

Some Important First Steps

The itinerary is planned, our bags are packed, and we're ready to launch our journey into Scripture. I'm excited! God's Word is wonderful, always worth studying, and I'm especially fond of this particular subject.

But where should we begin?

Normally if I'm leading a study on a theological topic, I recommend that we go through the whole Bible: beginning in Genesis, making our way through the Hebrew canon, and into the New testament documents starting with the Gospels and ending with Revelation. That's how the Bible's message unfolds, and it's the best way to ensure that we are reading each section in its fullest context.

Overall we will follow that approach, beginning in the next chapter. However, especially if we're working through this material in a group, I have found it helpful to begin with a few introductory points from the NT.

First, I like to review some well-known basics. This helps people like Jeff who are new to the subject to feel that they can keep up with the old-timers.

Then, I like to take a quick look at several things most Christians do not know—even Christians like Jane who have read a small stack of books and attended multiple seminars on the Spirit's gifts. In part this functions as a "teaser"—it should whet everyone's appetite to learn more. In part, I also include it as an invitation to reconsider. The subject of spiritual gifts has become somewhat commonplace in the church, and established Christians are sometimes inclined to think they have this topic well in hand: clearly understood, neatly boxed, wrapped in a tidy and attractive package with a pretty bow. They don't expect to learn anything new, or to have to revisit any of their old assumptions.

That would be fine if we had satisfying answers to every question, if we never fought over anything relating to the Spirit's gifts, and if we were always successful at putting this subject into practice. But, as Jeff and Jane and many other believers can attest, this isn't necessarily true. So we should at least be open to the possibility that we might need to reconsider a few things that we've always thought about the Spirit's gifts. Perhaps in the end all our previous ideas will be reinforced. Then again ... maybe not. Either way, our study will be more effective if we are open to new perspectives from the start. That's why I include a few early surprises.

A final observation before we embark. Because I have no idea who will be reading and studying along, how fast you will want to go, how deep you will want to dig, or how many sessions you plan to invest in this study, I've arranged chapters 3 through 10 topically without

trying to divide the material into “lessons.” Some chapters—perhaps 5, 6, and 9?—can be managed in a single lesson if you move through them quickly. To engage other chapters well, you will likely want to break them into several sessions. So, if you are leading a group Bible study, I highly recommend that you scan through these next chapters ahead of time and plan your strategy for dividing them into manageable chunks. Whether you are a leader or a participant, in a group or working alone, give yourself enough time to engage each section well. The study will be much more valuable if you read and reflect on each Scripture passage personally alongside the materials you find here.

Enough preliminaries. It’s time to fasten our seatbelts and let the journey begin.

A. Familiar beginnings

(1) The key passages

If you read 100 books on spiritual gifts, and sit through 100 lectures and sermons, I can confidently predict that every one will take you into one or more of the following passages. We think of them as the key passages, in the sense that they are the texts where the Spirit’s gifts are talked about most explicitly.

The three most important, because they are the longest and most developed, are:

- 1 Cor 12-14 (longest and most detailed, with several lists and explicit instructions)
- Rom 12:3-8 (second longest gift list with general teaching)
- Eph 4:7-13 (gifts, a list of ministry leaders, and their role in equipping the church to serve)

Alongside these “big three” are a number of shorter texts which clearly refer to the Spirit’s gifts:

- Rom 1:9-12 (Paul seeks to share a spiritual gift with the Roman church)
- 1 Cor 1:4-8 (Paul mentions that gifts are evident in Corinth)
- 1 Tim 4:14 (Timothy is not to neglect the gift within him, received through prophetic utterance and laying on of the elders’ hands)
- 2 Tim 1:6 (Timothy is to kindle afresh the gift within him)
- Heb 2:4 (the Spirit gave witness to the apostles’ preaching of the gospel by signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Spirit)
- 1 Pet 4:10–11 (use whatever gift you have received, speaking and serving)

We will work through all of these passages in some detail in chapters 7-10, so it’s not necessary to examine them closely at this point. In fact, I urge you to resist the temptation to go a full-blown study of any right now. That would take far too long at this early stage, and it would put the cart before the contextual horse. For the present the goal is to know where the key passages are, and to have a sense of the main ideas they present.

