:2; 1 Kings 8:14; and Psalm 22:22, 25. Even the New Testament refers to national Israel as an *ekklesia* in Acts 7:38. And listen to how Peter described the church in 1 Peter 2:9:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).

In speaking of the New Testament church, Peter called it by several Old Testament names for the nation of Israel.

As we read in Exodus 19:6, God called Israel, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." In Deuteronomy 7:6, Israel is referred to as "a people holy to the Lord ... his treasured possession." And in Isaiah 62:12, we read, "Israel will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord." When Peter referred to the New Testament church by

Israel's Old Testament names, he indicated that these two groups constitute a single, continuous covenant people.

Some believers have the idea that the church was created in the New Testament, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit... But the correct concept is that the church is an extension of the Old Testament church. God called Abraham and his people in the Old Testament, and they were the people of the Lord in the Old Testament, the church in the Old Testament. And this same church is extended in our day, and will continue until the second coming of Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Riad Kassis, translation

Of course, there are differences between God's covenant communities in the Old and New Testaments. But their continuity helps us understand the Holy Spirit's work. In both Testaments, and throughout history since then, the Spirit's work among God's covenant people has greatly surpassed his work in the rest of creation. So, in this lesson, when we use the word "church," we'll have both the Old Testament and New Testament covenant communities in mind.

We'll explore the Holy Spirit's work of providence in the church in three parts. First, we'll look at his covenant grace. Second, we'll consider his provision of Scripture. And third, we'll address spiritual gifts. Let's look first at the Holy Spirit's covenant grace.

COVENANT GRACE

In both the Old and the New Testament, Scripture describes God's relationship with his church as a covenant. The word "covenant" is translated from the Hebrew word *berith* (בְּרִית), and the Greek word *diatheke* (διαθήκη). These are the same words the ancient world used to describe international treaties. In particular, God's covenant relationship with his people resembles ancient treaties between great emperors or suzerains and the vassal kingdoms that served them.

Ancient suzerain-vassal treaties shared three features in common: They expressed the suzerain's benevolence toward his vassal. They defined the loyalty the suzerain required of his vassal. And they explained the consequences that would result from the vassal's loyalty or disloyalty. And these treaties, or covenants, continued throughout the generations, so that the successors of the vassals would continue to serve the successors of the suzerains. In a similar fashion, God's covenants record his benevolence toward his people, explain the loyalty they owe him, and describe the consequences for obedience or disobedience.

In our last lesson, we mentioned that the Holy Spirit's work in the world includes common grace. Common grace is the Spirit's work of promoting goodness and life in all humanity — a type of general benevolence. But God's covenant with the church includes

an even greater measure of benevolence, promoting goodness and life that exceeds common grace. And it includes greater patience, forbearance and mercy than the rest of humanity receives. This is true for everyone in the church, whether or not they have saving faith.

One of the common values or beliefs that we have in our culture today is that God's treats everybody equally. But I think in the New Testament what we see is that God actually treats his covenant people with a greater blessing and a greater amount of grace than he does with the rest of the world. It doesn't mean he doesn't care about everyone. It doesn't mean that his grace is not common in some way to all. But when it comes to his children, I think the stakes get raised a bit. And this shouldn't surprise us. An earthly father can love the other children in the neighborhood, but he'd better be loving and caring for *his own* children in a far greater way than he does for those others. And so, I think we see that same thing in the New Testament, that God pours out on those who are his even greater blessing, a greater sense of love and encouragement and support. And that should only be natural. We should understand that that's what we would want to see in a God who calls himself "Father."

— Dr. Dan Lacich

We'll consider the Spirit's work of covenant grace first by focusing on the church in the Old Testament, and then by looking at the church in the New Testament. Let's begin with the Old Testament expressions of covenant grace.

OLD TESTAMENT

In the days of Abraham, Moses and David, God made covenants that extended special grace to the entire nation of Israel. He first created Israel as a special nation when he called Abraham into a covenant relationship in Genesis 15, 17. This covenant graciously promised that Abraham's descendants would inherit the Promised Land, and that they would rule over all the nations of the earth. As Paul wrote in Romans 4:13:

Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world (Romans 4:13).

Moreover, Abraham received this promise on the basis of God's grace, which Abraham received through faith. As we read in Romans 4:16:

The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring (Romans 4:16).

And throughout Israel's history, God continued to deal with them graciously. Everyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that the nation of Israel was often unfaithful to God. They grumbled against him. They resented his plans for them. They worshiped other gods. They mistreated their neighbors. In fact, they did all these things even while God was redeeming them from slavery in Egypt! Listen to how Isaiah conceived of God's covenant grace in Isaiah 63:11-14:

[In] the days of Moses ... [he] brought them through the sea ... [He] set his Holy Spirit among them ... sent his glorious arm of power to be at Moses' right hand ... divided the waters before them ... [and] led them through the depths... [T]hey were given rest by the Spirit of the Lord (Isaiah 63:11-14).

God showed covenant grace to Israel when he rescued them from Egypt. He divided the Red Sea for them, destroyed Pharaoh's army, and gave Israel rest in the Promised Land. Despite these blessings, Israel continued to sin against him. But even as they continued to sin, God's Spirit continued to extend covenant mercy and grace to them.

In the Old Testament, God is patient and gracious towards everybody ... but he's especially patient with Israel because he had a covenant with Israel. He said, "I haven't done this for you, O Israel, because you were so righteous, or because you were the greatest of all peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples." He says, "I did this for you because I loved you and because I made a promise to your ancestors." Also, Israel was to be the vehicle through whom God was to reveal himself to the nations. God said to Abraham that he had chosen Abraham so that he would raise his descendants in the right way so that they would follow God's covenant. So, all through, God is patient, but God was especially patient with Israel because of his covenant with them and because God had a purpose to bless all the nations through the seed of Abraham.

