

The Purpose and Function of *Charismata* in the Christian Community: An In-Depth Study of 1 Cor 12–14

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>This study examines the purpose and function of charismata (spiritual gifts) within the Christian community, as articulated in 1 Corinthians 12–14. While the Corinthian church exhibited an abundance of spiritual manifestations, their misuse had created division, disorder, and an overemphasis on spectacular gifts. This paper argues that Paul’s primary theological objective in these chapters is not merely to regulate ecstatic phenomena but to redefine the very nature of spiritual giftedness as an expression of corporate edification and cruciform love. The analysis proceeds in three parts. First, it situates the charismata within Paul’s doctrine of the church as the Body of Christ, demonstrating that diversity of gifts is intentionally designed for mutual interdependence and unity (chap. 12). Second, it explores the enduring supremacy of agapē (love) as the essential operating principle that governs and evaluates all charismatic activity, rendering gifts without love as functionally worthless (chap. 13). Third, it examines Paul’s practical criteria for corporate worship, where intelligibility, order, and prophetic edification are prioritized over uninterpreted tongues (chap. 14). The study concludes that the function of charismata is fundamentally ecclesiological and missiological: they are not personal trophies or status symbols but temporary, Spirit-empowered instruments for building up the community in faith, hope, and love. Ultimately, Paul’s corrective to Corinth reveals a timeless principle—the purpose of every spiritual gift is the flourishing of the Body, oriented toward the glory of Christ until the perfect consummation arrives.</i> Keywords: Charismata, study, Christian, community.
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Introduction

The Corinthian correspondence demonstrates the Apostle Paul's pastoral skill and theological precision. The church in Corinth, founded within the complex moral and cultural environment of the Roman Empire, mirrored the broader tensions of the ancient world. Paul's first letter primarily addresses internal disorder rather than external persecution. Among several challenges—such as factionalism, sexual immorality, litigation among believers, and misuse of the Lord's Supper—the controversy over spiritual gifts (*charismata*) significantly threatened communal unity. The Corinthians, having received the Spirit in abundance, became focused on dramatic manifestations, especially glossolalia (speaking in tongues), which functioned as a

marker of spiritual status. Ongoing scholarly debate concerns the nature and function of these spiritual gifts within the Corinthian church. Some scholars argue that Paul's response represents a radical redefinition of charismatic experience, while others emphasise continuity with earlier Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions of ecstatic speech and prophecy. Further discussion considers whether Paul prioritises certain gifts or aims to democratise spiritual experience within the community. Unfortunately, that is what is playing out today in the christendom.

One of the major issues which seems to have divided the body of Christ is the lopsided orientation about the correct

use and purpose of the *charismata* (Spiritual Gifts).¹ At that time in the 1970s, tongues was largely misunderstood and largely a feature exclusive to Pentecostal churches. Yet, what has been known as the charismatic movement started to rapidly spread from within its historical roots of Pentecostalism into mainline Protestant churches including Presbyterian, Baptist, and Lutheran congregations and aspects of it were also embraced by the Roman Catholic Church during the 1960s. Even with this greater acceptance, however, there has been a mutual dismissal among some chambers (charismatic and non-charismatic) based on isolated Scriptures. Charismatics condemning non-charismatics for not understanding deep spiritual experiences and *charismata* is proof that they do not have the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, heretical charismatics may accuse non-charismatics of promoting “disorderly” worship, but claiming it contradicts God's purposes (1 Cor. 14:33, 40). that spiritual gifts are not for personal edification (1 Cor. 12:7; 14:4, 16–17, 27).²

It is degrading to attack each other on the basis of biblical scriptures. Biblical writings might be unclear in indicating the power of the Holy Spirit and pneumatic gifts. Thus, in spite of the ambiguous nature of biblical perspectives, I will analyse 1 Corinthians 12–14, the longest passage on *charismata*, to understand how Paul makes his argument: what does Paul actually say to the Corinthian congregation and what can his argument mean for Christian communities and churches today?

