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God's Empowering Presence
1 Corinthians 12:4-11

Clearing Up Confusion About Spiritual Gifts

Those of you who are parents, have you ever come home and your house is an absolute disaster area? You come home after a hard day's work or you are out grocery shopping and you step in the house and instantly wish you could have an out of body experience and, perhaps, travel to a place far, far away from your home, preferably a place with a beach. The moment you open the door you realize that total chaos has broken out while you were away. Maybe one of your kids decided to make pancakes. There is batter splattered all over the floor. A pancake is hanging from the ceiling. They have used eleven pans and something is burning. Or your 6-year-old has just discovered the wonders of electronics and has taken your stereo apart all over the living room floor. Or maybe you have noticed your cat is looking a little funny. He appears to have been given a haircut. Your kids are laughing because they have discovered food coloring and everything, including the dog, is now blue.

Have you ever walked into a situation in your home of just complete chaos, total confusion? Some of you are saying, "That's a nightly occurrence in our family. I mean that is normal living for us. What's your point, Rich?" Well, when I listen to the discussion and read some of the books about spiritual gifts, it feels to me very much like the confusion of walking into my house on a really bad day.

A few years ago I wrote a response paper to a Christian author who is very well known and has a national radio show. Basically, he said that people who [this is almost word-for-word from his book] practice spiritual gifts tend to be immoral. They are very close to pagan activity in their emotionalism. He called people who got involved with spiritual gifts “keen, but clueless.” Through the course of his book he pointed out that only the most ignorant, the most uninformed, and the least theologically literate people would ever dabble in things like prophecy or healing or discerning spirits.

I never would have responded to his book at all. I don’t particularly like spending any of my time involved in controversy in the Christian world. But I decided to respond to the book because he decided to call one of my friends a “heretic” and said that he was doctrinally unorthodox. At that point, I decided that I absolutely had to respond out of loyalty to my friend and for protection of the body from slander and from these horrible charges, I decided to write a response paper.

Now all of this is to say that it wouldn’t take you very long in going to a Christian bookstore or in listening to Christian radio shows to have the most amazing mess of teaching on spiritual gifts. It is like walking into your house where things are just hanging from the ceiling. There is so much confusion about a topic that is not really all that complicated in the Bible. The scriptures that we will be examining are fairly straight forward. They are not really any more difficult to interpret than any other Bible passages. The scriptures have a tremendous amount of clarity to them. I think sometimes we forget that when we tackle certain subjects like sexuality, it is not the Bible that is particularly unclear. We Christians have brought so much of our own nonsense and cultural baggage to the Bible. But, in fact, as we look at the Bible texts, and we are

going to look at one well-known text on spiritual gifts today and next week, we are going to find that the Bible's teaching on spiritual gifts is not all that complicated.

So, why all the confusion? Why all the chaos? Well, we are going to find out in a moment that spiritual gifts are given to empower the church in its job of spreading the kingdom of God. Spiritual gifts, we are going to find out, are power tools energized by the Holy Spirit to build the kingdom. And there is someone who would like the church to be weakened, to be unempowered, and to be ineffective in its ability to build the kingdom of God.

Is it any surprise to you that regarding issues that would assist in spreading the kingdom and empowering the church, the enemy of our souls, Satan, would just sow all kinds of confusion? I mean particularly when one of the spiritual gifts is the discerning of spirits, the ability to discover the presence of evil spirits, is it any surprise to you that Satan would want to blind our minds so that we could not discover his presence or his activity in the church or in an individual's life?

I think much of the confusion regarding what otherwise is fairly clear textual material in the Bible is the result of demonic activity. Satan wants a weak church. Satan wants an ineffective church. Satan wants a church that is dead and has the pretense of being alive because it says all the right things, but it can, in no way, really challenge his grip or mastery over people's lives. He wants a church that can't break people free from addictions, a church that is no threat to the ruling authorities, a church that can't really heal, a church that just goes through the motions and plays church. I think much of the confusion regarding spiritual gifts can, frankly, be assigned to demonic activity.

But a second cause for the confusion regarding spiritual gifts, frankly, is that many people have attempted to analyze gifts without ever having experienced the gifts or

having seen them in operation. There is much about the Christian life that you cannot understand without first experiencing it. The Christian life is not something that you can look at from the outside and say, “Ah, I have it all figured out.” A few of you are in the position of standing on the outside of Christianity and much of it is confusing to you.

