

For We All Share in One Spirit: Charismatic Gifts and Church Unity

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Abstract: Charismatic gifts are an understudied and divisive aspect of Christian worship. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4, Paul links these phenomena with his famous metaphor for the unity of the church as the Body of Christ. This paper argues that one can better understand how the Holy Spirit unifies both the universal and local church by viewing charismatic gifts as liturgical group actions. After briefly introducing the category of charismatic gifts, I argue that charismatic gifts are a semi-scripted improvisational activity which immerse participants into the core Christian narrative of the universal and invisible church. I then argue that charismatic gifts are given to and enacted by communities, rather than individuals, and so are an example of group action actualising the corporate agency of the local church. When charismatic gifts are seen as liturgical group actions it becomes clear how the Spirit uses charismatic gifts to transform the gathered people of God into the unified Body of Christ.

Keywords: Charismatic Gifts, Holy Spirit, Liturgy, Group Action, Church Unity, Body of Christ.

Introduction

1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:3–8, Eph. 4:11–13 are the three most detailed discussions of charismatic gifts within Pauline corpus.¹ All three passages also contain Paul's powerful metaphor for Church unity, as the Body of Christ and explicitly place the gifts in reference to church unity. Whilst Paul's overall argument that charismatic gifts are for the building up of the whole community is clear, the precise relationship between church unity and charismatic gifts remains underexamined. This lacuna may also be due to the tragic irony that "what for Paul is the basis of unity, namely, their [the church's] common life in

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the Spirit, has in later times become the point of so much tension" (Fee 2014, 673). Given the tension between Christians on this topic, readers may be unused to viewing charismatic gifts as a force for unity rather than division; yet that is what is repeatedly implied by Paul. It is not merely that there are conflicting beliefs *about* charismatic gifts that makes the link between the *charismata* and church unity surprising. If charismatic gifts are understood as supernatural powers or capacities which the Spirit grants to individuals, then there is very little about this work of the Spirit that facilitates unity. When viewed as a kind of superpower charismatic gifts appear to be just the sort of thing that would divide a community and breed competitive individualism.

In order to understand how the Spirit's agency as manifest through charismatic gifts facilitates church unity, we need a different vision of charismatic gifts from the individual superpowers view stated above. This paper builds upon the growing research in analytic theology of liturgy and analytic philosophy of group agency to argue that charismatic gifts are best understood as a form of liturgical group action. That is, charismatic gifts are given to and enacted by the corporate agency of the local church as an improvised part of scripted worship. When viewed as liturgical group actions, charismatic gifts can be understood as part of "the public act which eternally actualizes the nature of the Church as the Body of Christ" (Schmemmann 1966, 12).

This paper proceeds as follows: First, I will introduce charismatic gifts for readers unfamiliar with these phenomena. Second, I argue that charismatic gifts are liturgical in nature, because they are a semi-scripted form of improvisation that immerses participants into the core Christian narrative.² As liturgical actions charismatic gifts also facilitate unity between the local visible church and the universal invisible church. Third, I argue that charismatic gifts are group actions, which are received and enacted by communities rather than individuals. When charismatic gifts are seen as group liturgical actions it becomes clear how the Spirit uses charismatic gifts to transform the gathered people of God into the unified Body of Christ.

² The claim that Pentecostal spirituality or charismatic worship styles are liturgical or sacramental is not new (Gunstone, 1994; Albrecht 1999; Tomberlin 2000; Cartledge and Swoboda 2017). However, the central place of charismatic gifts within such liturgies (and with traditional church liturgies) and the relevance of recent work in analytic theology is, to my knowledge, unique to this paper.

1. Introducing Charismatic Gifts: Narrative and Definition

a. Narrative

The following narrative is constructed from my imagination, with almost three decades of acquaintance with a range of different denominational settings which frequently employ charismatic gifts within their services. It is intended to be specific enough to evoke the imagination, and vague enough to allow readers to adjust particulars to various ecclesial settings.³ Most importantly, we see a range of charismatic gifts manifesting within their ‘natural habitat,’ namely the gathered congregation of Christian believers.⁴ The medium of narrative enables a concise and thick description of the biblical category of *charismata*, without presupposing that we have a clear definition of these phenomena.⁵

The refreshing wall of airconditioned coolness and the warm embrace of friends welcome you as you are handed a bible and notice sheet. You find your usual seat as a voice over the PA system reads,

“Good morning friends. We read in the book of Isaiah the following remarkable statement from God: ‘Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.’ This is the God we worship this morning. God’s Spirit is already here, wanting to meet with us today. Let us prepare our hearts to worship.”

Music begins, and you feel your body relax. The singing starts and you are drawn into the rhythm with a gentle sway, asking Jesus to meet with you. As the music ends you take your seat, smiling softly. The service proceeds with a Scripture reading, a sermon, the offering, and communion. During the intercessions, a silence is left to listen to the prompting of the Spirit.

You stand at your seat, waiting. There’s music softly playing in the background.