This article contends that Paul neither dismisses nor privileges any particular charismatic manifestation but instead redefines the Corinthian understanding of spiritual gifts by centering them on the principle of communal edification through love. Through the integration of literary, socio-historical, and theological perspectives, this study provides a nuanced account of Paul's vision for spiritual gifts as both diverse and unified. It advances the scholarly conversation by emphasising their role as instruments of unity and mutual service within the church. By engaging in these perspectives, the study situates itself within ongoing academic discourse and re-examines the challenges and opportunities present in the Corinthian context.

In response, Paul dedicates three chapters (12, 13, and 14) to addressing theological misunderstandings and redirecting the community's practices. This section does not function as a detached theological treatise on spiritual

gifts; rather, it serves as a targeted intervention aimed at restoring the church's health. The central thesis of 1 Corinthians 12–14 is that the purpose and function of *charismata* are not self-edification or status acquisition, but the collective edification of the church through the expression of Christ-like love. The *charismata* are therefore presented not as trophies for display, but as instruments for service, and not as evidence of a superior spiritual state, but as responsibilities essential to communal life.

Methodologically, this article adopts an integrated approach, combining literary analysis of Paul's rhetoric and argumentation, socio-historical investigation of the Corinthian context, and theological reflection on the meaning and function of spiritual gifts. Previous studies have often examined these perspectives in isolation, with literary studies focusing on rhetorical structure, socio-historical approaches emphasising context, and theological analyses centring on doctrinal themes. In contrast, this article interrelates these dimensions to provide a more holistic understanding. By explicitly integrating these methods, the study elucidates the text's original significance. It demonstrates how a multidimensional approach can reveal connections and insights that might otherwise remain obscured, thereby advancing the interpretive conversation—aptly, by analysing their historical context, theological structure, and enduring practical implications for contemporary Christian communities.

Paul and the Problem in 1 Corinthians 12–14

Most scholars agree that in 1 Corinthians 12:1 *peri de tōn pneumatikōn* (concerning spiritual talents) the Corinthians were asking about spiritual gifts (see 7:1, 25; 8:1; 16:1, 12). In Corinthian worship, “Paul's answer is meant to be corrective, not instructional or informational.”³ The Corinthians placed a higher value on *glossolalia* than on other *charismata*, using it as a marker of authentic spirituality. Those who spoke in tongues considered themselves truly spiritual, and this attitude disrupted congregational unity. The Corinthians' emphasis on glossolalia resulted in several forms of misuse. During communal worship, individuals often spoke in tongues simultaneously and without interpretation, causing confusion and failing to edify the congregation. Some individuals interrupted others or attempted to dominate gatherings, treating glossolalia as

¹ Paul Danbaki Jatau, “A Biblico-Theological reflection on *Charismata* as Gifts of Service in the Church (Rom 12:6–8),” *International Journal of Integrative Humanism* Vol. 12, No. 1 (2020), 60.

² Darwin LumBantobing, *Teologi di Pasar Bebas* (Pematangsiantar: L-SAPA, 2007), 177–236.

³ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 570–71.

a demonstration of spiritual superiority rather than as a means for communal benefit. Consequently, the central issue in chapters 12–14 is “the overvaluing and abuse of the gift of tongues.”⁴

Paul does not question the legitimacy of glossolalia as a charisma in an effort to remedy the problem. He declares that it is a true charisma, which he himself has (14:18). But Paul insists that “the source and content of an utterance are all-important, not the fact that it was inspired.”⁵ Although speaking in tongues may appear more desirable due to its ecstatic and exalted qualities, it remains meaningless unless interpreted, given its unintelligibility. Some scholars interpret Paul’s approach differently, suggesting he may be more tolerant of glossolalia in certain contexts or that his primary concern is maintaining order and intelligibility in worship rather than suppressing tongues entirely. These perspectives contend that Paul seeks to regulate, rather than prohibit, the use of tongues. Nevertheless, to discourage the Corinthians from speaking in tongues during public worship, Paul highlights the diversity and equal value of *charismata* and their role in fostering community (see 1 Cor 12:4-7; 14:4, 5, 12, 26).

