

CONFUSING WORD AND CONCEPT IN “SPIRITUAL GIFTS”: HAVE WE FORGOTTEN JAMES BARR’S EXHORTATIONS?

KENNETH BERDING*

I. INTRODUCTION

“Spiritual gifts” have generated more discussion, both popular and scholarly, than any of us could (or would want to) read. But where did we obtain our idea of what a “gift” is? Is it from exegesis of the relevant Biblical texts or from a widespread conception which has gone unchallenged for too long? In this essay it will be argued that systematic and popular theology (almost entirely) and Biblical scholarship (to a lesser degree) are still influenced by a pre-James Barr conception of the word χάρισμα.

In his revolutionary book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Barr insisted:

I now would wish to reaffirm this much more forcibly, with especially the insistence that lexicographic research should be directed towards the semantics of words in their particular occurrences and not towards the assembly of a stock of persuasive and distinctive terms which could be regarded as a linguistic reflection of the theological realities.¹ This distinction between theological concept and the actual function/meaning of a word in a given passage has received wide acceptance among exegetes. It is now understood that a major problem with Kittel’s massive set² is that it is in fact “not lexicography at all, but rather the study of *concepts* on the basis of the terms used to express them.”³

Some patterns, however, die hard, particularly when they are widespread and deeply entrenched. The study of the so-called “spiritual gifts,” the focus of this paper, is just such a concept. “Spiritual gifts” are often treated as a theological category in their own right. In a day of explosive growth among “charismatics”⁴ and popular evangelicalism’s emphasis on “spiritual gifts” in body life, plus the continuing influence of Käsemann’s thesis that “charismatic gifts” rather than offices held sway in earliest

*Kenneth Berding is an instructor in Bible and Greek at Nyack College, One South Boulevard, Nyack, NY 10960.

¹ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) 274.

² *TDNT*, 10 vols.

³ Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 24–25. See also comments in Barr, *Semantics* 233–236.

⁴ Here I am using this term broadly and would include Pentecostals, Charismatics, and those in the “Third Wave.”

Christian communities,⁵ it is no wonder that a reorientation of perspective on this subject has been difficult to introduce.

I will argue that NT scholarship has not adequately appropriated Barr's concerns to distinguish word and concept in relation to the term χάρισμα.⁶ The problem is compounded by the fact that we have been largely influenced by a popular theological understanding that the *concept* to be discussed is a Spirit-given ability.⁷ The ability meaning is associated with the word χάρισμα and functions as its default definition (almost a received interpretation). Thus, the concept is imposed on the word in many contexts in which it is unnatural. Biblical interpreters as well often are unable to shake this conception (and some seem unaware that it is even an issue). Large numbers of books assume this interpretation without feeling any need to define it.⁸

But if we understand that the word χαρίσματα is unable to carry on its shoulders everything associated with the concept usually called "spiritual gifts," it becomes necessary to identify in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12–14, Rom 12:3–8 and Eph 4:11–13 the "theological reality" lying behind Paul's lists rather than assuming the meaning of those terms. In the following essay, I will argue that a consistent application of Barr's suggestions will produce the following two results:

1. The definition of "spiritual gifts" as particular Spirit-given abilities/enablers to do ministry⁹ will cease as a viable general definition of the

⁵ Ernst Käsemann, "Ministry and Community in the New Testament," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (trans. W. J. Montague; Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1964). Though the main outlines of this thesis were drawn by Sohm in 1892 and again in 1909 (see the excellent summary of Sohm in Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* [trans. John Richard de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975; repr. 1997] 438–440), Käsemann functions as the center of this thesis in modern times. See also in this regard Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (trans. J. A. Baker; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969) and James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

⁶ Turner makes the same complaint. Max Turner, "Modern Linguistics and the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 161. But, against Turner, I will argue that a study on the conceptual level leads to different results than those at which he arrives.

⁷ "Ability" in this paper should be considered inclusive of both more spontaneous enablements (such as in a "word of knowledge") or continuing enablements (such as a regular ability to teach).

⁸ Examples of books which appear to assume something like the received interpretation as the basis for further investigation: Craig S. Keener, *3 Crucial Questions about the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); Wayne Grudem, ed., *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 129–141; David Allan Hubbard, *Unwrapping Your Spiritual Gifts* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985) 52–60; and for an example of an older book, Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1931) 184–190. The dialectic tension between enablement and ministry has confirmed this view, as in Arnold Bittlinger, *Gifts and Ministries* (trans. Clara K. Dyck; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 15–45. This list should only be considered representative.

⁹ Typical definitions follow here: "Spiritual gifts . . . are enrichments received from Christ" (J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984] 82). "Extraordinary

items in the list-passages.¹⁰ There is a concept which links together the list-passages (1 Corinthians 12, Rom 12:3–8, Eph 4:11–13—and perhaps also 1 Pet 4:10–11) and that concept is *not* Spirit-given abilities. Spirit-given ministries rather than abilities is what links these passages together. A “ministry” in this essay is any edificatory activity in the Christian community which serves to build up the Christian community. A ministry can be a regular role in the community (such as teaching or leading) or it can be a spontaneous activity which builds up the community (such as an unanticipated prophecy). It is neither limited to ministerial office nor to sudden acts engaged in during periods of worship. It will be argued that ministries (roles, functions) rather than special ability is the theological entity lying behind Paul’s discussions in 1 Corinthians 12, Rom 12:3–8, Eph 4:11–13. Special ability/enablement is only present in 1 Cor 12:8–10. Undoubtedly, no one can engage in a particular ministry without being *able* to do so, but when we mistakenly equate the entity we call “spiritual gifts” with special abilities, we end up reading *special* skills into a place where *special* ministries (supported by *general* empowerment) rather than special abilities are in view.