I have often pictured Christianity as being like a giant cathedral with stained glass windows. Standing on the outside, the stained glass windows look gray and you can’t make a picture out of it. If you have looked at stained glass windows from the outside, you cannot make a picture out of what that stained glass is about. It is only when you enter the cathedral and you look up that you can see a wonderful picture from the Bible of maybe the face of Jesus or a story from the scriptures.

That is the way Christianity is. You never can get it from the outside looking in. And many of you have had that experience, haven’t you, of not really understanding the Bible very well when you used to read it before you made a commitment to Jesus Christ. The Bible was a boring religious book. It was unintelligible. Maybe you tried to read it for a while and you lost interest even though you were intrigued by spiritual things.

But once you made your decision to follow Christ and the Holy Spirit entered your life, suddenly the Bible came alive and you found you had an appetite for the scriptures. In fact, one of the marks of being born again is that you have an appetite for the Bible. 1 Peter 2:2 says, “Like newborn babies, you crave pure spiritual milk,” (he is talking about the milk of the Word of God) “so that by it you can grow up into your salvation. Now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.” We taste God’s goodness and we want more of God and so we have now discovered how refreshing and nurturing the Word of God is.

Standing on the outside of spiritual gifts and trying to analyze them and explain them has created a great amount of confusion. People who have never experienced these things or observed them in operation in a balanced, healthy way are writing commentaries and writing books and attempting to speak about that which they don't understand. They haven't seen them operate in the church. They haven't watched the way that the Holy Spirit works.

So, my basic point is that I think a lot of the confusion regarding spiritual gifts is the result of utterly inexperienced people writing about and discussing the things they have never participated in. It is like getting marital counsel from someone who has never been married. It just all has a very hollow and confused feel to it.

By the grace of God, here in the Vineyard, we have had the operating. Here in this church, we believe in all of the biblical gifts of the Spirit and believe that they are all available today. As I said before, the scriptures are not unclear. This morning, what I would like to do is clean-up and clear-out some of the confusion regarding spiritual gifts. I am calling today's talk, "Clearing Up the Confusion About Spiritual Gifts." Let's ask God's presence.

In clearing up the confusion around spiritual gifts, before we look at them in particular, we might ask, "What is the purpose of the spiritual gifts?" Why are they given to the church? If you look with me at 1 Corinthians 12:4-7, we read:

"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 workings, 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."

Last week I pointed out the fact that the Trinity is involved in spiritual gifts. In verse 4 we see that Paul refers to the Spirit. He is talking about the Holy Spirit. In verse 5, the Lord, which for Paul always meant the Lord Jesus Christ, and in verse 6, he refers to God and we are talking about God the Father. Spiritual gifts are given, first of all, to glorify the Triune God. We see that explicitly stated in 1 Peter 4, which is one of the other gifts passages in the New Testament. There are four gifts passages in the New Testament, for those of you taking notes, by the way. You could look at Romans 12; Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12; and then 1 Peter 4. And in 1 Peter 4, the apostle Peter writes:

“If anyone speaks, he should do as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides so that in all things, God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”

Why are gifts given? To give glory to God. Many people suggest that if we start getting involved in spiritual gifts and start seeking spiritual gifts, we will somehow be taking glory away from God. There is this little phrase, “Don’t seek the gift, seek the Giver” which has an element of truth in it, but it sets the gifts over against the Giver and suggests that in charismatic churches, God is somehow obscured. God is somehow not glorified. Quite the contrary is true. I have seen the response of people to the true exercise of a spiritual gift and it almost always is to give glory to God. You see, the Father always points to the Son, doesn’t he? And the Son gives glory to the Father and speaks to us about the Spirit. Then the Holy Spirit comes along and points us back to Jesus. And each of the members of the Trinity are always giving glory to one another. Do you understand that when the Trinity is at work in a church, the members of the

Trinity are going to be giving glory to each of the persons of the Triune God? If we have charismatic gifts operating, people are going to worship God better, not worse. At least people whose hearts are inclined toward the Lord.

Do you remember when Jesus healed that paralytic who was brought to him on a mat by his friends? He looked at the man and raised him up. The charismatic gift of healing was operative there. What was the result of that dramatic healing? Well, it says in Luke 5:25, “Immediately the man stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.” The man praised God for his healing. In verse 26, “Then everyone else was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’”

That is what happens when spiritual gifts are operative, at least for people who want the Lord. They are drawn upward toward God and give praise to God.