— Dr. Craig S. Keener

Nehemiah 9 summarizes Israel's national history from Abraham through the attempted restoration of the kingdom in the fifth century B.C. And throughout this summary, it says that God treated Israel with love and mercy, despite their flagrant rebellion. Listen to just a couple of examples of the Spirit's covenant grace in this chapter. In Nehemiah 9:17-20, we read:

You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, "This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt," or when they committed awful blasphemies. Because of your great compassion you did not abandon

them in the desert... You gave your good Spirit to instruct them (Nehemiah 9:17-20).

Here, Nehemiah referred to Israel's sin in the days of Moses. The fact that Israel committed these idolatries and blasphemies proves that many Israelites weren't true believers. Even so, they were still in covenant with God, and he still treated them with covenant grace. As Nehemiah emphasized, God sent his Spirit not to punish Israel, but to instruct them.

In the days of David, God graciously established a permanent dynasty in Israel. But the people were so unfaithful that in 930 B.C. God divided the kingdom into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. For the next several hundred years, God continued to express covenant grace by sending prophets to encourage the people to repent. But they didn't. So, he sent Israel into exile in 722 B.C., and Judah into exile in 586 B.C. But even then, he maintained his covenant grace. As we read in Nehemiah 9:30-31:

By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God (Nehemiah 9:30-31).

The attempted kingdom restoration in Nehemiah's time was another example of God's covenant grace. It ultimately failed because the people continued to be unfaithful. But God's covenant grace stood firm, so that he protected and sustained the nation for the next five centuries, and promised to restore them to faith through his Messiah or Christ. Listen to how Zechariah 12:10 describes this coming salvation:

I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication (Zechariah 12:10, NASB).

Some translations render this "a spirit" rather than "the Spirit." But when the verb "pour out," or *shaphakh* (שָׁפַךְ) in Hebrew, is used with the word "spirit," it generally indicates that *God's* Spirit is in view. We see similar ideas in Isaiah 32:15, and 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; and Joel 2:28, 29.

Ancient Israel's history is characterized by failure and hope. God's covenant promises guaranteed Israel's ultimate success. But Israel's near-constant rebellion against God meant that, generation after generation, they fell under the consequences of disobedience. Israel's kingdom was divided in two, and each part was dragged away into exile for its own sin. When their exile ended, their restoration attempts failed because they wouldn't remain faithful to the one that had rescued them. Even so, God's covenant grace remained strong. And in that grace, he eventually sent Jesus to rescue his covenant nation. Some in that nation received him as Messiah and they became the early constituents of the church.

Keeping in mind how the Spirit providentially dealt with the church in the Old Testament, let's turn our attention to his New Testament covenant grace.

NEW TESTAMENT

Just like the church in the Old Testament, the New Testament church contains both believers and unbelievers. And, just as in the Old Testament, the *entire* church community is in covenant with God. This is why the New Testament often addresses the matter of unbelievers in the church. For example, Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds, in Matthew 13:24-30, assumes that there will be unbelievers in the church, and it warns that even professing believers might not be saved. In Galatians 5:4, Paul said that those who were trying to be justified by the law had fallen away from grace. First Timothy 1:19, 20 speaks of some that had "shipwrecked their faith" and had been "handed over to Satan." Hebrews 6:4-6 also warns that those who have shared in the Holy Spirit can fall away and be lost. All these ideas are points of continuity between the church in the Old and New Testaments. Listen to how Hebrews 10:26-29 speaks of unbelievers in the church:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left ... Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy ... How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:26-29).

There are certainly unbelievers in the church, and they will eventually fall under God's judgment. But prior to this, they receive covenant grace. They have "knowledge of the truth." They're sanctified by "the blood of the covenant." And the "Spirit of grace" ministers to them.

Hopefully, most of the people in our churches are believers. But regardless of our faith, the fact that we're in covenant with God means that the Holy Spirit shows us a measure of covenant grace. This isn't saving grace — that grace is reserved for believers. But it's still grace. It's still unmerited favor from God that improves our lives and presents us with the opportunity to be saved.

Unsaved people do benefit from being in covenant with God... That is to say that they are members of the visible church, to be technical. And the visible church is where God does very much display his character through the preaching of the word, through the presence of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These people are benefiting by simply being observers of these things, of hearing the Word taught to them. They have the accountability provided by the leaders of the church... Not only that, I would add that in the visible

church, God — in maybe some mysterious ways — protects his people. He guards them from things they might otherwise be exposed to... They're actually, therefore, more accountable to him than they would have been otherwise. They will have more to answer to one day, but in the meantime they have all these amazing privileges, and God, I think, is pursuing them, reaching out to them in all sorts of ways, giving them teaching, giving them the gospel, opportunities to believe and follow after him, and I would definitely say that even though they're unsaved, being in covenant with God is a tremendous blessing.

— Rev. Mike Osborne

Think of it this way: everyone that is part of the church is regularly presented with the gospel and the opportunity to repent and be saved. And we all share in the grace that God grants the church as a whole, such as protection from our enemies, provision of our earthly needs, and forbearance when it comes to earthly punishment for our sins. Consider the example of the early church, in Acts 9:31, which says:

The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31).

The Spirit graciously restrains our sin, and gives us all a measure of peace, strength and encouragement.

Beyond this, the Holy Spirit ministers to everyone in the church through the fellowship or communion of the church. He strengthens and prompts all of its members to love, support and help each other. For instance, covenant grace includes the church sharing material goods and money, as we see in Acts 2:44, and 2 Corinthians 9:13, 14. And it includes the unity and peace we share with each other, as Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:3. And as we'll see throughout the rest of this lesson, it also includes a variety of other gracious ministries of the Spirit.

