

PREFACE

As we turn the page to Chapter Twelve, we discover two things: First, Paul is still answering the questions submitted to him by the Corinth church. We may not always know precisely what those questions were (as here), but we know that that is what he is doing. Second, we discover that Paul is still on-topic—the topic he opened at the beginning of Chapter Eight. And that topic remains proper, God-honoring, church-edifying worship. Just as with his extended treatise on eating food offered to idols in Chapters Eight to Ten, we have the ultimate purpose of his lengthy counsel near the end. Regarding edifying the church, we have the passage in Chapter Fourteen.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-4.

Regarding proper, orderly, God-honoring worship, we have the passage further on in Chapter Fourteen.

Read vv23-26, 40.

- In Chapters Eight through Ten (including 11:1) it was “things sacrificed to idols.”
- In Chapter Eleven, verses two to sixteen, it was the proper dress and appearance for men and women in worship.
- In verses seventeen to thirty-four, it was the proper behavior during the observance of the Lord’s Supper.
- And now in Chapters Twelve through Fourteen it is the proper use of spiritual gifts in worship.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-3.

Before we proceed, let me add one point of clarification—regarding the text in v1, but which colors the entire topic. In a sense this takes us all the way back to something we discussed in Chapter Three. That is, how to understand and express the Pauline use of the word translated, more often than not, the adjective “spiritual.” First, regarding *how the word is presented in our text*, I subscribe to Gordon Fee’s practice of making every effort to translate and express the word *pneumatikos*, no matter the modern convention, as something obviously of the Holy Spirit. That is, the modern convention is to *not* capitalize the word “spiritual,” which, while perhaps grammatically correct, risks lumping the things of the *Holy* Spirit in with earthly trivialities as someone or something being generically “spiritual,” mystical, contemplative, healing crystals and oils, *ad nauseum*.

So, first, in v1 the original Greek has just *pneumatikos*; “gifts” has been added, as in most of our translations. (Later in the topic Paul will indeed switch to *charismaton*, translated “gifts,” or “spiritual gifts.”) Fee translates this in v1, “matters of the Spirit” (neuter), and I would also commend to you the NIV2011, “Now about the gifts of the Spirit,” both of which make clear that Paul is speaking of gifts coming from *the* Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

Second, there has long been a debate over whether *pneumatikos* in v1 is masculine or neuter. Most of our translations make it to be neuter, and thus refer to “spiritual gifts”—or, better, “things of the Spirit.” That is, Paul refers to the gifts themselves, or the Spirit giftings. If masculine, then Paul refers here to spiritual *people*, or “those who have the Spirit,” or “spiritual ones” (Garland).

I realize this may be stretching one’s comfort level, perhaps getting a little too far down in the weeds. But consider:

- Be assured that anything I include here is a dramatically abridged version of any scholarly discussion of the situation.
- As always, it seems, learned scholars do not agree on how to interpret this; Fee (with MacArthur) and Garland take different approaches, and D. A. Carson something a little different from those.
- As tedious as this discussion may be, it is important, because our interpretation may color how we approach the next three chapters of this letter.
- As he has before in this letter (e.g., 7:1, 8:1), in v1 Paul is quoting from the Corinthian letter query to him. As before, he begins by using *their* terminology, but then proceeds to correct their thinking and behavior, employing his more focused terminology. This means that we should not give too much weight to just one word in the first verse of a three-chapter treatise (i.e., Paul’s repeating of their terminology does not necessarily signal his acquiescence to it). Yet those who take the position that the v1 *pneumatikos* is masculine, referring to people, cite v14:37, which forms an inclusio pointing back to v12:1. There Paul chooses for himself the same word used in v12:1.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:37.

- Finally, in this instance my proposition is that we not force a narrow approach to this treatise by selecting just one of the positions cited earlier, but instead consider them all—for one can make reasonable arguments for each. Thus:
 - We could gain valuable insight into the various gifts of the Spirit if we approach this treatise only from that perspective.
 - But we can gain much more if we include *along with that* the position that Paul is speaking to the fact that we are to be spiritual *people* (better, people of the Spirit). It is clear from the text that although Paul will address the importance of the other gifts of the Spirit, the issue in the Corinth church was predominantly about the more *ecstatic* gifts: tongues and prophesy. This, Paul will claim, was a hold-over from their pagan roots, in which such impressive drama played an important role. Once again the Corinthians were superimposing the beliefs and practices of a secular *and pagan* world on the church.
 - A more nuanced approach, espoused by D. A. Carson, can add yet a third valuable perspective.

Carson: Paul offers a telling rebuttal: Your horizons, he says, are too narrow. For participation in the things of the Holy Spirit is attested by *all* who truly confess Jesus is Lord. Both parties must expand their horizons: the charismatics should not feel they have some exclusive claim on the Spirit, and the non-charismatics should not be writing them off... If First Corinthians 12:3 offers a criterion not to establish true and false ecstatic utterance, but to establish whether or not any particular spiritual manifestation may be used to authenticate the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit, then Paul's answer is in line with the entire New Testament, to be able to confess that the Jesus of the Incarnation, cross, and resurrection is truly the Lord. To put the matter in another way, if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ (Romans 8:9)... Paul provides a profoundly Christological focus—as Schwietzer puts it, perhaps a little too simply, “The Holy Spirit makes us receptive of Jesus.” In short, the purpose of 12:1-3 is not to provide a confessional test to enable Christians to distinguish true from false spirits [as in John 1], but a sufficient test to establish *who has the Holy Spirit at all*.

We can gain by including all of these perspectives—and perhaps others—in our study of this next three-chapter treatise. In the time remaining, let's look more closely at this first verse.

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

As mentioned earlier, the church had written a letter to the apostle, submitting—let the evidence show not necessarily politely or respectfully—a number of issues for which they requested his input. In the next three chapters we have Paul’s “input” regarding those things in the corporate worship generated or energized by the Holy Spirit. No matter what their actual question was, Paul takes this opportunity to express his thoughts broadly, including a discussion of some of the specific gifts of the Spirit and their proper use and level of importance in corporate worship. He will also use this occasion to address the larger issue of those who *have* the Spirit versus those who do not. We see that in v3.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:3.

...brethren

It is to Paul’s credit—and to the gracious genius behind God through Christ’s “perseverance of the saints”—that the apostle still considers those that comprise the Corinth church “brethren” in Christ, even with all their horrendous problems.

Sidebar: the word translated brethren in most of our translations (*adelphos*) is indeed masculine. Some of our newer translations (e.g., NIV2011 and CSB) make it “brothers and sisters,” and our principal commentators have no problem with this. “It is therefore not pedantic, but culturally sound and biblically sensitive, for the NIV[2011] and other contemporary English versions to render this vocative “brothers and sisters” (Fee). Personally I wouldn’t take this to court, but I still prefer “brethren,” because that is what is in the text. We all know and understand that Paul is not restricting this to the male of the species.

...I do not want you to be unaware.

Using the same phrase he employed at the beginning of Chapter Ten, Paul makes it clear that what follows is important; he wants to make sure the church gets it right.

MacArthur: The Greek *agnoeo* literally means “not to know” or “to be ignorant of.” It is the term from which we get agnostic. Paul wanted the Corinthians to have no ignorance and no doubts, no uncertainty or agnosticism, about the identification and use of their spiritual gifts. The church cannot function, and it certainly cannot mature, without properly and faithfully using the gifts God gives His people for ministry. Satan will try to counterfeit the Spirit’s gifts, and he will try to induce believers to ignore, neglect, misunderstand, abuse, and pervert them. Consequently, Paul’s teaching here is critical.