

1

Laying a Foundation

Not long ago I had a very interesting coffee conversation with my friends Jeff and Jane. Our discussion drifted into the subject of spiritual gifts and the Bible study I plan to lead. I shared my excitement for the topic, including some of the thoughts from a few pages ago, and was pleased when both responded with some excitement of their own.

At the same time, there was a subtle hesitation in their eyes, and just a little embarrassment in their smiles. That tone came out in Jeff's comment, too. "Well, *hopefully* the class will be a big success."

His emphasis on the word "hopefully" stirred my curiosity. Usually Jeff and Jane are enthusiastic participants in our church's Bible studies, but I sensed that they had mixed feelings about this particular class. I value their friendship and their candid, thoughtful input. So I asked them to say a little more about their hesitations.

Jeff opened up first. "You know I'm relatively new to church and the Bible, and I have a lot to learn. But even as a newcomer I've seen enough to know that spiritual gifts can be divisive. I've been surprised how easily people who love Jesus and His Word get upset with each other over tongues and prophecy and miraculous gifts, calling each other 'unspiritual' and 'immature' and other more inflammatory names. It feels like spiritual gifts too often divide us instead of helping us to serve more effectively. I'm also a little concerned that instead of looking carefully at what the Bible says, we'll spend a lot of time comparing our experiences and complaining about what is or isn't happening at the church. I hope this class will be different—which is where that word 'hopefully' comes in—but my (admittedly limited) past experience makes me wonder."

Jane nodded agreement. "I grew up in the church, so I've been in at least four or five classes on the gifts, and I've read more books than that. Jeff is right: sometimes this subject does generate more heat than light. To be fair, I know it isn't always that way. Sometimes the teaching is gracious and Bible-focused and the conversation is constructive. But even then, I've had a more general problem. In my experience, there has often been a disconnect between the things we've studied about the Spirit's gifts and the way we live and serve in the church."

I certainly don't want our class to be a theoretical study with no practical impact. So I urged her to continue. Jane had plenty to say.

"Every spiritual gift study I've seen ends with some kind of tool or exercise to help us figure out what gifts we have. That was good. Yet in the churches I've attended, the process stopped there. There was no plan or system to help us put those gifts to work. When people were recruited to serve in the kids' program or the worship team or some other ministry, the process

usually had a lot to do with who knows whom or who is available and willing, and very little to do with what we learned about our spiritual gifts.

“Maybe in part that was because, at least in the older gift studies, we all tried to figure out which of the gifts listed in the Bible were present in our lives. That worked fine for our pastor—he had a gift of teaching. Our elders had gifts of leadership, and so on. But for many of us who didn’t identify as teachers or leaders or evangelists, we ended up checking the box for the gift of ‘helps.’ That was fine, but it really didn’t help us to know what we should do or how the church should involve us in ministry.”

Here Jeff chimed in again. “Recently Jane and I read another book that was genuinely helpful. It challenged us to think about our lives through a wider lens. Instead of focusing entirely on our spiritual gifts, it invited us to see how God has ‘shaped’ us: what kind of personality and experiences and other things He has built into our lives that might open doors for ministry. It was really good! However”—he paused and looked thoughtfully at his wife—“it struck me that this process was almost identical to the personality testing exercises we do downtown in my very secular corporate office. And what bothered me most was: the most helpful part of the book wasn’t the part that talked about my spiritual gifts. It was the other practical analysis that could as easily have come from business theory as from the Bible.”

Jane made a check-mark motion with her finger. “That’s another part of what I mean by a ‘disconnect.’ I’ve heard some very practical messages on putting our spiritual gifts to use. But those tended to be long on common-sense and illustrative stories, and short on careful study of the actual Scripture passages. That wouldn’t be so frustrating if I felt confident that all my questions about the Spirit’s gifts had been answered. Yet even after multiple seminars and books, I find that I’m still puzzled about a number of things. How do I ‘seek’ or ‘stir up’ a gift if the gifts are given as the Holy Spirit decides? If spiritual gifts are supernatural things received when someone becomes a Christian, why do they so often correspond to that person’s natural abilities? Can a person use a spiritual gift ‘at will,’ anytime they choose? If so, how does that work with things like prophecy?