Having considered the Holy Spirit's providential works of covenant grace in the church, let's turn to his provision of Scripture.

SCRIPTURE

Many human beings have access to Scripture. But it's important to recognize that Scripture wasn't revealed to humanity at large. It was given particularly to God's covenant community — Christ's church. The Holy Spirit chose people from his covenant community as Scripture's divinely inspired human authors. And in both the Old and the New Testaments, they delivered their writings to the church.

In this lesson, we'll focus on just three aspects of Scripture that help us see the Holy Spirit's work in the church. First, we'll talk about the Spirit's inspiration of

Scripture. Second, we'll look at the Spirit's unified message in Scripture. And third, we'll address his covenant purpose for the church in Scripture. Let's start with the Spirit's inspiration.

INSPIRATION

The word "inspire" means "breathe into." So, when we say that the Holy Spirit inspired human authors, we mean that he breathed his words into them. This is why 2 Timothy 3:16 says:

All Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16).

Scholars have different ideas of how the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture, and of what roles the Holy Spirit and human authors played. But in general, these views fall into three categories.

Most critical interpreters embrace a view we might call "romantic inspiration." They believe that the Holy Spirit simply motivated the human authors to write, much like an artist might be "inspired" or motivated by a great idea or a beautiful landscape. In this sense, the Holy Spirit didn't actually control or supervise the words of Scripture. So, Scripture was really written only by its human authors.

Many conservative Christians hold to a view we might call "mechanical inspiration." In this perspective, the Holy Spirit so controlled the human authors that these men had little to no creative input into Scripture. This view is sometimes called "dictation," since it views the human authors simply as secretaries who wrote down the exact words the Spirit told them.

In contrast with romantic and mechanical inspiration, the Bible promotes a view we might call "organic inspiration." This view is called "organic" because it appeals to the natural writing process of Scripture's human authors, using their own ideas, words and personalities. So, it's far from mechanical. But it's also distinct from romantic inspiration because it says that the Holy Spirit superintended their writings in ways that ensured they would say what he wanted them to say, and that prevented them from falling into error. Listen to how Peter described inspiration in 2 Peter 1:20-21. He said:

No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Peter didn't deny the role or even the will of Scripture's human authors. He simply insisted that Scripture originated with the Holy Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit superintended their writing.

In this sense, the Holy Spirit really is the author of Scripture, and not just its motivator. We see similar ideas in passages like 2 Samuel 23:2; Acts 1:16, and 4:25; and Hebrews 3:7. On the other hand, other biblical authors indicated their own personal

involvement in, and contributions to, their writings. Listen to how the gospel writer Luke described his work in Luke 1:3:

Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account (Luke 1:3).

Luke didn't deny the Holy Spirit's involvement in his writing. He simply made it clear that he wrote according to his own understanding, and that he recorded things he himself had researched. In this sense, Luke and Scripture's other human writers really were *authors*, and not just *secretaries* taking dictation.

The Holy Spirit and the human authors, the authors of Scripture, work together in organic inspiration. As the biblical author is writing, the Holy Spirit is coming alongside and moving, prompting that biblical author to write what we now call the Word of God. So, there was a confluence, a coming together, a writing together of the Spirit who was superintending the writing process and the biblical author, like Moses or Isaiah or Paul, who was the actual *writer* of Scripture, this cooperative effort, so that the Spirit and the biblical authors composed Scripture together.

— Dr. Gregg R. Allison

Now, even though all Scripture was organically inspired, we have to admit that the Spirit worked with human authors in a range of ways. Some parts of the Bible come close to dictation, such as when God told Isaiah what to say in Isaiah 6:9, 10. And Moses said that God himself wrote the Ten Commandments with his own finger, as we read in Exodus 31:18. Still, we have to remember that the books of Scripture are reports of the things God said and did. They are books written by human authors to record these events. We don't have a single book of Scripture that consists entirely of quotations from God.

Other parts of Scripture seem to be closer to romantic inspiration, such as the books of wisdom where the authors considered earthly concerns. For example, Proverbs 30:25-28 reflects on the daily lives of ants, coneys, locusts and lizards. Certainly no one would argue that only the Holy Spirit could grant the knowledge that ants store up food in the summer!

Nevertheless, Scripture demonstrates at least two things: One, the human authors of Scripture weren't just secretaries writing words dictated by the Spirit. And two, regardless of the occasional resemblance to romantic inspiration, the Holy Spirit was always intimately involved in revealing God's word to the church, and in recording it for the church through his inspired human authors.

Having looked at the Holy Spirit's inspiration of Scripture, let's talk about his primary message in the Bible.

MESSAGE

We can describe Scripture’s central message in different ways. For one, we might see it as the history of humanity’s creation, fall into sin, redemption, and ultimate glorification. Or we might follow a more systematic approach by speaking of humanity’s belief in and duty to God. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s answer 3 says:

The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

Or we could summarize the Bible’s central message as Jesus did in terms of love for God and love for neighbor. In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus taught:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40).

When Jesus said “the Law and the Prophets,” he meant all of the Old Testament Scriptures. So, we could summarize the Old Testament — and by implication, the New Testament as well — using the two greatest commandments.

But when we talk about the Holy Spirit’s primary message in Scripture, we have something else in mind — something that incorporates all of these summaries. What modern readers often miss is that these summaries are entirely covenantal. And *this* is the Holy Spirit’s foremost message to his church. Scripture is fundamentally a *covenant document*. It reveals God to his covenant people in ways that define and explain our relationship with him. It records his covenant benevolence toward us. It explains the human loyalty he requires from us. And it outlines the consequences of our obedience or disobedience — including our ultimate salvation or condemnation. In one way or another, every passage of Scripture serves these basic covenant functions.

