



Charismatic Gifts
in the **Early**
Church

*The Gifts of the Spirit in
the First 300 Years*

RONALD A. N. KYDD



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H HENDRICKSON
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Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church: The Gifts of the Spirit in the First 300 Years

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To Roseanne

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PREFACE

The initial motivation to undertake this study arose from my own experience of the Holy Spirit. Having become curious about more expressive aspects of the spirituality of early Christian communities, I quickly discovered that it was a topic which had not attracted much attention from historians. This was in the late 1960s, just as what we came to call the “charismatic renewal” was taking its first steps. I was pleased to be able to pursue the issue in my doctoral dissertation at the University of St. Andrews (Scotland). The work turned out to be novel, but I benefitted from the oversight of an excellent group of scholars of that generation. Professor J. H. Baxter was my supervisor at the beginning, and then Professor R. McL. Wilson succeeded him when he retired. Professor Matthew Black and Professor Ernest Best also served on my doctoral committee. I am indebted to all of them, but especially to Professor Wilson. This book is a rewriting and a distillation of the thesis which I submitted in 1972.

A large quantity of excellent work has appeared since I completed this study. The stimulation of the charismatic renewal and the appearance of a growing cadre of superb scholars within classical Pentecostalism accounts for much of it. Names such as James D. G. Dunn, Gordon Fee, Norbert Baumert, Kilian McDonnell, William Tabbernee, Andrew Daunton-Fear, and Simon Chan stand out among many others as having contributed greatly to our understanding of the spiritual dimensions of early Christian lives. Given the nature of this project, I will not be able to interact with them, but they must be read.

I am grateful that Hendrickson proposed a reprint of the book. Ongoing requests for it indicate that there is still a role for the book to play.

Originally I dedicated the book to Roseanne, my wife, who subsequently earned a PhD of her own. In the midst of her local, regional, and national responsibilities, she continues to comfort and inspire me and display deep interest in my work. I am blessed beyond words.

Hefenfelth

Eastertide 2014

INTRODUCTION

First century Christians were a dynamic group of people. They were radically committed to Christ, and they preached the Good News of His life, death, and resurrection with terrific zeal. Their vitality was remarkable. When we read the New Testament, we learn of miracles, acts of raw courage, and explosive evangelism. How do we explain this? Where did they get their drive? Closer probing gives a large part of the answer to these questions: these were people of the Spirit. They were certainly preoccupied with Christ, but they were very much alive to the presence of the Holy Spirit also.

They often found that Presence showing itself in dramatic, unusual ways. John says he was carried away “in the Spirit” (Rev 21:10); Paul pronounces judgment on an opponent of the Gospel through the Spirit (Acts 13:10 and 11), and believers spoke in tongues as they were filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4). The Holy Spirit was among them, leading them to do some very surprising things. He was also at work quietly and inconspicuously helping Christians to spiritual maturity,¹ but He showed Himself in powerful action again and again. New Testament Christianity was charismatic. Times when the Holy Spirit broke in upon them with great force were common to these Christians.

There are many observations which support this. To begin with, the records show that Christians in virtually every major New Testament center knew something about the powerful moving of the Spirit. This includes Jerusalem, Caesarea, probably Samaria, Antioch, Ephesus, Colossae, Thessalonica, Corinth, Rome, and the communities to which Hebrews was written. We know that in some of these places worship was very much alive in the Spirit, if 1 Cor 14:26–33 and Col 3:16 are any indication of what went on.

We do not have as much information as we might like about cities such as Athens, Lystra, and Derbe, to select several at random, but maybe the kind of people who took the Gospel to them should tell us something. Paul, Barnabas, and Silas were all known as prophets among their brethren,² a name they no doubt gained by speaking in obedience to the Spirit's urging. It is unlikely that this aspect of their ministries changed significantly when they moved into the Greek world. They were trying to bring these new converts into the fullness of Christianity, and the Holy Spirit was a very important part of that.