“I’ve heard different answers to these questions, but none that really satisfied me. And those answers were rarely well-connected to the more general, practical teaching about putting gifts to use. So if I’m really honest, I find myself wondering if this study will be different, or if I will come away a little frustrated again.”

I’m not offended by comments like these from Jane and Jeff,¹ nor am I surprised by them. I’ve heard them often. In truth, I’ve raised the same complaints myself. I suspect that those of

¹ In the interest of transparency, I need to deal with a question you may be asking: “Are Jeff and Jane real people?” The answer is yes, and no. No, I am not describing two actual individuals named Jeff and Jane from my church. On the other hand, the questions and concerns and perspectives that I have put in the mouths of “Jeff” and “Jane” flow out of many actual gift conversations I’ve had over the years. Please permit me to summarize these using my two symbolic friends as a way of emphasizing that these aren’t just hypothetical ideas I’ve made up. Many

you who have been around the church for a while, who've gone to gift seminars and read gift books, can relate to at least some of these concerns; and you can probably add to the list. Even if you're new to Christian faith like Jeff, you've likely heard an occasional complaint. Or perhaps you've heard nothing at all about spiritual gifts, which probably means your church is avoiding the subject.

We need to take these concerns seriously. They shouldn't discourage us from digging into the Bible's teaching on the Spirit's gifts. God's Word is inspired and profitable and worth exploring in every subject it covers. At the same time, there are pitfalls to avoid, and it's difficult to avoid them if we have no idea what they look like. If this is going to be a successful study:

- It needs to *nurture unity* and mutual understanding, not promote division;
- It must lead to *practical applications* for us, as individuals and as churches;
- It must be *applicable to every member* of the church, not just a few with obvious leadership gifts;
- It should take us *deeper into the Bible's message*, generating fresh insights and offering at least some help with stubborn questions.

I can offer no guarantee that we will address every issue and achieve all these goals perfectly. However, there are some practical things we can do to make this study more enjoyable and to help us move in a successful direction. I have five specific suggestions to that end. I will do my best to model these in our study. As we prepare to launch, I urge you to consider them and put them into practice as well.

These practices are especially important if you are engaging this project in a group. We sometimes quote Amos: "Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?" (Amos 3:3, NLT). Amos isn't describing a Bible study, but the general principle holds: your group may find it difficult to navigate this sometimes challenging subject unless you have adopted some ground-rules to help you move forward together. So don't skip over the next few pages. Take some time to reflect on them and to discuss them together. Hopefully the group will agree that they are reasonable guidelines. If you are unhappy with one or more of my recommendations, that's fine too; but be sure you agree on the alternative you will adopt! Without consensus on the direction you plan to travel and the rules of engagement you will follow, your group is not likely to be unified and happy on the journey.

Some readers may be working through this material on your own. If so, of course you won't need to worry that your study will be interrupted by arguments. Nevertheless, I strongly recommend that you spend at least a little time considering the points I am about to make. You may think of this as a journey you are taking on your own, but that's not quite true. As you read, you and I are going to explore Scripture together. I will often repeat the refrain that you don't need to *agree* with me on everything. However, this book will be of little use to you if you don't *understand* the points I'm making and the reasoning behind them.

real people wrestle with these things; and many have spoken with me about them. In that sense, yes, "Jeff" and "Jane" are quite real.

The ground-rules I'm about to describe have shaped my own research, and they will color all that I present in this book. If you are unhappy with them, then know in advance that you will probably also disagree with at least some of what I present. If you aren't aware of those ground-rules, then we won't just disagree. At times you will simply not understand what I'm presenting.

So, before we launch into our Bible study, I offer a handful of guiding principles to help place that study on a firm foundation.

(1) Scripture is our authority and we study it together

I write this book as a Christian who holds to the classic essentials of Christian faith, including a commitment to the Bible as God's inspired and trustworthy Word, given to us by the Holy Spirit through a selection of human authors to serve as our authority for matters of faith and life. This commitment has always defined healthy Christian faith. Without it, I can see very little reason why anyone would bother to engage in a serious Bible study on any topic, including the spiritual gifts. I will assume that we share this conviction. If you are studying in a group, be sure that everyone holds it, or at least that they are willing to respect it. Nothing will derail your study faster than a group member who says, "Well, 1 Corinthians may teach that, but I disagree...."