“We believe in a God who is alive and who speaks. I feel that the Spirit is already revealing new truths to some of us here today. Sometimes God gives us a message that is not only for ourselves but is for someone else or for all of us.

³ The Roman Catholic contribution may be particularly significant, since theologians such as Yves Congar and Karl Rahner were arguing for the *charismatic* body of Christ long before the charismatic renewal began in 1967; O’Connor (1975).

⁴ I have tried to remove many of the denominational signifiers, such as the language of priest, pastor, vicar or worship leader, and left the overall shape of the service as non-specific as possible. Indeed, I have encountered each of these gifts in a wide variety of ecclesial settings. This narrative is in no way intended to be normative, or a guide for how charismatic gifts should operate or appear, but it as realistic a scene as I could construct for the utility of the purposes of this essay.

⁵ The main texts where *charismata* are explicitly discussed are Rom. 12:6-8, 1 Cor. 12:28, 1 Cor. 12:4-11, 12: 29-32, 13: 1-3, 14:26, Eph. 4:7-8, 11-15, 1 Pet.4:10-11. Other relevant passages include, much of Acts, 1 Timothy 4:13-16, Hebrews 2:4.

Maybe you've got a word or phrase in your head, a bible verse or a picture that you sense is from God. If so, come forward and tell me. Don't be embarrassed; it doesn't matter how weird the message is. We can discern this together. You never know, that message might really touch someone – so don't be shy." The leader then steps back from the microphone, eyes closed, muttering strange words under their breath.

You're aware that a person comes forward, nervously taps on the leader's shoulder and whispers in his ear. Handed the microphone, they read Matthew 8:5-8 and says that Jesus' Spirit is wanting to heal some people today, both physically and those who feel spiritually or emotionally paralysed, as the Centurion's servant was healed by Jesus's words. You close your eyes. The man returns to his seat and the leader asks if there is anyone with mobility issues who wishes to receive prayer for healing? Are there others who feel prompted by the man's words, to ask God for inner or outer healing?

Silence.

Slowly, several people come forward, some seemingly abled bodied, others requiring assistance from friends to make the short journey. Others gather in twos and threes around those seeking prayer, and with a hand lightly placed upon a shoulder or arm, they begin to pray. Some are praying in English, another a known language, others murmuring gibberish quietly. Under the cover of soft music, you hear a few gentle sobs.

"Come, Holy Spirit. Come, Holy Spirit."

You're jolted slightly as one person speaks loudly in an unknown language. The leader immediately asks God to provide an interpretation. After a short pause, a near-by voice calls out, "The lamb who was slain says, 'Pick up your mat and walk'." A person being prayed for, laughs and cries, saying over and over that they have been healed.

This scene above contains many of the phenomena that the New Testament refer to as charismatic gifts. The narrative starts with the more apparently mundane gifts: serving, administration, and helps from the stewards; encouragement, exhortation, and leadership from the worship leader; the community displays faith through the declaration of their faith and the expectation of the Spirit's presence; the sermon may contain gifts of prophesy, words of wisdom or knowledge, and discernment. Later in the service the more unusual gifts become explicit: the speaking of different types of tongues (private whispers to God, audible utterances in unknown languages) and which receive interpretation, gifts of faith and helps cover this time of intercession and free worship as the community aid one another in seeking God's will; and finally, there is a healing. This scene may be repeated, or events may occur in a different order.

b. The Problem of a Definition

One of the central problems in the theology of charismatic gifts has been providing a definition for these phenomena. In the Pauline literature we find sixteen of the seventeen New Testament uses of the term χάρισμα or χάρίσματα, which seems to be a nontechnical term for a range of phenomena. Paul explicitly mentions the various gifts represented in the narrative above, but this list should be taken as representative, rather than as a closed group (Fee 1994, 158–60; Synder 2010, 329–30). As such, it is common to state that “no normative list has ever been given, nor is one needed” for charismatic gifts, and the loose sets of lists we find in the New Testament (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12–14, and Ephesians 4) are sufficient to give us a picture of what kinds of things might be considered gifts without foreclosing the possibility of additional activities not explicitly mentioned (Abraham 2018, 209). There is a lot of wisdom in this approach. However, without some guide ropes for the concept in question, discussions are likely to only foster confusion and discord. A pertinent example is the assumption within cessationism that charismatic gifts are limited to the origins of Christianity because an essential function of the sign-gifts (often the most explicitly supernatural) is to provide evidence for new teaching, and so if they were to occur today this could undermine the sufficiency of Scripture (Ruthven 1993). In order to make progress on these kinds of disagreements, it is necessary for different groups to make their criteria and assumptions about charismatic gifts explicit.⁶

Whilst a clear closed definition of charismatic gifts is desirable, there are two main reasons this has eluded scholars for over two-millennia and will not be resolved in this paper. First, as seen in the example of cessationism above, when approached from a study of the Christian tradition we find that charismatic gifts are an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1969). An essentially contested concept is when the criteria for identifying the concept cannot be agreed upon, even though all parties use the same exemplars as authoritative (i.e. Paul’s indicative lists). In such cases, ambiguity on the definition of a concept will, for good philosophical reasons rather than merely as a result of confusion, persist *ad infinitum*.

