

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

PNEUMATOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

UNIT 8: THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT — A CESSATIONIST THEOLOGY

Lesson 21

Spiritual Gifts — An Overview

What the New Testament Teaches About the Gifts of the Spirit

Given for the Common Good, Distributed as He Wills, Governed by Love

Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:4–11; Romans 12:3–8; Ephesians 4:7–13; 1 Peter 4:10–11

“One and the Same Spirit Works All These Things, Distributing to Each One Individually Just as He Wills”

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Series Verse

*“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all the truth;
for He will not speak on His own initiative,
but whatever He hears, He will speak;
and He will disclose to you what is to come.”*

John 16:13, NASB 1995

Introduction

With Lesson 21 we enter the final and most contested unit of this Pneumatology series: Unit 8, The Gifts of the Spirit, A Cessationist Theology. The previous seven units have established, in sequence, the Person of the Spirit (Units 1–2), the Spirit in the Old Testament and in the life of Christ (Units 3–4), the Spirit’s application of redemption in the *ordo salutis* (Unit 5), the Spirit’s indwelling, sealing, and baptism (Unit 6), and the Spirit’s sanctifying work in the believer’s life (Unit 7). Now, having laid this comprehensive pneumatological foundation, we turn to the question that has generated more theological debate and more practical division in the church over the past century than perhaps any other pneumatological question: the gifts of the Spirit, what they are, who has them, how they function, and which of them continue in the church today.

Unit 8 will address this question with the theological commitment to the cessation of the extraordinary sign gifts that characterizes this series’ Reformed, cessationist position. But the unit will not begin with cessationism, it will begin with the New Testament’s own foundational teaching about the nature, purpose, and distribution of spiritual gifts in general. Before any specific gifts can be understood, and before the question of cessation can be addressed with exegetical precision, the shared convictions that should unite every biblically informed Christian about the doctrine of gifts must be established: that gifts are grace-gifts from God, not natural talents or self-generated abilities; that they are sovereignly distributed by the Spirit as He wills, not earned or achieved by spiritual performance; that their purpose is the common good and the building up of the body, not self-exaltation or personal validation; and that the greatest gift context, 1 Corinthians 12–14, has love, not tongues, at its theological center.

This overview lesson also introduces the critical distinction that will govern Unit 8’s entire discussion: the New Testament distinguishes between ordinary, continuing gifts (those that operate through the regular means of Word, wisdom, and Spirit-empowered ministry and that continue in the church throughout its history) and extraordinary, sign and revelatory gifts (those that authenticated the apostolic message, confirmed new stages of redemptive-historical revelation, and belonged to the foundational apostolic era). This distinction is not invented by cessationism to rationalize the cessation of gifts the church finds inconvenient; it is a distinction internal to the New Testament’s own gift theology, visible in the qualitative difference between the gift of teaching (which operates through the ordinary means of biblical instruction and Spirit-illuminated understanding) and the gift of tongues (which operates through the extraordinary means of Spirit-given speech in unlearned languages or ecstatic utterance requiring divine interpretation).

This lesson will examine the definition of spiritual gifts, survey the four primary New Testament gift passages, establish the purpose and the distribution of the gifts, introduce the critical ordinary/extraordinary distinction, address the unity and diversity of the body in relation to the gifts, and establish the priority of love over gifts as the theological heart of the entire

discussion. The goal is the framework that makes the more specific discussions of Lessons 22–28 both coherent and convincing.

I. Spiritual Gifts Defined

Grace-Given Abilities for the Building Up of the Body

A. The Greek Vocabulary: Charisma and Pneumatika

The New Testament employs two primary terms for spiritual gifts, and the difference between them illuminates the nature of the gifts themselves. The first is charisma (plural: charismata), from charis, grace. The word literally means “a grace-gift”, a gift that is given freely, without merit, as an expression of the giver’s grace rather than the recipient’s achievement. It is the word used most frequently for the gifts in Paul’s letters (Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:4, 9, 28–31; Ephesians 4:7) and it establishes the foundational theological character of the gifts: they are not earned, not natural talents developed into spiritual effectiveness by spiritual effort, not the reward for exceptional piety. They are grace-gifts, sovereign expressions of the Spirit’s generosity toward the members of the body He is building.

The second term is pneumatika (1 Corinthians 12:1; 14:1), the neuter plural of pneumatikos, meaning “spiritual things” or “spiritual gifts.” The use of pneumatika emphasizes the source of the gifts: they are pneumatological realities, not merely human abilities or institutional roles. The gifts are the Spirit’s own expressions through the members of the body, the Spirit working through human personalities, natural capacities, and specific ministries to accomplish the Spirit’s own purposes in the community. A charisma is not identical to a natural talent, though the Spirit may use natural talents as the substrate through which He expresses the gift; it is the Spirit’s sovereign empowerment of whatever capacity He chooses to use for whatever ministry He intends in the body.

From these two terms a working definition emerges: a spiritual gift is a grace-given ability or capacity, sovereignly distributed by the Holy Spirit to believers in Christ, for the Spirit’s own purposes in the building up of the church and the advancement of the gospel. The gifts are not the believers’ possessions to use as they see fit; they are the Spirit’s instruments through the believers for the Spirit’s purposes. The gift-bearer is a steward, not an owner; the Spirit is the one who gives, determines, and directs the expression of each gift.