My advice? If, like Jeff, you are investigating the Spirit's gifts for the first time, I recommend reading through these passages quickly, making note of obvious headings and themes. If the texts are familiar but foggy in your mind, this is a good opportunity to scan over them and refresh your memory. Where you know one or more passage well, it will be enough to look over the pages and remind yourself of what is taught in each section. As you do, here are some questions to consider.

Some questions to consider

1. Based on a quick overview/review, what would you say are the 2-3 most important "big ideas" in each passage? (For the longer passages, you might find 2-3 for each chapter.)
2. What questions come to mind as you read over (or think through) each of these passages? Again, I suggest focusing on the most significant 1-3 questions raised by each.
3. Having looked over all these key passages, do you see any prominent themes that come up repeatedly in many or all?

Teachers representing the Pentecostal tradition will be quick to add that we should explore the Spirit-filling narratives from Acts 2:1-21, 8:14-17, 10:34-48, and 19:1-7, noting the presence of tongues and prophecy (explicit in 2, 10, and 19 and implied in chapter 8). If you have a special interest in questions about Spirit-baptism and Pentecostal theology you will want to review all of these passages as well. We will return to them briefly in chapters 6 and 11, though a detailed review of Pentecostal distinctives lies outside the scope of this study.

If there were no limits on our time, we might also search for verses that speak of prophecy, healings and other miracles, discernment, evangelism, and other phenomena associated with spiritual gifts in the book of Acts and more broadly across Scripture. This would make our study much too long, however, so we will have to be content with selective references to specific gifts that come up in the course of a broader overview.

Even browsing casually through the key passages, a number of essential truths about the Spirit's gifts rise to the surface. We learn that God distributes these to every Christ-follower so that we can all contribute in fruitful ways to the ministry and growth of the body. Different individuals receive different gifts, as the Lord determines. We need one another, and everyone's role is important. Our gifts are granted, not as rewards for personal achievement or signs of status, but as expressions of God's grace and sovereign wisdom. We are responsible to steward them with a Christlike attitude, for the good of our Lord's Kingdom.

These are basic truths, but they are very powerful, and when taken seriously they can transform the ministry of a church. They come through so clearly that many studies of the

spiritual gifts are content to stop here and look no further. However, as we saw in the last chapter, there are questions that we have not yet answered. So this is still only a beginning to our study.

One other observation is worth mentioning before we go on. Depending on how closely you looked at the key passages and on what translation you used, you may have noticed that the Spirit's gifts are described using several different terms, expressions and images. The central ideas are consistent from chapter to chapter, but that content comes in more than one package. We will come back to this theme, and I think it is important. A *concept* of ministry gifts from God can be *presented* in various ways.

For those who want to probe this last point in more depth, you might find it interesting to pull out whatever Bible software you have on hand and try searching for various expressions that are obviously connected to spiritual gifts. For example, look up “spiritual gift*,” and combinations of terms like “gift*” and “God,” or “gift*” and “Spirit.” Try using a couple different Bible versions. If you put the search results side-by-side you’ll find that overall you get a standard list of key spiritual gift passages; but each query will generate a slightly different set of verses, reinforcing the point that a common *concept* can be presented with slightly different labels.

(2) Gift lists

One of the most obvious features in the longer gift passages are lists of gifts. This shouldn't come as a surprise. Paul is a preacher, and preachers tend to like lists. In Paul's letters you can find lists of sins, of good and bad spiritual fruit, and more. Especially in 1 Cor 12, Rom 12, and Eph 4, gift lists account for quite a large percentage of what he has to say on the subject. This has captured the imagination of many students of the Spirit's gifts, so it is not uncommon for texts and seminars to elaborate at length on the lists and to focus almost entirely on the gifts that are named in them.

We will come back to specific gifts later on. For the moment I invite you to think a bit about the lists themselves.