***Charismata*: Diversity and Equality in 1 Corinthians 12**

Paul commences his discourse not by defining the gifts themselves, but by asserting a foundational theological claim: the one God is the source of all spiritual phenomena. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul both distinguishes the *charismata* and emphasises their equal status. This dual emphasis is evident in the structure of the lists of *charismata* and in Paul’s evaluative interpretation. Scholarly debates have arisen regarding Paul’s theology of *charismata*. Some scholars emphasise the charismatic and ecstatic nature of certain gifts, while others highlight Paul’s concern for order, community, and the universal presence of the Spirit among believers. For instance, some argue that Paul seeks to correct Corinthian enthusiasm for spectacular gifts such as *glossolalia*. In contrast, others focus on the social and communal implications of attributing spiritual value to all members.

In 12:12–13, Paul contends that the Spirit operates not only through supernatural and ecstatic speech. The confession “Jesus is Lord” occurs in ordinary circumstances, yet it is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. From this perspective, all believers are spiritual because all confess Jesus’ lordship.⁶

Verses 1–3 introduce the Spirit’s work as a foundation for discussing the specific manifestations of the Spirit in *charismata*. Paul asserts that any genuine confession of “Jesus is Lord” is possible only through the Holy Spirit, thereby establishing that the Spirit’s presence is not confined to extraordinary experiences but encompasses the shared faith of the entire community. This assertion prepares the audience for verses 4–6, where Paul addresses the diversity and equality of spiritual gifts. Although there are many types of *charismata*, all originate from the same source, the Spirit. This progression in Paul’s argument demonstrates that, since every authentic spiritual expression—including the basic confession of faith—derives from the same Spirit, distinctions among gifts do not affect their spiritual value or legitimacy. For emphasis, the terms *diakrisis* (varieties) and *ho autos* (the same) are repeated in three consecutive verses, creating parallels in both style and content.

Paul’s use of *ho autos* to refer to the source of the several *charismata* (the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God) in lines 4–6 is a rhetorical device used to subvert the Corinthians’ presumption of the superiority of glossolalia. He says that although *charismata* are diverse they come from the same source and are of equal value. Status equality is the sameness of the source. The same notion is restated in 12:11 with the expression *to hen kai to auto pneuma*, “the same Spirit.” The use of the word “one” emphasises further the unity of the source.

Paul lists nine *charismata* in 12:7–11 and twice as many in 12:28–30 to explain that the Spirit grants particular *charisma* to particular people. The three lists vary in terms of numbers, order and form as can be seen in the table below:

⁴ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 574.

⁵ Frederick F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians, New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971), 117.

⁶ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 567.

12: 8 -10	12:28	12:29-30
utterance of wisdom	apostles	apostles
utterance of knowledge	prophets	prophets
faith	teachers	teachers
<i>charismata</i> of healing	deeds of power	work of miracles
working of miracles	<i>charismata</i> of healing	<i>charismata</i> of healing
prophecy	forms of assistance	speak in tongues
discernment of spirits	forms of leadership	interpretation
various kinds of tongues	various kinds of tongues	
interpretation of tongues		

Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, along with many other scholars, categorise the nine *charismata* in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10 by grouping them first with intellect, then with faith, and finally with glossolalia.⁷ In contrast, Ciampa and Rosner propose an alternative structure, analysing the *charismata* in an A B A' B' sequence: A represents speech (wisdom and knowledge); B represents wonder (faith, healing, miraculous powers); A' denotes speech of a more spectacular nature (prophecy, distinguishing of spirits); and B' denotes wonder of a more spectacular nature (*glossolalia* and its interpretation).⁸ However, these categorisation efforts are not entirely successful, as the categories frequently overlap. A *charisma* assigned to one category may also fit within another. For example, “distinguishing spirits” is characterised by faith according to Robertson and Plummer, yet it can also be understood as a charisma associated with intellect.⁹