B. The Four Primary New Testament Gift Passages

The New Testament’s teaching on spiritual gifts is concentrated in four primary passages, each of which addresses the gifts from a different angle and for a different pastoral purpose. Together they form a remarkably comprehensive and theologically consistent account of the nature, distribution, purpose, and practice of the Spirit’s gifts in the body of Christ.

First Corinthians 12–14 is the most extensive gift discussion in the New Testament, addressing the Corinthian community’s specific problem of gift-pride and gift-misuse (especially the misuse of tongues). It contains the Spirit-baptism universality argument (12:13), the body analogy and the diversity-in-unity principle (12:14–27), the most complete list of gifts in a single passage

(12:4–11, 28–30), the love chapter (13) as the theological heart and evaluative criterion for all gift-exercise, and the specific instructions for orderly, edifying, and intelligible gift use in the gathered community (14). Romans 12:3–8 addresses spiritual gifts in the context of corporate humility and the proper assessment of one’s own gift-measure, producing a briefer but theologically complementary list of gifts. Ephesians 4:7–13 addresses the gifts in the context of the ascended Christ’s gift of specific ministries (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors-teachers) for the equipping of the saints and the maturation of the body toward the fullness of Christ. First Peter 4:10–11 provides the most succinct and most practically framing of the gift principle: “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

II. The Purpose of the Gifts

The Common Good and the Building Up of the Body

The New Testament is remarkably consistent about the purpose of spiritual gifts, and that consistency is the most powerful corrective to the most common misuses of the gifts in the history of the church. The purpose of gifts is not the spiritual benefit of the individual gift-bearer, not the validation of the gift-bearer’s spiritual status, not the demonstration of the gift-bearer’s intimacy with God, and not the production of impressive spiritual experiences for those who observe the gifts in operation. The purpose is the edification of the body and the common good of the community.

First Corinthians 12:7 states the purpose with the most comprehensive single phrase in the New Testament’s gift theology: “But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (NASB 1995). The Greek phrase *pros to sympheron* (“for the common good,” “for what benefits all”) is an unambiguous corporate purpose: the Spirit’s manifestation through each individual is given for the benefit of the community as a whole. There is no such thing, in the New Testament’s gift theology, as a gift that exists solely for the spiritual enrichment of the gift-bearer; every gift is a grace-loan from the Spirit to the individual for the community’s benefit.

Ephesians 4:12 provides the most focused statement of the gifts’ corporate purpose in the context of the ministry gifts: the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers are given “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” The purpose-chain of Ephesians 4:12 is three-link: the ministry gifts equip the saints; the equipped saints perform the work of service; the work of service builds up the body of Christ. The ultimate terminus is the body’s maturation and Christ’s glorification, not the ministry gift-bearer’s reputation or influence.

First Peter 4:10–11 frames the purpose in terms of stewardship and divine glory: “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God... so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever.” The gift is received, the believer is its steward, not its owner; it is expressed in service to others, the direction of the gift is outward, toward the

community; and the ultimate purpose is the glorification of God through Jesus Christ. The Spirit's gifts exist finally for God's glory, not the gifted person's advancement.

III. The Sovereign Distribution of the Gifts

Distributed Just as He Wills

The second foundational principle of the New Testament's gift theology is the sovereign distribution of the gifts by the Spirit. First Corinthians 12:11 states this principle in terms that leave no room for human achievement or personal spiritual effort as the basis of gift-reception: "But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills" (NASB 1995). The sovereign distribution is absolute: the Spirit works all of the gifts (the One Actor behind every gift-expression in the body), He distributes to each one individually (no gift is withheld from any genuine member of the body who needs it for the body's edification), and He distributes just as He wills (the determining factor in who receives which gift is entirely the Spirit's own sovereign purpose, not the recipient's spiritual status, maturity, or piety).

The sovereign distribution has several important practical implications. First, it removes pride: the believer who has a spectacular gift has received it from the Spirit's sovereign generosity, not from his own spiritual achievement; he has no more grounds for pride in his gift than the recipient of an inheritance has grounds for pride in the wealth he did not earn. Second, it removes envy: the believer who lacks a particular gift that another possesses is not spiritually inferior to the gift-bearer; the Spirit has distributed differently in accordance with His own purposes for the body's edification, and the lack of a particular gift is not a spiritual deficiency but the Spirit's sovereign allocation of different capacities to different members for the body's diverse needs. Third, it removes anxiety: the believer does not need to seek, tarry for, or achieve any particular gift; he needs to faithfully exercise the gift or gifts that the Spirit has already sovereignly given, in the service of the body for which they were given.

The diversity of gifts reflects the Spirit's wisdom in designing a body that needs multiple, diverse, complementary capacities for its full health and mission-effectiveness. A body composed entirely of teachers would produce a community of informed but unserved members; a body composed entirely of givers would be generous but directionless; a body composed entirely of prophets (in any sense) would be spectacular but unstable. The Spirit's sovereign distribution of diverse gifts to diverse members produces the complementary, interdependent, mutually-serving body that 1 Corinthians 12:14–27's body analogy describes.