I've already talked about studying together in the Introduction, and won't repeat those comments here. However, I do feel a need to underscore the importance of the point. One of the main reasons the subject of spiritual gifts divides Christians is that we too often *do not* study the Bible together.

Far too much discussion of the gifts is based on no study at all. People will listen to a favorite teacher and adopt his or her views without doing any research of their own. This would be fine if we all followed the same teacher. But teachers hold different positions. They may know why they differ, but often their followers have no idea. So people in our churches have no common framework to help them understand and sift through their differences.

To make things more complicated, spiritual gifts are closely connected to personal experience. People often adopt a particular position on the gifts at least in part because it coincides with their experience. Those positions become entrenched, in part, because the experiences are powerful. Also, people who have had similar experiences flock together, reinforcing their confidence that the positions are sound.

Again, this would be fine if everyone had the same experiences. But that's not how it is in the larger world and in the larger church. So we find groups of Christians standing in opposition to each other over different beliefs that are reinforced by different patterns of experience.

Now, the Christian's authority is Scripture, not personal experience. So we naturally respond that Bible study should help us to get beyond these differences. This is true, but it isn't as simple as it sounds.

The Bible is a large book with many passages that emphasize different aspects of God's truth. Imagine if person #1 focuses her study on passages that fit well with her experience and

support her view on an issue, while person #2 focuses his study on other passages that fit well with his different experience and support his different view. These two get together to discuss the Spirit's gifts. Both share what they have found in Scripture, only to discover that they disagree. Each acknowledges that the other is reading the Bible, but each tends to interpret the other's arguments in light of their own prior conclusions. In the end, two people who love Jesus and seek to honor His Word find that their disagreement has hardened rather than softened, because both believe their own views are anchored in Scripture while the other person's "must flow out of misinterpretation."

The problem here is not that these individuals are studying, but that they are studying *separately* (and perhaps not as thoroughly as they should), forming conclusions *independently*, then trying to engage in a Bible-based discussion shaped by *pre-decided* but incompatible conclusions.

Studying the Bible together doesn't make every problem go away. We can sit side-by-side and look through the same passages and still find that we disagree on their interpretation and application. But when we examine the Word as collaborators, it does help us to move in a healthy direction. We get a better understanding of the reasons behind our different interpretations. We are forced to think about how the Bible's overall message addresses all our different experiences. We grow in the humility which recognizes that none of us knows and sees everything. We get fresh insights as we learn from one another.

I hope this book will promote group as well as individual study. Learning with one another is important, especially when we tackle challenging subjects like the gifts of the Spirit.

(2) We agree on a process and stick to it

In a sense this is easy. If you continue through this book, and assuming you follow my chapter order, you will explore the subject of spiritual gifts along a prearranged path. We will discuss some foundational ground-rules (this chapter), think briefly about our own context and the questions that we face (ch. 2), consider some basic but important biblical ideas (ch. 3), review themes from the OT (ch. 4), survey concepts from the Gospels and Acts (ch. 5 and 6), then tackle the most significant NT passages (ch. 7-10). We'll draw some conclusions in a summary (ch. 11), and think about ways to put our discoveries into practice (ch. 12).

This isn't the only possible path through the material. A different book or seminar might recommend a slightly different process. I take this approach because I find it helpful, and hope you will too.

Though different paths are possible, it's important to choose one intentionally and *to follow it consistently*. Otherwise your study can go into the ditch in several different ways.

The first is the most serious. Anytime you and I explore a topic we care about, there is always a temptation to jump ahead into the conclusions before the investigative work is done. Sometimes we feel an urgent need to get an answer to an important question. For those who've studied the subject before, sometimes the material feels so familiar that we don't expect to find

anything new. Sometimes we're not even aware that we're making assumptions about our final destination before we've arrived.

It's OK to talk about *possible* conclusions anytime. This can help us to see the potential implications of what we're reading. It can remind us of the subject's importance. It's natural, and it can be very useful.