I see no evidence that Paul intended for us to place these lists into side-by-side charts in a kind of periodic table of spiritual elements. They appear in different letters written at different times to different churches. All the same, I find it instructive to compare them as part of building a picture of the overall NT teaching. You may find it helpful to do this exercise yourself, as a way of getting more familiar with the gifts. To save a little time I have provided two tables below, the first showing the main NT lists in order, and the second rearranging those lists by types of gift. To get the full effect, I have color-coded the gifts that are most common, or that generate the most discussion.

1 Cor 12:8-11	1 Cor 12:28	1 Cor 12:29	1 Cor 14:26	Rom 12:6-8	Eph 4:11	1 Pet 4:11
Word of wisdom Word of knowledge Faith Gifts of healings Effecting of miracles Prophecy Distinguishing of spirits Kinds of tongues Interpretation of tongues	Apostles Prophets Teachers Miracles Gifts of healings Helps Administrations Kinds of tongues	Apostles Prophets Teachers Miracles Gifts of healings Tongues Interpretation	Psalms Teaching Revelation Tongue Interpretation	Prophecy Service Teaching Exhortation Giving Leading Showing mercy	Apostles Prophets Evangelists Pastors Teachers	Speaking Serving

1 Cor 12:8-11	1 Cor 12:28	1 Cor 12:29	1 Cor 14:26	Rom 12:6-8	Eph 4:11	1 Pet 4:11
Prophecy	Prophets	Prophets	Revelation	Prophecy	Prophets	Speaking
	Teachers	Teachers	Teaching	Teaching	Teachers	
Kinds of tongues	Kinds of tongues	Tongues	Tongue			
Interpretation of tongues		Interpretation	Interpretation			
Word of wisdom				Exhortation		
Word of knowledge						
			Psalms			Serving (and leading)
				Service		
Effecting of miracles	Miracles	Miracles				
Gifts of healings	Gifts of healings	Gifts of healings				
Faith						
Distinguishing of spirits						
	Apostles	Apostles			Apostles	
					Evangelists	
	Administrations			Leading	Pastors	
	Helps			Giving		
				Showing mercy		

When we set the gift lists next to one another, we notice several things. They are all different: in content, order, and in the types of things listed. Individual gifts such as prophecy are described differently in different places. Even the lists that appear back-to-back in 1 Cor 12 vary in content and arrangement. (This is one of the reasons I do not think Paul intended these to be used in combination.) We also notice that none of the gifts are explained; they are just named as things which the readers were expected to recognize.

Some questions to consider

1. Is there any significance in the fact that the lists are all different? What might it imply?
2. Do you see any interesting patterns in which gifts are present, or absent, in various NT letters (Romans 1 Corinthians, Ephesians). What might these patterns mean?
3. What about the different ways the gifts are ordered from list to list? Do you see patterns here that might be meaningful? Why?
4. Is there any significance in the fact that the lists name different types of things. (Example: some are people and some are things people do.)
5. (And if I might ask a cheeky question ...) Do you see any evidence that Paul created lists of gifts so that his Christian readers could try to figure out which gift(s) they have out of the ones listed? Or are there hints that he had other purposes in mind for these lists?

It's too early for us to draw large conclusions from this quick look at the gift lists. But it's good for us to be aware of them and thinking about the way they are presented.

One point is worth mentioning here. When we dive more deeply into 1 Corinthians, Romans, and Ephesians later in our study, we will see that these lists are superbly designed to illustrate the larger points Paul makes in each passage. In this, the gift lists function exactly like many other lists Paul uses—lists of sins, character qualities, etc. In other words, the most important thing about spiritual gifts is not our ability to “list” them. There are other things that are more central in Paul's thinking, and the lists function as illustrations of those truths. More on this in chapters 7-10.

(3) Two key terms

I have observed that the NT uses a variety of terms and expressions to describe the concept of spiritual gifts. This is even clearer in the original Greek—though I won't burden you with the details here. Setting aside the names of specific gifts, in the key passages the gifts God gives for ministry are referenced using no less than six different Greek words in at least ten different arrangements.

This diverse vocabulary is significant, and we will come back to it. Nevertheless, two terms stand out as clear favorites in the letters of Peter and Paul. These have become so well-known in the modern world that they are widely recognized even by Christians who can't read a syllable of Greek.