"To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" | "Distributing to each one individually just as He wills" | "As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another"

1 Corinthians 12:7, 11; 1 Peter 4:10, NASB 1995

IV. The Diversity and Unity of the Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:14–27 and the Body Analogy

First Corinthians 12:12–27 is the most sustained and most theologically illuminating treatment of the relationship between the diversity of gifts and the unity of the body in the entire New Testament. Paul's body analogy is not merely an illustration; it is a theological argument that directly addresses the Corinthian community's specific pneumatological pathology: the treatment of some gifts (particularly tongues) as spiritually superior to other gifts, producing a spiritual hierarchy within the body and a corresponding spiritual shame or inadequacy in those who lack the superior gifts.

Paul's argument from the body analogy moves in two directions simultaneously. The first direction is against pride in superior gifts: the eye cannot say to the hand "I have no need of you" (v. 21); the apparently more honorable members of the body do not make the less honorable members unnecessary; if anything, Paul argues, the less honorable members are given greater honor precisely because of their apparent weakness (vv. 22–24). No gift-bearer can legitimately claim superiority to other gift-bearers; the body's diversity of function is not a hierarchy of value but a complementarity of service, in which every member is genuinely necessary and no member is expendable.

The second direction is against despair in apparently inferior gifts: the foot cannot say "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body" (v. 15); the ear cannot say "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body" (v. 16). The member who lacks a spectacular gift is not outside the body or beneath the body; it is as fully a part of the body as the most visibly gifted member, because the body's health requires both the spectacular and the unremarkable, both the visible and the invisible, both the apparently superior and the apparently inferior. Every member is necessary; every gift is genuinely given by the Spirit for the body's genuine need; and the absence of spectacular gifts is not spiritual inferiority but the Spirit's sovereign allocation of different capacities to different members.

The concluding verse of the analogy (v. 27) brings the argument home with disarming simplicity: "Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it." The community's identity is not constituted by the spectacular gifts of its most gifted members but by its corporate identity as Christ's body, the body that the Spirit has baptized into existence through the Spirit-baptism of every genuine member (12:13) and that is characterized by the mutually serving, mutually honoring, mutually suffering and rejoicing interdependence of all its members (v. 26). The community that understands this will neither exalt its gift-bearers to celebrity status nor dismiss its apparently less-gifted members as spiritually marginal.

V. The Critical Distinction: Ordinary and Extraordinary Gifts

The Framework That Governs Unit 8

A. The Distinction Introduced

The critical distinction that governs Unit 8's entire gift discussion is not a distinction invented by cessationism to rationalize a conclusion already reached on other grounds; it is a distinction that the New Testament's own gift theology recognizes and that the character of the gifts themselves demands. The New Testament distinguishes between two qualitatively different categories of gifts: ordinary, continuing gifts and extraordinary, sign and revelatory gifts. The two categories differ in their mode of operation, their purpose, their relationship to the canon of Scripture, and their expected duration in the church.

Ordinary gifts operate through the regular means of the Word, wisdom, Spirit-empowered ministry, and human capacity sanctified by grace. The gift of teaching does not bypass the teacher's careful study, sound interpretation, and lucid communication; it works through and sanctifies those capacities, enabling an understanding and communication of the Word that exceeds what the teacher's natural ability alone could produce. The gift of giving does not bypass the giver's financial resources and decision-making; it produces a Spirit-given generosity and wisdom in the use of those resources. The gift of administration does not bypass the administrator's organizational capacity and wisdom; it sanctifies and supernaturally empowers those capacities for the Spirit's purposes in the community. These gifts are ordinary not because they are unimportant but because they operate through the ordinary, recognizable, regular channels of human capacity sanctified and empowered by the Spirit.

Extraordinary gifts operate through means that bypass, supplement, or suspend the normal operation of natural human capacities. The gift of tongues as described in Acts 2:4–6, where the speakers proclaimed the great works of God in unlearned foreign languages understood by native speakers, is not the sanctification of a linguistic ability; it is the Spirit's supernatural gift of a language the speaker did not study or acquire. The gift of healing is not the sanctification of a physician's medical skill; it is the Spirit's immediate, supernatural restoration of health through a human instrumentality, bypassing the normal processes of medical intervention and natural recovery. The gift of prophecy, in its revelatory dimension, is not the sanctification of a teacher's interpretive ability; it is the Spirit's communication of specific, previously unknown divine revelation through a human instrument. These gifts are extraordinary because their mode of operation is beyond the normal range of human capacity, even capacity sanctified and empowered by the Spirit.

B. The Purpose Distinction

The purpose distinction between the two categories is equally important for the cessationist argument of Lessons 23–28. Ordinary gifts serve the ongoing, regular ministry of the church in every generation: teaching builds up the body in knowledge of Christ; administration organizes the community's life and mission; giving sustains the work of ministry; evangelism extends the gospel into the surrounding world. These are permanent needs of the church that will not be met by the natural maturation of the community or by the completion of any specific redemptive-historical stage; they will continue as long as the church continues.