Despite their limitations, attempts at classification persist because categorisation offers a framework for interpretation and teaching, making the passage more accessible to readers. Methodologically, such schemes impose a sense of systematisation on Paul’s often ambiguous terminology, reflecting a modern scholarly preference for order and coherence. Theologically, categorisation can reveal interpreters’ interests or concerns regarding the relationships and perceived value of different gifts. However, this impulse may oversimplify the complexities and nuances in Paul’s presentation, where overlapping categories may intentionally resist rigid boundaries. The ongoing effort to categorise the *charismata*

highlights both the desire for clarity and the inherent limitations of contemporary approaches to ancient texts.

The three lists include both extraordinary and ordinary *charismata* without establishing any hierarchy. This combination indicates that, for Paul, a charisma manifested extraordinarily is not considered more significant than one manifested ordinarily. Paul does not specify which *charismata* are extraordinary or ordinary; interpreters introduce such distinctions rather than Paul himself. His purpose in presenting the three lists is neither to provide an exhaustive catalogue nor to establish categories or hierarchies among the *charismata*. Instead, he offers examples to illustrate the diversity of gifts given by God to the church. The varying order and structure of the *charismata* in each list further emphasise their multiplicity. Nevertheless, some scholars contend that Paul’s lists imply an intended order or hierarchy, suggesting that gifts such as apostleship or prophecy are more prominent or foundational. Others argue that the lists aim for completeness in representing the range of spiritual gifts.

The body metaphor was widely used in Greco-Roman literature, often to illustrate the structure of society and to emphasise the need for harmony among different social classes, typically reinforcing social hierarchy and the importance of each part contributing to the stability of the whole. However, Paul adapts this familiar image by applying it to the church and emphasising not just unity, but also equality and mutual care among the members. The goal of this analogy is explicitly stated in 12:25 so “that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” In the first small

⁷ Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *The First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1929), 265.

⁸ Ciampa and Rosner, 572–73.

⁹ Donald A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 37.

unit, 12:12–14, Paul “pictures the church not as a body of Christians but as the body of Christ. There is unity in plurality, but not uniformity. Individual integrity remains.”¹⁰ This analogy focuses on the affiliation of the church's members. In the second (12:15–20) and third (12:21–26) small units of the body metaphor, Paul develops his analogy by portraying some body parts as talking to another part.

In the first scenario, Paul suggests that some members who feel inferior claim they are not integral to the body. In the second, he suggests that members who feel superior assert that they do not need those who seem weaker. In both cases, Paul emphasises that God intentionally designs the diversity among the body's members (vv 18, 24).¹¹ The first scenario aims to awaken those who feel inferior to their essential role within the body. The second encourages those who feel superior to recognise their dependence on others and, if they are indeed superior, their responsibility to show greater respect to those who appear inferior. Both scenarios affirm that “diversity is necessary for a body to function, but the body is unified as each member is interrelated and interdependent.”¹² Ultimately, Paul's analogy seeks to eliminate division within the church by promoting equality in honour and concern for all members, regardless of their position or role.

Paul's teaching on diversity and equality remains relevant to contemporary discussions about spiritual gifts and church structure. His assertion that all members are essential, regardless of perceived prominence, challenges tendencies to prioritise certain gifts or roles. This perspective encourages modern churches to cultivate inclusive communities in which diverse gifts are equally valued and mutual care shapes relationships. In ongoing theological discourse, Paul's analogy prompts continual reassessment of how unity and diversity should be enacted, reminding faith communities to honour every contribution and work toward reducing division.

