

The Definition of a Spiritual Gift

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Introduction

In biblical studies we sometimes come across definitions of words and concepts that are assumed but not defended. This is the case with spiritual gifts. The definition of spiritual gift as “ability” is frequently offered but rarely defended. This definition is prevalent to the point of being a default—proponents cite it automatically without discussion or support. It is simply assumed to be correct.

Related to spiritual gifts is the Greek word often associated with them: *χάρισμα*. As with the concept of spiritual gift, so too with the word *χάρισμα* a particular meaning, namely, “spiritual gift,” is assumed but not defended. The purpose of this paper is to correct these misunderstandings about the word *χάρισμα* and the concept of spiritual gift and to offer alternate understandings of both word and concept. I will accomplish this by defining the word *χάρισμα*, surveying and cataloging its seventeen NT uses, clarifying the concept of a spiritual gift, and finally offering an alternate definition of a spiritual gift as a ministry function, not an ability.

The Meaning of *χάρισμα*

Some of the confusion over spiritual gifts relates to the meaning of the Greek word *χάρισμα*. Writers sometimes give the impression that the word *χάρισμα* itself *means* “spiritual gift.”¹ While the NT uses the word to refer to what we call spiritual gifts, this is not what the word means or refers to in every instance. *Χάρισμα* is not a technical word in the Greek NT (hereafter GNT).² This is easily proven. In Rom 6:23 Paul declares that the “free gift [*χάρισμα*] of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”³ This divine gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus is the possession of every believer, for “whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13).⁴ In this usage *χάρισμα* clearly refers to something that *every* believer possesses.

¹ Ryrie gives this impression. When introducing the doctrine of spiritual gifts, the only term he mentions is *χάρισμα*, which he calls the “Greek word for spiritual gift” (Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, rev. and expanded ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1997], 123). Elsewhere, however, Ryrie does acknowledge the NT’s use of *χάρισμα* for various things like salvation (Rom 6:23), God’s providential care (2 Cor 1:11), and gifts of grace to the individual believer (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1986], 367).

² A technical word is a word with the same meaning every time it is used. For example, *γραφή* is a NT technical word since throughout the NT it refers to sacred Scripture exclusively (BDAG, 206).

³ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this paper are taken from the NASB.

⁴ In this regard Paul uses *χάρισμα* as a synonym for *δωρεά*, another Greek word for gift, to describe God’s gift of salvation to the believer. In Rom 5:17 Paul refers to the “the gift [*τῆς δωρεᾶς*] of righteousness,” which is “for all those who believe ... through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:22).

However, in other contexts *χάρισμα* clearly does *not* refer to something possessed by every believer. For example, while discussing marriage and celibacy, Paul recognizes that “each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that [ἕκαστος ἴδιον ἔχει χάρισμα ἐκ θεοῦ, ὁ μὲν οὕτως, ὁ δὲ οὕτως].” Not everyone has the gift of marriage, and not everyone has the gift of celibacy. In Rom 12:6 Paul declares that believers have “gifts that differ [χαρίσματα ... διάφορα] according to the grace given to us” (Rom 12:6). Paul then offers a sampling of seven such differing gifts. Similarly, in 1 Cor 12:4 Paul speaks of “varieties of gifts” (διαρέσεις ... χαρισμάτων) and then later makes it clear that not every believer has the same gift (vv. 28–30). All these passages make it clear that, depending on the context, *χάρισμα* may or may not refer to something that all believers possess. Because this is true, *χάρισμα* is clearly not a technical word in the GNT—it does not mean the same thing in every usage.

The common idea of *χάρισμα* in each of the sample passages above is that of a gift. Related to the abstract noun *χάρις* meaning “a beneficent disposition toward someone, favor, grace,” and the verb *χαρίζομαι* meaning “to give freely as a favor,” the noun *χάρισμα* refers specifically to “that which is freely and graciously given,” a “favor bestowed,” or a “gift.”⁵ According to Fee *χάρισμα* relates to *χάρις* “as a way of concretely expressing the abstract noun. *Χάρις* issues in a *χάρισμα*; and that is what it means in its every instance in Paul—a concrete expression of grace, thus a ‘gracious bestowment.’”⁶ Berding concurs, “The idea of concrete grace ... is adequate to each occurrence in which *χάρισμα* is found.”⁷

Surveying the NT Uses of *Χάρισμα*

Χάρισμα appears seventeen times in the GNT, sixteen by Paul and once by Peter.⁸ A survey of usage supports the claim that in every instance the word refers to some concrete expression of grace or, more simply, gift. However, context must determine the exact nature of the gift. The following is a survey of the seventeen GNT usages.

Paul uses *χάρισμα* six times in Romans. In Rom 1:11 Paul wants to impart “some spiritual gift” (τι ... χάρισμα ... πνευματικόν) to the Romans, that they might be established. Paul does not define what this gift from the Spirit would be; he simply “hopes that in coming to Rome he might be an instrument through whom the Spirit will

⁵ BDAG, 1078–81. Rom 12:6 is a good passage to show the relationship between the abstract idea of grace conveyed by *χάρις* and the concrete idea of gift conveyed by *χάρισμα*, since here Paul says our gifts (*χάρισμα*) differ according to the grace (*χάρις*) given to us (see also footnote 28).

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 33.

⁷ Kenneth Berding, “Confusing Word and Concept in ‘Spiritual Gifts’: Have We Forgotten James Barr’s Exhortations?” *JETS* 43 (2000): 44.

⁸ In his otherwise excellent article, Berding slips and refers to “Paul’s seventeen uses,” although in a footnote on the same page he does accurately list the seventeen passages to include 1 Pet 4:10 (*ibid.*, 40n16).

further benefit the Roman believers, by means of a ‘Spiritual gift.’”⁹ In Rom 5:15, 5:16, and 6:23 χάρισμα refers to the gift of salvation: it abounds to the many by the grace of Jesus Christ (5:15); it results in justification (5:16); and it is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (6:23). Moving on to Rom 11:29, “the gifts [χαρίσματα] and the calling of God are irrevocable.” The gifts here refer to “the many special privileges granted to Israel (... referring to 9:4–5).”¹⁰ The final instance of χάρισμα in Romans is in 12:6. Here it does seem to refer to what we commonly call spiritual gifts: believers have different gifts (χαρίσματα ... διάφορα) according to the grace given to them by God. These differing gifts include prophecy, service, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and showing mercy (vv. 6b–8). These gifts are meant for the proper functioning of Christ’s body (vv. 4–5).¹¹

Χάρισμα turns up seven times in 1 Corinthians. In 1 Cor 1:7 Paul describes the Corinthians as “not lacking in any gift” (μὴ ὑστερεῖσθαι ἐν μηδενὶ χαρίσματι). In view of the coming discussion in 1 Corinthians 12, this appears to reference the so-called spiritual gifts, although here Paul only describes the gifting as being “enriched ... in all speech and all knowledge” (1 Cor 1:5).¹² First Corinthians 12 contains the most concentrated use of χάρισμα in the GNT, where it appears five times. Paul says that in the church there are “varieties of gifts” (διαίρεσεις ... χαρισμάτων) (v. 4), one of them being “gifts of healings” (χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων, v. 9, my translation). Paul repeats “gifts of healings” in vv. 28 and 30, then concludes the chapter by exhorting the Corinthians to “earnestly desire the greater gifts” (ζηλοῦτε δε τὰ χαρίσματα τὰ μείζονα, v. 31).