Second, when approached with reference to the New Testament text, we find that charismatic gifts are an open concept.⁷ An open concept is where necessary but not sufficient criteria can be stated. Paul’s corrective discussion of the

⁶ I have attempted to offer a definition and criteria elsewhere (Leidenhag, 2021).

⁷ There is no tension between an essentially contested concept and an open concept. To the contrary, W.B. Gallie argued in his pioneering paper, “Essentially Contested Concepts,” that all such concepts are also open concepts (but not all open concepts are essentially contested.) (Gallie 1969, 124-25).

performance of charismatic gifts in some of his churches, most notably in Corinth, provides some necessary criteria such that we can sometimes rule out that what has occurred is a charismatic gift. However, without sufficient criteria we can never be certain that an event is a charismatic gift.⁸ This is why “testing the spirits” or the gift of discernment is so important (I Jn. 4:1). But, since discernment is also a gift, we have no criteria or method outside of the gifts themselves with which we might identify an event as a charismatic gifting. However, this ambiguity does not nullify the usefulness of the concept of charismatic gifts, nor undermine their practice within the church today. Let me briefly explain the minimum necessary criteria, taken from the New Testament, in the context of the aims of this paper.

The term *χάρισμα* can be translated as “a concrete expression of grace, thus a ‘gracious bestowment’” (Fee 1994, 32–3). Importantly, charismatic gifts are gratuitous; a person can neither deserve a charismatic gift, nor gain merit from receiving one, nor conjure a gift through their own will alone. Charismatic gifts are not like superpowers or latent capacities for a Christian spiritual elite. In 1 Cor. 12:7 the *χάρισμα* are explicitly linked with the manifestations of the Spirit in the community (Fee 1994, 29–32, 33–5). Moreover, in 1 Cor. 12:4, 8–11 these phenomena are primarily predicated of the Holy Spirit, rather than the human recipients. This has led some commentators to argue that the gifts not only source their power in the Spirit, but are “a ‘manifestation,’ a disclosure of the Spirit’s activity in [the church’s] midst” (Fee 1994, 164). They reveal the personal agency of the Holy Spirit. Charismatic gifts thus stand-out from the wider nexus of God’s providential and sustaining activities (*contra* Rea 2018: 90–112). Yet, the gifts are not performed by the Spirit alone, but actions performed by the Spirit in and through a receptive *habitus* of human agents (Blankenhorn 2014). If a person enacts a charismatic gift through a receptive *habitus*, then a person can also learn

⁸ For example, baptism and eucharist fulfil the necessary criteria for charismatic gifts discussed below. Although they are not commonly thought of as such, but I see no clear reason why sacraments or other church orders could not be contained within an expanded notion of charismatic gifts, which may help to soften our ecclesial divisions on such issues. William J Abraham, for example, identifies the orders of deacon, presbyter and bishop which provide for order, continuity, and succession across generations as “charismatic gifts in the church.” (Abraham 2018, 210). As far as I can tell, the central difference between commonly cited charismatic gifts and other liturgical group actions such as baptism, eucharist, or ordination is the level of spontaneity and improvisation within the script surrounding such actions, which is discussed further below. However, this is not a clear cut demarcation to provide a useful point of criteria; how much spontaneity moves one into the category of charismatic gift? Could the same type of divine action (say, preaching) then be considered a charismatic gift in one service and not within another, because the preacher spoke extemporaneously or not? It would be wrong (as per The Continuum Fallacy) to conclude from this that a lack of a clear line between charismatic gifts and sacraments means that either concept is useless. The larger question of how charismatic gifts are related to sacraments lies beyond the scope of this paper.

a gift by developing a “increased sensitivity, receptivity and docility” to the Spirit’s will (Yong 2005, 294). This receptive *habitus* may account for particular anointings on individuals, who seem particularly attuned the Spirit’s movements and regularly and reliably enact certain gifts. Charismatic gifts can be learnt, but not earned.

The definition above gives two further criteria for a charismatic gift: first, that it be for the building up of the community and, second, that it occurs in the context of eschatological expectation. The latter does not indicate that one must believe that the final return to Christ is temporally imminent but connotes a receptive and open posture towards the surprising, and hereto unknown, activities of the Spirit which inaugurate the Kingdom of God. Importantly, eschatological expectation locates the gifts within a cosmic narrative of Christian redemption and under the Lordship of Christ (Smith 2010, 44; Albrecht and Howard 2014, 244). To be clear, the main work that this criterion is doing is limiting charismatic gifts to the Christian community for the building up of that particular community. The Spirit may well act in other communities in ways that appear similar to charismatic gifts (such as by performing healings or imparting knowledge), but according to this definition such miraculous or mundane works of the Holy Spirit should not be considered charismatic gifts. So here we have a particular sub-type of Spirit-human activity that has a restricted context and purpose.⁹