The question I want to raise is: what happened after this first period of the Church's life? In particular I want to address myself to the interval between the late first century and about AD 320. I draw the line there, because the Council of Nicaea was held in 325, and it serves as a kind of watershed in Church history. Steps were consciously taken there to tighten up things in the Church, in terms of both doctrine and practice. Did Christians continue to pulsate with the life of the Spirit throughout this period?

I think the answer may be found by focusing upon the "gifts of the Spirit," the *charismata*, as the Greek has it. These phenomena were recognizable among the contemporaries of Peter and Paul. Maybe they will be in the later time slot also. But first, what is a "spiritual gift?" We had better know what we are looking for before we try to find it.

In order to come up with the sought after definition, let us pause over the most important New Testament passage related to these matters: 1 Cor 12–14. We will try to develop a definition from what is given to us there and elsewhere in the Scriptures.

Basic to the understanding of a "spiritual gift" is the idea that it is an ability which is given to someone by God. He is its source. It is not at the disposal of a man, but rather it comes into play when God chooses.³

Secondly, we observe that spiritual gifts seem to be tailored to particular situations. The main thrust of Paul's teaching on this point is his insistence that the gifts are to build up the Christians among whom they appear. They really only find their meaning when they are carrying out this function within the Church. Primarily, they relate to situations existing at the moment when they appear, expressing God's will or showing His power in them. Maybe an illustration would be useful. Let us look at the gift of prophecy.

When we consider what is said about this gift in 1 Cor 12–14, we can make some specific observations. First, it is speech in the vernacular. It can be understood locally without translation or interpretation. This it shares with another gift, the interpretation of tongues. Second, it draws its inspiration from God. Third, it is addressed to people who are present, having significance for what they are experiencing. These last two characteristics of prophecy seem to be the norm for any of the spiritual gifts, the word of knowledge, giving money, healing or whatever. They all come from God, and they all relate to the situation that exists at the moment.

However, we must not become too rigid here. When we look at the Book of Acts, we see some things which depart somewhat from what I have suggested is the norm. For example, prophecy as it is spoken of in 1 Cor 12–14 does not appear to be predictive, and yet in Acts 11:28 the prophet, Agabus, made comments about the future, which apparently came true. Further, the information which one receives through the gifts of the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge mentioned in 1 Corinthians seems to be implanted directly in someone's mind by the Spirit, but in Acts 10:9–29, we find Peter learning something by means of a vision. I think what I have suggested as a norm is still valid, but it is obvious that we must remain flexible about these things.

And so what are we looking for when we are looking for spiritual gifts? We are looking for the kinds of things we see the Spirit doing in the New Testament. It should be noted in passing that the lists of spiritual gifts we are given in 1 Cor 12:8–10 and Rom 12:6–8 probably should not be regarded as definitive. When you compare them with each other and with material to be found in Acts and Hebrews, you discover too much imprecision and fluidity of thought to allow that. Even if they were exhaustive, we would have to acknowledge that some of the gifts will stand out more clearly than others; tongues, for example, more clearly than giving aid. We will try to catch them all, but we are likely to encounter the dramatic more often than the non-dramatic.

In this study, we will address ourselves to the whole body of Christian literature produced between about AD 90 and 320. On one hand, we will come across reports of the presence of spiritual gifts. On these occasions, we will have to weigh the historical value of what is said before we may admit them as evidence. On the other

hand, we will find people talking about their spiritual experiences in terms which will remind us of the gifts of the Spirit, although these phenomena may not be explicitly mentioned. These passages will have to be interpreted carefully in order to determine how close what is being spoken of comes to the New Testament picture of the spiritual gifts. The closer the similarity, the better will be the grounds for assuming the presence of spiritual gifts. This illustrates our basic concern, which is to discover how particular New Testament experiences carried over into the period following.