Paul uses χάρισμα once in 2 Corinthians, where in 1:11 he hopes for God’s deliverance from danger as a “favor [χάρισμα] bestowed on us through the prayers of many.” The final two Pauline uses of χάρισμα come in 1 and 2 Timothy, both times concerning Timothy himself. In 1 Timothy 4:14 Paul exhorts Timothy, “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you [τοῦ ἐν σοὶ χαρίσματος], which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery.” The immediate context concerns Timothy’s pastoral responsibilities of teaching and exhortation (vv. 11–13, 15–16). Because of this Fee thinks that χάρισμα indicates Timothy’s “‘giftedness’ for ministry.”¹³ However, in light of the surrounding exhortations for Timothy to carry out his pastoral duties, the gift Timothy has which was bestowed upon him and which he must not neglect may simply be his pastoral ministry itself. The same may be said for 2 Tim 1:6, where Paul exhorts Timothy “to kindle afresh the gift of God [τὸ χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ]

⁹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 33. “Paul does not mean here that he is going to bestow upon the Roman believers what is commonly known as a ‘spiritual gift....’ Instead, this is either a metonymy of cause for effect (Paul will use his own spiritual gifts to edify the Romans), or it simply means something akin to a blessing or benefit in the spiritual realm” (The NET Bible, ad loc.). I would opt for the second of these two possibilities since Paul’s explanation of the spiritual gift here is so general.

¹⁰ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 33.

¹¹ As I will show later, the common thread in the passages where χάρισμα refers to the so-called spiritual gifts is that these gifts are distributed to believers individually for their service in and to the body of Christ.

¹² Paul most likely highlights these because, as made clear in chapters 1–4, 8–10, and 12–14, speech and knowledge were “noticeably evident in this community,” “highly prized among them,” misunderstood and abused by them, and needing Paul’s corrective instruction (Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 87).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

which is in you through the laying on of hands.” Because this context is similar to that of 1 Tim 4:14, emphasizing Timothy’s pastoral responsibilities (2 Tim 1:7–8, 13–14), the reference to the gift Timothy has from God may again be to his “Spirit-given ministry that came to him through ‘prophetic utterances.’”¹⁴

The sole appearance of *χάρισμα* outside of Paul comes in 1 Pet 4:10. Peter says that as each believer has received a gift (*χάρισμα*), believers should “employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Peter then follows up with two sample gifts: speaking and serving. Although general in nature, these gifts that different believers have for the benefit of the church seem similar to those Paul discusses in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 1 and 12, 1 Timothy 4, and 2 Timothy 1. Thus, 1 Pet 4:10 likewise seems to use *χάρισμα* for what we normally call spiritual gifts.

Categorizing the NT Uses of *Χάρισμα*

How might we categorize these seventeen NT uses of *χάρισμα*? As we have already seen, *χάρισμα* means a concrete expression of grace and each context must determine its exact identity. In three passages the concrete expression of grace is salvation (Rom 5:15, 16, 6:23). In one passage it is Israel’s special privileges as God’s chosen people (Rom 11:29). In one passage it is physical deliverance from danger (2 Cor 1:11).

Two passages merit closer attention. In 1 Cor 7:7 *χάρισμα* refers to marriage and celibacy. While Paul wishes that all believers could be celibate as he is (vv. 7a, 8), he recognizes that “each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that [ἕκαστος ἴδιον ἔχει χάρισμα ἐκ θεοῦ, ὁ μὲν οὕτως, ὁ δὲ οὕτως]” (v. 7b). Some mistakenly label marriage and celibacy spiritual gifts in the commonly understood sense based on this verse. For example, about this verse Ryrie says, “Being single or being married are spiritual gifts that need to be developed.”¹⁵ Grudem likewise claims that 1 Cor 7:7 “mentions two gifts that are not on any other list,” and he includes marriage and celibacy in his table of spiritual gifts.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid. Later in 2 Timothy Paul exhorts Timothy to “fulfill your ministry” (4:5b).” In this context Timothy’s pastoral ministry includes preaching, reproving, rebuking, exhorting with great patience and instruction (v. 2), enduring hardship, and doing the work of an evangelist (v. 5a). This pastoral ministry itself may be what Paul meant earlier in 1:6 by the gift God had given to Timothy by the laying on of hands. In a similar context Paul has a word for Archippus via the Colossians, “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it” (Col 4:17). This exhortation regarding Archippus’s ministry from the Lord mirrors closely the exhortations to Timothy regarding his God-given gift.

¹⁵ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 371. Although Ryrie does not include marriage and celibacy in his later list and description of the spiritual gifts (ibid., 372–74), the fact that he discusses 1 Cor 7:7 in his chapter on spiritual gifts and refers to marriage and celibacy as spiritual gifts shows a lack of clarity regarding the meaning of *χάρισμα* in 1 Cor 7:7 and the relationship of this passage to the so-called spiritual gifts.

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester, U.K.: IVP; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1019–20. Thomson and Elwell reference 1 Cor 7:7 and claim that *χάρισμα* may signify “a gift enabling the Christian to perform his service in the church” (J. G. S. Thomson and Walter A. Elwell, “Spiritual Gift,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984], 1042).

This is a mistake based on a misunderstanding of what *χάρισμα* means. As argued earlier, *χάρισμα* does not mean “spiritual gift” in any technical sense in the GNT. The mistake of treating a non-technical word like *χάρισμα* as a technical word is to commit what Carson calls the exegetical fallacy of “false assumptions about technical meaning.”¹⁷ Paul’s mere use of the word *χάρισμα* in 1 Cor 7:7, even though he uses it for so-called spiritual gifts elsewhere in the letter, does not warrant the assumption that the word means “spiritual gifts” in this context. The word simply indicates a concrete expression of grace, and the context must determine the nature of that expression.

The context of 1 Cor 7:7 concerns sexual relations and marriage. At 1 Cor 7:1 Paul begins to respond to “things about which [the Corinthians] wrote,” the matter here being whether “it is good for a man not to touch a woman.”¹⁸ Judging from the ensuing context “touching a woman” is a euphemism for sexual relations.¹⁹ Paul argues that, because of the danger of sexual immorality, married couples should have sexual relations and not deprive one another (vv. 2–5). Paul wishes that all believers could be like him, that is celibate; however, he recognizes that God gives individual believers different gifts—some the gift of marriage and others the gift of celibacy (v. 7). Therefore, Paul knows that all believers *cannot* be celibate like he is. So the context of 1 Cor 7:7 has nothing to do with the so-called spiritual gifts as Paul will later discuss them in 1 Corinthians 12–14 (cf. 1:7). Rather, the passage deals with sexual relations, marriage, and celibacy among believers.²⁰ *Χάρισμα* does not refer to so-called spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 7:7.