One reason for this is that Paul’s overarching argument in 1 Corinthians is that charismatic gifts are given to up-build the Christian community, unifying it into the Body of Christ. This criterion does not restrict the performance of charismatic gifts to the regular times of gathered worship, but it does suggest that corporate worship, when the community is gathered together, is the most appropriate environment for these phenomena. As such, some scholars go so far as to define the church as a “charismatic fellowship”, “essentially charismatic” and, linking with the imagery of the body, “a charismatic organism” (Kärkkäinen 2001; Synder 2010, 328; cf. Küng 1965, 41–61). It is clear that charismatic gifts are a feature of a unified church life, but it is not yet clear exactly how. It is this issue that the remainder of this paper seeks to answer by arguing that charismatic gifts are liturgical (section 2) group actions (section 3).

2. The Liturgical Nature of Charismatic Gifts

The recent “*flowering* in the analytic theology of liturgy” (Smith 2008, 134; Cockayne, 2020) provides philosophical analysis of how liturgical activity

⁹ As described by Paul in 1 Cor. 14: 23-25, this restriction is not incompatible with the idea that gifts may be instrumental in conversion for the unbeliever who comes into the gathered worship of the church.

contributes to the knowledge and love of God in the Christian life. Can charismatic gifts be considered liturgical actions and thus be a source for such ongoing reflection? This section answers in the affirmative. First, I articulate how, like all liturgical practices, charismatic gifts are a semi-scripted activity that immerses participants into the central Christian narrative. In the second section, I suggest that one reason charismatic gifts have not been considered as liturgical activities more frequently is because of the distinctive emphasis on improvisation that these actions demand.

Charismatic churches that explicitly emphasise the role of charismatic gifts within their worship are often (mis-)advertised as a non-liturgical alternative form of church praxis (Cartledge and Swoboda 2017, 2; Vondey 2010, 129). Such a dichotomy relies on a fairly restrictive, if wide-spread, definition of 'liturgy' to refer to a historic, inflexible text, which guides the pattern of worship so as to ensure only limited variation from week to week and place to place. Whilst liturgical studies began as the examination of such texts, there has been an increasing shift to define liturgy in a much wider sense to refer to practical and embodied "rituals of ultimate concern" that are to do with what a person most deeply loves, or as "a way of life" (Smith 2009, 86; Benson 2013, 24). That is, there has been a trend to locate "the embeddedness of liturgy within practices that embrace the whole of life", rather than as one side of a sacred/secular dichotomy (Bradshaw 2019, 785; cf. Schattauer 2007; Bradshaw 1990).

Whilst there may be some benefit to narrating the whole of one's life in terms of worship and liturgy, for the purposes of this paper such an extreme expansion of the term 'liturgy' is unhelpful. Instead, I propose that a 'liturgy' refers to collective activities which follow regulations or correctness-rules. Wolterstorff refers to these rules as the 'script' (Wolterstorff 2015, 4-7). Importantly, this script is distinct from the text or score one follows week to week, and so does not need to be (and rarely is) written down. To be a Christian liturgy, these scripted activities must be ordered towards Christian truth-claims. This is often achieved by connecting participants of the liturgy to the core Christian narrative, and thereby connecting participants to invisible and universal Body of Christ whose narrative this is. So, in this paper, something counts as liturgical if and only if it is a scripted activity within a collective activity of worship that connects participants to the core Christian narrative.

Despite the widening of the field of liturgical theology, charismatic gifts (and the charismatic liturgies which make these explicit) are notably understudied. This is particularly true in the recent literature on analytic theology of liturgy. The pioneers in this field, such as Nicholas Wolterstorff and Terrence Cuneo have focused on liturgical actions and texts from established churches, since these are the liturgical traditions both scholars are most familiar with, able to access for close analysis, seen to carry most weight, and believed to offer the widest range

of liturgical acts (Wolterstorff 2015, 19–20).¹⁰ However, in this preference, they have overlooked charismatic gifts as a feature of Christian liturgy (in any tradition) or the distinctive contribution that traditions which emphasis these gifts might make to liturgical theology.¹¹ Although I cannot fully defend this thesis here, I suspect that if we tarry a little longer we will find that charismatic gifts constitute an important way that believers can immerse themselves within the Scriptural narrative, learn how to engage with God, and become unified into the corporate Body of Christ.