Extraordinary gifts, by contrast, served the specific redemptive-historical purpose of authenticating the apostolic message and confirming new stages of divine revelation. Hebrews 2:3–4 establishes this authenticating function explicitly: the salvation "was first spoken through

the Lord, then confirmed to us by those who heard, God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.” The signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Spirit were God’s own authentication of the apostolic proclamation, the divine signature on the message that the apostles were delivering. This authenticating function is inherently tied to the unique, unrepeatable situation of the apostolic era: the era in which the new revelation of the New Covenant was being delivered and needed to be authenticated as genuinely divine. Once the canon of Scripture was complete, once the apostolic message had been definitively recorded and the canon’s self-authenticating authority had been established, the authenticating function of the extraordinary gifts had been fulfilled, and the gifts that served that function were no longer needed in the same way.

VI. The Priority of Love Over Gifts

1 Corinthians 13 as the Theological Heart

The most important theological statement in the entire New Testament’s gift discussion is not the list of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 or 28–30, not the tongues instructions of 1 Corinthians 14, and not the ministry gifts of Ephesians 4:11. It is 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter that stands between the gift discussions of chapters 12 and 14 and that is too often treated as a beautiful but parenthetical interruption in the gift discussion rather than as its theological heart. Paul places the love chapter exactly where he does because love is the criterion by which every gift is to be evaluated, the motivation from which every gift is to be exercised, and the “still more excellent way” (12:31) to which the pursuit of gifts must always be subordinate.

The opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13 are among the most radical pneumatological statements in the entire New Testament: the most spectacular gifts imaginable, tongues of men and of angels, prophecy knowing all mysteries and all knowledge, faith that removes mountains, self-sacrifice to the point of death, are evaluated as literally nothing without love (vv. 1–3). The word is not “less valuable” or “incompletely expressed”; it is “nothing” (ouden). A gift exercised without love is spiritually worthless, regardless of how spectacular the gift or how impressive its expression. The most dramatic pneumatological manifestation in the community’s gathered life is evaluated as noise, “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal”, if it is not motivated and governed by love.

The love chapter’s placement in the gift discussion also serves a diagnostic function: it establishes love, the first fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), the greatest of the three abiding realities (1 Corinthians 13:13), the quality that Jesus identified as the mark of His disciples (John 13:35), as the primary pneumatological criterion for the genuineness and the effectiveness of the Spirit’s work in the community. The community whose gift-exercise is characterized by love, by the patient, kind, humble, self-giving, truth-rejoicing, endurance-bearing quality that verses 4–7 describe, is the community that is genuinely and effectively Spirit-empowered for its mission. The community whose gift-exercise is characterized by pride, envy, self-seeking, and the craving for spectacular demonstrations of spiritual superiority, however impressive its

pneumatological repertoire may appear, is the Corinthian pathology that Paul is addressing, not the New Testament norm that Paul is celebrating.

The practical application of the love priority is direct and searching: the most important question to ask about any gift-exercise is not “Is it spectacular?” or “Is it biblical?” or even “Is it genuine?” but “Is it loving?” Is the gift being exercised for the benefit of the community, motivated by the community’s good, and conducted in a manner that honors the dignity and the spiritual welfare of every member present? The gift that meets this criterion is a genuine pneumatological blessing to the community, regardless of whether it is spectacular or unspectacular, extraordinary or ordinary, recognized or unnoticed. The gift that does not meet this criterion is spiritually worthless, regardless of how impressive its expression.

VII. Every Member Gifted, Every Gift for the Body

The Pastoral Vision of Gift Theology

The gift theology established in this overview lesson leads directly to a positive, community-shaping, mission-energizing pastoral vision for the church. Every genuine believer has at least one spiritual gift (1 Peter 4:10: “as each one has received a special gift”, the “each one” and the “has received” together establish universality). Every gift is given for the service of others (1 Peter 4:10: “employ it in serving one another”). Every member of the body is simultaneously a gift-receiver (from the Spirit) and a gift-giver (to the community). No member is merely a passive recipient of the ministry of others; every member is, by the Spirit’s own sovereign provision, equipped to contribute to the community’s edification.

The pastoral vision of a community in which every member’s gift is identified, cultivated, deployed, and received in love is the New Testament’s own vision of the healthy, maturing, Christ-resembling community described in Ephesians 4:13–16: the body growing up in all aspects into Christ, every joint supplying, according to the proper working of each individual part, causing the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. The “proper working of each individual part” is gift-exercise: the teacher teaching, the encourager encouraging, the giver giving, the administrator leading, the mercy-shower serving with cheerfulness. When every part is working properly, the whole body grows; when parts are idle, underutilized, or misemployed, the growth is stunted.

The pastoral challenge of gift theology is therefore not primarily the identification and cataloging of gifts, important as that is, but the cultivation of a community culture in which gifts are welcome, needed, recognized, and expressed. A community in which the paid minister does all the ministry and the congregation passively receives is a community that has failed to grasp the New Testament’s vision of the gifted body; a community in which every member is encouraged, equipped, and deployed in his or her Spirit-given capacity for the community’s good is the community that the Ephesians 4 vision describes. The Spirit has given gifts for the building up of the body; the pastor’s task is to create the community culture in which those gifts can be freely and faithfully exercised.