It should also be mentioned that we will have to be careful in handling what appears to be evidence of the presence of spiritual gifts. The quality of this material is very uneven. Some of it is very good, but on the other hand, some is quite weak. We will keep this in mind as we proceed.

I suggest that what emerges from a study of the sources is the picture of a Church which is strongly charismatic up until AD 200. In the half century following this date, the importance of the spiritual gifts in the lives of Christian communities appears to decline significantly and attitudes towards them change. Following about AD 260, there is no more evidence of charismatic experience, at least up until AD 320, the end point of this study.⁴ We will review the evidence chronologically, which is in keeping with the basic argument of the study.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM THE EMERGING CHURCH

Have you ever sown grass or planted a shrub? I had my first taste of “husbandry” after we moved into a new house a few years ago. Our yard was like everyone else’s—a sea of mud—and it needed a lawn. I chose to remedy the situation by sowing grass seed, while some of our neighbors opted for a quicker solution: laying sod. The sowing of the seed was the beginning of an anxious few days for me. The newly-placed lawns in the yards across the street quickly became lush and green. Ours stayed black. Questions began to flood my mind: “Is it too wet? Is it too dry? Will it ever germinate?” The concern, anxiety, and suspense grew until the grass finally appeared.

I get much the same feelings when I ponder over the sources for the history of the Church for the period before AD 150.

Now the Church looms like a mighty colossus over Western society. It manifests its presence by its cathedrals and chapels, its publishing houses, its theological seminaries and Bible colleges, its globe-encircling missionary endeavors, and its television spectacles. Much of society may be rejecting the message and the principles of Christianity, but it cannot reject “the Presence.” It is just *there*. But things were not always thus.

From where we view history, we know that Christianity “took,” and from God’s perspective, that was always a sure thing, but back in the first century, that outcome was by no means obvious or certain to the average casual onlooker. Try looking at the history of the first century of the Church’s life with the same frame of mind you use while reading a mystery novel *after* you have skipped ahead to the last chapter and found out “who done it.”

With what looks like agonizing slowness, the Church struggled toward stability and permanence, although the people who were playing out the roles did not realize that this was what they were

doing. Their tomorrows were just as uncertain and as ill-defined as ours are. With the passing of decades, the New Testament was recognized for what it was. Scripture and organization evolved; Christians began thinking carefully about what they believed; and all the while, evangelism kept sweeping people into the Church. Christian communities must have lived in a kind of continuous tension as they were faced daily with the need to react to, then integrate a steady stream of new people, new ideas, new sacred books, and new ways of worship. Suspense grips me as I block out what I know took place and watch the Church unfold. This suspense is heightened by the scarcity of information we have about this period. Often we can only probe gently in the darkness in hopes of touching something solid.

It is to the first part of this dramatic period that we turn in pursuit of light regarding spiritual gifts, and we find it shining from one document and one man.

The *Didache*

In 1873 the library of the Jerusalem monastery in Constantinople yielded a treasure that no one knew it contained: *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, or the *Didache*. Since its publication ten years later by Philotheus Bryennius, its discoverer, it has been the subject of a host of scholarly investigations. People have focused on questions like the strata of material it contains and the revisions it has passed through, the place where it was written, and the date at which it appeared. While there has been nothing like oneness of mind among the scholars, I think some fairly concrete conclusions have been reached. We should probably assume that the *Didache* was written in Syria, which leads us into the heat and dust of the Middle East.¹ In terms of dating it, we are most likely on the best ground when we place it in the second half of the first century.² Of course this makes it a highly significant document, because it then takes on the status of an independent witness to what the Church, in places at least, was like during the time when the New Testament was still being written.

It is interesting to speculate about how widespread the conditions the *Didache* reflects were. Who received the counsel it gives?

How far did its influence extend? We know that it was important in the Middle East, especially in Egypt in the fourth century, but can we assume that the circumstances to which it addresses itself existed that far away when it first appeared? There is probably no way that that question can be answered, but there is a clue which may suggest that it was relevant to a fairly large segment of the Palestinian Church.