Subsequently, Paul extends the metaphor of the body to the context of *charismata* by using rhetorical questions with *mē* (vv. 29–31), to which he gives negative answers: not everyone is an apostle, not everyone is a prophet, and so forth. This reinforces the arguments in 1 Corinthians 12:7–11 and 12:28 that each member possesses a distinct charisma and that no single spiritual gift is common to all members of the church. As Herman Ridderbos observes, the central message of 1 Corinthians 12 is to reject

hierarchical distinctions that regard certain gifts or forms of service as more or less “pneumatic” or spiritual.¹³

Paul thus contends that hierarchies among the various *charismata* should be rejected and that all gifts are to be accepted. However, some scholars have proposed alternative interpretations. Certain interpreters argue that Paul's lists of *charismata* and the ordering of apostles, prophets, and teachers in 12:28 may suggest a functional hierarchy, particularly regarding roles or authority within the community. In contrast, others maintain that the diversity and order presented ultimately serve to promote unity and interdependence, rather than to establish a strict hierarchy. These differing perspectives illustrate ongoing scholarly debates concerning the extent to which Paul envisions hierarchy or egalitarianism among the gifts. In parallel, just as the members of the body are interrelated and interdependent, and cooperation is essential for the body's health, the various *charismata* should also function in an interrelated and cooperative manner to ensure the church remains harmonious and united. For Paul, unity is achieved through diversity in harmony. The *charismata* should operate so that the church remains harmonious and united. According to Paul, diversity in harmony creates unity.

Charismata: Building up community—1 Corinthians 14 in its literary context

Ecclesiology is Paul's major concern in 1 Corinthians, where he extensively discusses the church's life and unity. Of the 46 occurrences of *ekklēsia* in the undisputed Pauline letters, 22 are in 1 Corinthians, with ten occurring in 1 Corinthians 12–14. In the context of chapters 12–14, Paul understands *ekklēsia* as the Corinthian assembly with the purpose of worship.

In chapter 13, Paul constructs a “love” argument that, as some scholars note, “opens up the possibility of treating the spiritual phenomena ethically.”¹⁴ After concluding chapter 12 by introducing a more excellent way, Paul begins chapter 13 by emphasising the futility of all abilities apart from love. *Glossolalia*, prophecy, comprehension of mysteries and knowledge, faith capable of moving mountains, and even bodily sacrifice are all rendered meaningless without love (13:1–3). Verses 4–7 detail how love should be enacted through fifteen characteristics, each addressing specific forms of misconduct among the Corinthians. This focus suggests that the central issue in

¹⁰ Garland, 590.

¹¹ Ciampa and Rosner, 596–97.

¹² Garland, 588.

¹³ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 442.

¹⁴ Oda Wischmeyer, “1 Corinthians,” in *Oda Wischmeyer (ed.), Paul: Life, Setting, Work, Letters* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 167.

Corinth is a deficiency of love.¹⁵ Fee observes that “Paul sets out to put their zeal for tongues within a broader ethical context that will ultimately disallow uninterpreted tongues in the assembly. In chapter 14, love will be even more specified in terms of ‘building up’ the church.”¹⁶ The absence of love leads to the pursuit of personal advantage, whereas the practice of love strengthens, unifies, and edifies the community.

The above emphasis on love as the essential criterion for assessing spiritual gifts has received considerable attention in Pauline scholarship. Commentators such as Gordon D. Fee and Anthony C. Thiselton highlight that Paul intentionally places the ‘love chapter’ between his discussion of *charismata* in chapters 12 and 14, thus positioning love as the interpretative key to communal life. Others, like Richard B. Hays, argue that Paul’s ethical framing of the gifts serves as a corrective to the Corinthians’ competitive spirituality. Alternative readings have stressed, as Dale Martin suggests, that Paul’s argument reflects not just ethical, but also social and rhetorical concerns about status and identity in the assembly. However, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul advances an argument centred on “community upbuilding” (14:26–40), emphasising that knowledge and understanding are essential (14:6–25). His objective in this chapter is to challenge the elevation of speaking in tongues as the superior *charisma* and to encourage the Corinthians to prioritise prophecy, which serves communal edification.