The first and most common is the word *charisma*—or *charismata* in the plural form. You will recognize it immediately as the term for which the “Charismatic Movement” is named. In Greek it means an expression of grace. (“Grace” is *charis*.) It is naturally connected both to forgiveness and to gifts graciously offered.

The second term is *pneumatikon*, which means “spiritual” (rooted in *pneuma*, spirit). In Christian circles where the ministry of the Holy Spirit is emphasized, references to *pneuma* and things that are *pneumatic* are fairly common. (As one good illustration, the Journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies is called *Pneuma*.)

These two terms have become so closely associated with spiritual gifts that they are sometimes treated as if one or both of them actually *means* “spiritual gift” when it appears in our NT documents. This is not true, and we need to investigate their meaning and use more closely. However, they appear regularly in common Christian conversation about the Spirit’s gifts, and it is useful to be aware of them.

On that note, it’s time to turn our attention to a few surprises—things in the NT that affect our understanding of the Spirit’s gifts which are not so commonly known.

B. Some spiritual gift surprises

(1) The expression “spiritual gift”

In Greek, as in English, “spiritual gift” is a two-word expression. Paul makes this absolutely clear by stringing the words together in the phrase: a *charisma* ... *pneumatikon*, a “gift which is spiritual.”

It’s not uncommon for the NT to use just one of these terms to refer to spiritual gifts in a more generic way. Paul and Peter both do this with *charisma*. See for example 1 Cor 1:7 (“you are not lacking in any *gift*”) or 1 Tim 4:14 (“do not neglect your *gift*”) or 1 Pet 4:10 (“as each has received a *gift*...”). Paul does something similar with *pneumatikon* in 1 Cor 12:1 and 14:1 (“Now concerning *spirituals*, brethren...”). A number of our English Bible translations render these one-word expressions as “spiritual gifts” because the translators recognize from the context that this is the subject Paul and Peter are talking about. However, we need to understand that in these situations “spiritual gift” is actually an interpretation, not a strict literal translation. If a biblical author wanted to say “spiritual gift” in the most explicit sense, he would need to use the two words together, because neither *charismata* nor *pneumatikon* actually *means* “spiritual gift” on its own.

This isn’t a big deal. It’s a completely legitimate way to translate the passages. As I keep reiterating, we can refer to the *concept* of spiritual gifts using different language and imagery.

But it does serve as a caution. In modern Christianity we tend to treat the expression “spiritual gift” as if it were a kind of technical term, a specific name given to a very specific, tightly-defined category of things that always has exactly the same flavor wherever it is referenced. As an example, I think of the way my American friends refer to “the 4th of July.” In

my home country of Canada, July 4 is simply a date on the calendar. But south of the border, “The 4th of July” has a much more specific, universally-recognized meaning, associated with flags, fireworks, hot dogs, and national patriotism. For them, “the 4th of July” doesn’t just refer to a day on the calendar; it *means* Independence Day.

If Paul and other NT authors used the expression “spiritual gift” that way, we would be under some pressure to decide exactly what the specific, tightly-defined category of things called “spiritual gifts” are about. Many Christians live under that pressure—and it contributes in no small way to the intensity of the debates between different perspectives. However, when we see how Paul and other NT authors actually used *charisma*, *pneumatikon*, and related Greek words, there is no evidence that they thought of “spiritual gifts” as a technical term for a narrow, precisely defined category of things.

At this point in a seminar or class, I usually ask the group: how many times do you think the two-word expression “spiritual gift” actually appears in the Greek NT?

I always get a range of answers, usually somewhere between 5 and 20, and frequently on the higher end.

Surprise! In actuality, Paul only uses the expression “spiritual gift” (*charisma pneumatikon*) once. And—in another unexpected twist—that one instance is not found in any of the best-known passages: not in Rom 12 or Eph 4 or anywhere in 1 Corinthians. It is found in Romans 1:11, where Paul says, “I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you.”

Please understand, I am not saying that Paul only teaches us about the spiritual gifts in this one passage. We must not confuse term and concept. My point is: this phrase “spiritual gifts” which has become so familiar to us is actually very uncommon in the Greek NT. Instead, the concept that God gives us gifts for service through the Holy Spirit is conveyed in many different packages. As I noted just above, in the key passages you will find it referenced using multiple gift-related terms in various arrangements.