I was reading a historical account this week of the great St. Augustine and his church. It was one Easter morning where a brother and sister came into church. They were part of the church. They both suffered from palsy at least that is what the condition was called back in the 5th century. But Augustine described it as a condition that sounds a lot to me like Parkinson’s. I am not sure if people shake with palsy, but these two always shook and they couldn’t walk very well. Their limbs would go in different directions. During the worship time, the brother felt the power of God come on him and he was instantly healed. His shaking stopped. He was sitting in the middle of the church and suddenly his shaking and trembling stopped. People looked over and word began to spread and there was this spontaneous outburst of worship as people saw him healed.

His sister was standing in the back of the church and she was still shaking. As people began giving praise to God, she lifted up her hands and the power of God came on

her and she was instantly healed. Augustine writes that the worship that day was among the most memorable of any Easter he ever celebrated.

See, God shows up through spiritual gifts. It is through the gifts that the church becomes alive with the presence of God. If you want a dead church, shut down the gifts; if you want a living, healthy, vibrant church, let the gifts be expressed and people will give glory to God.

In understanding the purpose of the spiritual gifts, we would note that they are, after all, gifts. Paul writes in verse 4: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.” So much of the confusion about spiritual gifts is that people have forgotten that they are gifts, which means that they are given not based on merit. They are not rewards for a job well done. They are not the result of having grown to a certain place in your life where you are able to handle things. They are gifts. They are signs of grace, unmerited, unearned, and unworked for. You don’t give your children Christmas gifts, at least I hope you don’t, because they have had a good year. You give gifts to your children because they are your children. That is what the Bible teaches about God our Father. He gives good gifts to his children.

You know, I think that many, many Christians are confused about spiritual gifts because they see immature believers, believers who are worldly in a lot of their attitudes, believers who are in sin, believers who have moral problems, exercising spiritual gifts. They say, “Surely, this could not be God because we know the kind of life that person is living and the fact that they were at a bar last night or the fact that they explode in anger, or they don’t know their Bible very well. We see so much immaturity among so many people; therefore, we know those gifts that are operating in that church could not be God.

Now, I am in no way trying to promote immaturity. My goal here is to be a good pastor and to bring each one of you along to maturity. But there is no relationship whatever between a gift given by God and the level of an individual's maturity. These are not rewards. These are not merit badges. The Christian life is not the Boy Scouts where if you have done a certain amount and if you have learned how to tie those eighteen knots and have collected eleven different kinds of acorns, then you get another merit badge. That is not the way spiritual gifts work.

You say, "Well, what is the condition for receiving spiritual gifts? Well, the only condition that I see scripturally is that a person is open to receiving the gifts and asks for them, and keeps asking. Then, of course, it is up to God to sovereignly distribute. Many, many young believers are far more open to receiving from God, having a purer faith with less faith-destroying teaching and less obstacles than some of us who have been Christians for 15, 20 or 25 years and have been talked out of a simple faith in spiritual gifts. These are gifts and not rewards for maturity.

And you can tell nothing of the validity of a gift, whether its source is God or not, by looking at the maturity of the person who is exercising the gift. The disciples with their radically imperfect faith were healing people, casting out demons, and prophesying in the gospels, but they were utterly immature in their understanding of the Christian life.

You know, the fact that God gives gifts to immature people really does offend many of us. We really don't understand the grace of God very well. God's grace goes to the utterly undeserving. How many times does Jesus say about God that God is generous and responds to the attackers of God's grace with lines like, "Are you offended because God is generous?" Matthew 20 and the whole parable of the workers in the Vineyard is about that, people taking offense at the grace of God. If you are upset because spiritual

gifts are being exercised by the immature, you may want to reread the parable of the prodigal son and pay specific attention to the older brother in that story because you may be playing the role of older brother in your offense.

The Father has no problem of giving an utterly undeserving son the gift of a ring, the gift of a fattened calf, the gift of a party, the gift of a robe. That is just the nature of God. We will get rewards at the end. There are rewards for being faithful. We will get those at the end. Those of us who have loved God, and even that is a gift I believe, and we who are living for God will be rewarded for our faithful service while some will get into the kingdom with a smell of smoke on their clothes, everything will burn up. Others will be rewarded. Nevertheless, friends, don't ever be offended because God has chosen to give spiritual gifts to someone you don't deem worthy. That is the nature of God. It is, after all, his prerogative to give gifts to whomever he chooses.