Rom 1:11 likewise merits closer attention. To set the context, Paul opens this letter by introducing himself and his gospel ministry (vv. 1–6), greeting the believers in Rome (vv. 7–8), and expressing his desire to visit them (vv. 9–15; cf. 15:20–33). Three times Paul states his reason for wanting to come to them: (1) to impart some spiritual gift to them so that they may be established (v. 11); (2) to obtain some fruit among them (v. 13); and (3) to preach the gospel to them in Rome (v. 15). These expressed reasons, when read along with 15:20–33, show that Paul’s desire to visit Rome revolves around his mission of the gospel to the Gentiles.²¹

The first stated reason contains the word *χάρισμα*: Paul desires to impart “some spiritual gift” (*τι ... χάρισμα ... πνευματικόν*) to the Roman believers, “that [they] may be established” (or “strengthened,” from *στηρίζω*). For Fee this unique juxtaposition of *χάρισμα* and *πνευματικόν* is clear evidence that *χάρισμα* by itself does not mean

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 45.

¹⁸ This appears to be a quotation of the Corinthians’ letter to Paul: they themselves were claiming that it is good for a man not to touch a woman (see discussion in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 267–74).

¹⁹ Fee has argued convincingly against the NIV 1984 Edition translation, “It is good for a man not to marry” (but see marginal reading), demonstrating that “touching a woman” is a euphemism for sexual relations, not marriage, in this context (Gordon D. Fee, “1 Corinthians 7:1 in the NIV,” *JETS* 23 [1990: 307–14]). The NIV 2011 Edition has remedied this by bringing the earlier marginal reading to the text: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman (cf. ESV, NET).”

²⁰ The passage also mentions unbelievers as they may be married to believers in the church (vv. 12–16).

²¹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 487.

“spiritual gift,” but simply “a concrete expression of grace.”²² How should we understand the “spiritual gift” that Paul wants to impart? Fee’s answer is worth quoting in full:

In light of this evidence, both the meaning of the term [χάρισμα] and the context, what then is the “Spirit gifting” that [Paul] wishes to share with them? It is possible, of course, that he had in mind some expression of Spirit gifting such as those enumerated in 1 Cor 12:8–10 or Rom 12:6–8. But if so, then we can never know which, if any in particular he intended. Far more likely, however, this common interpretation represents a thoroughly noncontextual view of this term. In its present context, and especially in light of the letter as a whole, the “Spirit gift” that he most likely wishes to share with them is his understanding of the gospel that in Christ Jesus God has created from among Jews and Gentiles one people for himself, apart from Torah. This is the way they are to be “strengthened” by Paul’s coming, and this surely is the “fruit” he wants to have among them when he comes (v. 13). If so, then in effect our present letter functions as his “Spirit gifting” for them. This is what he would impart if he were there in person; this is what he now “shares” since he cannot presently come to Rome.²³

The “spiritual gift” that Paul has for the believers in Rome is his gospel for the Gentiles. The very reason Paul was “called as an apostle [and] set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1) was “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles” (v. 4).

We have identified seven of the seventeen NT usages of χάρισμα as referring to something other than the so-called spiritual gifts. Now we will cover the other ten which do concern spiritual gifts. These ten passages use χάρισμα to describe God’s granting individual believers various gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. After surveying these ten passages I will summarize all the findings in a chart and then move on to clarify the concept of a spiritual gift and offer a definition of a spiritual gift.

Paul uses χάρισμα to refer to spiritual gifts in Rom 12:6. In Romans 12 Paul describes the Christian life as one of service to God (vv. 1–2), fellow believers (vv. 3–16), and society as a whole (vv. 17–21).²⁴ Concerning our service to each other as believers, we must not think too highly of ourselves, but rather have sound judgment “as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (v. 3). Paul uses the physical body as an illustration of the body of Christ—fellow believers living and serving together in community: “just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another” (vv. 4–5). Paul describes our relationship to each other in the body of Christ as having “gifts that differ [χαρίσματα ... διάφορα] according to the grace given to us” (v. 6a). Paul offers a sampling of seven such differing gifts: prophecy, service, teaching,

²² Ibid., 487–88.

²³ Ibid., 488. Put simply, Paul “hopes that in coming to Rome he might be an instrument through whom the Spirit will further benefit the Roman believers” (ibid., 33). “Spiritual gift” here “simply means something akin to a blessing or benefit in the spiritual realm” (The NET Bible, ad loc.).

²⁴ We cannot make a sharp division between these second and third sections of the chapter, since aspects of the second section may apply to unbelievers (e.g. v. 14) and aspects of the third section may apply to believers (e.g. vv. 17–19). However, we do see a shift in emphasis at v. 17 from fellow believers to society as a whole. For this point see Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 451.

exhorting, giving, leading, and showing mercy (vv. 6b–8). The implied purpose of these gifts is that each believer use his or her gift to minister to the body of Christ (vv. 4–5). This is the common thread of the “spiritual gift” usages of *χάρισμα* in the NT.

Paul uses *χάρισμα* to refer to spiritual gifts six times in 1 Corinthians. The first comes in 1 Cor 1:7, where Paul notes that the Corinthian believers “are not lacking in any gift.” Paul describes this gifting as being “enriched in [Christ], in all speech and all knowledge” (v. 5). Paul will return to this gifting in speech and knowledge—as well as in other areas—in chapters 12–14, where he takes up in detail the need for the Corinthians to minister to each other properly as the body of Christ.

Five times Paul uses *χάρισμα* in 1 Corinthians 12 for spiritual gifts. In the church are “varieties of gifts” (v. 4), which are for the “common good” of the church (v. 7). Similar to what he does in Rom 12:4, but in much greater detail, Paul uses the physical body to illustrate the nature of Christ’s body, that though we are made up of many members we are one body (vv. 12–13), that all the members are necessary for the proper function of the body (vv. 14–19), and that as one body all the members need and should care for each other (vv. 20–26).

Three of the five usages of *χάρισμα* for spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 name one of the “varieties of gifts” as “gifts of healings” (vv. 9, 28, 30, my translation of *χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων*). This is just one of many gifts that Paul identifies in two lists: (1) word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healings, effecting of miracles, prophecy, distinguishing of spirits, various kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues (vv. 8–10); and (2) apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues (vv. 28–29).²⁵

The fifth and final use of *χάρισμα* for spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 comes in v. 31, where Paul tells the Corinthians to “earnestly desire the greater gifts.” What are the greater gifts? From the ensuing context the greater gifts are those that edify, exemplified by prophecy (1 Cor 14:1, 39) since it is intelligible (in contrast to uninterpreted tongues) and it edifies the church readily, immediately, and effectively (vv. 2–5, 12, 18–19, 24–26, 31).²⁶ If the members of Christ’s body love each other as they ought (1 Corinthians 13), they will use their spiritual gifts for the good of the body—that is, to serve and build each other up in the faith.