It is *not* helpful to skip forward and camp firmly on a set of conclusions before the process is complete. When we do this, we almost always end up exactly where we started when we began. This does nothing to help resolve differences and improve mutual understanding between people who come from different perspectives. It also robs us of the new information and fresh insight we gain when we work through aspects of the Bible's teaching that are less familiar.

Whether you are studying individually or in a group, there will almost certainly be times when you find that you want to jump ahead to chapter 11 and 12, to debate conclusions and talk about the implications of the study before you've made it through chapters 3 to 10. There will also be times when, perhaps without realizing it, you are tempted to interpret the passage in hand a certain way, not because of anything in the passage itself, but in light of assumptions you make about the conclusions you expect to reach later on.

Be careful! I won't tell you that you aren't allowed to read ahead. But any good study process will always work through all the biblical material first before drawing final conclusions. This requires self-awareness and discipline. As you engage in this study of the Spirit's gifts, make an explicit commitment to stay on the path and not jump ahead. And give one another permission to hold the group accountable if anyone senses that you are getting things out of order.

Especially in a group study, you can also land in the ditch by allowing conversation to wander off-topic too far and too often. Study can drift into a lengthy story-telling session. People can jump back and forth between chapters. Discussion of the Spirit's gifts can digress into a long exploration of other theological topics.

This is less serious, but it can still be a source of frustration. A little digression is stimulating. Too much will be distracting and annoying, and it will either undermine the depth of your study or drag it out so long that it is difficult to finish. Your group needs to decide what the right balance will be, then stick with it. Raise the subject explicitly up-front, and revisit it from time to time. Here again, allow the group to hold each other accountable: give permission to say "Let's get back on topic" without anyone feeling offended.

(3) We understand and follow good exegetical principles

I'm hoping my readers are familiar with the term "exegesis." To read the Bible "exegetically" means that we seek to "draw out" the meaning of each passage using the ordinary rules of literary and linguistic interpretation, rather than reading a meaning "into" the passage that its original author and readers would not recognize. An exegetical approach hears the voice of God's Spirit in the messages the inspired human authors of Scripture intended to communicate

to their anticipated historical audiences: what Paul wanted to convey to the Romans, what Isaiah meant to say to his Hebrew readers, and so on.

An exegetical approach pays attention to the same things we consider when we read other books and letters. It examines word-meanings and grammatical constructions; it unpacks figures of speech; it respects genre and literary style; it honors historical, cultural, literary and canonical context; it traces the flow of thought in each book and passage, seeking to understand the questions the biblical authors are trying to answer rather than using our own contemporary questions and ideas as a filter that determines meaning. Remembering that the Bible was written in a different era and cultural location, it considers issues of translation and cultural background, which means most of us are dependent to some degree on the work of others with expertise who help us with translation and context—who also do exegesis when they translate and provide us with tools for interpretation.

We do exegesis because that's how human language works. It's how we talk to each other. As I write this book, I express my thoughts in much the same way I would if I were talking with you in person, following the normal rules of the English language. I expect you to read my book that way. I would be profoundly disappointed to learn that someone placed their hands on the cover, closed their eyes, and tried to "feel" what it is that I want to say. Doing that just imposes the reader's ideas onto the book, making it a kind of puppet or secret code or mystical source of insight, rather than treating it as a conversation in ordinary language between regular people.

We do exegesis because that is the only way to consistently honor the Bible as our authority in matters of faith and life. When we read the Bible as regular human language, we may disagree on its meaning. But we can have a reasonable conversation about the best interpretation based on the text of Scripture before us. The Bible's words are our arbiter. By contrast, if we get our interpretations in some other way—by trying to "feel" what the Spirit is saying, or through some supposed direct revelation, or by reading through the lens of tradition or experience, or applying a creative form of allegory—we effectively place authority in the mouth of the person giving the interpretation. There is no way for the rest of the church to evaluate what is said. We can't use the Bible to do so, since on that model the Bible only means what one person or another claims that it means.