For example, when theologians tell the story of the creation, fall, redemption and glorification of humanity, they typically do so through the various covenant administrations associated with each period. So, if we describe Scripture’s message in these terms, we generally consider the covenant administrations of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. And each of these administrations teaches us what it means to be in covenant with God.

If we consider the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s summary of Scripture’s message, we see that it focuses on God himself, including his benevolence, and on the human loyalty he requires — both characteristics of a covenant relationship. And if we choose to summarize the Bible’s message as Jesus did in Matthew 22, we can’t help but recognize its covenantal nature.

The commandment to love God comes from Deuteronomy 6:5. That chapter presents a tremendous summary of God’s covenant relationship with his people. First, it reminds Israel that they are God’s covenant people, according to the promises he made to

them. Second, it recalls God's divine benevolence in freeing Israel from slavery in Egypt. Third, it emphasizes the need for human loyalty in obeying all of God's laws with a sincere and loving heart. And fourth, it explains the great blessings his people will receive if they keep his law, and the terrible curses they'll suffer if they rebel against him. So, when we get to Deuteronomy 6:5, we're to understand that the commandment to love God includes all of these ideas.

When we are given the commandment to love God with all our mind, soul and heart, it affects all areas of our lives. In other words, it could have been translated, "Love God with all your being." The Lord who has made a covenant with us has given us a commitment to be faithful, and we, as the other part of the covenant, we have a duty to be faithful to the God who has covenanted with us... In other words, loving God with our minds, with our hearts and with our souls is the response of our faithfulness to God, the response of our loyalty to God. We are telling him, "Lord, we are putting all of our being before you."

— Pastor Ornan Cruz, translation

The commandment to love our neighbors is also fundamentally covenantal. The verse Jesus specifically quoted is Leviticus 19:18. Like Deuteronomy 6, Leviticus 19 emphasizes the covenant relationship between God and Israel. We see this especially in the repeated phrase, "I am the Lord your God." As Israel's God, his covenant extended to the whole community. So, Jesus reinforced loving our neighbors as fellow citizens in God's kingdom. We are to bless one another and avoid things like revenge and abuse because this is what God established as the basis of a covenantal society.

The entire message of Scripture relates to God's covenant. And this is true whether we see it as history, or systematic theology, or as a practical matter of living in fellowship with God and humanity. All Scripture is based on the covenant relationship between God and his people. And the Holy Spirit, in inspired Scripture, repeatedly emphasized this message of God's commitment to his people individually and corporately.

Now that we've examined the Holy Spirit's providential work of Scripture in terms of its inspiration and covenantal message, let's consider its purpose.

PURPOSE

Given that the Holy Spirit's central message in Scripture is covenantal, it follows that the central purpose of Scripture is also covenantal. It's important to keep in mind that because Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit, the human authors' purposes always agreed with the Spirit's. And we can confirm that this unified purpose was covenantal by looking at places where they stated it rather directly.

We'll mention four ways the Spirit revealed his covenantal purposes. First, Scripture identifies its authors and original audiences as members of God's covenant community.

Covenant community

The New Testament was written by apostles and prophets who served as God's covenant emissaries. Their job was to hold God's people accountable to his covenant. Beyond this, most of the New Testament letters, as well as the book of Revelation, explicitly name their audiences as churches, often in particular locations. The book of Hebrews is a notable exception, since it never names its audience. But it still includes greetings at the end that indicate it was also written to the church. First John doesn't name its audience specifically, but it indicates in no uncertain terms that the audience is Christian. First and 2 Timothy, Titus, and 2 and 3 John were written explicitly to individuals. But even those show evidence that their authors intended them for the broader church, and their inclusion in the New Testament verifies that inference. Something similar is true of Luke and Acts, which name Theophilus as their initial audience. And the very genre of gospel, as well as comments throughout the books, argues that the church is the original audience of Matthew, Mark and John.

And of course, the Old Testament contains many statements that identify its covenant audience, too. Many prophets specifically identified their audience as Judah or Israel. And even those prophets that spoke to Gentile nations — such as Obadiah, Jonah and Nahum — wrote their books for God's covenant people. Romans 9:4 and various other New Testament passages argue that the Old Testament was written for God's people. And there are many other indications that the Old Testament audience was God's covenant community. Consider Moses' words in Deuteronomy 4:8:

**What other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?
(Deuteronomy 4:8).**

Moses said that possessing the law distinguished Israel from all other nations. Only they had received God's law because only they were God's covenant people. We find this same idea in Exodus 24:1-12. There, Moses said that the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant were specific to Israel's covenant relationship with God.

This covenant audience is also apparent in 2 Kings 22, 23, where King Josiah of Judah renewed Israel's covenant with God. In these chapters, the priest Hilkiah found what he called "the Book of the Law" in the temple archives. Many scholars believe this was the book of Deuteronomy. Apparently, it had been stored and neglected for many years. When he read this book, he realized its covenant implications, and had it sent to King Josiah. And when Josiah read the book, he responded by reading the book to the assembly of Israel — the Old Testament church. He emphasized its covenant purpose by calling it "the Book of the Covenant." And he recommitted himself and his people to keeping its terms. Listen to this account in 2 Kings 23:2-3:

[Josiah] read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant ... The king ... renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord — to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant (2 Kings 23:2-3).

A second group of passages that demonstrate the Spirit's covenant purpose in Scripture are those that were written to show God's divine benevolence.

Divine benevolence

As we've said, God's covenant consists of three basic elements: God's divine benevolence; the human loyalty he requires; and the consequences for obedience and disobedience. When a biblical author mentioned one of these as his purpose, he intended to explain, confirm or emphasize God's covenant with his people.