2. We should entertain eliminating the translation of the word *χαρίσματα* as “spiritual gifts” or even just “gifts” because the English is so laden with the ability concept that it is very difficult to adopt a new perspective without new terms.¹¹

The path to these conclusions will include an evaluation of the lexical data and an investigation of whether the word *χαρίσματα* continues to be confused with the concept known as “spiritual gifts” in books and articles. After a technical use of *χάρισμα(τα)* has been rejected, the theological entity lying behind the lists found in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12, Rom 12:3–8, and Eph 4:11–13 will be exposed.

The primary goal of this paper is not to suggest new directions in exegesis of individual passages (which in any case is impossible in such a short paper) but to synthesize and bring new perspectives (where possible) to work which has been done by recent exegetes, particularly those who show some awareness of Barr’s concerns.¹²

powers, distinguishing certain Christians and enabling them to serve the church of Christ, the reception of which is due to the power of divine grace operating in their souls by the Holy Spirit” (J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [New York: American, 1889] 667). “Certain capacities, bestowed by God’s grace and power, which fit people for specific and corresponding service” (John R. W. Stott, *Baptism & Fullness* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976] 87).

¹⁰ I use the term “list-passages” to refer to the lists and their contexts found in 1 Corinthians 12; Rom 12:3–8; Eph 4:11–13 (and 1 Pet 4:10–11 when we step outside the Pauline corpus). I am trying to avoid the term “spiritual gifts” for reasons explained later in the paper.

¹¹ I am *not* suggesting that we replace “spiritual gifts” or “gifts” with another stock term, but that we translate *χάρισμα* according to its function in the passage in which it is found while attempting not to impose meanings foreign to the text in which it is found.

¹² The secondary literature on this subject is almost limitless. My interaction will be, following Schatzmann’s lead, primarily with literature written since the 1970s. See Siegfried S. Schatzmann, *A Pauline Theology of Charismata* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987) vi.

II. LEXICAL CONCERNS

Χάρισμα is found rarely in sources outside of Paul's seventeen uses¹³ (twice in variants in the LXX, twice in Philo, a few times in secular Greek, and once in 1 Pet 4:10—all with varying meanings), and scholars agree that little is gained toward understanding Paul's use of the word from those extra-Biblical sources.¹⁴ The patristic writings give us little help, because they seem to have been influenced by the term as found in the NT.¹⁵

As to Paul's usage,¹⁶ we are confronted with a broad semantic range for the term, with overlapping borders of meaning in various passages.¹⁷ Outside the list-passages we are faced with a variety of meanings of the same term, as Fee has summarized: "It includes such diverse 'gifts' as eternal life (Rom 6:23; cf. 5:15, 16), the many special privileges granted to Israel (Rom 11:29, referring to 9:4–5), celibacy and marriage (1 Cor 7:7), and deliverance from a deadly peril (2 Cor 1:10)."¹⁸ Even within the list-passages, χάρισμα can be broad or narrow, and its referents can vary considerably.

1. *A technical force for χάρισμα?* There is no agreement among NT exegetes as to whether χάρισμα has a technical (or semi-technical) force in the list-passages (and perhaps by extension in other verses like Rom 1:11 or 1 Cor 1:7). For example, Turner and Carson argue that there is *not* a technical use of χάρισμα for Paul,¹⁹ whereas Dunn and Schatzmann argue that there is.²⁰ Note, however, that the general force for Carson and for most

¹³ I assume, but will not argue here, the Pauline authorship of all of the books traditionally considered Pauline (except Hebrews). See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990) 386–684.

¹⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 205–206.

¹⁵ For relevant patristic passages, see Ronald A. N. Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984) and Eusebius A. Stephanou, *The Charismata in the Early Church Fathers* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 1976).

¹⁶ Χάρισμα appears in Rom 1:11; 5:15, 16; 6:23; 11:29; 12:6; 1 Cor 1:7; 7:7; 12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31; 2 Cor 1:11; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6 (and 1 Pet 4:10).

¹⁷ Koenig rightly says, "When thinking about gifts, the New Testament writers do not appear to be striving for rigid definitions" (John Koenig, *Charismata: God's Gifts for God's People* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978] 95). Koenig's discussion, 95–104, helps remind us of the breadth of the word in various contexts.

¹⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 33.

¹⁹ Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996) 262–267; also Max Turner, "Spiritual Gifts Then and Now," *Vox Evangelica* 15 (1985) 30–31; D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 21. Turner's argument is directed against those who would define it in a narrow technical sense of "divine grace in miraculous manifestations of the Spirit" (*The Holy Spirit* 272).