In 12:7, Paul defines *charismata* as a common good, highlighting their role in edification. He underscores the interdependence and equality of all community members, compelling their participation in ecclesial edification. Paul revisits this theme in chapter 14 (vv 1–5), where he prioritises prophecy over *glossolalia*: prophecy edifies the community, whereas *glossolalia* benefits only the individual speaker. His argument centres on the necessity of understanding; intelligible speech is required for communal edification in public worship. For edification to occur, the Spirit operates through the human mind to facilitate understanding. The mind produces understanding, which in turn leads to edification, especially in congregational settings. This perspective aligns with Paul’s foundational view of the Spirit, which emphasises the presence of God in action rather than solely ecstatic experiences such as *glossolalia*.¹⁷

Paul provides three reasons for this (14:6–25). The first argument relies on analogies from three musical instruments and a foreign language. Playing musical instruments and speaking in a foreign language are useless if no one understands (14:6–13). A second objection is that while Paul himself could talk in tongues, he did not exercise that gift in church (14:14–19). The final and most authoritative argument is the quotation of Jewish Scripture in 14:21, when Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11–12: “By the peoples of strange tongues and by the mouths of foreigners shall I speak unto this people, and they shall not listen unto me,” Paul utilises this verse to contend that speaking in tongues causes alienation. In the original context Isaiah’s words spoke of judgement through incomprehensible speech, and Paul uses this to warn that uninterpreted languages will drive outsiders away, rather than build up the assembly.

Prophecy, in contrast to *glossolalia*, leads to repentance and attracts outsiders (14:20–25). In the concluding section (14:26–40), Paul provides practical instructions for communal worship, addressing the practice of speaking in tongues, prophecy, and the participation of women (14:27–36). Paul’s directives regarding women’s participation in the assembly (14:34–35) have been the subject of extensive scholarly debate. Some scholars contend that these verses are later editorial additions, while others maintain they are authentically Pauline and integral to his argument for order in worship. Scholarly opinion remains divided, with interpretations ranging from context-specific instructions for Corinth to universal principles for Christian assemblies. Recognising these debates underscores the complexities of applying Paul’s directives to contemporary contexts. Within public worship, these guidelines aim to promote the mutual “building up” (14:26) of the community and ensure that “all things should be done decently and in order” (14:40). He affirms the significance of both the mind and the spirit (1 Cor 14:15). As noted, “Paul is, of course, not a philosopher who conceives of the spiritual life as a rational comprehension of the truth. He desires his converts to be emotionally gripped by the truth of the gospel; but the path to the emotions is through the mind, not around it.”¹⁸ Thus, worship of God requires engagement of both the mind and the spirit.

A brief consideration of 1 Corinthians 8–10 reveals that Paul has previously addressed the necessity of ecclesial edification. In these chapters, he argues that all community members bear responsibility for building up the

¹⁵ Garland, 607.

¹⁶ Fee, 627.

¹⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, First Corinthians, *The Anchor Yale Bible*, vol. 32 (New Haven

and London: Yale University, 2008), 80.

¹⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press and Leicester: Apollos, 2001), 355.

community, particularly in the context of eating food sacrificed to idols. Here, the principle of ecclesial edification extends beyond worship to encompass ethical conduct in daily life. In this context, understanding and knowledge are valued differently than in 1 Corinthians 14: knowledge alone, when exercised without regard for the weak, can result in actions that undermine communal edification.¹⁹ Even though Paul strengthens those who know that idols do not exist, their behaviour is regarded critically: since they do not prioritise ecclesial edification, they should not depend only on that knowledge but, rather, care for the mutual edification of the community. In conclusion, Paul urges them not to eat the sacrificed food for the sake of the weak, which is for the sake of the community's common edification (8:1; 10:23).