a. Charismata as Liturgical Immersion

The first indication that something liturgical is going on in the reception of charismatic gifts is that these phenomena are not merely mental or doxastic but are a form of embodied church praxis. The reception of charismatic gifts is often accompanied by particular bodily movements or sensations (shaking, swaying, raising hands, etc.). Such actions (including relevant speech–acts) constitute a distinct liturgy that “is enacted by every ‘hands–in–the–air charismatic’ around the world”, even if they would not embrace the term ‘liturgical’ (Cartledge and Swodoba 2017, 6). But it is not merely bodily movements that make a liturgy, but the scripted way these actions are performed such that they immerse participants within a narrative, in this case the Christian narrative and the universal church. In order for charismatic gifts to really function as liturgical actions, they will need to “conscript us into the story” that the liturgy as a whole is telling, “by showing, by performing” the various events within the story (Smith 2009, 109). How is this liturgical conscription typically seen to work? Wolterstorff and Cuneo have both argued that liturgies conscript us into a story through *immersion* (Wolterstorff 1990, 146; Cuneo 2016, 66–87). According to this model, participants “immerse themselves in the core narrative by identifying to some degree or other with its characters and their situations,” and thereby assuming “target roles” (Cuneo 2016, 86). By “target roles”, as opposed to “pretense roles”, Cuneo means that

¹⁰ Wolterstorff even goes as far as to say that “in discussing the theological implications of the acts to be found in the traditional liturgies we are also discussing the acts to be found in these alternative contemporary liturgies, since there are none to be found in the latter that are not to be found in the former.” (Wolterstorff 2015, 20). Whilst I agree that charismatic gifts may manifest in any liturgical setting, the emphasis, space and intentionality given to charismatic gifts in charismatic liturgies (which I take to be Wolterstorff’s main referent when we writes of ‘alternative contemporary liturgies’, given his allusion to “some Pentecostal pastor in Houston”) is distinctive and these practices need to be considered a highly significant aspect of Christian worship throughout the centuries.

¹¹ It is perhaps no coincidence that the same general disparagement and disdain can be found in philosophical aesthetics towards improvisational music and jazz, which is discussed as an analogue to charismatic gifts and worship below (Alperson 2014, 420–421).

participants do not pretend to be Jesus, Mary, Peter or some other character, but to take on the attitude or the posture towards God and others that these characters represent at specific moments of the narrative (Cuneo 2016, 86–87). This is a pedagogical exercise that transforms the participants' relationship to the core Christian narrative: "They are not outsiders to it, onlookers or spectators of its events and characters. Rather, they inhabit the narrative" of Scripture and make it their own self–narrative (Cuneo 2016, 87).

Charismatic gifts immerse recipients into the liturgical narrative in a very similar way. A prominent (but not only) example is the re–enactment of the day of Pentecost through the speaking of tongues, healings, and weekly calls for conversion. This activity of immersive liturgical re–enactment is referred to in Pentecostal theology through the principle: "this–is–that".¹² This well–worn hermeneutical principle in charismatic and Pentecostal circles deliberately and consciously frames a particular, contextual phenomena as an echo or fulfilment of what was promised within Scripture. This framing calls on participants to embody the stance, attitude, or vocation of a character within the core Christian narrative, and then to live–out this role within the liturgical performance and in their daily lives. This is an empowered and truth–seeking "play of the imagination," where self–identity and the identity of the local church is interwoven with both the cosmic biblical narrative of redemption and present–day situations (Vondey 2010, 40–41).

More specifically, speaking in tongues within a contemporary liturgical setting is not to pretend that one is the Apostle Peter speaking tongues to the people of Jerusalem, as if one were retelling a story or performing a drama. For by participating in the charismatic gifts as liturgical rites, a person not only re–enacts biblical scenes of the Spirit's power but participates in the Spirit's power in the present (Yong 2005, 162). Nor is it an activity that takes place in some separate temporal hyper–time or spiritual plane (*contra*, Land 1993, 98). Instead the principle "this–is–that" states that in such activities, participants place themselves in imaginative continuity with Peter and the early church, as well as with the prophecy of Joel and the people of Israel. In this way, the principle "this–is–that" quickly gives way to the profound claim that we–are–they. This associative form of church unity across vast historical and sociological difference is facilitated by the embodied liturgical practice of charismatic gifts, interpreted as a continuation of the Spirit's similar activity witnessed to in the New Testament.

What this indicates is that, as with all liturgies, the use of charismatic gifts within charismatic liturgies remains a "scripted activity" with "tradition–

¹² This hermeneutical principle within Pentecostalism attributed to Aimee Semple McPherson, and recently popularised and defended in Mark Stibbe's account of the Toronto Blessing and Pentecost. McPherson (1923); Stibbe (1998).

specific” principles or “rules for correct liturgical enactment” (Wolterstorff 2018, 13; Wolterstorff 2015, 7, 9). For example, there are appropriate and inappropriate times for certain expressions, movements, words, and engagements with God, and a person must learn such implicit rules to participate well within the collective liturgical worship. If one speaks or acts wrongly then the narrative is disrupted and the participants (not just the individual) are momentarily disengaged from the narrative. The prescribed social practice with even the most apparently disorganised or spontaneous liturgies still represents “a kind of submission to the authorities of one’s tradition” that can “immerse us into the deep stream of the communion of saints,” just as the written scripts of established churches to the core Christian narrative itself (Wolterstorff 2015, 19; 2018, 20; Smith 2013, 77).