This matters! People sometimes ask me why I think it’s important that we study the Spirit’s gifts for ministry more broadly in the Bible rather than just looking at a few key passages, perhaps with a special focus on 1 Corinthians and Romans. This is why. If we center our Bible study only around the verses that speak of *charismata* and *pneumatikon*, we will get a helpful theology of the Spirit’s gifts. But it will be an *incomplete* theology, because the words *charismata* and *pneumatikon* are only used in tandem once, neither one *means* “spiritual gift” on its own, and they are not the only ways the Bible refers to the grace the Spirit of God gives us to help us serve.

(2) More on the word *charismata*

To be fair, I should acknowledge that there are some people who read biblical Greek who will disagree with me, insisting that *charismata* can be a technical term for spiritual gifts. Personally I don’t see how this is possible, since Paul himself speaks of a *charisma pneumatikon*

in Romans 1. If *charisma* means spiritual gift, then Paul would be saying he wishes to share a “spiritual spiritual gift,” which makes no sense at all.

Another, better way to test the idea is to consider consistency of usage. In Canada, we refer to the 4th day of July in different ways depending on our mood and situation. I might talk about “July 4th,” or “the fourth of next month,” or “07-04,” or just “next Thursday.” There isn’t one official way to describe the day, because it’s just another day on our calendar. By contrast, my American friends *always* describe their independence day as “The 4th of July.” It’s never “the first Thursday next month.” The day has a particular meaning for them, and it is captured in a precisely-defined expression.

So how is *charisma* (/charismata) used in the Greek NT? The term shows up 17 times in total, 16 in Paul and once in 1 Pet 4. I have listed all the instances below, with a brief description of the subject matter. As part of doing your own Bible study, I recommend that you look through all of these verses yourself, preferably with several translations open. If you do, you will notice that the word isn’t always translated the same way, and it clearly doesn’t always refer to exactly the same thing.¹

- 1 Cor 1:7 “You are not lacking any *gift*...” (speech, knowledge, etc.)
- 1 Cor 7:7 “Each man has his own *gift* from God” (relating to marriage or celibacy)
- 1 Cor 12:4 “Now there are varieties of *gifts*, but the same Spirit”
- 1 Cor 12:9 “To another *gifts* of healing”
- 1 Cor 12:28 “God has appointed ... *gifts* of healings”
- 1 Cor 12:30 “All do not have *gifts* of healings, do they?”
- 1 Cor 12:31 “But earnestly desire the greater *gifts*”
- 2 Cor 1:11 “Thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the *favor* bestowed on us through the prayers of many” (deliverance from peril)
- Rom 1:11 “I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual *gift* to you”
- Rom 5:15 “The *free gift* is not like the transgression” (reference to salvation)
- Rom 5:16 “The *free gift* arose from many transgressions resulting in justification (salvation in Christ)
- Rom 6:23 “The wages of sin is death, but the *free gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”
- Rom 11:29 “The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (OT covenant blessings and promises)

¹ In the quotes below I use the NASB. I have added italics to the English translation for *charisma* and *charismata* so you can easily see which words are referring to those Greek originals. Please note that in doing this I have made a change to the NASB text. The translators of the NASB normally use italics to signal that they have added a word for clarity. So, for example, in 1 Cor 12:1, the NASB reads “spiritual *gifts*,” though the actual Greek is just *pneumatikon*—“spirituals.”

The NASB also sometimes adds explanatory terms: “*spiritual* gifts” or “*special* gift” or “*free* gift” where the Greek original only has “gift.” Since our goal is to track the use of *charisma* and *charismata*, I have removed “spiritual” where the translation adds it. This applies to 1 Cor 1:7, 7:7; 1 Tim 4:14, and 1 Pet 4:10.