To a large measure, the *Didache* focuses upon matters related to a class of wandering ministers. In the course of the discussion, we learn that these people were expected to keep on the move. If all of this was taking place in a relatively small area, the people who were travelling from place-to-place would soon have become well-known, and the suggestions the *Didache* offers to govern and test them would have been superfluous. Therefore, we should probably conclude that the *Didache* spoke to people in a fairly large geographical area.

The importance which the *Didache* has for this study rests upon what it has to say with regard to the people who ministered to the communities to which it was written. The New Testament Church in Antioch was marked by the gifts of the Spirit. In both Acts 13:1 and 2 and Acts 15:32, we discover that prophets were active in the Syrian capital, and the impression we gain from the *Didache* suggests that things had not changed much in that regard. There are two features of the Christian communities from which the *Didache* grew which are particularly interesting for us.

First, we focus upon the attitude which the *Didache* displays toward the prophet, and we note that there is a kind of ambivalence involved: they like him, and they do not. We find a positive view of prophecy in instructions following the prayers which are prescribed for use during the celebration of the Lord's Supper. *Did.* 10:7 says, "Allow the prophets to give thanks as much as they wish."³ The author obviously thought that whatever prophetic messages were delivered would be beneficial to the Christians who would hear them. In view of this, prophets were not to have restrictions placed upon their giving thanks.

This attitude is revealed again a little later in the *Didache*. We read, "And you shall neither test nor judge any prophet who is speaking in the Spirit. For every sin will be forgiven, but this one will not be."⁴ When a prophet spoke as a prophet, his message was

not to be criticized. This exhortation reflects the esteem in which the prophetic message was held.

At the same time, the author of the *Didache* and the communities to which he wrote were not naive. They had learned that not everyone who said he was a prophet in fact was, and it seems that at the time when the *Didache* was written there was a large number of men, both inside and outside the Church, who were claiming this status.⁵ A suspicion of prophets (and of wandering ministers in general) appeared, and it surfaces in *Did.* 11:8, “Not everyone who is speaking in the Spirit is a prophet.”⁶ This concern led the one who wrote the *Didache* to lay down tests by which false prophets could be separated from true ones.

The first test mentioned has to do with what the prophet teaches. *Did.* 11:1 and 2 state that the content of a man’s message must conform to the instruction given in the previous part of the *Didache*. If it did, he was to be welcomed by the community. This test appears to apply both to prophets and to other travelling ministers.

The second test is directed specifically to prophets and is moral in nature. In *Did.* 11:8–12,⁷ the author says that the true prophet may be distinguished from the false by observing the man’s life-style. If he shows “the way of life the Lord requires,” he is to be received as a true prophet. Enlarging upon this, he says that while speaking in the Spirit, a prophet must not order a meal to be prepared and then eat it. He must do what he teaches, and he must not ask for money or similar things unless it is for someone else. Once the prophet has passed these tests and is approved, his ministry is not to be judged.

There are also regulations which govern the length of the stay of wandering ministers, who come to visit communities. *Did.* 11:4 and 5 say that at the most he may stay two days. This seems to be aimed specifically at “apostles,” that is, itinerant missionaries, because *Did.* 13:1 states that if a prophet wishes to settle in a community, he is to be supported.

From all of this, it is obvious that the Syrian Church was developing ways of protecting itself from false prophets.

The passages which we have looked at from the *Didache* illustrate the dilemma confronting the author and his contemporaries. They wanted prophetic messages in their churches, because they thought these were beneficial to them. However, they were also very conscious of the danger of being infiltrated by false prophets.

