

“Empowered by the Spirit”
A Selected Annotation of the Sovereign Grace Ministries Statement of Faith
Jeff T. Purswell
Presented at the 2003 Leadership Conference

Last year, a section in the Sovereign Grace Ministries Statement of Faith was modified—specifically, the section on the role of the Holy Spirit in the believer’s life. Formerly titled “The Baptism of the Spirit,” the new section is titled “Empowered by the Spirit.” The modified section reads as follows:

In addition to effecting regeneration and sanctification, the Holy Spirit also empowers believers for Christian witness and service. While all genuine believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit at conversion, the New Testament indicates the importance of an ongoing, empowering work of the Spirit subsequent to conversion as well. Being indwelt by the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are theologically distinct experiences. The Holy Spirit desires to fill each believer continually with increased power for Christian life and witness, and imparts his supernatural gifts for the edification of the Body and for various works of ministry in the world. All the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first century are available today, are vital for the mission of the church, and are to be earnestly desired and practiced.

For most of us, this modification comes as no surprise. However, there may be some who view this as a major modification or doctrinal shift; others might infer a downgrade in the rigor of our commitment to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This brief annotation will seek to set the modification of our Statement of Faith in context, explain the substance of the new section, highlight the salutary effects of the change, and allay any potential concerns of pneumatological erosion.

The Context of the Modification

Let it first be said that the Sovereign Grace Ministries leadership team has not moved from its understanding of the work of the Spirit, an understanding that could be classified as a traditional charismatic/Pentecostal view.¹ However, as our family of churches has grown, an increasing number of people have been drawn to Sovereign Grace’s combined emphases of sound doctrine and charismatic experience. Many of these people come from backgrounds or contexts that are theologically Reformed; what they have encountered in Sovereign Grace is a somewhat unusual combination of the key elements of their own theological heritage with a robust doctrine of the Spirit and a corresponding pursuit of the ministry of the Spirit. It has been both humbling and encouraging to see the enthusiasm of so many over their experience with Sovereign Grace churches.

¹ The addition of “charismatic” to this label implies some distinction from a traditional Pentecostal view. The primary distinction would be the lack of insistence that the gift of tongues is the *necessary* evidence that a person has been baptized in the Holy Spirit, an insistence that characterizes the doctrinal statements of many Pentecostal denominations. The general perspective of the Sovereign Grace leadership team is represented by the essay by Douglas Oss in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 239-283.

As our history with such people has grown, we have increasingly found that our common ground far exceeds our differences. For a number who share our commitment to the centrality of the gospel, our Reformed soteriology, our pursuit of the active presence of God, and our belief in ongoing ministry of the Spirit (including the continuation of spiritual gifts), Sovereign Grace has become a congenial context in which fruitful participation can flourish. Many of these people have experienced what they would understand as the baptism in the Holy Spirit. For them, this has been an introduction into a fundamentally different, more dynamic relationship with God. However, for some who have come to a Sovereign Grace context and experienced an enriched experience of God, a few residual theological differences remain, primarily one. It is this difference that has prompted the modification of our Statement of Faith.

This remaining theological difference involves one's understanding of the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. Again, the common ground is extensive. Together, we acknowledge the empowering work of the Spirit, relish the active presence of God, daily seek the ongoing filling of the Spirit, and actively pursue the gifts of the Spirit. The difference for some is how they view one's introduction into the experience of the Spirit. These individuals would understand the phrase "baptism in the Spirit" to refer to what happens to a believer at conversion: when he is born again, he receives the gift of the Holy Spirit in keeping with the promises of the new covenant.² Of course, the historic—and present—position of the Sovereign Grace team has been that the baptism in the Holy Spirit is an experience distinct from conversion (though not necessarily *temporally* separate from conversion) in which the Spirit comes upon a believer to empower him for Christian life and service. When extensive common ground exists, such as that described above, the Sovereign Grace leadership team has found in many cases that the primary difference amounts to a matter of terminology regarding one's inaugural experience with the Holy Spirit. In such instances, we would consider that difference in terminology to be of secondary importance.³

So, while the Sovereign Grace team has not shifted from its view of the work of the Spirit, it has decided to welcome those who hold a "third wave" view of the Spirit's work—as long as certain fundamental values about the work of the Spirit are held in common. It is these common values that the modified statement expresses and emphasizes.