Not only are these gifts, but they are also called services in verse 5. "There are different kinds of services, but the same Lord." The attitude of an individual who is seeking spiritual gifts ought to be "God, I just want to serve you better and serve the church better." Some people don't have gifts because like James 4 says, they don't ask. "You have not because you ask not." God doesn't waste gifts on people who don't want them. If you are not interested in spiritual gifts, if you don't desire them, you don't find them to be of any value, then I don't think that God is going to waste gifts on that kind of attitude.

But then James goes on and says, "But when you ask you don't receive because you ask with wrong motives that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." Some of our desire is really just self-centered, isn't it? We must ask God for a purifying of our motives. We will never get this completely right. We will never be completely free of

our own flesh and our own egocentric way of living, but we can ask God to purify us. We can and we should. The attitude in which we approach spiritual gifts should be one of service to God and the church. Lord, I want to be a better servant.

We are told that these are not only gifts and services but they are also workings of the same God who works all of them in all men. The Greek word is the word from which we get the English word “energy” from. Spiritual gifts are divine energizers. They have the dynamic of God at work. The power of God is released through spiritual gifts. Do you want a simple way to understand spiritual gifts and their place in the church? Spiritual gifts are meant to be power tools to get the job of the church done. They are power tools. Now at times you can do the same job without a power tool. But why would you want to? I don’t know how many of you have ever tried to work with a conventional hand tool and have then switched to a power tool. I have had a number of experiences like that. Several years ago, my dad and I built a deck out on the back of my house. And, yes, it is still standing. And it is level and even. But I was digging holes with a post hole digger for the posts of the deck. And I needed to make about 30 holes. The dirt was really hard. We had a post hole digger and since my dad is older, I had to do all the work. And if you have ever used a post hole digger, you know that after digging 15 or 20 times with one of those things, your arms ache. I looked around the yard and I thought, “My goodness, I have to dig 30 more of these holes.” I went down, I don’t remember, 2 ½ feet, you know, below the frost line. I figured there had to be an easier way to do that job. So I called up one of those rental places and got a power auger. A power drill. I just stood there and vroommm, just drilled into the ground – love that power.

It is the same case if you have ever used a power nail gun. I helped my dad build a house years ago, framing in a house. And after you have pounded 300-400 nails, you really appreciate one of those power nail guns. You just walk up and bang, bang, bang, bang.

Well, that is the way the life of the church is. You can bang your head into the wall repeatedly, trying to counsel an individual through a problem. But when the power tool is pulled out, the spiritual gift, you might get a prophesy, a revelation about what is at the root of this individual's problem, or maybe you will have the discerning of spirits, the ability to perceive that the problem has a demonic element in it. You may be trying to evangelize the neighborhood and be getting nowhere, just running your head into the wall repeatedly, finding it so hard to move forward with the gospel. But when one of the power tools is taken out you may get a new revelation, "Oh, this is the problem in the neighborhood!" and the gospel moves forward by leaps and bounds.

At different critical moments in our church's history, the Lord has spoken to us. God has employed one of these power tools and the church has moved forward appreciably because of the direction or correction or the revelation of God's will.

In verse 7 the gifts are called manifestations. Look at the four words used. They do help us to clear out some of the confusion about spiritual gifts. They are called gifts. They are called services. They are called workings or divine energizings and here they are called a "manifestation of the Spirit." By manifestation, the Bible is referring to something that makes the invisible God visible. Something that would take God out of the realm of the far-away, the far off, the invisible, the ethereal, the abstract, and make him manifest and make him appear, becoming real and tangible. That is what spiritual

gifts do. They take God out of the realm of “Oh, he must be sitting on Mars somewhere.” And suddenly he is in our midst and we can see him.

Spiritual gifts are like electric lights. When you flip on the switch, the current which has been heretofore invisible, you have this stream of electrons that you can't see, the current, is suddenly manifested. We have light. And we say, “Ah, there is the presence of the invisible power in our homes.” We just flip the switch and now we see the power. When you flip the switch on of faith, you release the invisible God to manifest himself.

So many people today say, “Where is God? We can't find God. He seems so hidden. He seems so aloof. He seems so distant and uninterested in our own lives.” Do you understand that when spiritual gifts are taught against, we see few manifestations, few exhibitions of the reality of God's existence?