Paul uses *χάρισμα* two times for spiritual gifts in his letters to Timothy. In 1 Tim 4:14 Paul tells Timothy to “not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on

²⁵ In this second list Paul does not repeat the last gift in the same way as he did in the first list—“interpretation of tongues” (*ἐρμηνεῖα γλωσσῶν*)—but rather uses a related verb form in asking, “All do not interpret [*διερμηνεύουσιν*], do they?” Since the previous question in v. 30 is, “All do not speak with tongues, do they?” it seems clear that interpretation of tongues is what Paul has in view here.

²⁶ Although Paul uses different words in 12:31 and 14:1—*χαρίσματα* in the former and *πνευματικά* in the latter—he seems to be referring to the same thing: the spiritual gifts among the Corinthian believers. In particular, they are to earnestly desire (*ζηλοῦτε*—same verb used in 12:31 and 14:1) the greater ones, that is, the ones that edify most readily.

you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery.” Although Paul does not identify the gift here by name, the surrounding context focuses on Timothy’s pastoral responsibilities of teaching and exhortation (vv. 11–13, 15–16). Elsewhere Paul calls teaching and exhortation gifts in the church (Rom 12:7–8; 1 Cor 12:29; cf. Eph 4:11). Timothy should carry out these pastoral duties for his own good and for the good of his hearers (1 Tim 4:16).²⁷

In a similar way Paul reminds Timothy “to kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Tim 1:6). As in the case of 1 Tim 4:14, the context concerns Timothy’s need to carry out faithfully his pastoral responsibilities of standing strong for the gospel (vv. 7–8) and guarding the treasure of truth that has been entrusted to him (vv. 13–14). As Timothy does this he will receive the approval of God (2:15) and be a help to those he serves (2:1–2, 14, 24–26; 4:1–2).

The tenth and final use of *χάρισμα* for spiritual gifts comes from Peter in 1 Pet 4:10. Here Peter says that as each believer has received a gift, we are to “employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”²⁸ Peter mentions two examples of such gifts—speaking and serving—and challenges his readers with the way they should employ their gift, “Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies” (v. 11a). We are to speak to each other the word of God and serve each other by the strength of God “so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (v. 11b).

There is a common thread in the ten passages where *χάρισμα* is used to refer to spiritual gifts: ministry in and to the body of Christ. God distributes the various gifts to individual believers so that they will use them to serve their fellow believers for the spiritual good and growth of the body of Christ. The ministry of believers to and for each other is the concrete expression of grace conveyed by *χάρισμα* in these ten “spiritual gift” passages.

On the following page is a chart summarizing the above findings and classifying all seventeen uses of *χάρισμα* in the GNT:

²⁷ Ensuring “salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” does not mean that Timothy somehow earns or accomplishes his own spiritual salvation, or that of his congregation. Rather, “salvation” is most likely being referred to here in the more general sense of “deliverance.” From what will Timothy deliver himself and those who hear him as he faithfully carries out his pastoral duties of sound teaching and exhortation? From the afore mentioned unsound beliefs and behaviors (cf. vv. 1–3, 7–8).

²⁸ Along with Rom 12:6, 1 Pet 4:10 shows the relationship between the abstract idea of grace conveyed by *χάρις* and the concrete idea of gift conveyed by *χάρισμα*: as we employ our gift (*χάρισμα*) to serve one another we show ourselves to be faithful stewards of God’s grace (*χάρις*) (see footnote 5 above).

Classification of GNT Uses of Χάρισμα		
Reference	Form	Category of Usage
Rom 1:11	χάρισμα	Paul's Gospel for the Gentiles
Rom 5:15	χάρισμα	Salvation
Rom 5:16	χάρισμα	Salvation
Rom 6:23	χάρισμα	Salvation
Rom 11:29	χαρίσματα	Israel's Special Privileges
1 Cor 7:7	χάρισμα	Marriage and Celibacy
2 Cor 1:11	χάρισμα	Deliverance from Danger
Rom 12:6	χαρίσματα	Spiritual Gift
1 Cor 1:7	χαρίσματι	Spiritual Gift
1 Cor 12:4	χαρισμάτων	Spiritual Gift
1 Cor 12:9	χαρίσματα	Spiritual Gift
1 Cor 12:28	χαρίσματα	Spiritual Gift
1 Cor 12:30	χαρίσματα	Spiritual Gift
1 Cor 12:31	χαρίσματα	Spiritual Gift
1 Tim 4:14	χαρίσματος	Spiritual Gift
2 Tim 1:6	χάρισμα	Spiritual Gift
1 Pet 4:10	χάρισμα	Spiritual Gift

Now that I have discussed the meaning of *χάρισμα* and surveyed and classified its seventeen NT appearances, I have two final tasks to accomplish in this paper: clarify the concept of a spiritual gift; and propose a definition of a spiritual gift.

The Concept of a Spiritual Gift

First off, why do we refer to them as “spiritual” gifts? After all, as we have seen, *χάρισμα* means a concrete expression of grace with no connotation of the Spirit attached to the word. Furthermore, not every passage where *χάρισμα* refers to spiritual gifts mentions the Holy Spirit. Most likely “spiritual gifts” has become the common designation because of 1 Corinthians 12. In this most detailed discussion of spiritual gifts in the NT (and most

highly concentrated use of χάρισμα) Paul explicitly connects the Holy Spirit to the distribution of gifts in the body of Christ. In his first reference to the gifts in this chapter Paul uses the expression τῶν πνευματικῶν, “things that are spiritual,” or “things of the Spirit,” to refer to spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:1).²⁹ Paul then makes a number of references to the Spirit as the source behind the gifts: “there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit” (v. 4); “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (v. 7); “to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit” (v. 8a); “to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit” (v. 8b); “to another faith by the same Spirit” (v. 9a); “to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit” (v. 9b). Finally Paul sums up in v. 11, “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” In this most detailed discussion of spiritual gifts in the NT Paul clearly credits the Holy Spirit with their distribution in the body of Christ.

This is the case in 1 Corinthians 12, but what about in other passages such as Romans 12 where I have claimed that χάρισμα refers to spiritual gifts but the Spirit is not mentioned? Fee uses this fact to argue that there is no way that the Romans could have understood Rom 12:6–8 to be listing “spiritual gifts,” and that “we probably have overstepped legitimate exegetical boundaries by a fair margin when we use this ‘list,’ alongside 1 Corinthians 12–14, to develop a theology of ‘Spiritual gifts.’”³⁰

On an exegetical level Fee makes a good point. However, on the level of theological integration I think he overstates the case. After all, right before making this point Fee acknowledges the “clear verbal conceptual ties [Rom 12:3–8 has] with 1 Cor 12:4–14,” and Fee believes there is “little question that in Paul’s thinking the Spirit lies directly behind the body imagery and these exhortations.”³¹ Therefore, it is not illegitimate at the point of theological integration to link passages that appear to deal with the same concept to develop a theology of the subject. Using both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 to develop a “theology of spiritual gifts” does not mean we are trying to make the word χάρισμα *mean* “spiritual gift,” or trying to claim extra knowledge for the Roman readers. Instead, we are operating under the legitimate distinction between word and concept: “spiritual gift” is a concept discussed in both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 even though the specific words used to discuss the concept differ.