Listen to how Psalm 102:17-18 speaks of God's divine benevolence:

[The Lord] will respond to the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their plea. Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord (Psalm 102:17-18).

The context of Psalm 102 indicates that the speaker was in need of help, and that he looked to God for kindness, mercy and rescue. He recognized God as the great emperor over the world, and asked God to meet his needs. The purpose of his psalm was to tell future generations about how God had rescued him so that they, too, would see God's benevolence and praise him. And this call to recognize God's benevolence was clearly covenantal. We also see God's benevolence in the introduction to Luke's gospel in 1:3-4, where Luke wrote:

It seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

The central message of Luke's gospel tells us that God sent his Son to become incarnate, to die an atoning death on our behalf, to be raised from the dead so that we might live, and to ascend into heaven to reign as our Messiah or Christ. There's no possible greater goodness and kindness than this! So, when Luke wrote to help Theophilus know these truths with certainty, his purpose, at least in part, was to record God's benevolence. And in this, we can see the Spirit's covenant purpose for this book.

In a similar but more direct way, in John 20:30-31, the apostle John also mentioned God's benevolence through Christ as the purpose of his gospel. He wrote:

Jesus did many other miraculous signs ... But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

In Luke 7 we read about how Jesus was asked by a centurion to heal a servant who was very valuable to him, and with just a word Jesus is able to speak and the servant is healed. And then right after that episode we read of how Jesus comes upon a funeral procession in the village of Nain, and there he finds a widow who is weeping inconsolably over the death of her son, and once again, with just a word, Jesus speaks and this young man is brought back to life... So, it shows who Jesus is, but his miracles also show that the kingdom of God is about restoration, that this servant and this widow's son were restored to their families, they were restored to their role as image bearers, that they could go back to work, that they could go back to the temple and worship God, that they could contribute once again to the flourishing of their community. So, Jesus' miracles show not only who Jesus is, but his great grace and benevolence, the benevolence of restoration.

— Dr. Greg Perry

Jesus' miracles were examples of God's benevolence. He healed the sick and the lame. He fed the hungry. He cured the demon-possessed. He raised the dead. In short, he gave people a foretaste of the blessings of God's earthly kingdom. These acts of benevolence were unmerited, undeserved, and in many cases even unprompted by those who received them. They flowed purely from God's goodness, kindness and mercy.

John's purpose was to showcase God's benevolence, so that we would be drawn to him for salvation through his Son. When we remember that all Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit, it's not difficult to see how this passage supports the Spirit's covenant purpose.

The third type of passage demonstrating the Spirit's covenant purpose focuses on human loyalty.

Human loyalty

Many times when biblical authors stated their purposes for writing, they mentioned human loyalty. They didn't just write to inform their readers about history, or to increase their wisdom and happiness. Through the Spirit's inspiration, they wrote to motivate their readers to obey God. As Paul wrote in Romans 1:5:

We received grace and apostleship to call people ... to the obedience that comes from faith (Romans 1:5).

And as he said in 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Every passage in the Bible teaches us how to be faithful, and how to live according to God's requirements. In other words, every passage teaches us about our covenant obligation of human loyalty. This idea is also explicit in Deuteronomy 29:29 which says:

The things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law (Deuteronomy 29:29).

We also see it in these words from 1 John 2:1:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin (1 John 2:1).

In some places, the instructions are rather specific. For instance, Ezekiel 43:11 was written with the express purpose of ensuring that the future temple would be built according to God's specifications. And in 1 Corinthians 5:11, Paul wrote so that the Corinthian Christians would not associate with those that professed faith in Christ, but lived immorally.

Now, we should stress that the human loyalty God requires from his church isn't mere outward obedience. Throughout Scripture, the Spirit made it clear that true covenant faithfulness is sincere and heartfelt, and motivated by love for God. Consider the words of Deuteronomy 6:1-6:

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe ... Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments ... are to be upon your hearts (Deuteronomy 6:1-6).

This passage contains the verse Jesus quoted in Matthew 22:37 — the one he called "the greatest commandment." And it closes with the idea that the law should be written on our hearts.

Loving God isn't simply a matter of emotion, and it's not simply a matter of obedience. It includes both. It is faithfulness and loyalty to God, expressed in heartfelt obedience to his commands. We find similar descriptions of love in places like Deuteronomy 11:13, and 30:1-6; and in Joshua 22:5. And listen to what Jesus said in John 14:15:

If you love me, you will obey what I command (John 14:15).

As the Holy Spirit spoke to his church through his inspired human authors, he never intended love for God to be the only law we should follow. Rather, he intended us to understand the fulfillment of every covenant requirement as an expression of love for God.

God cares a great deal why we are obedient to him, and he really desires that our obedience be to him because we love him. There are only a handful of ways why anyone would be obedient for something. One is a fear of punishment; that we don't want to have the repercussions for disobedience... Another option for us is we'll be obedient because we think if we are, we'll achieve something, we'll gain something, we will earn something... But yet, God doesn't want us to have a sense of having earned his favor on any level, and certainly we can't earn our salvation. So, that leaves us, really, with the motivation of love, that we obey God out of love for him. Jesus makes this point. He says, "If you do love me, you'll obey me. That's why I want you to obey, because you love me." Because when you obey out of love, you're not thinking about yourself. Obedience out of fear is about me. Obedience out of gain is about me. Obedience out of love is about the one I love, it's about my beloved, it's about honoring the one who I am obedient to, or who I am serving or in any way trying to honor. So, when we obey God out of love, it really takes the focus off of us and puts the focus on him and his goodness and his greatness.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

The fourth and final type of passage we'll mention that demonstrates the Spirit's covenant purpose in Scripture emphasizes covenant consequences.

