

Position Paper: Holy Spirit and the Supernatural.
Approved by elders: 10/6/99, Verses added 5/1/00

Current Constitution: (approved 10/14/01)

Article III (our Statement of Faith) includes section E. THE PERSON AND WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT which reads as follows: “We believe that the Holy Spirit is the divine Person through whom the world is convicted of sin, through whom new life is brought to those who are spiritually dead and in whom believers are baptized and thus placed into the one true Church, which is the body of Christ. The scriptures affirm that He is with us forever, that He seals us unto the day of redemption, that He bestows spiritual gifts upon us, and that He empowers us for service. (John 16:7-11; 3:5-8; 1Cor 12:7-13; John 14: 16-17; Eph 4:13, 30; Acts 1:8)” Other places where He is mentioned in Article III include the Holy Spirit being one of the Persons of the Trinity (in section B), Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit (section D), all who trust in Christ as Savior “are born into the family of God by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit” (section F), and in regards to the Church (section G), we state that “every person who has trusted Jesus Christ for salvation has been baptized with the Holy Spirit.” In Article VI (Ordinances), #4 describes the ordinance of baptism as being “a symbol of receiving the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:38).” The Holy Spirit is also mentioned elsewhere as “calling” elders and deacons, and “leading” covenantors in decisions regarding the body. These are the only statements we make of a theological nature concerning the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, let alone charismatic gifts, the supernatural, etc.

Need for a position paper:

Grace Community Church is an evangelical interdenominational body of believers. We wish to see God glorified in the lives of all those who have trusted Christ as Savior, regardless of their personal theological leanings. We see the Gospel of Christ as the essential issue defining those who are in God’s family and those who are not. While refusing to compromise the central tenets of salvation (as defined in the church constitution), we will welcome into our church and will welcome into all levels of church leadership those who embrace these central tenets, but may come down differently concerning other non-essential theological issues such as those discussed here. Throughout church history, many sincere born-again Christians who have looked to God’s Word as the final authority have divided over issues not essential to salvation. This is especially true for issues surrounding the Holy Spirit and the supernatural (such as spiritual gifts, healing of the sick, miracles, etc.). While this very brief paper is an effort to define and clarify what we will teach and practice as a church, we refuse to divide over or make “more essential” these controversial issues. Instead of compromising truth or being overly tolerant of divergent beliefs, we see our theological position as keeping the Gospel in its proper place.

INTRODUCTION:

Although the Scriptures teach that Christ’s death and resurrection have ultimately defeated Satan, demons (Jn 12:31; 1Jn 3:8; Col 2:15) and the eternal consequences of the Fall (2Cor 5:1; Rev. 21:4), we now live in a world where evil forces fight against God’s rule and reign in the lives of men and women (1Pet 5:8) and a world where sickness, suffering and death are present realities for all people (2Cor 5:4-5). What do the Scriptures teach about how the children of God are to respond to evil and suffering in a fallen world? While God’s providence is in ultimate control of everything (Eph 1:9-12; Heb 6:17), He also permits the evil deeds of persons (Gen 50:20; Acts 2:23-24), the evil deeds of Satanic forces (Job 1:12, 2:6) and negative results of the Fall such as death (Deut 32:40-52; Acts 4:27-28) and physical suffering (Jn 9:1-7; Eph 3:1; 2Cor 12:7) to happen to people. God is not the active agent causing evil, sin or temptation (James 1:13-14) but judges sin (Acts 12:23), limits/restrains all evil (Job 1:10-12, 2:6; 2Th 2:6-7; 1Cor 10:13), and uses the consequences of evil for His glory (Gen 50:20; Ps 76:10; Rom 8:28; Heb 12:5-11). But Scripture clearly does not teach that God’s sovereignty should produce passive/fatalistic saints that sit back and watch history unfold (1Tim 1:18-19, 6:12; Eph 6:10-14; Rev 12:17). Stopping short of emotionalism and letting our experience dictate our doctrine, we should ask what the Bible says a proper Christian understanding of the Holy Spirit, the charismatic gifts, miracles, healings and sufferings should be for us today.