²⁰ ". . . Paul took it up, transformed it by his usage, and gave it the status of a technical term of Christian theology." James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998) 553. Though Schatzmann says he does not want to call χάρισμα a "fully developed *terminus technicus*" (*A Pauline Theology of Charismata* 4), his study assumes from the outset that Paul has distinctly infused the term with theological meaning. Again on p. 5

others includes a connection to Paul's use of χάρις,²¹ whereas for Turner there is no such connection.²² Also, Dunn and Schatzmann's technical meanings are somewhat distinct from one another.²³

The difficulties for those who try to defend a technical use by Paul are significant. To be considered a technical or somewhat technical term, a word must be used consistently in related contexts with more or less the same meaning. But this is precisely the problem for the word χάρισμα.

First, Paul does not use the word very often (only 17 times), and the only passage in which he uses it more than twice is 1 Corinthians 12 (where he uses it five times). The diversity of the passages outside 1 Corinthians 12 supports the idea that Paul did not immediately associate the word with a narrower technical meaning.

Second, as our later discussion will show, the only other Pauline list-passage in which χάρισμα is found, Rom 12:3–8, focuses upon ministries. The role of the Spirit is not mentioned at all.

Third, another list passage, Eph 4:11–13, does not even use the word χάρισμα.

Fourth, Paul has used the term twice already in 1 Corinthians (1:7; 7:7) before he arrives at the discussion beginning in chap. 12, and apart from 1 Corinthians 12 there would be no reason to take those appearances in any way but in a general sense.

Fifth, even if a technical use is limited to the five appearances in 1 Corinthians 12, there are some problems. Paul has failed to make it clear that his key word is χαρίσματα in the context of 1 Corinthians 12. He uses πνευματικά, not χαρίσματα,²⁴ as his head word both in 1 Cor 12:1 and in 1 Cor 14:1.²⁵ The word χαρίσματα does not appear at all in 1 Corinthians 14. Three of the five appearances in 1 Corinthians 12 are in the phrase "χαρίσματα of healing" (12:9, 28, 30), which has a narrow referent.²⁶ This leaves 12:4 and 12:31 as the only two possible instances where χαρίσματα is being used with a technical meaning and encompasses all the items in the lists of 1 Corinthians 12.

Schatzmann says, "Χάρισμα is unquestionably the term which Paul made distinctive and important." See also René Lauretin, "Charisma: Terminological Precision," in *Charisms in the Church* (ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristan; New York: Seabury, 1978) 5.

²¹ Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 19.

²² Turner, "Modern Linguistics" 156–159.

²³ Käsemann's influence on Dunn is evident, even in his understanding of a technical meaning for χάρισμα. Käsemann said, "Paul . . . was the first to use it in this technical sense and who indeed introduced it into the vocabulary of theology" ("Ministry and Community" 64).

²⁴ Πνευματικά is probably better understood more broadly as spiritual issues or "spirit matters." See Gordon D. Fee, "Gifts of the Spirit," in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 341. It should not be equated with χάρισμα. (Note that Fee covers much of the same material as in "Gifts of the Spirit" 339–341 in *God's Empowering Presence* 32–35.)

²⁵ It is, of course, possible that this could be a term preferred by the Corinthians and disliked by Paul.

²⁶ Fee views χαρίσματα as being used in a broad sense in 1 Cor 12:4 (= manifestations of the Spirit in 12:7) and an even broader sense in 12:31, but more narrowly applied to healings three times in 1 Corinthians 12 ("Gifts of the Spirit" 340).

But when we look at 12:4–6, we see three terms, not one: “χαρίσματα . . . διακονία . . . ἐνεργήματα . . .” It is true that these verses are “deliberately parallel formation,” as Dunn has pointed out.²⁷ It is *not* necessary, however, as Dunn concludes, that each term on its own is a general descriptive term of the list that follows.²⁸ But neither are they distinct categories.²⁹ Carson comments,

The parallelism does not of course make the words strictly synonymous, any more than Spirit, Lord, and God are strictly synonymous; but because none of the three terms can be associated with only certain spiritual gifts and not with others, it is clear that Paul uses the three terms to describe the full range of what might be called spiritual-gift phenomena.³⁰

It appears that Paul considered all three terms to be needed as a description of the items which appear in the lists of 1 Corinthians 12. This argues against the idea of a technical force for χαρίσματα.

It is commonplace to assume that what is termed “manifestations of the Spirit” is a subset or equally inclusive to the category described by the term χαρίσματα.³¹ But this only works if χαρίσματα is assumed to stand as a head word for all the items in the lists (or at least the list immediately to follow). The parallel construction of 12:4–6 instead argues that the three terms *together* make an adequate summary in Paul’s mind of the concept he is discussing in 1 Corinthians 12. Therefore, it is anything but certain that χαρίσματα has a technical force in 1 Cor 12:4.³²

1 Cor 12:31 is the best candidate for a technical force because of its seemingly summarizing position in the text. But it should be noted that its appearance there follows 12:28, which is a list made up of three personal categories (apostles, prophets, teachers) followed by a list of “functions” or “ministries.”³³ These persons and functions are then repeated in the rhetorical questions of 12:29–30. In other words, if χαρίσματα is technical in any sense, it will be difficult to make its technical meaning account for both persons and functions (particularly if the popular meaning “ability” is brought in).