Consequences

As you'll recall, the consequences of being in covenant with God include blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Many passages of Scripture display the Spirit's covenant purpose by encouraging the church to pursue God's blessings through faithful obedience. For instance, passages like Deuteronomy 6:1-4, teach that the purpose of God's commands was so that God's people would pursue his blessings by their obedience. And Joshua 1:8 says that the book of the Law was written to produce the obedience that leads to prosperity and success. First Kings 2:3, 4 tells us that the purpose of Moses' law includes teaching God's people how to prosper in his blessings, and how to produce the blessing of an everlasting Davidic dynasty. And listen to what Paul wrote about the Old Testament in Romans 15:4:

Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4).

Similarly, in John 20:31, John said that he wrote his gospel to lead people into God's covenant blessing of eternal life through Jesus. And in 1 John 5:13, he said that he wrote so that believers could be assured of their eternal life.

Scripture also indicates its purpose of warning against God's curses. Deuteronomy 28:58 teaches that if God's people don't obey the words written in Deuteronomy itself, they'll suffer his curses. Jeremiah 36:6, 7 indicates that Jeremiah's original book of prophecy was intended to produce repentance in God's people so that they would avoid his wrath. And in 1 Corinthians 10:11, 12, Paul again commented on the purpose of the Old Testament, saying that the troubles God's ancient people suffered were written down as warnings to future generations, so that they would avoid the same judgments.

As we've seen, Scripture is highly covenantal. It's the product of the Holy Spirit inspiring and superintending his representatives to deliver his covenant message to his covenant people. And if we're faithful to that message, we'll enjoy his blessings forever.

Now that we've looked at the Holy Spirit's providential work in the church with regard to his covenant grace and his provision of Scripture, we're ready to address our last major topic: the spiritual gifts he grants to his covenant community.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

When we speak of spiritual gifts or "gifts of the Spirit" in systematic theology, we have in mind those:

Manifestations of the Holy Spirit's power that produce or enhance abilities in human beings, especially to benefit the church

Some spiritual gifts resemble natural abilities and talents, so that it's not always obvious who has them and who doesn't. For instance, one person might naturally be a good teacher, but another might only teach well because the Holy Spirit empowers him. Other gifts are spectacular in nature, such as performing what can only be supernaturally explained, so it's obvious these are spiritual gifts and not just natural abilities. But in all cases, a gift of the Spirit entails the Holy Spirit working through an individual to accomplish a powerful work of providence.

Our discussion of spiritual gifts will divide into three parts. First, we'll define their purpose. Second, we'll survey their history in Scripture. And third, we'll explore some evangelical approaches to their present use. Let's look first at their purpose.

PURPOSE

When we defined spiritual gifts a moment ago, we said that they “produce or enhance abilities in human beings, especially to benefit the church.” This is an important distinction to make. Spiritual gifts are not provided mainly for the purpose of enhancing an individual’s relationship with God.

It’s certainly true that, as the Spirit works through us, we benefit personally. But if an apparent gift doesn’t benefit the church, then it’s likely that it’s being misused, or that it isn’t a spiritual gift at all. In fact, this is one of Paul’s main points in 1 Corinthians 12–14, where we find Scripture’s most extensive teaching on the gifts of the Spirit. Listen to what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:1-7:

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant... There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:1-7).

Paul equated gifts, service, and working because spiritual gifts are works God performs through us in service to the church. They’re “given for the common good,” that is, for the good of the church.

In 1 Corinthians 12:8-31, Paul explained the purpose of spiritual gifts in more detail. He introduced the metaphor of the human body, and explained that each body part depends on and benefits from the others. In the same way, the members of the church are all one body, so we benefit from each other’s gifts. Paul also made the point that the Spirit chooses which gifts to give to each person. Not every person in the church has the same gifts, just as not every part of the human body is the same. So, no one should think that those with more exciting gifts are superior, or that those who lack such gifts are inferior. All of the gifts were given as a means to build up the church. In fact, in verse 26, Paul said that the parts of the church body are so dependent on one another, that when “one part suffers, every part suffers”, and when “one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

Then, in 13:1-13, he taught that unless the gifts are used in love for each other, they’re useless. They don’t accomplish their purpose of building up the church, and they certainly don’t benefit the one using them.

The proper use of spiritual gifts, as we know and as the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Corinthians is that spiritual gifts are given for the building of the body of Christ — the church. And he himself, Paul, says in 1 Corinthians 13, I will show you the most excellent way, which is love. And then he continues to explain, without love you can do nothing; all the gifts become nothing. So, what that means is love is one important thing that binds all the other spiritual gifts together

because then the body of Christ can be built out of the spiritual gifts when love binds them together.

— Prof. Mumo Kisau

Now, it's sometimes thought that Paul distinguished between gifts that are intended to build up the church, such as prophecy, and gifts that are intended to be used privately, such as tongues, when used as a personal prayer language. As he said in 1 Corinthians 14:12:

Try to excel in gifts that build up the church (1 Corinthians 14:12).

Initially, Paul's words might seem to indicate that some gifts aren't intended to build up the church, and are given only to build up the person that receives them. But in the broader context of this verse, Paul meant that even gifts that have personal applications should also be used publicly to benefit the church.

For instance, in 1 Corinthians 14:22, he said that tongues could rightly be used in the church as a sign for unbelievers. And in verses 27, 28, he added that if anyone spoke in a tongue during a church meeting, that tongue had to be interpreted to be of value to the church.

Now, different theological traditions understand prophecy and tongues in different ways, as they do a number of the gifts. But we should all be able to agree that the primary purpose of all spiritual gifts is to build up the church.

Now that we've defined the purpose of spiritual gifts, let's address their history in Scripture.