Daniel E. Albrecht describes charismatic gifts specifically as “a kind of Pentecostal rite (i.e. a practice or set of actions recognized by the community)” (Albrecht 1992, 115; cf. Albrecht 1999; Lindhardt 2011).¹³ He describes a prophetic “word” or taking up an offering, both of which can occur at a number of different times, as examples of “moveable” rites within the context of a larger liturgy (Albrecht and Howard 2014, 238f). As moveable scripted activities, charismatic gifts allow churches to play around with the “liturgical sequence” and so allow communities to explore different aspects of the core narrative (Cuneo 2016, 66). These gifts, therefore, play a fundamental role in immersing participants in the core narrative by empowering communities to enact (not merely repeat) events found in the core narrative, and to do so in ever novel ways appropriate to the contemporary context. This brings us to the emphasis on improvisation in the enactment of charismatic gifts

b. Charismata as Liturgical Improvisation

All liturgies require some level of improvisation as we respond in real-time to problems, challenges, and opportunities. Bruce Benson suggests that liturgical practice in general is not unlike jazz improvisation where individual players skilfully interweave newly inspired melodies undergirded by tonal patterns and structures to which each player conforms (Benson 2013, 24; cf. Hollenweger 1971–72, 209–211; Rowlands 2019). In liturgy, as with jazz, one must learn the solos of previous masters and be steeped in the genre and tradition in order to perform

¹³ In many Pentecostal churches the enactment of charismatic gifts, and most notably the gift of tongues, is more than a rite – it is a rite of passage. To be clear, the idea that charismatic gifts are a necessary sign of salvation or evidence of a spirit-baptism is not affirmed in this paper. Something can be a ‘rite’ without being a ‘rite of passage’ or necessary practice. It is for this reason that, aside from quotations and particular references to Pentecostal theology, I prefer the broader term, ‘charismatic’.

well or discover new possibilities. Benson writes that to be a “*Christian improviser . . . one must be part of the community of improvisers*” (Benson 2013, 42). As such, improvisation is not often ‘pure,’ but flows out of learnt scripts as seen in the section above (Iyer 2014, 75). As such, the improvisational emphasis within the liturgical enactment of charismatic gifts should not be seen as an individualistic tendency within the activity of charismatic gifts. Instead, the emphasis on improvisation enables unity by allowing one’s own experiences, voice, and activities to be shaped by the community and tradition in which one stands.

A powerful example comes from John Coltrane’s “*Giant Steps*”. It is Coltrane’s deep knowledge of the history, genre, and narrative of jazz that allowed him to create something new; he showed something to be possible that others did not even know to be there (Hagberg 2019). To receive and perform a charismatic gift well, similarly, requires knowledge of the narrative and tradition of Christian worship and empowers a community to respond to God in new ways that were previously unknown. In this way, great jazz is not only the result of artistic creativity but, in the words of Garry Hagberg, it transforms the “*very conditions of creativity.*” (Hagberg 2002, 195) This is precisely how we should understand liturgy, and the place of charismatic gifts in liturgy in particular, as not only the result of a divine–human encounter, but as the Spirit’s means of transforming the very conditions of humanity’s encounter with God.

Whilst pertinent in some respect for all liturgies, the comparison to jazz is particularly helpful for the improvised enactment of charismatic gifts within a liturgy. The skills of musical and spiritual improvisation are similar in that they can only be learnt through participation and imitation. One must learn to really listen, before one can learn to play. Jazz does not have scores, but transcriptions which guide but do not determine a performance. Hence, jazz might also be considered a semi-scripted improvisational activity. The interest lies not in the perfectly accurate recreation of predetermined material (which can be treated with suspicion), but how a performance “*departs from, or adds distinctive interpretative content, to the basic structure of the piece.*” (Hagberg 2002, 189) The goal is to find the changes that communicate something that is at once new, timely and faithful to its predecessors (Alperson 2014, 427–28). This way of learning and creating music makes improvisation and spontaneity central to the genre.

For charismatic gifts, the pedagogical emphasis on improvisation is essential since it allows participants to anticipate and respond to the Spirit’s presence and prompting as experienced through charismatic gifts (Vondey 2010, 43–44). Sometimes this leading of the Spirit might occur in a pre-set time within the liturgical script, comparable to an improvised pre-planned solo section within jazz. At other times, the prompting of the Spirit may take, guide or even interrupt

a section of the liturgical script that was not previously set aside for charismatic gifts. In either setting, explicit interest is often on novelty and what God is doing differently today through the enactment of charismatic gifts, understood to occur in the context of faithfulness to the core narrative and eternal identity of God. As with jazz, one can never predict where the melody or harmonic shifts will go; one can only listen and play along. Charismatic gifts depend upon this same kind of listening to the faithful, yet unpredictable, guidance of the Spirit. Improvisation in the Spirit comes forth from a community as a “community–formed” skill, knowledge and activity that unites a gathered community with the indivisible and universal Body of Christ. As we shall see in the next section, charismatic gifts are not only “community–formed”, but as group actions they are also “community–forming,” in important respects (Vondey 2014, 44).