The suggestion that ζηλοῦτε in 12:31 is an indicative statement (“You are seeking the greater/more spectacular χαρίσματα”) rather than an im-

²⁷ Dunn, *Theology* 554.

²⁸ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* 209. This is necessary for Dunn’s contention that χαρίσματα here has a technical force.

²⁹ F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 281.

³⁰ Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 34.

³¹ As in Fee, “Gifts of the Spirit” 340, who considers them to be a subset. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* 209, considers them to be equally inclusive.

³² Turner says, “The scarlet thread running through the whole discussion in 12:1–10 is that the phenomena Paul lists are regarded as events in which the Spirit is made manifest (phaneroseis) . . .” (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* 261). But it is unclear why he loads the weight upon “manifestation” (φανέρωσις) when he has also included as descriptive terms ἐνεργήματα, διακονία, πνευματικά, χαρίσματα and the thought that they are for the common good as central ideas in the text.

³³ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* 253; Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 36.

perative (“seek the greater *χαρίσματα*”)³⁴—if correct—would also argue against the idea of any technical meaning for *χαρίσματα*. The referent would then not be the immediately preceding list as the imperative would imply, but be directed toward those spectacular activities which the Corinthians evidently had been valuing too highly—a value judgment from which Paul clearly wants to dissuade them. If it is in fact indicative rather than imperative, *χαρίσματα* would not be an all-inclusive term for the items in the immediately preceding list.

Alternately, if Fee’s suggestion is correct that 1 Cor 12:31 belongs at the beginning of the argument of 1 Corinthians 14 (with 1 Corinthians 13 as a parenthesis) instead of being aligned with the preceding context,³⁵ it again becomes difficult to connect *χαρίσματα* with all the items in the lists. The only explicitly “greater” item in Paul’s argument of 1 Corinthians 14 is prophecy.

Both examples above were given to show that *χαρίσματα* is not necessarily a summarizing term in 1 Cor 12:31. Even if it is, it cannot be assumed that it therefore functions as an inclusive term for the other list-passages (Rom 12:3–8; Eph 4:11–13).

I conclude that the data probably does not allow us to attribute a technical meaning to the word *χάρισμα(τα)*.

2. *General meaning.* If a technical meaning of *χάρισμα(τα)* is rejected, then what is being suggested is that its general meaning is adequate in all the cases in which it appears.

What is this general meaning? Again we are faced with some difficulty. It seems that the majority of interpreters (even those who posit a technical meaning in some passages) would agree with Fee’s assessment, “The noun has been formed from *charis* (“grace”), referring to a *concrete expression of grace*, which is what it means in every instance in Paul.”³⁶

Turner, however, represents another stream in the understanding of what ties together all the appearances of *χάρισμα*, i.e. “gift” (in the sense of something which is given).³⁷ He carefully separates *χάρισμα* from *χάρις*.³⁸ *Χάρισμα*, according to Turner, should be placed in the same semantic field as *δόμα*, *δῶρον*, *δωρεά* and *δῶρημα*, with a little more emphasis upon the graciousness of the gift.³⁹ It should not primarily be understood in relationship to *χάρις*.

While sympathetic to many of Turner’s concerns, it should be noted that it is not only on the level of word formation that exegetes have posited a

³⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in 1 Corinthians 12–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 34–35 following Iber, Baker and Chevallier.

³⁵ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* 195–197.

³⁶ Fee, “Gifts of the Spirit” 340.

³⁷ Note the two English senses of “gift” discussed later in this paper.

³⁸ He disagrees with the assessment that *χάρισμα* has been formed from *χάρις*, thinking rather that it has been formed from *χαρίζομαι*.

³⁹ Turner, “Modern Linguistics” 155–165; Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* 262–267.

relationship between χάρισμα and χάρις.⁴⁰ Rom 12:6–7, 1 Cor 1:4–7, and also 1 Pet 4:10 all contextually link χάρισμα to χάρις.⁴¹ The semantic range of χάρις itself is not limited to Paul’s soteriological formulations, but, among other uses, sometimes refers to “the particular ministry or service to which grace/Spirit inspires and which grace/power enables . . .”⁴² As χάρισμα is used in contexts about ministries (see discussion below), so also sometimes is χάρις.⁴³ Thus, there are reasons based upon usage, not just form, that link these words.⁴⁴

It appears that Turner and others who talk about the general meaning “gift” have drawn from Rom 5:15–16 and 6:23 and have transferred this meaning upon other NT passages in which it is found. Unless more extra-Biblical literature is found which shows that this term does mean simply “gift” in the greater Hellenistic world, there appear to be no reasons outside of Rom 5:15–16; 6:23 for doing so throughout Paul.⁴⁵ The idea of concrete grace is more encompassing and is adequate to each occurrence in which χάρισμα is found.⁴⁶

3. *Continuing confusion of word and concept.* Before moving away from an analysis of the lexical level into an analysis of the underlying theology of the list-passages, I wish to point out some examples of continuing confusion of word and concept, even among those who seek to be sensitive to this issue. There is not space to develop this. The examples here should be understood only to illustrate some of the continuing confusion.