The Substance of the Modification

In essence, we have produced a statement designed to find agreement among those with a charismatic/Pentecostal perspective and among those holding a third wave viewpoint. The following points characterize the modified statement:

² A common label for such a view, when coupled with a belief in the ongoing work of the Spirit and the continuity of spiritual gifts, is "third wave." Since that term is perhaps the most recognizable one in this discussion, it will be used throughout this paper. Another term that is sometimes used for this view is "continuationist," a term that actually seems preferable to "third wave" since its surface meaning is descriptive of specific aspects of this view.

³ This is not to deny that there are not larger theological structures involved in one's view on this issue, nor that those theological structures have no bearing on one's actual practice. It is, however, to affirm that such differences ultimately prove to be of secondary importance in light of the vast areas of agreement described above. Issues of practical application will be addressed later in this paper. In any event, it should be noted that there are Sovereign Grace pastors who hold to a third wave view and who function very comfortably within our family of churches.

- The statement *does not require* one to hold to a baptism in the Spirit distinct from conversion.
- The statement certainly *does not exclude* such a distinct baptism in the Spirit.
- The statement simply *declines to specify* what a second experience of the Spirit (i.e., an experience apart from conversion) should be called.
- The statement *makes clear which values are central* and should be held, whatever terminology one uses to describe a second work of the Spirit. As such, the statement contemplates a particular kind of lifestyle and experience: one marked by the Spirit's presence and power.⁴

This does not mean that any and all who hold to either of these positions would find a Sovereign Grace context consistent with their viewpoints. For example, one can imagine a more traditional Pentecostal whose attitude is “Don’t tell me about the Holy Spirit—I was baptized in the Spirit 20 years ago! It’s those other people who need the Spirit.” This is obviously a caricature, but it illustrates a misapplication of the charismatic/Pentecostal view in which pride exists because of a past experience, and the ongoing necessity of the Spirit’s work—repeated fillings of the Spirit for empowerment—are ignored. On the other hand, one can also imagine a “third waver” who says, “Don’t tell me I need the Spirit—I got all I needed at conversion!” This caricature illustrates a similar misapplication of a faithful third wave view in which the necessity for the ongoing work of the Spirit is ignored, and confidence is placed in a past experience—in this case, conversion.

A full exposition of the modified paragraph is beyond the scope of this paper, but the statement includes the following salient points:

1. “*In addition to effecting regeneration and sanctification . . .*” The statement makes an important acknowledgement of **broader aspects** of the Spirit’s work. We never want the miraculous nature of regeneration and sanctification to be overshadowed by an undue emphasis on other and more apparently “spectacular” aspects of the Spirit’s work such as spiritual gifts.
2. “*While all genuine believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit at conversion . . .*” The statement acknowledges the **indwelling** of the Spirit in all believers.
3. “. . . *the New Testament indicates the importance of an ongoing, empowering work of the Spirit subsequent to conversion as well.*” The **empowering** nature of the Spirit’s work in a believer’s life is emphasized.
4. “*Being indwelt by the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit are theologically distinct experiences.*” The statement makes a **distinction** between the indwelling of the Spirit at conversion and the subsequent empowering work of the Spirit in the believer’s life. These are described as “theologically distinct” experiences; clearly, a subsequent filling of the

⁴ Such an experience of the Spirit is clearly the expectation of those who hold to a charismatic/Pentecostal view; within Sovereign Grace, a third wave view would need to be formulated in such a way as to carry this same expectation.

Spirit that directly results in, say, bold proclamation of the gospel (cf. Ac 4:8, 13:9) differs in certain fundamental ways from what one experiences at the new birth.