This pastoral vision applies equally to the cessationist community, where the temptation is to conclude from the cessation of extraordinary gifts that the Spirit's gift-giving has been correspondingly reduced in the present age. Nothing in the cessationist theology warrants this conclusion. The ordinary gifts, teaching, leadership, evangelism, mercy, giving, administration, pastoral care, are not lesser gifts by comparison with the extraordinary gifts of the apostolic era; they are the permanent, continuing, body-building gifts that the Spirit has provided for the church's entire history. The cessationist community that recognizes and deploys its members' ordinary gifts with the same seriousness and the same love that the New Testament commands is not a community diminished by the absence of extraordinary gifts; it is a community richly endowed with the Spirit's permanent gifts for the permanent mission of the church.

*“As each one has received a special gift,
employ it in serving one another
as good stewards of the manifold grace of God...
so that in all things God may be glorified
through Jesus Christ.”*

1 Peter 4:10–11, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Charisma	Greek: grace-gift, from charis (grace). The primary New Testament word for spiritual gifts, used in Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12:4, 9, 28–31, Ephesians 4:7, and 1 Peter 4:10. The etymology establishes the defining character of the gifts: they are given freely, as expressions of the Giver's grace, not earned or achieved by the recipient's spiritual merit or maturity. The gift-bearer is a steward of the Spirit's charisma, not its owner. The grace-character of the gifts removes both pride (the gift was not earned) and despair (the gift can be received regardless of the believer's inadequacy), since both pride and despair imply that the gift's presence depends on the recipient's merit.
Pneumatika	Greek: spiritual things, spiritual gifts (neuter plural of pneumatikos). Used in 1 Corinthians 12:1 and 14:1 for spiritual gifts, emphasizing their source in the Spirit (pneuma) rather than their character as grace-gifts (as charisma emphasizes). The pneumatika are the Spirit's own expressions through the members of the body, the Spirit working through human personalities, capacities, and ministries to accomplish His own purposes in the community. The term guards against the reduction of gifts to natural talents by locating their ultimate source in the Spirit's sovereign, life-giving activity.
For the Common Good	The purpose of spiritual gifts as stated in 1 Corinthians 12:7 (pros to sympheron): "But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." The phrase establishes that every gift is given for the benefit of the community as a whole, not for the personal spiritual enrichment or validation of the individual gift-bearer. There is no New Testament warrant for a gift that exists solely for the private use of the gift-bearer; every charisma is a grace-loan from the Spirit to the individual for the community's benefit. This corporate purpose is the primary corrective to the Corinthian misuse of gifts for self-display and spiritual status.
Distributing Just as He Wills	The principle of the Spirit's sovereign gift-distribution in 1 Corinthians 12:11 (kathōs bouletai, just as He wills). The Spirit determines who receives which gift according to His own sovereign purpose for the body's edification, not according to the recipient's spiritual achievement, maturity, or piety. Three practical implications: (1) removes pride (the gift was received, not earned); (2) removes envy (the lack of a particular gift is the Spirit's sovereign allocation, not a spiritual deficiency); (3) removes anxiety (the believer does not need to seek or achieve any particular gift but to faithfully exercise what the Spirit has already given).
Equipping the Saints	The purpose of the Ephesians 4:11 ministry gifts (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers) as stated in Ephesians 4:12: "for the equipping

Term	Definition
	of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” The ministry gifts exist not to do the work of ministry on behalf of the congregation but to equip the congregation to do the work of ministry themselves. The three-link purpose-chain: ministry gifts equip the saints; equipped saints perform works of service; works of service build up the body. The ministry gift-bearer is not the terminus of the Spirit’s gift-giving but the instrument through which the Spirit equips the entire community for its collective ministry.
Ordinary Gifts	The category of spiritual gifts that operate through the regular means of the Word, wisdom, and Spirit-empowered human capacity, gifts that continue in the church throughout its history and constitute the permanent equipment of the body for its ongoing mission. Examples include teaching, exhortation, giving, administration, mercy, evangelism, pastoral care, faith, and wisdom. Called “ordinary” not because they are unimportant but because they work through and sanctify the normal channels of human capacity and ministry, rather than bypassing or suspending them. Distinguished from extraordinary gifts by their mode of operation (through ordinary means) and their expected duration (permanent, throughout church history).
Extraordinary Gifts	The category of spiritual gifts that bypass or suspend the normal operation of natural human capacities, operating through means that transcend what human capacity sanctified by the Spirit can explain, gifts that served the specific redemptive-historical purpose of authenticating the apostolic message and confirming new stages of divine revelation. Examples include apostleship (in the foundational sense), revelatory prophecy, tongues, interpretation of tongues, and miraculous healings. Extraordinary in their mode of operation (beyond ordinary means) and in their purpose (authentication of revelation). The cessationist position holds that these gifts served a specific, bounded redemptive-historical function that has been fulfilled with the completion of the apostolic canon.
Love as the Criterion	The evaluative framework established by 1 Corinthians 13 for all gift-exercise: love is the criterion by which every gift is evaluated (its genuineness and effectiveness), the motivation from which every gift is to be exercised, and the “still more excellent way” (12:31) to which the pursuit of gifts must be subordinate. Without love, every gift, however spectacular, is “nothing” (ouden, 1 Corinthians 13:1–3). The love criterion is the primary corrective to both gift-pride (spectacular gifts exercised for self-display) and gift-envy (the coveting of spectacular gifts as markers of spiritual status). The community whose gift-exercise is characterized by patient, kind, humble, truth-rejoicing love is the community that is genuinely and effectively Spirit-empowered.
Cessationism	The theological position that the extraordinary sign and revelatory gifts of the apostolic era, including tongues, miraculous healings, and revelatory prophecy, ceased with the close of the apostolic age and the completion of