Though Schatzmann says he does not want to call χάρισμα a “fully developed *terminus technicus*,”⁴⁷ his study assumes from the outset that Paul has distinctly infused the term with theological meaning. “Χάρισμα is unquestionably the term which Paul made distinctive and important.”⁴⁸ But how can this be, if it is used so infrequently with such a large range of im-

⁴⁰ Turner argues that Dunn’s idea of χάρισμα being a spontaneous event of the Spirit does not work because -μα indicates that χάρισμα is a result (Turner, “Modern Linguistics” 156–159). I do not see how arguing that χάρισμα is a derivative of χαρίζομαι, not χάρις, argues against this (even though I also agree that χάρις is probably formed from χαρίζομαι), nor do I see how emphasizing the result would keep it from being a spontaneous event, as Dunn argues. An event could be the result of the Spirit’s work.

More seriously, Turner has stated that he supports Barr’s contention that words are defined in *context* and neither of these arguments are arguments from usage, but are arguments from form and derivation.

⁴¹ Koenig, *Charismata* 63–64.

⁴² Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* 203–204.

⁴³ Examples for Paul’s special ministry could include Gal 2:9; Eph 3:7; Rom 15:15–16; 1:5; 1 Cor 15:10 and for general believers’ ministries Eph 4:7 and Rom 12:6.

⁴⁴ “In its range of meaning *charisma* overlaps to a considerable degree with *charis*” (ibid. 206).

⁴⁵ “Strangely, there is no textually-secure pre-Christian occurrence of the word *charisma* . . .” (Turner, “Spiritual Gifts Then and Now” 30).

⁴⁶ Concrete grace does not have to mean immediate event, as in all of Dunn’s works (and against which Turner is arguing). Fee does not limit it this way even though he understands the general meaning of χάρισμα to be concrete grace (“Gifts of the Spirit” 340).

⁴⁷ Schatzmann, *A Pauline Theology of Charismata* 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 5.

port in specific passages (i.e. Schatzmann’s “non-technical” senses⁴⁹)? This is particularly perplexing when Schatzmann says that finding a simple definition for χάρισμα is a “naive hope.”⁵⁰ Also, he speaks of “. . . the scant usage in the NT and . . . the variety of meanings Paul attached to the term χάρισμα.”⁵¹ The confusion of word and concept is highlighted in the title of his volume, *A Pauline Theology of Charismata*, and continues throughout the book.

Concerning χαρίσματα, διακονίαι and ἐνεργήματα in 1 Cor 12:4, Montague says he is willing to admit that “Paul feels free to interchange these terms.”⁵² At the same time, Montague understands χαρίσματα to be Paul’s key word (instead of πνευματικά, which he considers to be the Corinthians’ preferred word) in 1 Corinthians 12–14.⁵³ But, we must ask, if the three terms listed above are interchangeable, how can χαρίσματα by itself be considered the key word?

Käsemann’s extremely influential essay “Ministry and Community in the New Testament” confuses word and theological concept throughout. Käsemann writes,

While there is no real equivalent in the New Testament for our present-day conception of “office,” there *is* a concept in Pauline and sub-Pauline theology which describes in a theologically exact and comprehensive way the essence and scope of every ecclesiastical ministry and function—namely, the concept charisma.⁵⁴

Käsemann’s influence is undoubtedly one of the main reasons the confusion continues today.

Amazingly, the imposition of 1 Corinthians 12 is sometimes allowed to influence the interpretation of substantially different passages, such as Rom 5:15–16 and 6:23. Michael Griffiths comments after looking at Romans 5–6, “In a biblical sense, someone without any experience of charismatic gifts would not be a Christian at all!”⁵⁵ This is a blatant example of “illegitimate totality transfer.”⁵⁶

The use of the term “charismata” in the midst of a discussion in English on the general theology which most people call “spiritual gifts” is a more minor, but quite widespread, example of the confusion of word and concept. It is understandable why some would be uncomfortable with the English designation “spiritual gifts” (see later discussion), but its replacement with “charismata” (or worse, with its Greek font χαρίσματα) in a general English discussion of community activities worsens the situation. It both makes the

⁴⁹ Ibid. 4–5.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 7.

⁵¹ Ibid. 10.

⁵² Montague, *The Holy Spirit: Growth of a Biblical Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 1976) 148.

⁵³ Ibid. 146.

⁵⁴ Käsemann, “Ministry and Community” 64.

⁵⁵ Michael Griffiths, *Grace-Gifts: Developing what God has Given the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 15.

⁵⁶ Barr, *Semantics* 218.

writing appear more scholarly and implies that this Greek term can handle all the concepts being discussed, which it cannot.⁵⁷

III. ABILITIES OR MINISTRIES?

Since this paper has argued that Paul does not use χάρισμα in a technical sense, and that the only thing which links *all* of Paul's uses of this word is the general idea of concrete grace, it becomes impossible to proceed meaningfully any further on a merely lexical level. Χάρισμα is not the "stock" or "distinctive" term which is "the linguistic reflection of the theological reality" found in passages such as 1 Corinthians 12, Rom 12:3–8, and Eph 4:11–13 (to cite James Barr's concerns again⁵⁸). Although χάρισμα cannot carry this theological weight, we still have to ask what is the "theological reality" behind the lists found in 1 Corinthians 12, Rom 12:3–8, and Eph 4:11–13 within the contexts in which they are found. Without a distinctive word to point the way, we are reduced to trying to decide whether or not there are enough typical characteristics in these lists to establish a single class which includes all these, some of these, or these plus more.⁵⁹

I want to suggest that the idea of ministries given by the Spirit to individuals for the common good is what ties together all the items in 1 Corinthians 12, Rom 12:3–8, and Eph 4:11–13 (and perhaps also 1 Tim 4:14 and 2 Tim 1:6), and maybe even 1 Pet 4:10–11. Ministries themselves, according to Ellis, may be called χαρίσματα.⁶⁰ This does not mean that a "ministry" is the new technical definition for χάρισμα (it is not), but rather that ministries is the concept which links these passages together, and that the various words used in the list-passages function within this conception.