5. “*The Holy Spirit desires to fill each believer continually with increased power . . .*” The statement emphasizes the necessity of the **ongoing** nature of the Spirit’s work, including continual and repeated fillings of the Spirit (cf. Eph 5:18). While one’s theological framework is important, we are nonetheless more concerned that second, third, fourth, fifth . . . sixtieth . . .(etc.) encounters with the Spirit *actually occur* than we are with what one should call a second encounter with the Spirit (either a “baptism” or a “subsequent filling”).
6. “. . . *with increased power for Christian life and witness.*” This phrase emphasizes the **ethical aspects** of the Spirit’s empowerment.
7. “[*The Holy Spirit*] *imparts his supernatural gifts for the edification of the Body and for various works of ministry in the world.*” The statement highlights the **purposes** of spiritual gifts in edifying the church and furthering the ministry of the gospel (as opposed to being merely a source of personal blessing or experience).
8. “*All the gifts of the Holy Spirit at work in the church of the first-century are available today . . .*” The continuity and importance of **the full range of spiritual gifts** presented in Scripture is insisted upon.
9. “[*Spiritual gifts*] *are vital for the mission of the church, and are to be earnestly desired and practiced.*” Beyond mere doctrinal acknowledgment, the paragraph communicates an **attitude**: believers are to desire and pursue the work of the Spirit. This is perhaps as important as certain creedal affirmations concerning the Spirit’s work.

These points articulate the main beliefs and values concerning the Spirit’s empowering work that we feel are most important for participation within a Sovereign Grace context. When these beliefs and values are held, latitude on other issues may be allowed.

Because the charismatic/Pentecostal viewpoint has been our position historically, these values are particularly important gauges for those exploring involvement in Sovereign Grace who hold a third wave view. A degree of precision is important here. As with most doctrines, those who hold to a third wave view represent a spectrum of beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Indeed, in this particular area of doctrine the categories of “attitude” and “practice” are especially important. The modified Statement of Faith would not necessarily embrace any and all who hold to a third wave view, but those holding to what the writer would call a “robust third wave view” (or, better, a “robust continuationist view”). Such a view would comprise the values articulated above: a passion for the Spirit’s presence and activity, a pursuit of the gifts, a faith-filled expectation of God’s gracious granting of the gifts, an expectation of conversions that exhibit more than simply profession but which are accompanied by encounters with God’s Spirit that seem to be in keeping with the momentous nature of conversion under the new covenant, etc. It is these things, which historically have marked the lives of so many in the Pentecostal and charismatic camps, that we want to preserve. The modified statement simply accommodates those who desire these

same things, but who view them as constitutive of the power of the new birth in the new covenant age.⁵

Our attempt has been to craft a statement that is biblically faithful, that emphasizes our particular values, and that could be agreed upon by both a traditional Pentecostal and a “third waver.” This is certainly possible with this statement as long as one does not insist on specificity with regards to what one calls a second experience with the Spirit, be it a “baptism in the Spirit” or a subsequent filling of the Spirit.

Is this Practical?

This statement is an attempt to allow for common association where sufficient agreement on doctrine and practice exists, and to draw appropriate lines of demarcation so as to preserve doctrinal integrity. Of course, practically implementing this statement will in many cases require wisdom and care.

At the local-church level, individual pastoral teams actually have to *teach* on the work of the Spirit, and it is probably wise—though not necessarily imperative—to teach one particular viewpoint. However, in so doing, the viewpoint that is taught could be qualified to allow for differing viewpoints *within a framework of commonly held values* and, of course, with the irreducible minimum of humility towards our own beliefs and the beliefs of others.

We have seen this approach function well at Covenant Life Church, where there are actually differing views on the pastoral team itself. The majority of the team holds to a traditional charismatic/Pentecostal view, but there are four pastors who have a third wave perspective.⁶ In settings where the work of the Spirit is taught (e.g., the New Members class), the majority view is presented. Pastors who hold to a different view are supportive of the majority position—i.e., they recognize it as a legitimate position biblically and, while not personally persuaded by it, are comfortable deferring on the issue and having it taught. This obviously requires some degree of humility and commitment to the team as a whole. The majority also expresses humility through the accommodation of other views. Moreover, even when the majority view is taught, care is taken to place the greatest emphasis on the values common to *both* views. These principles would apply to members as well: if a prospective member held a third wave view, enthusiastically embraced our common values, and was willing to support the church’s teaching and not make this difference into a point of controversy, we would gladly welcome him or her as a member of the church.