Term	Definition
	the New Testament canon. Grounded in the purposes of the extraordinary gifts (authentication of apostolic revelation), the foundational character of the apostolic office (Ephesians 2:20), the sufficiency of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16–17), and the testimony of the early church fathers regarding the cessation of miraculous gifts in the post-apostolic era. Distinct from the claim that the Spirit’s work has diminished: cessationism affirms the Spirit’s full, ongoing activity through the ordinary gifts, the Word, and the means of grace.
Good Stewards	First Peter 4:10’s description of believers in relation to their spiritual gifts: “employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Stewardship implies that the gift belongs to the one who gave it (the Spirit), not to the one who holds it (the believer); that it is held in trust for a specific purpose (the community’s service); and that the steward is accountable for how the gift is used. A good steward uses the gift for the purposes for which it was given (service to the community and glory to God through Christ), not for the purposes of self-advancement, personal validation, or the accumulation of spiritual prestige.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: *What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that every genuine believer has at least one spiritual gift, given by the Spirit for the common good. This conviction has immediate practical implications for every member of the congregation: no one can legitimately say “I have no gift to offer the community” without contradicting 1 Peter 4:10’s “as each one has received.” The question is not whether you have a gift but what gift you have and whether you are using it faithfully. The Spirit’s sovereign distribution ensures that every member is equipped for some ministry to the body; the question of faithful stewardship is whether every member is actually performing that ministry or whether the gift is lying dormant in the community’s body like an unused limb.

We must also believe the love priority with practical specificity: the most important question about your gift-exercise is not whether it is spectacular but whether it is loving. The teacher who teaches accurately but arrogantly; the giver who gives generously but condescendingly; the administrator who leads efficiently but harshly; the mercy-shower who serves practically but joylessly, all of these are gift-bearers who are exercising their gifts in ways that the 1 Corinthians 13 criterion evaluates as falling short of the Spirit’s intention. The love that 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 describes is the manner of every gift’s exercise, not a separate gift alongside the others. To exercise any gift lovingly is to exercise it as the Spirit intended.

B. For the Heart: *What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the grace-character of your gift produce genuine gratitude, not pride. The charisma you have received was given to you, you did not earn it, develop it independently, or achieve it by spiritual effort. The Spirit gave it to you for the community’s good, not your advancement. This gratitude is not false humility that denies the gift’s reality; it is the honest acknowledgment that the gift’s source is the Spirit’s sovereign generosity and that its purpose is the community’s good. Let this gratitude produce the servant-hearted exercise of the gift that 1 Peter 4:10’s “good stewards” describes.

Desire the community culture that 1 Corinthians 12’s body analogy envisions: a community in which no gift-bearer considers herself superior to other gift-bearers, no member feels inadequate because his gift is less visible, and every person’s contribution is genuinely welcomed, genuinely needed, and genuinely received with the mutual honor that verse 26’s “if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” describes. This is not a sentimental aspiration; it is the direct application of the theology established in this lesson to the specific relational culture of the specific congregation you serve and inhabit.

C. For the Hands: *What Must We Do?*

- Read 1 Corinthians 12–14 in one sitting, attending to the full argument as a unified whole: the Spirit’s sovereign distribution (12:4–11), the body analogy (12:12–27), the exhortation to earnestly desire the greater gifts (12:28–31), the love chapter as the

criterion for all gift-exercise (13), and the specific instructions for orderly, edifying, intelligible gift use (14). How does the placement of 1 Corinthians 13 between the gift discussions of 12 and 14 change the way you read the specific gift instructions of each chapter? What does Paul's decision to put the love chapter exactly there reveal about his pneumatological priorities?