²⁹It is possible to translate the phrase Περί δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν in 1 Cor 12:1 either as masculine (“Now concerning those who are spiritual,” i.e., “spiritual people”) or neuter (“Now concerning things that are spiritual,” i.e., “spiritual gifts”). However, in light of the neuter use in 14:1 and the overall argument of chapter 12 about the specific manifestations of the Spirit’s activity in the church, the word is most likely neuter in 12:1. Further, comparing 12:31 and 14:1 shows that χαρίσματα and πνευματικά for Paul can be virtually interchangeable. However, it also seems that Paul may be emphasizing the root of each word as he uses it—emphasizing the Spirit who gives the gift when using πνευματικά and emphasizing the gift itself when using χαρίσματα (Fee, *First Corinthians*, 575–76).

³⁰ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 606.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 605.

The same can be said about the other passages that appear to discuss spiritual gifts but do not reference the Spirit (1 Cor 1:7; 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6; 1 Pet 4:10).³² As stated earlier, all of these “spiritual gift” passages have as their common thematic thread the distribution of various gifts to individual believers for ministry in and to the body of Christ. This conceptual connection is what makes them all “spiritual gifts” passages, not whether they specifically attribute the gifts to the Holy Spirit.

With that said, we can move on to clarify the concept of spiritual gift. What exactly *is* a spiritual gift? As I said at the outset, the common definition of spiritual gift as “ability” is frequently offered but rarely if ever defended. Books on spiritual gifts are virtually unanimous in defining the gifts this way. For example, Blanchard defines a spiritual gift as “a specific spiritual ability for service.”³³ Gangel views a gift as “a *specific endowment of spiritual ability for service.*”³⁴ Following an unnamed Greek dictionary the Fortunes define a gift as “a spiritual endowment.”³⁵ Flynn refers to a spiritual gift as “a divinely ordained spiritual ability,” an “extraordinary [endowment],” and a “power.”³⁶ *Network*, a training booklet used by the Willow Creek Association in its Leadership Summits, defines spiritual gifts as “divine endowments ... abilities God has given to us to make our Unique Contribution.”³⁷ These representative samples suffice to prove the point.

Not just books on spiritual gifts do this. General theologies likewise define spiritual gift as ability without trying to defend it. For example, according to Ryrie “a spiritual gift is a God-given ability for service. In this proposed definition the synonym for gift is ability. A spiritual gift is an ability.”³⁸ Grudem says a spiritual gift is “*any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church.*”³⁹ Enns offers “grace gift” as a

³² Second Timothy 1:6 speaks generally of “the gift of God” and 1 Pet 4:10 exhorts us to employ our gift as “good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Even in 1 Corinthians 12, where we have seen Paul explicitly attribute the distribution of the gifts to the Holy Spirit, the various gifts are likewise traceable to “the same Lord” (v. 5) and “the same God” (v. 6). In this last case “God” seems to refer specifically to God the Father in a Trinitarian formula: “... the same Spirit ... the same Lord ... the same God” (vv. 4–6). Thus, for Paul all three Persons of the Triune God have a part in the distribution of the gifts, although the role of the Spirit is particularly highlighted. Perhaps the Triune God participates in the gifting of the saints through the agency of the Spirit, just as all the Persons of the Trinity have a part in saving us through the Spirit’s agency, and as the Son and the Father make their home in the believer “apparently through the agency of the Holy Spirit” according to John 14 (D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987], 33). Besides 1 Cor 12:3, Eph 4:7–13 likewise attributes the distribution of gifts to the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet even though this last passage neither mentions the Spirit nor uses the word χάρισμα, I would still employ it in formulating a “theology of spiritual gifts” because of its conceptual linkage to the other “spiritual gift” passages in the NT.

³³ Tim Blanchard, *A Practical Guide to Finding and Using Your Spiritual Gifts* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1983), 16.

³⁴ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Unwrap Your Spiritual Gifts* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1983), 8, emphasis original.

³⁵ Don and Katie Fortune, *Discover Your God Given Gifts* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1987), 15.

³⁶ Leslie B. Flynn, *Nineteen Gifts of the Spirit* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1994), 26.

³⁷ Bruce Bugbee, Don Cousins, and Bill Hybels, *Network: Participant’s Guide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 25.

³⁸ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 367. For all the emphasis put here on ability, no defense of this understanding is offered.

³⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1016, emphasis original.

“concise definition” of a spiritual gift, then quotes McRae for a “more complete definition,” namely, “a divine endowment of a special ability for service upon a member of the body of Christ.”⁴⁰ Lewis and Demarest likewise use the word “endowment” to define a spiritual gift, which is just another word for “ability.”⁴¹ For Thompson and Elwell spiritual gifts are for “enabling a Christian to perform a particular ministry in the church.”⁴² To enable means to make able—still another way to convey the idea of ability.⁴³

Besides general theologies, specific treatments of pneumatology define spiritual gift as ability and fail to defend it. For Pache a spiritual gift is “a certain qualification given by the Spirit to each individual believer to enable him to serve within the framework of the body of Christ.”⁴⁴ Following Thayer Walvoord claims that when referring to spiritual gifts *χαρίσματα* means the “*extraordinary powers, distinguishing certain Christians and enabling them to serve the church of Christ.*”⁴⁵ Unger assumes that a spiritual gift “implies a settled and continued ability to do something again and again.”⁴⁶ Ferguson does not clearly define a spiritual gift, but implies that they are abilities when he says, “Gifts are given to enable their recipients to minister to others.”⁴⁷ Keener describes a gift

⁴⁰ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 280–81, citing William McRae, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 18.

⁴¹ Here is their complete definition of a spiritual gift: “a particular endowment of the Spirit to specific believers for ministry to the church and world” (Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, Three Volumes in One [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 3:197). Later they use the word “ability” to define a number of the gifts, including word of knowledge as “the ability to apply and understand spiritual truths,” faith as “the ability to claim the promises of God,” teaching as “the ability to instruct others in apostolic doctrine,” exhortation as “the ability to persuade others to follow the way of godliness,” and leadership as “the ability to rule and provide direction to the church” (*ibid.*, 197, 199).

⁴² Thomson and Elwell, “Spiritual Gifts,” 1042.

⁴³ Some systematic theologies discuss spiritual gifts but fail to define them. For all Garrett says in his chapter on spiritual gifts he never defines them (James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 2:197–218). Erickson has a particular reason for not defining a spiritual gift generally. He thinks that different passages define a spiritual gift differently—Eph 4:11 as “a listing of various offices in the church,” Rom 12:6–8 as “several basic functions performed in the church,” and 1 Cor 12:4–11 as “special abilities.” “Hence,” concludes Erickson, “no attempt should be made to reduce this expression [i.e. spiritual gift] to a unitary concept or definition” (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013], 797–98). Erickson offers no defense of his understanding spiritual gifts as “special abilities” in 1 Cor 12:4–11.