Therefore, one may ask, what can Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 12–14 mean in practice for life in contemporary Christian communities? In this analysis, I approach Pauline hermeneutics by seeking to interpret Paul's instructions regarding *charismata* within their original context and applying them thoughtfully to present-day communities. This involves recognising both the continuity of certain principles, such as the priority of love and edification, and the differences in historical, cultural, and theological settings. I am aware that any attempt to adapt Pauline teachings to contemporary situations carries methodological challenges. These include the risk of anachronism, the complexity of translating ancient categories to modern contexts, and the diversity within Christian traditions themselves. While such a hermeneutical approach aims to be faithful to the text, it also inevitably involves interpretive choices and is limited by historical and cultural distance. Academic transparency requires acknowledging these challenges and the provisional nature of the conclusions drawn.

The current paper argues for the application of Pauline hermeneutics of diversity and evaluation of *charismata* in regard to the modern-day church, advocating that churches should not disparage one another based on spiritual gift usage. Different communities may embody different *charismata*, and while worship practices are largely left to the respective community, that commitment to mutual edification through love is vital. And therefore, ecumenical engagement has a part to play in the wider building up of the global Christian *ekklēsia*. We should respect and accept different expressions of spiritual gifts and religious experience in churches and communities. Diversity is not only allowed but it is necessary, yet the fundamental and

central matter of love, mutual building up, and unity in the ecclesial body continue to glue Christian communities together. Agape then becomes for Paul the highest hermeneutical principle of both ecclesial life and discourse.

Contemporary Applications for the Church in the Twenty-First Century

The dilemma encountered by the Corinthian church remains relevant in contemporary settings. Modern charismatic and Pentecostal movements frequently evaluate spirituality through outwardly dramatic experiences, establishing a hierarchy based on personal encounters and prioritising individual excitement over communal edification. Scholars such as Gordon Fee have identified the risks of equating spiritual maturity with charismatic manifestations. Conversely, cessationist traditions, which assert that certain gifts have ceased, often overlook the significance of Spirit-empowered ministries such as prophecy, healing, and the word of knowledge. This perspective may result in “quenching the Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:19) and reducing Christian life to an intellectual exercise. Paul's teachings provide a balanced and biblically grounded corrective to both charismatic and cessationist extremes.

I. The Biblical Foundation: The Centrality of Scripture and the Gift of Prophecy

This passage challenges the modern church to affirm both the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. The completion of the biblical canon indicates that no new revelation can bind the conscience in the same way as Scripture. Theologically, the closed canon suggests that contemporary prophecy or new revelation does not possess the same authority as Scripture. Contemporary prophecy may be regarded as a Spirit-inspired, edifying gift that requires critical discernment and must be evaluated against the final authority of Scripture and by the congregation. Consequently, any modern expression of prophecy or revelation should remain subject to scriptural authority and communal discernment, as instructed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14.

II. The Relational Foundation: Love as the Criterion for Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy.

The most significant application is the prioritisation of love above all spiritual gifts. In Paul's context, this emphasis on love was countercultural. While Greco-Roman society valued honour, status, and personal achievement, Paul redefined greatness within the Christian community through self-giving love. The love described by Paul,

¹⁹ Josef Pfammatter, “οἰκοδομέω,” in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (eds), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 497.

characterised by patience, kindness, and humility, contrasted sharply with the competitive and status-driven relationships of the ancient world. A church that displays spectacular gifts without exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit is regarded as “nothing” from God’s perspective. Paul’s definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13 establishes a standard for ministry. The true measure of revival is not the frequency of healings or speaking in tongues, but the presence of patience, kindness, humility, and the absence of envy, boasting, and self-interest. The central question is whether worship fosters a more loving community; if not, it is merely a noisy gong.