As an example of how we have sought to apply this at Covenant Life Church, there is attached to this paper a lesson from Covenant Life’s newly revised new members class (Lesson 7, “Strength

⁵ This is an important point for formulating what has been called in this paper a “robust third wave view.” Such a view does not downgrade the Spirit’s empowering work by relegating it all under the vague heading of “conversion,” an error of which some third wave formulations are guilty. Rather, it recognizes the epochal change that occurred at Pentecost and thus the significance of the new birth *under the new covenant*, an experience that brings a far greater measure of the Spirit’s presence and power than was available under the old covenant.

⁶ In the interests of proper disclosure, the writer would be included among these four.

for the Journey: Empowered by the Spirit”). Under Roman numeral IV, sections A and B outline a charismatic/Pentecostal view of the Spirit’s work. Section C notes our accommodation of other views, and articulates the common values that should be held by all members.

Our experience at Covenant Life gives us confidence that the broadening of this statement is indeed practicable. **In the case of a single staff pastor:** clearly, he would teach his own view of this subject, allowing for other views among his members assuming that our core values are shared and the matter will not become a point of contention. **In the case of a pastoral team:** the team would teach the majority view, while allowing latitude for the minority view (again, assuming the key values are shared). In such a case, humility is required on the part of the majority of the pastoral team to allow for different positions that are nonetheless consonant with our values. In addition, the majority should display biblical discernment through its greater emphasis on the essential values that unite us, rather than an insistence on conformity to all aspects of the majority view.

For team members in the minority, humility requires that they be supportive of the majority position (though not holding to it personally), deferring to the team as a whole on this issue. Ministry settings will be governed by the majority view; minority members should be able to participate fully and to do so in faith, being careful not to introduce confusion by the display of disagreement. When our essential values are held in common, it has been our experience that all members of the team pray with equal faith, display equal expectancy of the Spirit’s ministry, equally direct the attention of the person receiving ministry outward and upward to the Savior, and equally trust in the sovereignty of God in his care for his people.

A Way Forward

One might wonder if this accommodation will result in doctrinal degradation. While doctrinal latitude can lead to doctrinal indifference, it does not do so *necessarily*. What is required in such matters is absolute clarity on essentials and biblical discernment on non-essentials. Such discernment must include thoughtful consideration as to the entailments of having a spectrum of views on a particular subject. The modified statement does introduce a spectrum, but it is a limited one; not all views on the Spirit are accommodated, and those that are must be held within a common theological framework and set of commonly held values. For example, our statement would not accommodate a cessationist perspective on spiritual gifts. Although we love, respect, and affirm genuine brothers and sisters in Christ who are cessationists, the entailments of this view for life, ministry, and practice within the context of the local church would simply make laboring closely together in the context of a local church impracticable.

It is our belief that the framework set forth above and the values we seek to preserve within Sovereign Grace are sufficiently clear and rigorous to preserve *functional unity*. Moreover, they are sufficiently broad to allow for association between those with the requisite doctrinal uniformity. In short, the modified statement establishes a framework within which acceptable diversity on this issue is identified and allowed while clear biblical values and robust spiritual experience are preserved for future generations.

Hope for the future is fueled by the presence of another value that is cherished within Sovereign Grace: humility. Whenever doctrinal specificity and definition are valued and sought, humility is critical. Humility protects us from wrong-headed dogmatism, doctrinal intransigence, and arrogant condescension. It is our hope that as we pursue together a vibrant experience of God through the ministry of the Spirit, we will do so humbly, and in so doing we will maintain both doctrinal fidelity and an increasing unity with those who love God's word and his active presence.