- Rom 12:6 “And since we have *gifts* that differ ...” (introducing a spiritual gift list)
- 1 Tim 4:14 “Do not neglect the *gift* within you
- 2 Tim 1:6 “I remind you to kindle afresh the *gift* of God which is in you”
- 1 Pet 4:10 “As each one has received a *special gift*, employ it in serving one another”

In most cases, these verses refer to the things we call spiritual gifts, though they expand the usual Evangelical Protestant list to include celibacy and marriage. But as a free gift, *charisma* can also refer to forgiveness in Christ, to the gift of salvation, to OT blessings, and to a deliverance from danger in answer to prayer.

So what? This doesn’t affect any of the big ideas we have gathered from the key passages. Does it matter?

I suggest that it has a couple important implications. (1) It reinforces, yet again, that the *concept* of gifts given for ministry is not identical with any one term or expression, not even the term *charisma*. And (2) it hints that our understanding of the Spirit’s gifts is intertwined with a larger collection of truths about salvation and Christian discipleship—it is not a stand-alone idea.

Some questions to consider

1. Is this information about “spiritual gift” language in the NT new to you? Is it a surprise? It is not commonly known or talked about. Why do you suppose that is?
2. How might our study be affected by it as we go forward?

(3) More on the word *pneumatikon*

(We’re going to go a little deeper into the Greek for just a moment, and I apologize in advance to anyone who feels a bit overwhelmed. I’ll try to keep us focused on the main points. As you waded through this section, you may find it helpful to read through the various uses of *pneumatikon* in 1 Corinthians for yourself, to get a sense of what Paul is doing in this letter. See “spiritual” in 2:13-15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:3-4; 12:1; 14:1; 14:37; 15:44, 46. I recommend reading these in order, so you get the full effect when you arrive at chapter 12.)

Pneumatikon is used widely in the NT, as we might expect given the Apostles’ concern for life in the Spirit. It has many applications. We read about the Law being “spiritual” (Rom 7:14), about the Gentiles sharing in the “spiritual things” that were birthed out of Israel (Rom 15:27), about the “spiritual food ... and drink” Israel tasted in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:3-4), about the “spiritual body” experienced at resurrection (1 Cor 15:44, 46); about believers who are “spiritual” and able to help others (Gal 6:1), about “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph 1:3), singing “spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19, Col 3:16), “spiritual forces of

wickedness” (Eph 6:12), “spiritual wisdom” (Col 1:9), the church as a “spiritual house” where “spiritual sacrifices” are offered (1 Pet 2:5).

It is unlikely that anyone would think of *pneumatikon* as a technical term for “spiritual gifts” if it wasn’t for two references: at 1 Cor 12:1 and again at 1 Cor 14:1. The first of these is especially significant, in that it reads like a kind of heading introducing the longest NT passage on our subject. Paul begins: “Now concerning spiritual [gifts], brethren, I do not want you to be unaware” (12:1). In many of our English Bibles, this is accompanied by an editorial title something like: “The Spiritual Gifts.”

Does this imply that, at least in a few cases, *pneumatikon* does in fact serve as a proper name for the gifts of the Spirit?

On close inspection, the answer is “no.” Not only does this not fit the general use of the word, but it doesn’t make best sense of 1 Cor 12:1 and 14:1 either. I will explain more fully in chapter 7 when we dig into 1 Cor 12. For the moment, a few points need to be made as a quick preview.