- Read the four primary gift passages in parallel: 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 and 28–30; Romans 12:3–8; Ephesians 4:7–13; 1 Peter 4:10–11. List the gifts mentioned in each passage. Note which gifts appear in multiple passages and which appear in only one. Then consider: what does the diversity and non-exhaustiveness of the gift lists suggest about the nature of spiritual gifts? Are the lists intended to be complete catalogs, or illustrative examples of the Spirit's diverse gifting? And which gifts from the four passages do you believe you have received?
- Apply the body analogy of 1 Corinthians 12:14–27 diagnostically to your own congregation. Which gifts are most actively exercised in the community's life? Which gifts are present in individual members but not being deployed in service to the community? Are there ministry needs in the community that are unmet because the members with the relevant gifts are not using them? And are there members who feel inadequate or marginal because their gifts are less visible than others', the "foot" that says "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body"? What would it look like to actively cultivate the community culture in which every part is working properly?
- Apply the love criterion of 1 Corinthians 13 to your own gift-exercise. For the specific gift or gifts you believe you have received, honestly evaluate: is the manner of your gift-exercise characterized by the love of 13:4–7? Is it patient (with the community's slow reception or misunderstanding of what you offer)? Kind (in how it is offered)? Humble (free from the subtle pride of the person who knows she is gifted in this area)? Does it seek not its own (directed toward the community's good, not the gift-bearer's recognition)? Where the love criterion reveals a deficit in the manner of your gift-exercise, what specific change would bring the manner into alignment with the criterion?
- For one month, attend to each Sunday gathering with the specific intention of identifying the Spirit's gift-expression in at least three other members of the congregation, not only the obvious, public gifts of preaching and leading but the less visible gifts of helps, mercy, encouragement, and administration. After identifying the gifts, express specific, genuine gratitude to those members for the gift's contribution to the community's good. The practice cultivates the mutual honor of 1 Corinthians 12:26 and trains the community's attention toward the Spirit's work in every member rather than only in the most visible.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. If someone asked you what your spiritual gift is, how would you respond? Do you know what gift or gifts the Spirit has given you? If you do, how did you come to know it? If you do not, what has prevented the identification? And what does the congregation's culture communicate about the value and visibility of different gifts, which gifts are most celebrated, and which are least visible?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 carefully. Paul describes the gifts as distributed by the Spirit (“just as He wills”, v. 11), yet verse 31 commands believers to “earnestly desire the greater gifts.” How do the sovereign distribution of verse 11 and the command to earnestly desire of verse 31 relate to each other? Does the command undermine the sovereignty, or does the sovereignty qualify the command? And what specifically are the “greater gifts” Paul is urging the Corinthians to desire?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 12:14–27. Paul’s body analogy argues that “the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary” (v. 22) and that “the members we deem less honorable” are given “abundant honor” (v. 23). What is the theological logic of this reversal, why do the apparently weaker and less honorable members receive more honor? And what does verse 25 (“that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another”) establish as the ultimate purpose of the diversity of gifts?
4. Read Ephesians 4:7–16. The passage describes the ascended Christ giving gifts to His church (v. 8) in the form of specific ministries (v. 11). Note that the purpose of these ministry gifts is explicitly “for the equipping of the saints for the work of service” (v. 12) rather than for the ministry gift-bearers themselves to perform all the service. What model of church ministry does this passage endorse, and what model does it reject? And what is the ultimate goal stated in verses 13–16 toward which the equipping ministry is directed?
5. Read Romans 12:3–8. Paul introduces the gift discussion with an instruction about self-assessment: “not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (v. 3). What is the connection between the instruction about self-assessment and the subsequent discussion of gifts? And what does “a measure of faith” (*metrōn pisteōs*) contribute to the understanding of how gifts are received and exercised?

6. Read 1 Peter 4:10–11. Peter’s description of gifts is the most compressed and most comprehensive in the New Testament: “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God; whoever speaks, as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves, as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies.” What is the significance of the “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” description? And why does Peter frame the gifts under the two categories of “speaking” and “serving”?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson introduces the distinction between ordinary gifts (operating through normal means of Word, wisdom, and Spirit-empowered capacity) and extraordinary gifts (bypassing or suspending normal human capacities). Is this distinction the New Testament’s own distinction, or is it a later theological construct imposed on the data? What evidence from the gift passages themselves supports or resists the ordinary/extraordinary distinction? And can you identify specific gifts from the four primary passages that clearly belong to the ordinary category and specific gifts that clearly belong to the extraordinary category?
8. The lesson argues that 1 Corinthians 13 is the theological heart of the gift discussion, not a parenthetical interruption. But some interpreters read 1 Corinthians 13 as an extended argument for the temporary, imperfect character of spiritual gifts (cf. vv. 8–12: “prophecies... will be done away”; “we know in part and we prophesy in part”; “now I know in part, but then I will know fully”). Does this reading undermine the lesson’s treatment of 1 Corinthians 13 as primarily about love as the evaluative criterion? Or can both readings, love as the criterion and gifts as temporary, coexist within the passage’s argument?
9. The lesson defines spiritual gifts as distinct from natural talents but acknowledges that the Spirit may use natural talents as the substrate through which He expresses the gift. How does this relationship between charisma and natural talent work in practice? Is teaching as a spiritual gift the same as teaching as a natural ability? How would you distinguish the Spirit’s supernatural empowerment of teaching from the natural teacher’s merely human pedagogical skill? And what are the practical implications of this distinction for gift identification and deployment?
10. The lesson presents cessationism as holding that the extraordinary gifts served a specific, bounded redemptive-historical function that has been fulfilled. The Charismatic response is that God is still working miraculously today, and that the continuation of miraculous activity evidences the continuation of the extraordinary gifts. How does the cessationist distinguish between God’s ongoing sovereign miraculous work (which cessationism affirms) and the specific charismatic gift of miraculous healing or tongues (which cessationism denies continues)? Is the distinction between God working miraculously and the gift of miracles being exercised a coherent one?