Is it any wonder, then, that the world turns away in disbelief? What is the best thing you can offer for the existence of God? A clever explanation? It is good to rationally defend your faith, but we ought to be able to add to rational defenses the manifestation of God's power in spiritual gifts. Paul speaks about leading people to Christ by what he says and what he does. By the power of the spirit and the demonstration of signs and wonders. Paul talks about confirming the gospel not primarily with clever arguments, but confirming the gospel with manifestations, the show of the spirit.

God reveals himself through spiritual gifts. And one more thought about manifestations. There has been a lot of discussion recently as a result of the wonderful things happening in around the country in renewal of manifestations of the Spirit through falling and shaking and other physical bodily happenings. I think there is some scriptural

support for many of the things that they are witnessing in Toronto and we have witnessed to a lesser degree here in Columbus, but the primary way that the Spirit is made manifest in the church is not through bodily manifestations. The primary way is through spiritual gifts. A church is alive with the presence of God when the gifts are practiced.

Then we see that gifts are given to each one for the common good. Verse 7: “To each one, manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” And then in verse 11 Paul says, “All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he given them to each one, just as he determines.”

Last week I mentioned that when spiritual gifts are shut down in a church, people feel like they don’t belong and they don’t fit, because there is no place for all of us in the church unless we all have something to offer. Only when spiritual gifts are released in a church are people going to be free and say, “Ah, you know, I really belong here. I am needed here. I have a purpose. I can be used in this church.”

Biblically, I think that we can establish that the whole body was functioning in house churches that we would today call small groups or home fellowship groups. The meetings that Paul is describing in 1 Corinthians 12 were taking place in homes with groups of 20-30 believers gathering together. In that kind of smaller context, every single person could contribute, could minister, could pray, and could prophesy. Biblically, there are meetings in the temple and meetings in homes. That is what Acts 2 says. They went to the temple to hear the apostles’ teachings, but then they went from house to house breaking bread and fellowshiping. Spiritual gifts exercised in small groups; that is what we do in the Vineyard. We encourage every group to let the gifts be expressed. Spiritual gifts make a place for each of us. They make each of us feel like we belong.

Finally spiritual gifts are given for the common good. Paul uses different language. He says in chapter 14:12, “Since you were eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts the build up the church.” The typical language that Paul uses to define the common good is revealed by gifts that build up and that edify the church.

The last thing I would say about the purpose of spiritual gifts is that they are body-building equipment. I have been working out at the gym for years now and every gym that I have ever been in you basically see the same kinds of people. About half the people in the gym work out on only one or two kinds of equipment. People go into the gym and they find their favorite piece of equipment and they just work away at that. There are guys at the gym that spend all of their time working out on the bench press. They have these little skinny legs and these enormous chests or they are overweight but they have these enormous chests and they are working away on a bench press. That is all they do. And other people, the only thing they do is get on the stair stepper. Every other part of their body is undeveloped. Others just work out with their arms, they just do curls.

You know, this selective use of body building equipment is a good picture for what happens in churches where many of the gifts are suppressed and only a few of the gifts are allowed to be exercised. In some churches, the only thing you have is a mouth and feet. You have preaching and then people are running around in evangelism. A mouth and feet. But the church has no hands. There is no power to heal. The church has no ears. There is no ability to really hear from God in prophecy.

You see, when people in the church pick and choose, disdaining certain gifts, or if the leaders in the church pick and choose and they say, “Well, certain gifts we consider to be of value and we are going to do those gifts, but other spiritual gifts listed here in 1

Corinthians 12, we are going to assign them to the temporary category or the unnecessary category.” We are doing precisely what Paul says not to do in 1 Corinthians 12:21, “The eye can’t say to the hand, “I don’t need you.”

We are doing what the people in the gym that I described do. They say, “Well, I don’t need that piece of body building equipment and I don’t need this piece of equipment.” And you know what we end up with? We end up with a severely handicapped body. Until all of the spiritual gifts are manifested in the church, the church in some way is handicapped. It is not built up. It is not as strong as it needs to be.

We have a tremendous amount of information here in 1 Corinthians 12 about the purpose of spiritual gifts. We have lots and lots of confusing voices out there. Some people say, “Well, Rich, everything you say is true, but it was only true in the 1st century. You know, these wonderful supernatural gifts were only operative until the death of the apostles and then they faded away.” The picture that has always come to my mind when someone suggests that the gifts were only operative during the lifetime of the apostles and then they faded away is of the elderly apostle John who was the last of the twelve apostles to die. The elderly apostle John who was, presumably, able to heal the sick, lying on his bed and there is a long line of people standing outside of his door waiting to be healed and one of his followers comes out to the whole line of sick people and says, “I am sorry. You are all going to have to go home now. There is no more supernatural healing because the last of the apostles has died. The age of healing is done. Go home. Go away.” Everyone goes home disappointed. Well, it was nice while it lasted, but it's over now.