HISTORY IN SCRIPTURE

Spiritual gifts first appeared during the days of the Old Testament. Genesis 41 indicates that the Spirit enabled Joseph to interpret dreams. And Daniel 4 says the same thing about Daniel. And of course, the Old Testament mentions many prophets that God appointed and empowered to speak to his people. We can also find examples of Old Testament figures performing miracles and healings, such as curing leprosy and raising the dead. And even though the Old Testament doesn't always mention the Spirit of God in these cases, the New Testament makes it clear that these were spiritual gifts. Passages like Romans 12:6; and 1 Corinthians 12:28, 29, reveal that prophecy and healings and miracles are all gifts of the Spirit.

Beyond this, Exodus mentions in several places that the Holy Spirit gifted craftsmen with extraordinary talents and abilities to enable them to build the tabernacle, and also to teach other craftsmen. In fact, these are the first people in history to whom the Bible explicitly attributes spiritual gifts. Listen to Exodus 35:30-35, where Moses said:

The Lord has chosen Bezalel ... and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts ... And

he has given both him and Oholiab ... the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as craftsmen, designers, embroiderers ... and weavers — all of them master craftsmen and designers (Exodus 35:30-35).

The Holy Spirit also gifted kings with special talents that enabled them to rule and administer their kingdoms. For instance, King Saul received power from the Holy Spirit to accomplish his work. We see this in 1 Samuel 10:10, and 11:6. And in 1 Samuel 16:13, 14, we learn that when David was anointed to the office of king, God removed Saul's spiritual gifting, and gifted David instead. This is why in Psalm 51:11, after David's sin with Bathsheba, he prayed that God would not remove the Holy Spirit from him. David knew that God had removed this gifting from Saul because Saul had sinned. And David hoped that through his repentance, God would allow him to keep the spiritual gifts he had received.

But despite these examples of Old Testament spiritual gifts, it's important to recognize that these gifts were relatively rare. They were reserved to those whom God had called to special service on his behalf — people like prophets and kings. Even so, the Old Testament looked forward to a day when everyone in God's covenant community would be gifted by the Spirit. In Joel 2:28-29, the prophet Joel wrote:

Afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days (Joel 2:28-29).

When Joel said that these things would happen “afterward,” he meant they would occur in “the last days” or in “the end times.” At that time, when God brought his heavenly kingdom to earth, his people would widely receive spiritual gifts.

The Spirit's gifts wouldn't just be limited to people like kings and prophets. Instead, God would pour out his Spirit on the whole covenant community. And this is exactly what happened when Jesus inaugurated the kingdom during his earthly ministry.

Distinguishing the gifts of the Holy Spirit between Old Testament times and New Testament times is one of the most difficult questions that arises when it comes to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. I think that perhaps the clearest teaching of the Bible — and it doesn't tell us a lot, but it tells us something; at least it gives us an orientation — is that the Bible speaks about the difference between Old and New Testament gifting of the Holy Spirit in terms that are quantitative. We think about Isaiah 32:15 where the word “*arah*” is used, that the spirit will be *poured out*, talking about the days of the New Testament... Or the better known passage which of course would be Joel 2:28 where it speaks in terms of the Holy Spirit being poured out in the last days, in the days of Messiah, in the days of restoration and renewal, using the verb “*shaphak*.” These verbs in Hebrew are quantitative. It means “to pour out in large quantity.” And so, I think if we were to distinguish

the Old Testament work of the Holy Spirit from the New Testament work of the Holy Spirit, we'd have to be thinking in terms of there being *more*, that there's more work of Holy Spirit, and that Holy Spirit is distributed more widely because he is poured out in such larger quantity.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Acts 2 records that on the day of Pentecost, shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the entire church. What appeared to be “tongues of fire” descended on them and, as a result, they all began to speak in other languages. Then, in Acts 2:16-18, the apostle Peter explicitly declared that this happened in fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy about the last days.

From that day forward, spiritual gifts have been available to everyone in the church. Now, the Bible never attempts to compile a comprehensive list of gifts, and it never says that the only valid gifts are those that have already appeared. Furthermore, there are differences between the lists of gifts in places like Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. This implies that the lists only provide examples of what the Spirit has done and was doing at the time. They aren’t intended to put boundaries around what the Spirit can do. Moreover, many of the gifts mentioned are general in nature, so that their original manifestations are impossible to determine with any precision. As a result, it’s reasonable to think that the Holy Spirit has the divine freedom to produce or enhance any ability he wants in human beings.

Whether we think that the Holy Spirit can give any gift at all, or that he limits his gifts to those mentioned in Scripture, we should all agree that he grants gifts according to his own purpose and will. They are manifestations of his grace. He’s not obligated to distribute them in any particular way. Paul made this explicit in 1 Corinthians 12:11, where he wrote:

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines (1 Corinthians 12:11).

And he said something similar in Romans 12:6, writing:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us (Romans 12:6).

Most theologians interpret the New Testament to teach that the Holy Spirit is committed to giving every believer at least one spiritual gift. This idea seems to be supported not only by Joel 2:28, 29, but also Romans 12:6; Ephesians 4:7; and 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11. But what sometimes surprises Christians is that even unbelievers in the church can receive spiritual gifts. This was certainly true of the prophet Balaam in Numbers 22–24. Balaam tried to curse God’s people but was forced by God to bless them instead. And it’s true in the New Testament church, too. For instance, in Matthew 7:21–23, Jesus spoke of the ultimate destruction of many that had prophesied, cast out demons, and worked miracles in his name. And listen to this warning in Hebrews 6:4–6:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Here, the author said that those who fall away may have “tasted the heavenly gift,” “shared in the Holy Spirit,” and “tasted ... the powers of the coming age.” These are references not to salvation, but to experiencing spiritual gifts.