- a) First, this is not the only place we encounter “spiritual” terminology in 1 Corinthians. In fact, *pneumatikon*-related language appears 16 times in the letter. Paul has pointed out that the gospel advances through the power of the Spirit (2:4), and that the wisdom of its message is only understood as the Spirit gives insight (2:6-16). Believers can appreciate this because they have the Spirit (2:12), and so Paul can communicate “spiritual things” in “spiritual words” (or, depending on the translation, “to spiritual people”; 2:13). These are “spiritually” discerned (2:14), so the “spiritual person” can understand and evaluate (2:15). However, given their bickering and immoral behavior, the Corinthian believers cannot be viewed as “spiritual” people, but rather as infants in the faith (3:1).
- b) Note that throughout these early chapters, “spiritual” language can speak of the gospel message, the Spirit’s power, and the maturity of some who are filled with the Spirit and able to discern truth from error. It refers both to spiritual *things* and to spiritual *people*.
- c) The overall tone of the book, and especially the strong corrective words Paul directs at his Corinthian readers, suggest that many in this church want to be viewed as “spiritual,” or mature Christians. They are fighting over whose mentor is best, who has the most knowledge-based freedom, who has the best gifts. Being “spiritual” matters to them. They will be attentive when they hear Paul speak about spiritual things, and no doubt his criticism that they are not spiritual will sting.
- d) In Greek, Paul’s phrase at 12:1 is ambiguous—and deliberately so. His words “Now concerning *pneumatikon*” could naturally be translated in several ways: “Now concerning spiritual *things*,” or “Now concerning spiritual *people*.” You and I read this verse knowing that what follows is a discussion of the Spirit’s gifts, and so we (quite correctly) translate the opening verse as spiritual *gifts* or *things*. But on the first reading, the Corinthians do not know what is coming. They remember that Paul has challenged them to be spiritual persons, and they are well aware that in the church there is dissention about the relationship between one’s spiritual maturity and the gifts

one manifests. So their natural response is to wonder: what is Paul going to tell us next? Will he tell us how to be more “spiritual”? Or give his ruling on which of us really is the most “spiritual”?

In other words, there is more going on with the word *pneumatikon* at 1 Cor 12:1 than simply an introduction to the spiritual gifts. Paul has chosen this word as an attention-grabbing start to a passage whose overall goal is to teach the Corinthians what kind of gift-based ministry *really* demonstrates spiritual maturity. The power of Paul’s introduction comes precisely because *pneumatikon* does not serve as a technical term for the spiritual gifts themselves.

Much of this can be seen quite easily even without a working knowledge of Greek. Two main indicators come into play. The first is simply that the Corinthians are *not* “unaware” of the Spirit’s gifts as such. We learn in 1 Cor 1:4-7 that they are actively practicing gifts already, and are not lacking in this area. The problem with their being “unaware” at 1 Cor 12:1 is not that they don’t know about gifts. It is that they aren’t using those gifts in a mature way.

Second, while 1 Cor 12-14 clearly deals with spiritual gifts at length, this passage never does actually explain what gifts are, how we get them, how we use them, or many of the other questions on this subject. The overall focus, from start to finish, is on the right use of gifts, and particularly the attitude of love and mutual service which must be present, in contrast to the self-focused and competitive mindset that characterizes this church. A truly accurate section heading is not “Spiritual Gifts,” but “The Right Way to Use Spiritual Gifts.”

Some questions to consider

1. How might our study of 1 Cor 12-14 be impacted when we frame it by Paul’s earlier comments about whether or not the Corinthian believers are “spiritual” people? (We’re going to look at this in more depth later, so don’t turn this into a full-blown study of the topic yet. But it’s useful to think a bit about what might happen as we go.)

C. Technical terms, broad concepts, and our study

My main goals for this chapter have been to orient newcomers like Jeff to the most well-known NT passages on the Spirit’s gifts, and to introduce some less-familiar information that will whet everyone’s appetite to explore further. More could certainly be said; but I trust we have accomplished both objectives well enough for the present.

Before we move on, it may be helpful to offer a few summary observations that will set the stage for what follows.

I’ve made some fuss about the modern church’s tendency to treat spiritual gifts as a tightly-defined, precise category of things, assuming that the words *charismata* or *pneumatikon*

function as technical terms with a very rigid meaning in Scripture. In effect, people talk about *the* spiritual gifts much the way my American friends talk about the 4th of July.

In part I've highlighted this because it fuels many of our debates and conflicts over the Spirit's gifts. Christians don't fight over the broad idea that we should be involved in ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is obviously true, and the truth is flexible enough to be applied in many ways. But we have jousting matches over how many gifts there are, how gifts relate to natural talents, when they are received, whether they can be divided into temporary and permanent categories, at least in part because we have felt it necessary to build a very specific and somewhat rigid notion of *the* spiritual gifts, and not everyone has arrived at the same definition.