⁵⁷ Examples would be Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996) 175, "Many of the *charismata*, especially the more extraordinary ones (prophecy, healings, miracles, tongues), fell into a time . . ." Also Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* 33. Martin uses *charismata* as the key term for Paul's "larger framework" (*The Spirit and the Congregation* 8 and throughout the book). Another example is Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 38, 41, 48–50, etc. Also, on 77–78 Carson continues the practice in the discussion of 1 Cor 14 where Paul himself does not use the word.

⁵⁸ Barr, *Semantics* 274.

⁵⁹ Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* 261–262. Part of the problem is that the class of phenomena usually called "spiritual gifts" sometimes is drawn narrowly by interpreters (i.e. limited to the list in 1 Cor 12:3–10) or broadly (as in Käsemann, "Ministry and Community") which would include a wide range of Christian activities. Some interpreters even include secular activities outside the Christian community. See the discussion of various positions in Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* 181–182.

⁶⁰ E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Exeter: Paternoster, 1989) 4. In this book, though he recognizes an ability level, Ellis emphasizes the level of ministry, even using for his English term "gifts of ministry" throughout his discussion, 26–52. Note that he does (though de-emphasizing it) seem to allow for the word χάρισμα a semi-technical force as a head word for all the "gifts" (see p. 35), a position being argued against in this paper. Ridderbos is another scholar who seems to work mainly on the conceptual level, since he does not consider χαρίσματα as a catch-all word for the enumerations of 1 Corinthians 12, Rom 12:3–8, and Eph 4:11–13. He generally talks about "gifts" and "ministries" together (*Paul* 438–467).

1. *Spirit-given ministries, not Spirit-given abilities.* In this section, I argue that individual ministries, rather than abilities, is the theological concept which links these passages. Paul's lists include various ministries, some (not all) of which would have required an extraordinary enablement to perform (such as prophecy and healing) and some of which would have required no more work of the Spirit than any other daily Christian activity (like administration and serving).⁶¹ All ministries are concrete ways in which God works his grace among his people. And though some of the more extraordinary functions are specifically singled out as activities which manifest the Spirit (1 Cor 12:8–10), in light of Paul's general theology of the Spirit all are in some sense empowered by the Spirit.⁶² Spirit-given ministries is a concept which accounts for all these passages; special abilities/enablements is not.

It is necessary to clarify both my agreement and distance from the position of Dunn.⁶³ Dunn has helped to direct some of the discussion away from a simple ability interpretation. He says that ". . . when Paul speaks here of charismata he is thinking of concrete actions, actual events, not of latent possibilities and hidden talents."⁶⁴ He has chosen to use the term "functions" or "ministries" as his inclusive English term for what most refer to as "gifts," terms I would also prefer.⁶⁵

But Dunn emphasizes the immediacy of the event and, in spite of some of the items in 1 Cor 12:28, never thinks in terms of "set functions."⁶⁶ In this he reflects the influence of Käsemann and others who have made a clear distinction between gift (as spontaneous work of the Spirit) and office, which only developed later in the church. Though I want to affirm my agreement that there was development toward progressively centralized official ministries as church history progressed, it seems necessary also to affirm regular ministries in the church from the earliest days (1 Thess 5:12–13; 1 Cor 16:15–16; Gal 6:6; Phil 1:1; Eph 4:11) alongside the more spontaneous functions.⁶⁷

Returning to the thesis of this section, that ministries rather than abilities is what ties together the lists in their contexts, it is significant that exegetes uniformly point toward the functional significance of the items being discussed. Though many would understand a "gift" to be the ability to

⁶¹ On Paul's general work of the Spirit in the Christian life: Rom 8:14, 26; 14:17; 15:13; 1 Cor 2:13; 2 Cor 3:6–8; Gal 5:16–18, 22–25.

⁶² Ellis comments that for Paul, all "Christian ministry is an activity of the Holy Spirit" (*Pauline Theology* 26).

⁶³ Remember also that Dunn groups all these under the term *χαρίσματα* since he gives it a technical force.

⁶⁴ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* 209; id., *Unity and Diversity* 110–113.

⁶⁵ For example, *Unity and Diversity* 110–114.

⁶⁶ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* 264. This is true of healing (pp. 210–211): "The charisma is not a healing power . . . it is the actual healing itself." Also with prophecy (p. 229), "And prophecy as charisma is the actual speaking forth of words given by the Spirit in a particular situation and ceases when the words cease." See also the discussion on pp. 284–291.