The second feature of the *Didache* which is of interest to us here has to do with the relationship between travelling and local ministers. While discussing the question of officeholders and “the old free men of the Spirit” in the Church of the second century in general, Hans von Campenhausen states that they were both there and then goes on to say:

The coexistence of these various kinds of authority is not felt to be a problem. To start in every case from a supposed opposition between two separate blocs, the official and the charismatic, is a typical modern misunderstanding. Not only do office-holders possess the Spirit, but the spirituals for their part, to the extent that they rightly belong to the Church, derive the power of their teaching from the traditional apostolic truth.⁸

Von Campenhausen stresses that charismatics and officeholders could, did, and should work side by side.⁹ The *Didache*, while coming from an earlier period, illustrates precisely the point which von Campenhausen is making.

Therefore choose for yourselves bishops and deacons who are worthy of the Lord, men who are unassuming and not greedy, who are true and who have been approved. For they are performing the service of prophets and teachers for you. Therefore, do not despise them, for they are your honoured men, along with the prophets and teachers.¹⁰

The first thing which catches our attention in this passage from the *Didache* is the fact that the bishops and deacons, the elected officials, were apparently doing the same things as the wandering charismatics. They were “performing the service of prophets and teachers.” It is a little difficult to decide exactly what this service was.

At first it appears that *Did.* 10:7 might provide a hint, because it seems to associate prophets with the Lord’s Supper. Perhaps they led this ceremony. However, we really cannot say this, because the *Didache* does not explicitly show that the Church of that time and place had assigned this responsibility and privilege to any particular group. If we cannot hold onto that idea, the only activity which we can be sure the prophets engaged in was the delivery of free, inspired messages and instruction in doctrine. Granting all of this, we are left with the conclusion that, in addition to any administrative responsibilities they might have had, the bishops and deacons were

also teaching and delivering prophetic messages. This highlights a tendency which gained momentum as the Church developed.

As far as we can tell, in most New Testament churches there was a great deal of openness to ministry “in the Spirit.” Col 3:16 is instructive:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

1 Cor 14:26 adds, “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” When they gathered, all believers were potential ministers.

However, even while these conditions existed, a different model was emerging: some of the spiritual gifts became associated with particular individuals. As I mentioned earlier,¹¹ Paul, Barnabas, and Silas were all known as “prophets,” and the same thing may be said about Agabus (Acts 21:10). In addition to this, perhaps the impression we should receive from 1 Cor 14:28 is that specific people were being recognized as “interpreters,” who would handle utterances in tongues. So, in the midst of a setting in which free congregational participation in worship was being encouraged, certain people were standing out as those from whom charismatic ministry could be expected. Certainly some of these people, like Paul, Barnabas, and Silas, had special positions of leadership within the Church, but there is no clear indication that Agabus did, and the “interpreter(s)” are not even named. This suggests that being in a position of leadership was not a prerequisite in order to enjoy an advanced ministry through the gifts of the Spirit.

Did. 15:1 and 2 carry this whole discussion a step further. There, as we saw above, the elected officers were also expected to minister charismatically. There seems to be movement here toward placing the responsibility for all types of ministry, administrative and charismatic, in the hands of known and approved men, who had been elected to leadership in the churches.

We should pause over another observation drawn from this passage in the *Didache*. It is worth underlining that both types of leadership, the charismatic and the elected, existed in these communities. It is true that the tone of the passage indicates that the wandering ministers still hold precedence in popular opinion. The

author feels he has to elevate the bishops and deacons by saying, “Do not despise them, for they are your honoured men, along with the prophets and teachers.” However, the “organization men” seem to be coming on. The author stresses that they are to be held in honor, not beyond that given to the prophets and teachers, though, but equal to it. He is encouraging a balance between the two styles of leadership, and he is doing so rather well.

The *Didache* has a lot to say about the gifts of the Spirit. While the cautious attitude must be acknowledged and the rise of elected officials noted, prophecy is still highly valued, and the charismatics are active. The Syrian communities to which the *Didache* was written sometime between AD 50 and 100 were very much aware of the ministry of spiritual gifts, and they were not alone.