This comes to roost in our Bible studies. If we agree to let exegesis drive our work, we can have very good discussions about word meanings, grammatical structure, flow of thought, and the like. Where questions or conflicts emerge, we can test them against what the text of Scripture says. Without exegesis, anyone can say: "God showed me that the passage means such-and-such," and we have no way of evaluating the claim. Nor can we discern between views when two or more members believe they are hearing different messages. We either accept our friends' words based on their own personal authority, or we don't, but we have lost the ability to determine meaning through study.

We do exegesis because when the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of Scripture, He chose to speak through them using the languages they understood. I have occasionally heard people suggest that we somehow disrespect the Spirit when we study the Bible as real human language written in a real historical context. Along with the entire classic Protestant Christian tradition, I

emphatically disagree. The Spirit of God can speak to anyone, anywhere, in any way that He wishes. But God is the one who created us with the ability to use language. God chose to give us His word in letters and books written in Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic, and it was His plan that we, the church, would study and learn from those books together—which is only possible by treating them as language.

Certainly, we need the Spirit's help to understand and apply what we are reading, just as we need His enabling for all aspects of our Christian walk. Bible study should be bathed in prayer and approached in submission our Lord. We need to remember that the Spirit who inspired these letters so long ago is also present in and among us, giving us grace to understand. This is not at odds with the practice of disciplined, thoughtful exegesis. These things need to be done together—just as we should listen to the Spirit's leading in our lives while simultaneously exercising wisdom when we make decisions.

So, before you start into Bible study, be sure every member of the group is committed to biblical exegesis, and willing to grow in their exegetical skills. Agree together that you will base your conclusions on interpretations that are exegetical. Don't dismiss people's intuitions about what the Spirit may be saying to them. But don't put "I feel that..." statements on par with "Scripture says that..." statements, either.

(4) We commit ourselves to Christ-like mutual love and respect

It's good to have a plan and a common framework of interpretive rules, and essential that Scripture be examined carefully as our authority. But as Paul will point out so eloquently in 1 Cor 13, all this other stuff will be useless if we don't reflect the love of Jesus toward one another. Good assumptions, processes, and tools will all go astray if our hearts are full of pride and a need to be "the one who knows the most," if we care more about being right than building up our brothers and sisters, if we get angry or hurt when people raise questions about our views, if we speak unkindly, if we are unwilling to listen and to consider that we might sometimes need to learn from the others.

This is obvious. But it's easy to forget. As we will see shortly, the Corinthian church forgot, and had a good deal of trouble with their handling of spiritual gifts as a result. We are all capable of forgetting. So as you launch into the study, commit yourselves to Christ-likeness, to love and humility and mutual respect. Agree that everyone has permission to hold the rest accountable for this, and that you will all be quick to forgive if anyone slips. Let Jesus rule the study. It will be more fruitful, and a lot more joyful!

(5) We keep our minds open to fresh perspectives

For someone like Jeff who is fairly new to Christian faith, this won't be difficult. Much of our study will be new.

It's a bigger challenge for Jane and others like her who have been around for a while. Especially between the 1970s and about 2010, a small mountain of books were published on spiritual gifts. There was a time when pretty much every church ran a spiritual gifts course every year or two, and it was a common theme in Sunday morning preaching. It was almost impossible

not to be pulled into spiritual gift conversations, and most faithful church-goers had worked through several “inventories” designed to help them identify their gifts.

Mature Christians will bring a lot of background knowledge, and good-sized bag of assumptions and convictions to any new study of the Spirit’s gifts.

Those assumptions and convictions are likely to be reinforced by what I will call a surprising community consensus. In spite of heated disagreements over miraculous gifts and other issues, when it comes to the basic concept of what a “spiritual gift” is, in recent decades there has been a remarkable degree of agreement among Protestant Christians of all stripes. If you read widely in spiritual gift literature since the 1950s you will find that most authors adopt a definition that sounds something like this:

The “spiritual gifts” are (supernatural) abilities, at least one of which is granted by the Holy Spirit to every Christian at conversion, enabling each member of the church to minister effectively so that the body of Christ will be built up in healthy growth.

Versions of this definition are used by Pentecostals, Charismatics, and people who are absolutely non-Pentecostal, even though these groups have battled with each other on many points. Something like it is common in the popular literature, but you will also see it in very technical articles and books. In my experience, most Christians you meet today who want to talk about spiritual gifts will assume something like this for their basic concept.