⁶⁷ See the discussions in Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988) chap. 9 (esp. p. 186) and Ronald Y. K. Fung, "Charismatic versus Organized Ministry: An Examination of an Alleged Antithesis," *EQ* 52 (1980) 195–214.

perform the function rather than it being the function itself (an idea which is argued against here, and an idea which is often influenced by a word-concept confusion as noted above), all NT interpreters bring the idea of function and the role of these activities for the strengthening of the community into their discussions.

Concerning 1 Cor 12:12–27, commentators will agree with Martin’s assessment: “The body analogy stresses functionality as its chief feature.”⁶⁸ And Fee comments that what holds together the list found in 1 Cor 12:27–30 is the idea of “ministries.”⁶⁹ It appears that Paul’s purpose in the writing of 1 Corinthians 12–14 is to correct some at Corinth who were puffed up about the special things they could do. Paul’s correction is to emphasize the functionality and the edificatory role of various activities in the church. For Paul the issue at stake was ministry and edification. The Corinthians, not Paul, were the ones who emphasized abilities.⁷⁰

Χάρισμα is so closely linked with πρᾶξις in Rom 12:4–8 it is difficult to think of the list which follows as anything other than in terms of functions or ministries.⁷¹ Fee emphasizes that Rom 12:6–8 is more about the broad and various ways God’s grace works among believers, and that the enablement which comes from the Spirit to do these activities is not at all prominent.⁷² Turner also comments that some of the “gifts” were not Spirit-given in any extraordinary sense, particularly in Rom 12:3–8 and Eph 4:11–13 (though he would not deny their place under Paul’s general understanding of the work

Schatzmann says, “To hold charisma and office in dialectical tension may prove to be more feasible from the exegetical perspective than is commonly presumed” (*A Pauline Theology of Charismata* 85, also 90). But Schatzmann is holding these concepts in tension when he claims he is looking at the word χάρισμα. Montague comments, “The distinction between a ‘charismatic’ church and an ‘institutional’ one is a modern invention not founded in the New Testament” (*The Holy Spirit* 162). Ridderbos says, “If one chooses to regard the enumerations in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians 4 from the viewpoint of office and charisma, then only one conclusion is possible, namely, that the office itself is a charisma (Paul 446). Gaffin is another who tries to bring “gifts” and office into harmony (Richard B. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979] 51).

⁶⁸ Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation* 30.

⁶⁹ Fee, “Gifts of the Spirit” 343; Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* 189. Turner comments, “Paul appears to be pointing out that these functions, too, are God’s gifts to the interdependent spiritual body, and by the same token the abilities enabling teachers (etc.) to function are no less ‘spiritual’ than those vaunted by any self-styled pneumatikoi” (*The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* 269). It is not clear, however, why Turner had to emphasize the ability theme with teachers in this list. This imposes a concept picked up from the list of extraordinary “manifestations” earlier in the chapter.

⁷⁰ Bittlinger (though he includes natural abilities in his idea of “gifts”) says, “. . . Paul knew no distinction between natural and supernatural gifts, between ordinary and extraordinary ministries” (Arnold Bittlinger, *Gifts and Graces: A Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12–14* [trans. Herbert Klassen; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967] 70). Ministries were as much “gifts” for him as were healings, according to Bittlinger. Note that Lauretin also draws the net broadly (perhaps too broadly), “Even in the matter of glossolalia or cures, what is extraordinary is not essential to the charisms [which he understands semi-technically], and what is essential to them is not extraordinary” (“Charisms: Terminological Precision” 7).

⁷¹ Dunn, *Theology* 554.

⁷² Fee, “Gifts of the Spirit” 341.

of the Spirit).⁷³ The idea of special Spirit-given ability is not the issue in these passages.

If 1 Tim 4:14 and 2 Tim 1:6 add anything to the discussion of the list-passages,⁷⁴ the only addition would be a continuing emphasis upon ministry. Carson summarizes the understanding of most of NT scholarship on these verses: ". . . the gift was the ministry to which he [Timothy] was called . . ." ⁷⁵

In the passages linked together by the idea of ministry (1 Corinthians 12; Rom 12:3–8; and Eph 4:11–13), Ellis has put it well, "The gifts of the Spirit are the functions of the Spirit that Paul identifies with Christian ministry."⁷⁶

2. *Other influences on interpretation.* It may be that the ability idea appears to be so strong in the list of "manifestations of the Spirit" in 1 Cor 12:7–11 that it is allowed to influence the interpretation of other list-passages. Though no one will deny a special empowerment to do the activities described in 1 Cor 12:7–11, this idea should not be imposed upon other passages which are primarily functional in nature. Even the lists of "manifestations" themselves are clearly for the common good, as the illustration of the body which follows it so aptly communicates.

Perhaps the ideas of *givenness* (1 Cor 12:7, 8, 11) and *having* (1 Cor 12:30; 13:2; 14:26; Rom 12:6) influence interpreters' conceptions toward the ability idea. But it should be pointed out that a ministry is something both which is given by the Spirit and is something which an individual has. *Givenness* language and the language of *having* should not swing the interpretation toward the ability idea.⁷⁷

English usage appears to have played a larger role in this discussion than has hitherto been acknowledged. The language of gifting in English includes the following two definitions from Webster's dictionary (there are only two). The first is "a special or notable capacity, talent, or endowment either inherent, acquired, or given by a deity." The second and broader definition is "something that is voluntarily transferred by one person to another without compensation."⁷⁸ It is evident by comparing these two definitions with each

⁷³ Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* 271–272.