3. Group–Action: On Predicating Charismatic Gifts of a Community

As semi–scripted improvisational activities of worship empowered by the Holy Spirit, charismatic gifts can be considered a form of liturgical action that enables participants to immerse themselves – interweaving their own stories and identities – into the core Christian narrative. In this final section, I wish to make the stronger and more controversial claim that charismatic gifts are not only liturgical actions but are liturgical *group* actions. Contrary to the idea that charismatic gifts are given to individuals as a kind of superpower, I argue that charismatic gifts are given to and performed by gathered church communities as corporate agents. As group activities, charismatic gifts not only allow individuals to identify with the universal and invisible church, but they are a unifying feature of the local and visible church today.

Corporate agents are groups of individuals that have a structure or decision–making process that allows them to function corporately as a single agent. We speak as if corporate agents exist all the time. For example, we might say that “the conservative government decided to change its policy,” or “the NHS fought against Corvid–19 valiantly.” I want to suggest that we can also speak this way about churches with statements like, “The Vineyard Church has the gift of tongues,” or “Sacred Heart Church has the gift of exhortation.” Just as not all ministers in the conservative government may have voted for the change in policy, not all members of the Vineyard Church may speak in tongues. And yet, in both cases we can still rightly predicate these actions to the whole group and hold the group accountable for these activities.¹⁴

There is already some movement in this direction from within charismatic studies. Simon Chan argues similarly that Spirit–baptism, which is often seen as

¹⁴ For an excellent introduction and defence of group action, agency and accountability see, Tollefsen 2015.

an initiation into some of the gifts, “is first an event of the church” rather than one of an individualized experience (Chan 2000, 99). He suggests that early pioneers such as William Seymour at the Azusa Street Mission (often seen as the birth place of North American Pentecostalism) understood that the out-pouring of charismatic gifts as “the event [that] bring[s] into existence a church which is marked supremely by an all-transcending catholicity,” because the gifts have a unique ability to transcend boundaries of language, gender, class, social-economic status, and race (Chan 2000, 103). Estrelda Y. Alexander similarly reports that in early African American Pentecostalism it was widely held that “[t]he gifts rest in the community, not on any isolated individual”, although any individual member of the community – young child, disabled person, or elder – may be ‘anointed’ by the Spirit and used as the particular vehicle for the Spirit’s action in the community (Alexander 2015, 144–45). As we shall below, one can (and indeed must) affirm particular anointings and roles for individuals, whilst claiming that it is the corporate agency of the gathered church that has and performs the gift of prophecy, the gift of healing, the gift of knowledge. Chan laments that a “basic mistake in Pentecostalism is that this [the collective receiving and enacting of the gifts] has not been more emphasized,” and that this mistake has led to a distortive racial segregation and individualism in many Pentecostal churches (Chan 2000, 99). Only when they are viewed as liturgical group actions can charismatic gifts be the right sort of activities to facilitate unity in the Body of Christ in the manner Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4.

The concept of group liturgical action corresponds to a significant argument within analytic theology of liturgy; namely the idea that various actions within liturgy are performed by gathered communities, rather than by individuals (Cockayne 2018a, 6; Smith 2009, 169). For example, Wolterstorff writes,

The church blesses God, praises God, thanks God, confesses her sins to God, petitions God, listens to God’s Word, celebrates the Eucharist. It’s not the individual members who do these things simultaneously; it’s the assembled body that does these things. (Wolterstorff 2015, 11).¹⁵

It is through such group liturgical actions that the unity of the church is expressed, and perhaps even actualised.¹⁶ By articulating various liturgical

¹⁵ Contrary to this important statement, the majority of Wolterstorff’s work in this area assumes that liturgical actions are performed by individual agents, rather than the group agent of either the gathered or universal church. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

¹⁶ The idea that liturgical worship actualising the church is a point made by Alexander Schemann and J.-J. von Allmen. I am building off this to suggest that liturgical group actions are a way that local church unity (not ecumenical unity) is achieved.

actions as group actions, analytic theologians are speaking of the group (the local church) as an ontologically real and single entity, despite being made up of many members. This seems to mimic Paul's concept of the Body of Christ as a real unity, despite having many different parts. To suggest that charismatic gifts are a form of liturgical group action, then, may necessitate going beyond saying that charismatic gifts are given *for* communities, and instead claiming that charismatic gifts are given *to* and enacted *by* communities as corporate agents.