THEOLOGY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT:

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity (Jn 14:16; Acts 10:38) and He has knowledge (1Cor 2:10-11), feelings (Eph 4:30; Rom 15:30) and a will (1Cor 12:11). He is divine (2Cor 3:18), eternal (Heb 9:14), omnipresent (Ps 139:7), and omniscient (Jn 14:26; 1Cor 2:10). The Bible teaches the Holy Spirit was active in creation (Gen 1:2; Job 33:4), He inspired the Bible authors (2Pet 1:21), He convicts unbelievers of sin (Jn 16:7-11; 2Cor 4:3-6), He regenerates (Jn 3:5-6; 1Pet 1:23-2:3), counsels (Jn 14:16-17), assures of salvation (Rom 8:15), teaches (Jn 16:12-14; 1Cor 2:13), calls to service (Acts 13:4), seals the salvation of the elect (Rom 8:9-23; 2Cor 1:21-22, **5:5**; Eph 1:13-14, 4:30) and works in the Church (1Cor 12:7-11). The Holy Spirit is said to “indwell” the true believer (1Cor 3:16-17, 6:19) in a personal relationship from the moment he or she receives Christ (Rom 8:9; Gal 3:2).

The “filling” of the Holy Spirit occurs as a person yields control of their life to the leading and power of the Spirit for effective Christian living and service (Eph 5:18, 6:18; Rom 6:1-4, 12-14; **7:5&6; 8:3-4, 9-23**). Ten times in the book of Acts alone we see examples of the Holy Spirit being “full” in the lives of yielded Christians working in and through them for God’s glory (cf. Acts 2:4ff). This “filling” is not to be confused with the “baptism” of the Holy Spirit which brings a believer into Christ’s body (1Cor 12:7,11-13), the Church, upon receiving Christ at conversion (Rom 6:1-14, **8:1-23**; 1Cor 12:12-13; Gal 3:1-3, 26-28). “Filling” occurs continuously as we yield our lives to God in obedience to His Word (Gal 5:16-18; Col 3:16-17; **Rom 8:1-10**), but “baptism” in the Spirit only occurs once (not twice as some would claim, referring to Acts 8:15-19, 9:17, 19:2-6) as people truly believe on Christ (see Gal 3:26-27; 1Cor 12:7-13). Examples of an apparent “second baptism” are instead first time “descriptions” (not “prescriptions”) of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to new peoples (Gentiles) and areas as the gospel was truly received and believed by them (see Eph 4:4-6; Gal 3:1-3, **26-27**; 1Cor 12:7-13; Rom 8:9-11).

Acts also describes at least seventeen different occasions where people were “led or told” to go and “say or do” something by the Spirit (cf. Acts 8:29ff). As believers, we are commanded not to “quench” the Spirit (1Th 5:19), or to “grieve” the Spirit (Eph 4:30), but instead to “walk” in the power of the Spirit (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:16-17), obeying His leading in our lives. Lastly, the Holy Spirit is also the giver of various gifts that equip believers for ministry and service in the Church (1Cor 12:7; Eph 4:12; 1Tim 4:14; 2Tim 1:6). We believe that the Spirit gives any gift (1Cor 12:7-11) to any believer in any congregation at any time as He so wills. This brings us to our next topic of spiritual gifts.

THEOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS (esp. tongues):

There are four main lists of spiritual gifts found in Scripture (1Cor 12:8-10; 1Cor 12:29-30; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11). It is clear that the Holy Spirit has given these gifts to believers within the Church, not for their own personal exaltation, but instead for service promoting the unity and edification of the true body of Christ (see 1Cor 14:26-33). We find no biblical evidence to suggest that God intended even the more charismatic gifts to cease from being present in the Church over time. It is proper to be cautious about many of the emotional abuses we see in some charismatic circles today, but if the Bible does not exclude these gifts from our churches today, then neither should we.

In looking specifically at the gift of tongues, we believe that 1Cor 12-14 (esp. 1Cor 14:1-28) gives fairly specific guidelines for its use. The gift of tongues is an unlearned foreign language or a prayer language (Acts 2:4-18; Joel 2:28-29; 1Cor 14:21-22) that edifies the public body of believers (1Cor 14:1-5) only if one person speaks in tongues at a time. At the most three prayers/messages in a tongue should be given per worship service, and an interpretation of the tongue must follow each prayer/message. Otherwise persons with this gift should remain quiet in the church (1Cor 14:26-33a). From 1Cor 14:21-22, we would say that it appears the gift of tongues is an unlearned foreign language or a prayer language and that it is a sign for unbelievers who may be attending a worship service. Wild ecstatic utterances where everyone speaks at the same time were more commonly found in pagan rituals. While speaking in tongues, a person does utter mysteries (1Cor 14:2) but he/she is also encouraged to be able to interpret what they are saying (1Cor 14:13,27). We also want to point out that the biblical writers expected this gift and others to continue until the second coming of Christ (1Cor 13:8-13), that the gift of tongues is certainly nowhere prescribed as the sign to assure that a person had received the Holy Spirit (1Cor 12:7-11), and that the consistent emphasis in Scripture is on the fruit of the Spirit, not the gifts of the Spirit (Gal 5:22).