I have also noted this tendency because it lies behind the widespread habit of trying to build a complete theology of the spiritual gifts out of a handful of key passages, without probing any further in our Bibles. People seem to assume that the only places Scripture has anything to say about our gifts for ministry are the passages that contain the "technical terms" along with passages that describe gifts from the gift lists. So study after study centers on 1 Corinthians 12-14, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4 (which is good!), without even asking whether we might learn something about the Spirit's gifts from the Gospels, much less the Old Testament (not so good).

The problem is, there is no evidence that either *charismata* or *pneumatikon* ever functioned as a technical term for spiritual gifts. Nor is the full expression *charismata pneumatikon* a common feature of NT teaching. Nor are the gift lists all exactly parallel. Nor do the key passages we've identified answer all the questions that we'd need to resolve in order to arrive at a really detailed, precise concept of *the* spiritual gifts.

For me, at least, this raises the question whether the Bible ever tries to give us that kind of definition. What if the thing the NT really cares about is not an air-tight box in which we can put some things called *the* spiritual gifts, but rather a broad and somewhat fluid idea that God equips us for ministry by the empowering work of the sovereign Spirit? If that were the case, we could still affirm all the central things we do about the Spirit's gifts. But we would have much less reason to fight over details, and perhaps some of the lingering questions that still nag us would not matter so much anymore.

It's too early in our study to make any final decisions about this. You've heard me stress that we need to wait until we've done all our homework before we etch our conclusions into stone. So I am not going to make any claims about whether the Bible's concept of spiritual gifts is narrow or broad, rigid or fluid. We can weigh the merits of such thinking later on.

But we do have to make decisions about what Bible books, chapters, and passages we're going to study. We have to make a choice. (a) We can follow the typical path and restrict ourselves to a few NT passages. Or (b) we can consider the possibility that the Bible actually presents a broader and more fluid concept, and cast the net more widely to find out whether that is really the case.

If we adopt strategy (a) our study will be shorter and simpler, but it will probably not generate many new insights or resolve many of the old, lingering problems. If we opt for path (b)

our journey will be longer, but there is a much greater chance of gaining fresh insights and discovering new ways to get around old problems. In the end we may find that we have come full-circle to the same definitions and explanations as others. But at least we will be able to say that we have considered the options carefully.

I've already made it clear that I prefer path (b). I believe our study will be richer for it, better positioned to deal with the questions and frustrations Jeff and Jane have raised, and generally more satisfying.

However, one question remains. If we're not going to select passages based only on the use of classic "spiritual gift" language and gift lists, then what will guide our search? What clues will we look for to decide where we should dig for treasure?

At the start of this chapter I invited you to scan through the key spiritual gift passages looking for the "big ideas" that stand out most clearly. I'm pretty sure everyone identified a number of big ideas in common. You almost certainly noted that spiritual gift passages talk about *ministry* which *builds up* God's Kingdom and the Body of Christ; about things God has *graciously "given"* us to equip us for service; about our need to be good *stewards* of what we have received; about *diversity* in the Body which is guided by *God's will* and also the need for *unity and love* to serve well together; about the *empowering* presence of God's *Spirit* to guide us and make our work fruitful.

We know these themes relate to the Spirit's gifts. When the NT speaks about the gifts, we always seem to see at least one, and usually a cluster of these ideas converging together. So, I suggest that we use these themes as guideposts for our Bible study. Not every passage in Scripture speaks about the gifts that equip us to serve. But when we hear about ministry, resources graciously given, about stewardship, unity and diversity, power, and the presence of God's Spirit, and especially when several of these are woven together, it is at least possible that we have found teaching which should inform our concept of the Spirit's gifts—His "graces"—to equip us for service.

That will set our agenda for the next three chapters. We will look broadly at Scripture, on the assumption that the Bible's gift concept just might be broader than what we first thought. Then we will return to key passages to see whether this approach helps us to navigate that familiar territory. Then we will be in a position to draw conclusions and offer some practical applications.

Some questions to consider

1. How does this approach compare to what we have seen and experienced before? Is it familiar to anyone? All new?
2. What potential advantages might this approach have? Can you foresee possible benefits in broadening our study, and perhaps also our concept of the Spirit's gifts?
3. Are there potential pitfalls that we might need to avoid? What can we do to make the most of this approach to our study?