⁴⁴ René Pache, *The Person and Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. J. D. Emerson (Chicago: Moody, 1954), 140.

⁴⁵ John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 164, emphasis original, citing J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), 667. Walvoord goes on to say that “the whole idea of spiritual gifts necessitates a supernatural work of God quite distinct from any natural powers of man, or even from any spiritual qualities which are universal among the saved” (Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit*, 164).

⁴⁶ Unger is specifically making a case for the sign gifts being temporary, but in doing so speaks generally of spiritual gifts as abilities, endowments, and enablements (Merrill F. Unger, *The Baptism and Gifts of the Holy Spirit* [Chicago: Moody, 1974], 139–41).

⁴⁷ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1996), 209.

as “a special endowment of grace.”⁴⁸ Pettegrew offers this definition, “*A spiritual gift was a supernatural, Holy Spirit-energized ability that was sovereignly given by God for service within the local church.*”⁴⁹ To support this definition of spiritual gift as ability, Pettegrew merely offers six representative works that likewise define it this way, but he does not attempt to defend the definition.⁵⁰

Commentaries also perpetuate the default definition of gift as ability. Commenting on Rom 12:6, Harrison defines the gifts as “functions made possible by a specific enablement of the Holy Spirit granted to believers.”⁵¹ Morris calls *χάρισμα* in 1 Cor 12:4 “the usual word for one of the extraordinary endowments the Spirit confers on men.”⁵² Ciampa and Rosner say of 1 Cor 12:7 that “each gift is a manifestation of the Spirit, that is, an ability or ministry which the Spirit actualizes within the believer.”⁵³ Mare describes many of the gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 as abilities: word of wisdom is “the ability to communicate wisdom”; word of knowledge is “the ability to communicate with knowledge”; prophecy is “an ability to give insights into ... God’s redemptive program”; distinguishing spirits is “a distinct ability”; and tongues are the “ability to speak

⁴⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Gift Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 104.

⁴⁹ Pettegrew says further that God only gave these gifts “during the transition from the old covenant program to the new covenant program”—hence for Pettegrew all the gifts were temporary and no gifts are being given today (Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001], 160, emphasis original).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 238n12. In his book on the Holy Spirit Ryrie offers the same definition of spiritual gift as ability as in his *Basic Theology*: “The Greek word for spiritual gift (*charisma*) ... most frequently is used of the special grace gifts or abilities given to men by the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit. When referring to a gift for service to the body of Christ, a spiritual gift may be defined as a God-given ability for service ... *ability* is a synonym for the concept of a spiritual gift” (Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, 123–24, emphasis original). Not all theologians define spiritual gifts *solely* as abilities or endowments. Some include the idea of ministry as part of their understanding of the gifts. For example, as we saw earlier Erickson sees spiritual gifts defined differently in the list passages—gifts as “various offices in the church” in Eph 4:11, gifts as “basic functions performed in the church” in Rom 12:6-8 and 1 Pet 4:11, and gifts as “special abilities” in 1 Cor 12. Since the passages seem to have different things in mind when they speak of “gifts of the Spirit,” “no attempt should be made to reduce this expression to a unitary concept or definition” (*Christian Theology*, 797–98). Grudem likewise notes that “in some cases Paul lists [for a gift] an activity ... (such as ‘prophecy’ in Rom 12:6 and 1 Cor 12:10 ...)” (*Systematic Theology*, 1020). Finally, Lewis and Demarest define some gifts as “abilities” and others as the activity itself (*Integrative Theology*, 3:199). They also call some of the gifts, namely, those individuals named in Ephesians 4 and 1 Corinthians 12 (apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor-teacher, teacher) “gifted ministries” (*Integrative Theology*, 3:198, 199, 266).

⁵¹ Everett F. Harrison, “Romans,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978–1991), 10:130.

⁵² Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 168.

⁵³ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Nottingham, U.K.: Apollos, 2010), 571.

unlearned languages.”⁵⁴ Kelly says that gifts in 1 Pet 4:10 refer to “any capacity or endowment which can be employed for the benefit of the community.”⁵⁵

Since it is difficult to find anyone who defends or supports this definition of spiritual gift as ability, it is difficult to say whence or why it has arisen.⁵⁶ One thing is certain: it is widespread and dominant. Yet does it have any basis in Scripture? I do not believe so. There is another idea that better captures the essence of a spiritual gift, that of ministry and not ability. A survey of the relevant passages will bear this out.

Starting with Romans 12, vv. 3–16 address our service as believers in Christian community. In vv. 4–5 Paul uses the physical body to illustrate the body of Christ: “just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” For Paul the body is a useful illustration of the body of Christ not just because of its unity and diversity, but also because of the *purpose* of its diversity: every member of the body has its own *function* (πρᾶξις). The word πρᾶξις indicates function, activity, deed, or action.⁵⁷ The point of Paul’s illustration is not the “ability” that each body part possesses, but the “function” that each part performs. Paul then describes our diversity as Christ’s body: we have “gifts that differ [χαρίσματα ... διάφορα] according to the grace given to us” (v. 6a). The parallels seem clear: not the same function (v. 4), differing gifts (v. 6a). The word “gift” is almost a synonym for “function” here. Put another way, our different gifts *are* the different functions we perform in and for the body of Christ. As Berding puts it, “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.”⁵⁸

The list in vv. 6b–8 “illustrate[s] v. 5 with seven different ways of ‘serving’ the church, which Paul calls χαρίσματα.”⁵⁹ The first two describe the activity or ministry itself

⁵⁴ W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 10:262. Mare appears uncritically to follow the 1978 edition of the NIV, which used the word “ability” in translating several of the gifts in 1 Cor 12:8, 10. This shows that even translations have played a part in perpetuating the default understanding of gifts as abilities. It is worth noting, however, that the 1984 edition of the NIV removed the word ability from its translation of these verses.

⁵⁵ J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 179.

⁵⁶ Berding suggests that the rise of the default definition has been in part because “the English [word ‘gift’] is so laden with the ability concept (“Confusing Word and Concept,” 39). Berding notes that the first definition of gift offered in Webster’s dictionary is “a special or notable capacity, talent, or endowment” (ibid., 49).

⁵⁷ BDAG, 859–60.

⁵⁸ Berding, “Confusing Word and Concept,” 48. In his book-length treatment of the subject, Berding says that since πρᾶξις corresponds with χάρισμα in Paul’s analogy, χάρισμα should be understood to indicate a function here, not a special ability (Kenneth Berding, *What Are Spiritual Gifts? Rethinking the Conventional View* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006], 96). Osborne likewise notes this correspondence, calling one’s gift his or her “*function* ... in the community” and our “different gifts ... the part [we] play in the oneness that is the church” (Grand R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2004], 324–25).

⁵⁹ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 604–5.