There is nothing in the Bible that would suggest to us that spiritual gifts were to exist only to the end of the 1st century. Some have tried to suggest in 1 Corinthians. 13

that prophesy, tongues and what these folks call the “sign gifts” (which is a totally man-made term, the Bible never calls any particular gifts “sign gifts”) will pass away after the Bible is completed. They read this out of 1 Corinthians 13, “Love never fails, but where there are prophesies 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 will disappear.”

These folks argue that prophesy and tongues (they usually don’t talk about knowledge) are separated out and called “sign gifts.” It says that these things will disappear when the Bible is completed. That is their understanding of perfection coming in verse 10. “When perfection comes the imperfect will disappear.”

I haven’t the time to completely dismantle this argument except to say that perfection in 1 Corinthians 3:10, which will cause the end of spiritual gifts, is in no sense talking about the Bible. The perfection that will come that will bring spiritual gifts to an end is the perfection of the return of Christ. Paul here is referring to the kingdom coming and the return of Christ. When the kingdom comes, then we will see God face to face. Then we will have no need to prophesy because God himself will talk to us audibly. Then there will be no need to speak in tongues or have all of this other kind of revelation. “Then we will know fully even as we are fully known.”

If you are interested in this subject of the argument of 1 Corinthians 13, I would encourage you in several directions. I have tapes on the subject. I have a set of tapes on spiritual gifts that you may want to pick up. Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* (Wayne is a professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Seminary) has an excellent chapter which dismantles the argument that the Bible teaches that the gifts will cease, or that some of the gifts are temporary. I have mentioned before Jack Deere’s book called

Surprised by the Power of the Spirit. There is a thorough analysis in that book of the arguments for the supposed passing away of gifts. Jack very, very definitively dismantles those arguments.

But you know some people say that even if you can't establish a biblical case for the passing away of spiritual gifts, if these spiritual gifts that we are seeing today were real, if they really were from God, why didn't we see them in the whole history of the church? Some people say, "You know, Rich, we see them in the 1st century and then they show up again in the 20th century. It does seem very odd that if God is really at work in giving spiritual gifts to the Vineyard or in other churches today, that they didn't exist for 19 centuries except among fringe groups and groups whose theology was terrible and all these crazy reports from medieval church who believed in all this superstition. They had reports of spiritual gifts, but you never see it among believers that really held to an orthodox faith."

The reason I am raising all of these arguments, friends, is because there are so many books out on the market now on this subject. Maybe some of you have read them. I know some of you are really theologically well-educated. You may have gone to churches where things like what I am saying have been preached. As I said earlier in the talk, there is all of this confusing stuff discussing spiritual gifts, when it comes to spiritual gifts. The argument is often made that spiritual gifts basically didn't exist in the church from the 1st century until now except among fringe groups. Do you know that viewpoint is not only held by those who don't believe in spiritual gifts? That viewpoint is also held, unfortunately, by Pentecostals who like to believe that what they are living in is the restoration of the 1st century church. Pentecostals, looking at passages from Joel 2 which says, "Be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God for he has given

you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers both autumn and spring rains as before.”

They say, “See, on Pentecost and in the early church, that was the early rain. The Spirit fell on the church and there were all these spiritual gifts. But then the Spirit was withdrawn and there was this long period in church history of dryness. Then the later rains have come in the 20th century forming the Pentecostal church and the charismatic movement. And that signals the close return of the Lord. But in between time, there really hasn’t been any spiritual gifts.”

It is a funny thing. You know religion makes strange bed-fellows. But many Pentecostals have agreed with many people who are against spiritual gifts by suggesting that throughout Christian history there haven’t been any supernatural spiritual gifts. The fact is there has been a continual stream of reports throughout the history of the church of supernatural gifts being exercised among orthodox believers and not fringe groups. Some of the most thrilling reading you could ever read is to read the history of the church. God was not somehow deistically absent at some period of the church.

Oh sure, I know that there are times when the flame has burned low in the church because of people’s faithlessness, because of the confused teaching of much of the hierarchy of the church, because at different places and at different times the church moved away from the Bible as its authority. But there has always been a witness to a wonder working God in the church and any honest inquiry into the history of the church will reveal spiritual gifts and charismatic vitality as real as what was going on in the book of Acts and as real as what is happening today.