Clement of Rome

From a somewhat distant eastern province, our focus shifts to the heart of the Roman Empire itself, the “Eternal City.” Our attention is caught by Clement of Rome, who is traditionally regarded to be the third bishop of Rome. Late in the first century of our era¹² on behalf of the Roman church, he addressed a letter to the Christian community in Corinth. Difficulties had arisen there, and he was trying to restore order.

Embedded in this passionate appeal for understanding and cooperation is a passage which makes Clement of importance to this study—“So let our whole body be preserved in Christ Jesus . . . , and let each put himself at the service of his neighbour as his particular spiritual gift dictates.”¹³

Our discussion will revolve around the expression “spiritual gift.” (A form of *charisma* is used in the original.) The basic question relates to the interpretation of this expression here, bearing in mind the meaning it carries in Rom 12:6 and 1 Cor 12:4. In those passages it refers to unusual abilities which God gives to people to help them minister to others. Is that what it means here? If so, this passage provides us with evidence that the spiritual gifts were in operation among Roman Christians toward the end of the first century. I think there are a couple of considerations which suggest that this is what we have before us.

First, we note the context within which the expression appears. Clement is talking about how Christians should behave in the Church. In 1 Clem. 37:5–38:1a, he illustrates his point by drawing a comparison between the Church and the human body. “The head,” he says, “is nothing without the feet, just as the feet are nothing without the head.” As parts of the body cannot function in isolation from each other, so the effectiveness of a church is shattered when its members are not pulling together. Clement is building a case for unity and mutual concern, and he places the spiritual gifts right in the middle of it. He thinks they are important in helping Christians to function as a body.

This is exactly the same backdrop against which Paul places his discussions of the gifts of the Spirit. The key passages in Paul’s treatment of the gifts are found in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. In Romans, the comparison of the Church with a body immediately precedes what Paul says about spiritual gifts (Rom 12:4 and 5). A rather lengthy passage (1 Cor 12:12–26) is devoted to the comparison in 1 Corinthians, and it appears right in the midst of the extended treatment being given to the gifts of the Spirit.

Secondly, we turn attention to the function of spiritual gifts. The passage from Clement’s work which we are considering reveals his thinking rather clearly. They show each Christian what he should do to put himself at the disposal of others. The gifts find their meaning in ministry. They are given as means of blessing to others.

Paul has precisely the same focus. The fact that the purpose of the gifts is fulfilled only in service to others is implicit in Rom 12:6–8, and this is explicitly stated in the Corinthian correspondence. 1 Cor 12:7 says they are given for “the common good,” while 14:4,5, and 26 emphasize the “edification” of the group in which the gifts are manifested. There is no doubt in Paul’s mind but that the thrust of spiritual ministry is outward toward others.

These similarities between the thinking of Paul and Clement about the spiritual gifts are significant. The fact that they share a common understanding about the function of the gifts and that what they say about them appears in very similar literary contexts suggests that they are talking about the same things. “Spiritual gifts” to Clement probably means the same thing as it does to Paul, and Clement says that they are to have an important role in the help

which Christians extend to others. This looks like evidence that the gifts of the Spirit were to be found among the Christians at Rome toward the end of the first century.

The first century was an exceptionally dramatic period in the life of the Church. Christians were forced to cope with the influx of new people, with the need to organize, with evaluation of books claiming to be Scripture, and with misunderstanding in the society around them. They did not handle this situation without concern, but they did handle it.

We are able to gain impressions about their thinking and their experiences of the Christian faith not only through the New Testament books but also from a reading of the *Didache* and Clement's letter to the Corinthians. The early Christians, as we see them in the New Testament, were very much open to the ministry of the Spirit. Many, many of them must have been charismatics in the fullest sense of that word. The Christians whom we see in the other two documents differ very little in this regard. These sources add their information to what we can draw from the New Testament, leading us to the conclusion that the spiritual gifts were important features of Christian experience throughout the first century. How does this carry over into the next century?