11. The lesson's pastoral vision is a community in which every member's gift is identified, cultivated, deployed, and received in love. The Ephesians 4:12 vision is "the equipping of the saints for the work of service." In practice, many congregations function as consumer communities in which the professionally trained minister does the ministry and the congregation receives it. What specific structural, cultural, and theological changes would need to occur in a typical evangelical congregation to move from the consumer model to the Ephesians 4 equipping model? And what obstacles, structural, cultural, and theological, most commonly prevent the movement?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

12. Every believer has at least one spiritual gift (1 Peter 4:10). Identify what you believe your primary gift to be. If you are uncertain, describe the ministry contexts in which you sense the Spirit's empowerment and the community's affirmation most clearly, these are the primary indicators of gift-presence. Then evaluate: is this gift being actively deployed in serving the community, or is it lying largely dormant? What would faithful stewardship of this specific gift look like in your specific community context?
13. Apply the 1 Corinthians 13 love criterion to the most prominent gift-exercise in your congregation: the preaching, the leading, the serving, the giving. In which of these is the manner of exercise most clearly characterized by the patient, kind, humble, truth-rejoicing, others-directed love of 13:4-7? In which is the love criterion most deficient? And what would it look like for the community's culture around gift-exercise to become more deeply and consistently marked by the love that 1 Corinthians 13 places at the center of every gift discussion?
14. The lesson identifies two pathologies that the body analogy corrects: pride (the superior gift-bearer dismissing less-gifted members) and despair (the less-gifted member concluding he has nothing to contribute). Which of these two pathologies is more prevalent in your congregation? And what specific pastoral strategies, from 1 Corinthians 12's body theology, would most effectively address the prevalent pathology in your specific community?
15. The lesson closes with the observation that a cessationist community need not be a pneumatologically impoverished community: the ordinary gifts are rich, permanent, and abundantly sufficient for the church's mission. Evaluate your congregation's engagement with the ordinary gifts: are the teaching, leadership, evangelism, mercy, giving, and pastoral care gifts of your community being recognized, cultivated, and deployed as the Spirit's permanent provision for the church's permanent mission? Or has the absence of extraordinary gifts created a subtle sense that the Spirit's gift-giving is less rich in the present age than it was in the apostolic era?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson, the first of Unit 8, with a reading of 1 Corinthians 12:4–11 followed by a moment of corporate gratitude for the Spirit's gift-giving work in the specific community gathered for this lesson. Before moving to any discussion of which gifts are operative and which have ceased, establish the gratitude: the same Spirit who works all things according to His own will has distributed specific, grace-given, community-serving gifts to every member of this gathered body. Every person in the room has received at least one charisma, a grace-gift from the Spirit, given for the common good. What a remarkable and humbling reality: the Third Person of the Holy Trinity has specifically equipped every person in this room for a contribution to the community's edification.

Begin the prayer with extended gratitude for the diversity and the complementarity of the Spirit's gift-giving in the gathered community. Name, if possible, the specific gifts that are visible and active in specific members: the teacher who faithfully opens the Word; the administrator who manages the community's affairs with wisdom and integrity; the giver whose generosity sustains the ministry; the mercy-shower who serves the suffering with cheerful, practical compassion; the encourager who strengthens the wavering and the discouraged. These are the Spirit's charismatically gifted members of the body, and every one of them is an expression of the Spirit's own generosity toward the community. Thank the Spirit for each gift, and pray for the faithful stewardship of each.

Then pray for the discovery and the deployment of gifts that are present but inactive in the community. Pray specifically for those members who have not yet identified their gift, who have been told by the community culture that their contribution is not needed, or who have been discouraged from offering what the Spirit has given them by the pride of more visibly gifted members. Ask the Spirit to surface the gifts that are dormant, to heal the wounds that prevent their exercise, and to cultivate the community culture in which every member's gift is genuinely welcomed, genuinely needed, and genuinely received. The body's health depends on every part working properly (Ephesians 4:16); pray for the parts that are not yet working properly to be freed for their Spirit-intended contribution.

Close with the 1 Corinthians 13 love prayer: ask the Spirit to so fill the community's gift-exercise with the love that is patient, kind, humble, truth-rejoicing, endurance-bearing, and others-directed that the watching world would see not merely a community of impressive abilities but a community of Christlike character, a community that demonstrates the Spirit's presence not primarily by its spectacular pneumatological repertoire but by the love that Jesus identified as the mark of His disciples (John 13:35). Close with the doxological framing of 1 Peter 4:11: let all things be done "so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."

*“To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit
for the common good...
But one and the same Spirit works all these things,
distributing to each one individually
just as He wills.”*

1 Corinthians 12:7, 11, NASB 1995

Key Texts: 1 Corinthians 12–14; Romans 12:3–8; Ephesians 4:7–16; 1 Peter 4:10–11; Hebrews 2:3–4; John 13:35; Galatians 5:22–23

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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