There was a fellow in the 3rd century named Gregory who was called “Gregory the Wonder Worker.” He preached in what is now today Turkey and in Palestine. At the

beginning of his ministry, there were only 17 who were Christians in this one area. Forty years later, of the thousands and thousands of people in this one area, there were only 17 who were not Christians. That church's fathers writes about Gregory the Wonder Worker's ministry and says that his evangelism and his preaching was so effective because he moved in signs and wonders. He had prophetic gifts. He used to share the gospel with people and then reveal to them the secrets of their hearts. They would fall on the ground and accept Jesus. He was said to have power demons. He would cast out demons and heal the sick.

There was a book out in the 6th century by another Gregory, Gregory the Great, who goes through eyewitness accounts of a variety of miracles—healing the blind, healing leprosy, and raising the dead. You know, we moderns have such an arrogant attitude toward people who lived in the past in terms of their ability to discern, to distinguish the miraculous. We always think that the people back then were so ignorant, you know. We are so intelligent. We know how to work a word processor. We are so brilliant. People back then were so gullible. Someone would walk along and say, “Oh, I used to be blind and now I see” and people would go, “Praise God. A miracle! A miracle! Let's hold a feast. Kill the fatted calf.”

But that is not the way it worked. I mean they had these same questions about how do we know that you are telling us the truth and what is your proof that you were blind? In fact, in Gregory the Great's book, he goes through a very lengthy process of explaining exactly what he required for verifications of healing. He required documentary evidence of their illness before hand and he personally would interview eyewitnesses who claimed that there were at the event. He would investigate very closely regarding what townspeople said, found out if they had a reputation for being ill,

asked how quickly the healing came and all of that. These people were very bright. They weren't gullible. So when we read historical accounts, especially of some of the better church fathers and some of the better of the Protestant Reformers, these folks weren't just intellectual babies. Their reports were credible.

You know, I have given you some biblical and historical background to spiritual gifts. There is a personal dimension to our own confusion regarding spiritual gifts that ought never to be overlooked. Remember at the outset of this talk, I discussed standing on the outside of the cathedral looking in. From the outside, the stained glass windows are very gray. We don't see the picture very clearly. I think that apart from theology and apart from a reading of history, there are reasons why many of us continue to stand on the outside of the clear teaching of the Bible regarding gifts rather than plunging in.

I would like to close with three reasons why, at a personal level, I think we stand on the outside and then issue a call to plunge in and to begin to ask God to seek for spiritual gifts. Some of us have been disappointed. There was a man who wrote a book against spiritual gifts a number of years ago named Benjamin Warfield who had a brilliant theological mind. He was a Princeton seminary professor. He wrote one of the foundational works against spiritual gifts called *Counterfeit Miracles* in which he tried to debunk much of what was going on in the Pentecostal movement. He also wrote about history and how he didn't see any evidence of spiritual gifts in history. But you know, Benjamin Warfield prayed for years for his wife to be healed from a disabling disease that rendered her a practical invalid for much of their marriage. And I can't help but think that much of his anger regarding Pentecostals and his hostility towards spiritual gifts was really a personal issue. It had to do with his own disappointment with God about what God didn't do for him when he wanted God to heal.

This business of seeking spiritual gifts and moving in the power of the Spirit requires us to regularly deal with failure. You cannot successfully move forward in the power of God unless you develop a mechanism for dealing with failure. I explained in this series one time that the kingdom of God is like a picket fence. It sometimes is there and then it is not. Then it is there and then it is not. There is a strong “not-yet” to the kingdom. There are many, many times when we are just left out there. We have put out the effort, but the power of God just doesn’t seem to be there upon what we have done and our prayers feel like they are unanswered. You must develop a mechanism for dealing with disappointment and failure if you are going to move forward in spiritual gifts.

Let me tell you what I have done personally. You know, when I began to teach in this church almost every week I had the overwhelming sense of failure after I got done teaching. I believe much of it was spiritual attack, but a black depression used to settle on me after I got done preaching. So much so that sometimes I would literally break down and cry after I got done. I would just slink back to my office and this kind of accusing spirit, these thoughts would come to mind: “You just wasted 150 people’s time. That was the stupidest thing they ever heard. You are just the worst.” For a day or two, I would just be depressed and think, “How am I going to get up again next week and try to exercise this gift of teaching. How will I do that?”