(prophecy, service) while the remaining five portray the person serving (he who teaches, he who exhorts, he who gives, he who leads, and he who shows mercy). In any event the activities or ministries carried out by each member of the body for the body are Paul's focus here. "The idea of special Spirit-given ability is not the issue" in this passage.⁶⁰

Moving on to 1 Corinthians 12, Paul introduces the subject of spiritual gifts in v. 1 with the word πνευματικῶν, "things that are spiritual," or "things of the Spirit." Then in vv. 4–6 he uses three words in underscoring the variety of spiritual gifts in the church: (1) varieties of "gifts" (χαρισμάτων); (2) varieties of "ministries" (διακονιῶν); and (3) varieties of "effects" (ἐνεργημάτων). How should we understand these words? For Bittlinger they are distinct and denote a progression from the source of the gifts (χαρισμάτων, the divine χάρις), to the way they become real in practice (διακονιῶν), to their results (ἐνεργημάτων).⁶¹ According to Fee, however, "Given the flexibility of language ... one should probably not overanalyze the different words used.... They are simply three different ways of looking at what in v. 7 Paul calls 'manifestations' of the Spirit."⁶² Carson agrees that while these terms are not strictly synonymous together they "describe the full range of what we might call spiritual-gift phenomena."⁶³ It is significant that Paul can use the words "ministries" and "workings" to stand for "gifts." As he used "gift" and "function" as virtual synonyms in Romans 12, so here he uses "gift," "ministry," and "working" to stand for virtually the same thing. The gifts *are* ministries and workings. These three words "work together to describe the various ministries that are distributed to the church."⁶⁴

The noun φανέρωσις, "manifestation," in v. 7 comes from the verb φανερόω, "to cause to become visible."⁶⁵ Thus all the terms Paul uses to describe spiritual gifts in vv. 4–7 denote activity, not ability, including χαρισμάτων, which "refers to the more concretely visible manifestations of the Spirit's activity, such as those listed in vv. 8–10."⁶⁶

Notice the focus on ministry activity in the list of gifts. The Spirit gives some individuals "the word of wisdom" and "the word of knowledge" (v. 8). Rather than the ability to have wisdom or knowledge, these gifts are the actual communication of the words of wisdom and knowledge to the body (those with the gifts are given a "word," not an "ability"). The

⁶⁰ Berding, "Confusing Word and Concept," 49.

⁶¹ A. Bittlinger, *Gifts and Graces: A Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 20–21, cited in Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 161.

⁶² Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 161. Garland concurs, "All these same phenomena can also be identified as 'the manifestation of the Spirit'" (David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 576).

⁶³ Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, 34.

⁶⁴ Berding, *What Are Spiritual Gifts*, 116.

⁶⁵ BDAG, 1048. Chafer, one of the few theologians who defines a spiritual gift as a ministry and not an ability, draws his definition from Paul's declaration in 1 Cor 12:7 that a gift is a manifestation of the Spirit: "a gift in the spiritual sense means the Holy Spirit doing a particular service through the believer and using the believer to do it" (Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948], 6:216).

⁶⁶ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 161n277.

Spirit gives others “faith” (v. 9a). Rather than the saving faith exercised by all believers, this gift is most likely a supernatural faith that can “move mountains” (cf. 13:2). It is the “conviction that God will reveal his power or mercy in a special way in a specific instance.”⁶⁷

The Spirit gives others “gifts of healings” (v. 9b, my translation of *χαρίσματα ἰαμάτων*). The plural of both words shows that the focus here is on the actual instances of healing that take place rather than an intrinsic ability to heal. The same can be said for the rest of the gifts that follow: “activities of miracles” (my translation of *ἐνεργήματα δυνάμεων*), “prophecy,” “distinguishing of spirits,” kinds of tongues,” and “interpretation of tongues” (v. 10) are all ministry activities that believers carry out for the good of the body.⁶⁸

At first glance, 1 Tim 4:14 seems to support the contention that spiritual gifts are abilities, since Paul speaks here of the spiritual gift “within” Timothy (*τοῦ ἐν σοὶ χαρίσματος*).⁶⁹ An ability would indeed be “within” a person. On the other hand, as noted earlier, the immediate context of 1 Tim 4:14 concerns Timothy’s pastoral responsibilities of teaching and exhortation (vv. 11–13, 15–16). Thus, Timothy’s gift “includes, but is not limited to, the ‘public reading, proclamation/exhortation, and teaching’ that Timothy is urged to ‘devote himself to’ in the preceding imperative [of v. 13]. In the larger context of the letter it concerns the whole range of ministry in Ephesus.”⁷⁰ In this regard, the need for Timothy to not neglect his spiritual gift differs little from his need to “fulfill [his] ministry” (2 Tim 4:5), or from that of Archippus to “Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it” (Col 4:17).⁷¹

Although not Pauline, 1 Pet 4:10–11 lines up with what we have seen in the Pauline spiritual gift passages: spiritual gifts are better viewed as ministries, not abilities. Peter says that as each believer has received a gift, we should “employ it in serving one another [literally, “serving it to one another,” *εἰς ἑαυτοὺς αὐτὸ διακονοῦντες*] as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” Our gift is our ministry on behalf of fellow believers; this is how we “serve” each other as “good stewards” of God’s grace. The sample gifts that Peter offers likewise emphasize ministry. “Whoever speaks” places

⁶⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁶⁸ The same can be said for Paul’s second list of gifts in 1 Cor 12:28–30. “Miracles,” “gifts of healings,” “helps,” “administrations,” and “kinds of tongues” are ministries carried out in and for the church. Viewing the gifts as ministries rather than abilities helps make sense of the mixture of people (apostles, prophets, teachers, those who speak with tongues, those who interpret) and gifts in this list. In other words, the gifts named are ministries for the body and the people named are those who carry out ministries for the body.

⁶⁹ The same might be said of 2 Tim 1:6, where Paul refers to the gift of God which is “in” Timothy (*τὸ χάρισμα τοῦ θεοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἐν σοὶ*). However, what is true for 1 Tim 4:14 is also true for 2 Tim 1:6: the context concerns Timothy’s pastoral responsibilities (vv. 7–8, 13–14). Timothy’s gift may be his “Spirit-given ministry that came to him through ‘prophetic utterances’” (Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 35).

⁷⁰ Ibid., 773.