THE MIRACULOUS IN CHURCH HISTORY:

The book of Acts faithfully records various miracles of all kinds as the Church began to grow. But did these occurrences of the miraculous continue all throughout Church history? While the answer is hotly debated, we conclude along with many early church fathers, reformers and modern scholars that apart from times in which the Church became worldly and dry, the miraculous can be shown to have been recorded all throughout Church history until the present day. Healings, exorcisms, prophecies, and miracles are recorded from earliest times by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine and others. It does need to be recognized that Church history does not support what we would today call “faith-healers” whose primary function/attraction is simply healing. The miraculous was always a part of a fully balanced ministry of teaching, preaching, evangelism, church discipline and caring for the needs of believers within the church body. While miracles were used by God to authenticate Christ’s teachings (Jn 2:22, 20:30-31; Lk 5:24-25) and to establish the early Church (Acts 13:12), we should not on the one hand think miracles have ceased for today, nor on the other hand believe everything a person has said just because a miracle has occurred (as Satanic forces can perform miracles to deceive; 2Th 2:9-12; Rev 16:14, 19:20). Everything must be tested against the clear teachings of Scripture (Acts 17:11) – Scripture, not experience, validates truth (Heb 4:12).

WORLDVIEW CONSIDERATIONS AND THEOLOGY OF MIRACLES:

Especially in overseas cultures that have been under the overt control of demons and the occult, we see the Gospel being authenticated through miraculous signs and wonders. The God of the Bible still proves Himself greater than the gods of the occult. But what about here in North America? Could it be that Satan’s strategy is to get our “world” so figured out by science, technology and modern medicine that we just do not expect God to do miracles anymore? Or is it right to believe that God always wants to “give us a miracle” if we just have enough faith (i.e., “believe and receive”/“demand” a miracle)? We believe that the answer is in the middle.

God does use our faith in combination with His Sovereign will to produce miracles (Mt 9:28-29; Mk 9:22-24; Acts 14:9). But, as with Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (which he even ascribed as coming from Satan himself; 2Cor 12:7-9), it was for God’s greater glory that no miracle occurred on the physical level. Our more common problem in the West is that we usually think about prayers and miracles only as a last resort! Our worldview is sharply divided between the natural (usually “this life” oriented) and the supernatural (usually “next life” oriented). We believe that the Bible paints a picture of these two worlds as being side by side and even overlapping when God often chooses to change the usual way in which things operate for His glory (i.e., a miracle). To remove this “flaw of the excluded middle,” we must see the Creator as constantly at work in His creation (i.e., our everyday lives), and we must be primarily dependent upon God, asking Him for healing – whether God would choose to heal through miracles or medicine. We should not think we can “demand” a miracle because of faith, nor think that it is biblical simply “to be open to the possibility” of a miracle. We need to expect the possibility that it would be God’s will to heal in a miraculous way! We so often do not consider that this is even an option God would use. It also needs to be said that going to a doctor does not show a lack of faith as long as our dependence is on God first, not science, for healing.

We need to believe that God will provide whatever “weapons” are necessary for the proclamation and authentication of His good news (such as healing) as long as His truth is not watered down by a “healing/power” focus over a “proclamation” focus. The early Church was built just as much on suffering and the blood of the martyrs as it was on the miraculous. We should be willing to embrace both, as well (Acts 4:27-31). We must have faith in God whether He performs a miracle or not (Dan 3:17-18). Prayers of faith cannot “manipulate” God to heal, and the lack of faith to be healed does not prevent God from healing either (Mk 9:24-27). As Christians, we must yield to God’s will, even if that means suffering for us, because God may have a greater plan (Gen 50:20). But this never means we are to turn to God only as a last resort or to think that we do not have a Father Who longs to give good gifts to His children. Faith, dependence and submission to the will of a loving heavenly Father is the biblical posture of a believer.

THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF HEALING:

What are the specific causes of illness? We believe that the Scriptures indicate that Satanic forces and the curse from the Fall of Adam into sin are the ultimate causes of illness in the world. The Bible clearly describes demonization as a cause of some illnesses (Mt 12:22; Lk 13:10-16) instead of germs. Jesus rebuked demons that had caused illnesses (Mk 9:17-27; Lk 4:39). The Bible describes Satan as using the natural results of the Fall to cause accidents and illness (Job 1:12-19, 2:6-8). Satan also tempts people to sin (Mt 4:1; 1Cor 7:5) and illness can occur because God is punishing people for their sins (Ex 15:26; James 5:14-15; 1Cor 11:28-32). Illness can also simply be permitted for God's greater glory (Jn 9:3). Physical illness may be caused by a problem involving the mind, emotions, or spiritual aspects (e.g. unconfessed sin such as bitterness; James 5:15) in a person's life.

Is it always God's will to heal? There are many examples in Scripture where it was not God's will to heal someone (see 1Tim 5:23; 2Tim 4:20; Gal 4:13-15; Phil 2:25-30; 2Cor 12:7-9). Paul's suffering from the "thorn in the flesh" had nothing to do with a lack of faith for healing on his part. But we are always to pray for healing because we are commanded to (Heb 4:16, 11:6; James 5:16; Jn 16:23-24) and God may do more than just a physical healing as a result of a fervent prayer ministry (see Jn 11; 2Cor 12:8-9).

Must miraculous healing always be instantaneous, total and permanent? Although Christ's miracles were always total and permanent (except when a lack of faith was present; cf. Mk 6:4-6), we believe that God can partially heal, gradually heal or temporarily heal for His glory (see Mk 9:28-29; Num 12:10-15).

Who is authorized to heal? Prayers for the sick and the ministry of healing does not seem to be tied strictly to those with the gift of intercession, healing, or to the elders (Jn 16:23-24). Everyone can be used by God to heal if they are truly saved (Mk 16:18), have faith (James 1:5-7; Heb 11:6), and are open to God's healing power (Mk 6:4-6). But God's Gospel, glory and power (not our being used by Him) should be the primary focus.

What does God want us to do in terms of healing? All healing is ultimately in God's hands: no prayers, "formulas," or amount of faith can "demand or manipulate" anything from God apart from His will. But Scripture does indicate that we can cooperate with God as His instruments for healing. Faith in God and in His power to heal seems to be a common element in healing (see Lk 9:37-43, 5:20), whether that of the sick person, friends, elders or disciples. Sometimes people full of faith were not healed (2Cor 12:8-9) and at other times everybody seemed to be healed (Acts 5:16, 28:9). The elders are told to pray and anoint the sick with oil, setting aside that person for healing (James 5:13ff). People were healed in many different ways that encouraged faith such as with spittle (Mk 8:22-26), mud (Jn 9:6), commands (Acts 3:6), a shadow (Acts 5:15), and a handkerchief (Acts 19:11-12). These things do not have power in and of themselves and they are not "magic formulas" to be followed. The common elements are: 1. Faith that God can heal the sick; 2. A sincere compassion for suffering people and a desire to see God glorified in their lives; 3. And the personal investment and risk taking of those who prayed. A team of people should be used in praying for the sick if at all possible.

THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING:

The Scriptures clearly teach that though God is in control, this will not mean that His children are free from trials, suffering, and pain in this life (James 1:12ff). Apart from what we have stated about God and suffering in our introduction (Gen 50:20; Rom 8:28), we believe that God can use suffering in the following positive ways: 1. Suffering can teach us much about our God and can draw us closer to God (Acts 9:16-17; 2Cor 12:7-9); 2. Suffering can bring glory to God (Jn 11:4); 3. Suffering can display God's work (Jn 9:3); 4. Suffering can produce (and is almost necessary to produce) spiritual maturity (James 1:2-4); 5. Suffering prevents self-exaltation (2Cor 12:7); 6. Suffering brings needed chastening to believers and brings them back to God (1Cor 11:29-30; Heb 12:7-8); 7. Suffering helps us have compassion on others who are suffering (2Cor 1:3-5); 8. And suffering accomplishes God's unrevealed purposes (Rom 8:28; 2Tim 2:12; Rev 22:5).