Well, I came upon a passage one day in the Old Testament that described the priests and what the priests were called to do. They were called as part of their jobs to present before the curtain that covered the Holy of Holies, to present some loaves of bread each evening. They were called the “show breads.” They presented bread each evening to the Lord as sort of an offering to God.

I was reading that text one day about the priest presenting bread to the Lord and I felt like the Lord spoke to me and said, “This text has application to you.” I said, “Lord, what is it? What are you trying to say to me through this?” And he said, “The priests were presenting me with the fruits of their labor. Good, bad or otherwise. Each day they gave me the fruit of their hands.”

And so what I began doing at the end of my messages is turning my back to the congregation and picturing myself as one of those priests giving the Lord the fruit of my labor. Good, bad or otherwise, it now belonged to God. If it was good, I didn’t take the pride of it, the praise, and get puffed up. But if I felt like it was bad, I could give that over to the Lord. And so I began doing that and I practiced that and over the years this depression, actually it instantly broke, but I continued to do this from time to time as a spiritual discipline.

Friends, I am telling you that you need such a mechanism. And it could be what I have done or it could be something that the Lord has shown you to deal with your attempt to exercise a spiritual gift and failing in it. So that good, bad or otherwise, you could pick yourself up off the ground and say, “I am going to give it another try. I am going to pray for another sick person even though the last one didn’t get well. I am going to deliver another prophesy even though the last one fell flat. I am going to try again to speak in tongues in my small group even though the last time the interpretation didn’t come.

Some you have not been cleansed from past disappointments and so you said, “Just forget it.” Some of you are not entering into the power of God and the practice of spiritual gifts because of personal discomfort. It is not that you don’t see it biblically, it is not that you can’t be convinced historically, but you are uncomfortable around

supernaturals. You are uncomfortable around things that feel like they may get out of control.

For some, your life history is such that you experienced a lack of control growing up, you may have been controlled by someone who was abusive, or your home life was so chaotic that control is a big issue for you. It may be that the Lord has been engaging you in a process of trust so that you can begin to release your need to control your environment to him.

For others of you, you haven't engaged in that process of releasing your need to control everything in trust that God is good and will protect you. Now, you would have to be a lunatic to want to have a totally uncontrolled environment. None of us wants everything to break loose. But you know, the issue of control is an issue of trust. And the Lord can advance you from wherever you are in your discomfort, the Lord can advance you forward saying, "No, you can trust me a little bit more. You can risk a little bit more in this setting. You can risk sharing what you think you have heard from God. You can risk praying for the sick."

For some of us the issue is discomfort. And for some of us, finally, the issue is distortion. Your defensiveness about spiritual gifts, your unwillingness to enter in is the result of the past distortion of teaching in this area. And it could come from either end of the spectrum, this distortion. You may have been hit up one side of the head and down the other by an extreme Pentecostal group telling you that if you didn't speak in tongues immediately you weren't saved or you weren't spiritual. Or you saw flaky prophesying or a severe over-emphasis on experience and emotion. And you reacted very strongly to that and said, "Forget it."

That distorted teaching has impacted you so that it has been hard for you to hear something that might be life-giving and healthy. I think sometimes the distortion can come from the misuse of gifts. You know, the proper response to the misuse of gifts is not the non-use of gifts, but the proper use.

Some of us need to forgive those who have distorted teaching about gifts from the side of the extreme Pentecostalism that tries to shove them down our throats or suggests that if we don't do A, B or C, we don't have relationship with Jesus and we are not saved.

Of course, the distortion in your case may come from the other side where someone who had spiritual authority, a pastor, a leader, a parent, who told you that getting involved in spiritual gifts was positively damaging to your soul and that these things were dangerous and that they were false or they were of the devil. I have met many, many Christians who see the teaching of spiritual gifts in the Bible. They have read books and they cannot move forward because they have hit this internal wall. This other voice is playing in their mind, this voice from the past, "Don't get involved here. Don't reach out for more spiritually because this is dangerous." So they pull back. I don't think you can reason through distorted spirituality. I don't think it is simply a matter of lining up the arguments. There is a time when we must renounce faulty teaching. We must come against it and specifically renounce it. If there is a wall created in your life because of bad doctrine, then it is appropriate to speak against it, to break its power over your life and say, "Lord, I want to turn to the truth that is found in the Word of God." Let's Pray.