Whether the recipient is a believer or even an unbeliever, the purpose of spiritual gifts is the same. Their highest purpose is to benefit the church. The best use of our spiritual gifts isn't to enhance our spiritual lives, or to lift us up emotionally, or to distinguish us from others in the church. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit grants us gifts so that we can serve others. And we should serve them with humility, knowing that he's the only reason we're able to do what we do.

So far we've considered spiritual gifts in terms of their purpose and their history in Scripture. Now let's turn to the ways Evangelicals have tended to approach their present use.

PRESENT USE

As we've mentioned, all Evangelicals tend to believe that the Holy Spirit continues to grant spiritual gifts today. They even tend to agree that he grants them to all believers. But they have varying views regarding the nature of the gifts he currently gives — especially with regard to gifts that are spectacular in some way. Here we have in mind those gifts that are undeniably works of the Spirit because they don't mirror natural human abilities and talents. For instance, miracles, healing, raising the dead, dreams, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, prophesying, and messages of wisdom and knowledge, are all examples of the gifts Evangelicals debate.

In general, evangelical approaches to these spectacular gifts fall along a continuum between the complete cessation of these gifts, and their widespread continuation. On the cessation end of the spectrum, it's generally argued that the spectacular gifts belonged to an earlier age of history, and that they ended with that earlier age. Some equate that earlier age roughly with the lifetimes of the apostles. They often see this apostolic age as a period of bearing witness to the truth of the claims about Jesus Christ, and establishing the church. This view appeals, in part, to Ephesians 2:20, which says that the church is:

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20)

The belief here is that the spectacular gifts were foundational. They pertained only to the period of the apostles and prophets, when the New Testament church was first being established and distinguished from Israel.

In the eyes of many cessationists, these gifts were manifested only for the purpose of validating the gospel and apostolic authority. Once these had been sufficiently validated, the Spirit ceased to give these gifts. Some end this period as early as the death of the last apostle, typically thought to be John, who died at the end of the first century A.D. Others extend this foundational period farther — even to the formal closure of the canon of Scripture in the fourth century A.D.

God does supernatural miracles today. But these miracles and the works of the Holy Spirit today aren't of the same category as that of the apostolic age. The spiritual gifts of the apostolic age ... were for the purpose of establishing the church. They also laid the foundation of the apostolic teachings and were the means God used to reveal himself to humans. Miracles today are of a different, special category, and thus are not means for a new revelation. They don't add a new revelation to that which God has already accomplished in Christ and recorded for us in the Bible... So, the Holy Spirit throughout the ages gave supernatural gifts that had revelatory purposes for establishing the Christian faith, and they ceased by the end of recording the revelation in the Holy Scriptures.

— Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

On the continuation end of the spectrum, it's generally argued that the spectacular gifts belong to the entire church age, and that they won't end until Jesus returns. Some continuationists hold that, since the New Testament, all believers have had access to all the spectacular gifts. Some believe that the normal Christian experience should include at least the spectacular gift of tongues. And a few even insist that people who don't manifest tongues probably aren't saved. But most simply believe that the Holy Spirit still has the freedom to bestow spectacular gifts where and when he wants to. They insist that he's not bound to withhold these gifts simply because the apostolic age has passed. And they point out that the only passage of Scripture that specifically mentions the end of spectacular gifts places the timing of that end at Christ's return. In 1 Corinthians 13:8-10, Paul wrote:

Where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears (1 Corinthians 13:8-10).

The continuation view tends to argue that “perfection” is either Jesus himself, or our final state of glorification at his return. In either case, prophecy, tongues and knowledge will continue until then.

It's been a matter of debate for some time whether the gifts of the Holy Spirit are present today and particularly the more dramatic ones such as tongues, healing, prophecy, deliverance... The question is

whether those are still there for today. I would like to invite anyone who would like to bring the question, you know, show me the evidence biblically that states those gifts are no longer for today. I mean, they are a part of bigger gift lists and so I think we agree, the gifts of preaching, of administration, of teaching are still for today. And so, why would those gifts be different? Sometimes 1 Corinthians 13 is quoted in this regard, you know that — I’ve heard this preached — that when the perfect comes, these other things, prophecy and what not, will no longer be. And the claim is, well, the perfect is that perfect Word of God... It’s, you know, the real perfection that’s coming is the end of the age and the new heavens and earth and our life in it. And so, there’s every reason to think then that these gifts continue today.

— Dr. Jeffrey J. Niehaus

Of course, between the ends of the continuum, there are a variety of perspectives that blend elements of cessation and continuation. Some believe that spectacular gifts can continue, but that they’re extremely rare throughout history. Others hold that some spectacular gifts continue, but that they’ve been modified so that they’re no longer spectacular. For example, they might say that prophecy is now limited to preaching and teaching, and no longer includes receiving special revelation from God.

But whatever view we hold regarding the spectacular gifts, we need to remember the range of beliefs that are held by Bible-affirming, evangelical Christians. The Spirit has given us the gifts to build up the church. So, we shouldn’t allow our view of the gifts to become a reason to tear each other down.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the Holy Spirit’s work of providence in the church, we’ve explored three concerns. We’ve looked at the Spirit’s covenant grace in the Old and New Testaments. We’ve considered his provision of Scripture in terms of its inspiration, message and purpose. And we’ve addressed spiritual gifts by focusing on their purpose, history in Scripture, and present use.

As we’ve seen in this lesson, some of the Holy Spirit’s greatest works of providence are directed toward Christ’s church. We’re used to thinking about the ways he blesses believers, and we’ll focus on those blessings in our next lesson. But it’s important to know that he also shows tremendous grace toward his entire covenant community. For the Holy Spirit, his work on earth is much more than just rescuing individual sinners from the consequences of their sin. It’s about building up and equipping God’s people, so that we can grow his kingdom throughout the world.

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