⁷⁴ I am unsure at this point whether or how these should be related.

⁷⁵ Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 20. Bauer calls this "the gift of an office" (BAGD 879). Note, though, that for Bauer and many interpreters the Pastorals are late and non-Pauline and so reflect later developments toward official ministry (see 349). Against the consensus is Fee, who considers χάρισμα in 2 Tim 1:6 to be the Holy Spirit (*God's Empowering Presence* 785–789). Montague is undecided: George T. Montague, *The Spirit and his Gifts: The Biblical Background of Spirit-Baptism, Tongue-Speaking, and Prophecy* (New York: Paulist, 1974) 16.

⁷⁶ Ellis, *Pauline Theology* 34. Though non-Pauline, 1 Pet 4:10–11 also works well with the idea of ministries, particularly because of its connection with the reference to believers being "stewards." Ridderbos comments, "Generally, therefore, the *charisma* acts in the church as a ministry and finds its destiny and its criterion only in its character as ministry (cf. 1 Pet. 4:11)" (*Paul* 443).

⁷⁷ Though the idea of having may not argue against the idea of ministry, it does argue against Dunn's spontaneous event idea, as he himself comes close to admitting in Dunn, *Theology* 558. See also Carson, *Showing the Spirit* 21–22.

⁷⁸ Webster's *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (ed. Philip Babcock Gove; Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1961) 956.

other that exegetes who think that “gift” is a proper rendering of χάρισμα are referring primarily to the second definition, which is the more basic of the two, i.e. something given by God. However, it is not difficult to see how the first definition (relating to capacities and talents) influences the way English speakers think about this subject.

This is heightened by the fact that only the first definition of the English “gift” is found in other non-nominal forms. The verb “to gift” means “to endow with some power, quality, or attribute.” The adjective “gifted” (which often appears in discussions of “spiritual gifts”) is defined as “1: endowed by nature or training with a gift: as *a*: having a special talent or other desirable quality . . . *b*: having superior intellectual capacity . . . 2: reflecting or revealing a special gift or talent.”⁷⁹

Some exegetes have contended that the “spiritual” part of the designation “spiritual gifts” is inappropriate outside of passages like 1 Corinthians 12–14 or Rom 1:11,⁸⁰ because the Spirit’s activity is not explicit.⁸¹ But no one seems to have challenged in a sustained way the use of the word “gift.”

In light of the functional emphasis of the list-passages, however, and in view of the twofold definition of the English term “gift,” we must question the legitimacy of the English term “gift.” As long as the term “gift” is used in English, the idea that ministries is the primary idea in the list-passages rather than abilities will never take hold. When speaking of non-tangibles and human possessors, gifting language will always lead toward the idea of abilities. It is unlikely that without careful discipline of one’s mind the two meanings of “gift” will be able to be kept separate. Thus, the term “gift” should be dispensed of as the standard translation of χάρισμα (and πνευματικά for that matter).

In Rom 5:15–17 and 6:23, “gift” perhaps can be retained because of its interplay with δωρεά and δώρημα.⁸² But if, as has been supported earlier, concrete grace is the general meaning of χάρισμα, various English terms will have to be used in specific contexts to reflect usage in a given passage. Where a more specific term cannot be found for a given context, the expression “concrete expression of grace” can probably be employed.⁸³

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

“But what will I teach my Spiritual Gifts Class (or congregation, or college students, or seminarians)?”

⁷⁹ Webster 956.

⁸⁰ Inappropriate, for example, in Romans 12.

⁸¹ Fee, “Gifts of the Spirit” 339; Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts* 284.

⁸² But this does not mean that this passage defines all the other uses in the NT!

⁸³ The problem is not so much with the idea of gifting (as in something generally being given) in Greek as that when “gift” is given a technical meaning (which has here been argued against), it invariably comes to mean “ability.” One of many examples of the influence of the ability interpretation would be Ronald Yam-Kwan Fung, “Ministry, Community, and Spiritual Gifts” (Th.M. thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1971) 43.

You can begin by teaching that the word χάρισμα does not inherently mean Spirit-given ability. Χάρισμα, as with any other word, needs to be defined in such a way that it fits appropriately with the passage in which it is found. Teach that χάρισμα generally means a concrete way that God expresses grace but can be defined more narrowly if the context suggests it. You can teach that Paul’s list-passages discuss ministries rather than abilities (though God gives general spiritual enablement to every spiritual task). You can teach that the items listed by Paul (teaching, prophecy, administration, exhortation, tongues etc.) are in fact ministries (large and small) given by God to members of the Christian community to build that community up in Christ. You can teach your class to get involved in ministry and not wait around until they have figured out what special abilities they do or do not have. You can tell them to dispense with their “spiritual gift tests.” You can stop using the word “gift” and talk about ministries instead. And after you have done all these, you might consider cancelling your Spiritual Gifts Class altogether and start another called “Ministering to One Another.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Special thanks are due Dr. Vern S. Poythress for his interaction with me on this essay.