⁷¹ Carson agrees, “Perhaps we may deduce from [1 Tim 4:14 and 2 Tim 1:6] that the gift was the ministry to which [Timothy] was called, in danger of being curtailed by timidity and insufficient self-discipline” (*Showing the Spirit*, 20).

stress on the actual speaking, and “whoever serves” on the serving. Furthermore, the one who serves should do so “by the strength which God supplies.” In other words, the gift of service is the actual ministry of serving, not the “ability” to serve. God supplies the strength—the “ability” if you will—to serve others with our gift, but the gift itself is the ministry performed, not the ability or strength with which we perform it.⁷²

Upon examining the relevant spiritual gift passages, I see much support for viewing spiritual gifts as ministries and little if any for viewing them as abilities. I support the conclusion of Berding that “individual ministries, rather than abilities, is the theological concept which links these passages.... All ministries are concrete ways in which God works his grace among his people.... Spirit-given ministries is a concept which accounts for all these passages; special abilities/enablers is not.”⁷³

Viewing spiritual gifts as ministries not only enjoys the scriptural support summarized above; it also clears up confusion caused by the “ability” view. Viewing a spiritual gift as an ability immediately raises a question: what then is the difference between a *spiritual gift* as an ability and a *natural* ability? Ryrie ponders this question and concludes, “I am frank to acknowledge that I do not always know what difference would be seen, for instance, between a naturally talented teacher, a teacher who has been well trained, and one who has been given the spiritual gift of teaching.”⁷⁴ This conundrum vanishes, however, when we understand that spiritual gifts are ministries. Would it not make sense for the Holy Spirit to assign the gift (ministry) of teaching to believers having natural talent in that area? Would He not also lead them to training opportunities to hone the skills needed to carry out their gift (ministry) effectively? Puzzling over the

⁷² “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” (Berding, “Confusing Word and Concept,” 39, emphasis original). It is true that some of the miraculous gifts seemingly required special ability, for example healings, miracles, and tongues. However, even in the case of these gifts, the emphasis in the passages containing them is on the ministry activities themselves—the ministry functions carried out for the body of Christ. The ministries themselves are what the spiritual gift passages emphasize; the ability to perform them is simply assumed.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 47. I did not include Eph 4:7–13 in this survey of relevant spiritual gifts passages, although I could have. As I said earlier, although this passage does not mention the Spirit and does not use the word *χάρισμα*, we may still employ it in formulating a theology of spiritual gifts since it shares certain concepts with the other spiritual gift passages. Like 1 Cor 12:28–29, Eph 4:11 names individuals—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers—who serve the body of Christ. What I said about 1 Cor 12:28–29 holds true here as well. Viewing spiritual gifts as ministries helps explain why these individuals show up in the lists: the gifts named are the ministries and the people named are simply those who carry out their ministries in the body of Christ. Chafer describes the gifts in Eph 4:11 as “leadership ministries of divine appointment in the Church” (*Systematic Theology*, 6:217). Eph 4:16 may also support the understanding that gifts are ministries. Here Paul says the body grows “according to the proper working of each individual part.” Each part of the body has a gift, which is the “work” or “ministry” that each member performs for the good of the body.

⁷⁴ Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit*, 125.

difference between a spiritual gift and a natural talent is only necessary if gifts are abilities.⁷⁵

I have argued that spiritual gifts are ministries, not abilities. This view enjoys exegetical support and clarifies confusion caused by the ability view. With this understanding of gift as ministry now in place, I turn to the final objective of this paper: defining a spiritual gift.

The Definition of a Spiritual Gift

Throughout this paper I have raised various points that will now come together in formulating a definition of a spiritual gift. The first point is the obvious one just argued: spiritual gifts are ministries. What other facts gleaned from the spiritual gifts passages help us define a spiritual gift? I suggest at least five. First, a spiritual gift is a ministry distributed by the Holy Spirit according to His own will (1 Cor 12:11). Second, each believer receives at least one spiritual gift from the Spirit, since the Spirit is said to distribute a gift to each one (vv. 7, 11; cf. 1 Pet 4:10). Third, the Spirit seems to have assigned us our gift when we were first baptized into the body of Christ at conversion (1 Cor 12:13). Fourth, each believer is to carry out his or her gift for the purpose of building up (edifying) the body of Christ (14:12; cf. Eph 4:12, 16).⁷⁶ Fifth, the ultimate purpose of carrying out our spiritual gift is for the glory of God (1 Pet 4:11).

Putting these six facts together I propose the following definition of a spiritual gift:

*A spiritual gift is a ministry that the Holy Spirit graciously grants to each believer at conversion for building up the body of Christ to the glory of God.*⁷⁷

Conclusion

In this paper I examined the seventeen usages of χάρισμα and concluded that the word does not mean “spiritual gift,” let alone “special ability.” The word means a concrete

⁷⁵ Garrett also considers this dilemma and offers three possible solutions: (1) spiritual gifts are the “blossoming of one’s natural endowments under the Holy Spirit”; (2) spiritual gifts are supernatural and coincide with natural endowments; and (3) supernatural spiritual gifts should be sharply differentiated from natural endowments, although “the former may employ the latter” (Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2:200). Unfortunately Garrett does not give us his own view. More problematic, however, is the fact that his presentation here seems to rest on the unproven assumption that spiritual gifts are abilities. We see the same problem with Erickson. He says about the gifts, “it is not clear whether these gifts are endowments from birth, special enablements received at some later point, or a combination of the two” (*Christian Theology*, 798). This uncertainty is likewise based on understanding the gifts as abilities.

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 12 likewise addresses the purpose of the gifts. According to v. 7 “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” Verse 25 mentions the goals of “no division” (i.e., unity) and members having “the same care for one another.”

⁷⁷ If one hesitates to accept the position of this paper that a spiritual gift is a ministry, I commend an alternate definition from Fee, who calls spiritual gifts “gracious bestowments of the Spirit in the gathered community for the sake of building up the people of God” (*God’s Empowering Presence*, 33). This accurately reflects the meaning of χάρισμα and avoids the questionable default understanding of spiritual gift as ability. With some tweaking the other elements of my definition could be added to Fee’s.

expression of grace, and the context of each usage must determine the exact nature of that expression. In classifying its seventeen uses I showed its various referents, only one of which is spiritual gift. From there I explored the concept of spiritual gift and argued from the relevant passages that instead of denoting ability, spiritual gift indicates ministry carried out in and for the body of Christ. With that understanding in place I offered a definition of a spiritual gift based on six facts gleaned from the relevant passages.

Are there any practical implications of this study? I touched on one earlier. If we view spiritual gifts as ministries, we will avoid all the puzzling introspection over what special ability the Holy Spirit gave us when we came to faith in Christ, and how to distinguish that special ability from our natural talents. Instead, we will ask ourselves what *ministry* He has given us for building up Christ's body.

Berding suggests another practical implication: dispense with "spiritual gift tests," which are so often based on the misunderstanding of spiritual gift as special ability.⁷⁸ I do not believe we have to go this far. There may still be ways to administer "spiritual gift tests" that reflect the understanding of spiritual gifts as ministries.⁷⁹

A final suggestion by Berding is worth pondering: cancel your "Spiritual Gifts Class" and start another one called "Ministering to One Another."⁸⁰ Seeing the gifts as ministries removes the confusion and unnecessary "navel gazing" over nebulous abilities and places the emphasis right where the NT puts it: on *serv*ing one another for the glory of God and the good of the saints!

⁷⁸ Berding, "Confusing Word and Concept," 51.

⁷⁹ I have found and adapted a spiritual gift test that helps Christians consider the *desires* God has given them for various ministries, and reflect on the *opportunities* God might already have given them to do ministry. This can help Christians discover and confirm the spiritual gifts/ministries that the Holy Spirit has given them for building up the body of Christ. See John E. Packo, *Find and Use Your Spiritual Gifts* (Camp Hill, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1980), 74–80.

⁸⁰ Berding, "Confusing Word and Concept," 51.