iii. The Ecclesiological Foundation: Edification as the Litmus Test

The central question for all spiritual expression within the assembled church is whether it contributes to the edification of the body. Paul consistently emphasises edification as the primary criterion for spiritual gifts, stating, “Let all things be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26). Throughout 1 Corinthians 14, Paul maintains that the use of gifts such as prophecy and tongues must be evaluated by their capacity to strengthen, encourage, and comfort the church (1 Cor. 14:3, 5, 12, 17, 26). He instructs that tongues without interpretation do not benefit the congregation (1 Cor. 14:9, 19), and that prophecy is preferable in the assembly because it edifies all. Therefore, contemporary worship leaders, preachers, and those exercising the gift of tongues must adhere to this exegetical standard. If a gift does not result in the corporate edification of believers or the evangelisation of unbelievers, its use in the assembly constitutes a misuse. This necessitates a deliberate approach to worship planning, prioritising intelligible preaching, teaching, and music that are accessible to newcomers, while permitting the Spirit’s gifts to operate within a clear framework of order and

iv. The Inspirational Foundation: Redirecting Zeal.

Paul consistently redirects the zeal of the Corinthians. Rather than discouraging eagerness, he instructs, “Strive to excel in them for building up the church” (14:12) and “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (14:1). The contemporary church is thus called to cultivate a culture of enthusiasm for the things of God, characterised by discernment and a Christ-centred focus. The objective is to comfort, encourage, and edify one another with the truth of God, speaking truth in love. The *charismata* should not be regarded as a collection of isolated or ostentatious abilities. Instead, they function as diverse instruments in an orchestra, each fulfilling a distinct role under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to create a harmonious symphony that glorifies the Father and reflects the self-giving love of the Son. The “more excellent way” of love serves as the guiding principle for this collective

expression. Without love, the result is a discordant display of self-promotion. When love is present, the outcome is a beautiful, inspiring, and edifying expression of a community living in the Spirit.

The ultimate purpose of the *charismata* aligns with the fundamental purpose of the church: to serve as the visible and tangible expression of Jesus Christ on earth. The church is called to be a body that cares for its most vulnerable members, a temple indwelt by the Spirit, and a bride reflecting the love of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul provides a lasting framework for a healthy, Spirit-filled community in which every member is empowered to serve, every gift is directed toward edification, and every action is characterised by love. This defines the function of the *charismata*. Any deviation from this standard constitutes either a departure from the apostolic gospel or a distortion of it.

Ongoing scholarly debate persists regarding the precise purpose of the *charismata*. Some interpreters view these gifts primarily as signs authenticating the apostolic message or as foundational markers for the early church. Others emphasise their role in mission and evangelisation, while certain traditions maintain that some gifts are enduring marks of the Spirit’s presence in every era. These differing perspectives highlight the complexity of interpretation surrounding spiritual gifts and invite continued reflection within the church. The ultimate goal is that “God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28), a reality achieved as the body of Christ grows “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).13).

Conclusion

The *charismata*, therefore, are not a collection of disconnected, flashy abilities; they are the many instruments in an orchestra, each playing a unique part under the direction of the Conductor, the Holy Spirit, to produce one harmonious symphony that glorifies the Father and echoes the self-giving love of the Son. The “more excellent way” of love is the sheet music that guides the entire performance. Where love is absent, the music is a cacophony of self-promotion. Where love is present, the music is the beautiful, inspiring, and edifying sound of a community living out its life in the Spirit.

The ultimate purpose of the *charismata* is the ultimate purpose of the church itself: to be the visible, tangible expression of Jesus Christ on earth. It is to be a body that cares for its weakest members, a temple where the Spirit dwells, and a bride that reflects the love of her Groom. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul delivers a timeless blueprint for a healthy, Spirit-filled community—a community where every member is empowered to serve, every gift is focused

on edification, and every action is saturated with love. This is the function of *charismata*. Anything less is a departure from the apostolic gospel; anything more is a distortion of it. The goal is “that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28), a reality achieved as the body of Christ grows “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

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