This consensus view is widespread because it works fairly well. It captures big ideas from the key biblical passages. It encourages participation in ministry. It emphasizes the right goal: the health and growth of the church. It’s easy to teach and share.

At the same time, the consensus view often goes hand-in-hand with assumptions that are rarely explored in careful study. It is embraced by very diverse groups because it doesn’t address some of the most prickly issues. Beyond the big debated points, it leaves people like Jane (and me) with a fairly long list of unanswered questions. For these and other reasons, there are biblical scholars who question whether the typical definition is really the best way to capture what the NT means by the gifts of the Spirit.

I’ve already insisted that we stick to our study process and not jump ahead to conclusions, so won’t make any suggestions here about the best way to define the spiritual gifts. That will come in chapter 11. At present the point I want to make is this: a really healthy Bible study should lead to new discoveries and fresh insights. In subject areas where we have questions, it should bring some progress (though it may also raise new questions). It should refine our thinking and help us to grow. For these things to happen, we need to be open to seeing things from new perspectives, and perhaps even to letting go of some previous notions in favor of new insights that capture the Bible’s message more effectively.

This is certainly true as we turn to study the gifts of the Spirit. If we want to find fresh answers to questions and fresh strategies to help us address tensions and problems, we won’t get them by simply reinforcing all our established ideas. Where our current convictions are accurate, of course they should be confirmed. But if we sense that there are challenges with this subject,

we will also need to discover new things that we haven't seen before. We may need to revisit and revise some of our previous conclusions. Perhaps we will even find that the consensus view isn't as accurate as it could be on every point.

We want to learn. That's why I engage in new Bible studies. It's why you are launching into this one. For that to happen, we need to keep our minds open to fresh perspectives.

Well, I realize this has been a long preamble in a book that's supposed to focus our attention on the Scriptures. Please don't be discouraged. We will get a healthy dose of Bible study in the chapters to come. But the subject of spiritual gifts is not only important; it has also proved difficult. It is supposed to nurture ministry in the body, but it has caused far too much division. It ought to be intensely practical, but sometimes there is a serious disconnect between gift-theology and actual church ministry. It should enrich every member of every church, yet many have found themselves tagged with a gift of "helps" that doesn't help much. It should be a distinctive of Christian faith, yet sometimes it seems to blur into a kind of socio-psychological profiling exercise. It's important in Scripture and taught widely in the church, yet questions linger.

Spiritual gifts *are* important! This is a powerful, meaningful part of the Bible's message. It deserves to be clearly understood, and carefully studied. I have found that putting a little extra time into the preamble, laying a solid foundation for study, pays very good dividends in the long run. I hope you will find that to be true as well, whether you are studying in a group or exploring the subject one-on-one with me.

Some questions to consider

- I started this chapter by naming some challenges and frustrations that people encounter in books and Bible studies about the spiritual gifts. Has that been true for you—have you found aspects of this topic that were difficult for you and/or for other Christians you know?

If so, what were the main concerns? Do you relate to the issues raised by Jane and Jeff? Are there other issues that you'd want to add to the list?

- I've structured this book to follow a specific, somewhat unusual process for working through the Bible's teaching about the Spirit's gifts. (See point #2 above.) Does it make sense to you? Are there places where you have questions as you look ahead?
- If you're studying in a group, are the group members comfortable holding one another accountable to stay on topic and to follow the agenda, not jumping ahead to conclusions prematurely? Can you think of any specific strategies to help with this. (And if you're studying alone, how might you keep yourself from jumping ahead and letting your conclusions color your exegesis?)
- Is the idea of "exegesis" familiar? Does it raise questions? How would you rate your basic skills (or those of your group) for exegetical study? Are there things you can do to help the group grow in this area? Any aspects of my call to exegesis that you'd want to challenge, or to give special emphasis?
- In section #5 I describe what might be called a "typical" or "consensus definition" for the spiritual gifts. Does this fit what you've experienced? Does it fit your own instinctive way of describing the Spirit's gifts? Does the idea of being open to refine, or maybe even to make some adjustments to this typical concept excite you, or trouble you, or create some other reaction? Why?