There are currently two main ways that analytic theologians predicate liturgical action of communities; namely, through shared agency and group agency. In what follows, I will summarise each and briefly evaluate how well these fit a liturgical understanding of charismatic gifts.

a. Charismatic Gifts, Shared Agency, and Collective Intentionality

The model of shared agency is based upon the idea of “collection intentions” or “we-intentions” (Searle 1990, 2010; Bratman 2009). Shared agency arises as a result of the collective intentions of multiple individuals to act cooperatively, in a context where individuals take for granted that others are acting co-operatively with them such as in group singing or an orchestral performance. According to Cuneo, we must be “intentional co-participants in the performance of the action” for a liturgical action, such as communal singing, to be predicated of us, rather than of you or me (Cuneo 2016, 136). For this to be successful, it is not only that we must share a common goal, but our intended actions for achieving this goal (our sub-intentions) must “*mesh* ‘in the sense that they are co-realizable’” (Wolterstorff 2018, 60; Bratmann 2009, 48). That is, we each have to play a complementary role and often perform different actions (rather than all competing to be the leader or the soloist) for the shared action to be successfully achieved. This meshing of intentions is achieved through “mutual responsiveness”, which co-ordinates between the different roles that individuals take-on in order to achieve the overall collective act (Wolterstorff 2018, 60, 62; Bratmann 2009, 53). Thus, one person may speak (pray, preach, read the Scripture, etc.) and others may silently pray with the speaker, listen, raise their hands, etc., and by responding to each other in how they perform these sub-intentions, they together achieve the collective intention of performing the liturgy.

Imagine a church where there is a pre-established agreement that the public speaking in tongues must be accompanied by an interpretation. So, when a person speaks in tongues loud enough for the whole congregation to hear, it is because they believe that the Spirit will grant an interpretation to another member of the community. They have, therefore, performed an action in a context where they take it for granted that someone will respond and act

cooperatively with them. The congregation then wait for the Holy Spirit to grant an interpretation. The interpretation is received and shared. Here we have a number of sub-intentions, each of which is an act of shared agency between the individual and the Holy Spirit, that is performed in a coordinated fashion to bring about a shared action between multiple members of the congregation, in this case a word of knowledge or prophecy. A similar story might be told of other gifts, such as healing.

One advantage of this intentionality based model of shared agency is that it can be easily linked with the growing literature in analytic theology on joint attention and second-personal knowledge of God. Joint attention is “when one is engaged in an act of attending to something and in doing so is consciously coordinating with another on what both will attend to” (Green 2009, 459–60). Examples can be as simple as when one person points to an object to draw another person’s gaze towards the same object, or more complex such as when a group are playing a board game together. Joint attention has been used in recent analytic theology to distinguish between propositional knowledge and second-personal knowledge; that is, knowledge that comes only from relationship between persons (divine and human). When two or more people engage in joint attention together then they gain some second-personal knowledge; that is, they get to know one another.

When a group is co-ordinating their intentions and actions in this way in order to enact a gift, they are participating in triadic joint attention between themselves, the charismatic gift, and God. Adam Green describes how joint attention with God might result in a charismatic gift, as “a triadic experience, for example, by the divine showing a prophet the fate of a nation” (Green 2009, 462). If seen as a form of joint attention, charismatic gifts may be a means of gaining second-personal knowledge of the Holy Spirit as well as of fellow human participants, which enables greater unity within the gathered community. For example, if a person receives a word of knowledge from the Holy Spirit regarding another member of the congregation (which is a bit like God is asking them to pass on a message), then the recipient is engaging in triadic attention by both listening and attending to the Holy Spirit who is directing their attention towards another person. The same might be said for preaching, healing, or various acts of service. To draw again upon the analogy to dramatic and musical improvisation, Vijay Iyer argues that improvisation depends upon both the listener’s and performer’s ability for joint attention and empathy, which gives rise to a “shared sense of time” and “a sense of mutual embodiment,” between performers and observers (Iyer 2014, 80; cf. Hagberg 2014). When transposed into a liturgical key, this shared sense of time may be viewed as either the immersive performance of past events within the liturgical narrative, or the shared expectation of the coming kingdom where participants share a sense of eschatological temporal suspension,

the now-and-not-yet. Similarly, the sense of mutual embodiment can be interpreted as the forming of this group into a single body, the Body of Christ.

The concept of collective intentionality holds a high-level of promise for articulating how it is that charismatic gifts are liturgical group actions. However, these intentionality accounts are also limited in a few ways. One danger of emphasising particular psychological capacities of intentionality and joint attention is that it implies the primacy of the human agent's capacities, and only secondarily considers the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing about these actions. As stated in the first section of this paper, charismatic gifts are primarily actions of the Holy Spirit, received as a gracious gift and performed by a receptive community. Moreover, as Cockayne warns, it is important for the inclusivity of the Church that everyone, even those whose age or neurology make them unable to form the appropriate shared intentions, can participate in a liturgy in some way and be considered full members of the church (Cockayne 2018b).

Furthermore, Benson has raised the concern that analytic philosophers tend to give an overly homogenous or harmonious view of liturgy, and instead suggest that sometimes liturgies can be fruitfully dissonant (Benson 2013, 94). This suggests that liturgies can be successful even when individual intentions are, in fact, not 'meshing' smoothly. If we only speak of church unity in terms of shared agency, then the dissonant or non-meshing intentions of individuals would consist in a failure of the church to act as a group and perform the liturgy successfully. Collective intentionality is easy to achieve in smaller numbers, say groups with less than ten members, but becomes very difficult to maintain in larger groups, as in many church gatherings (ranging, say, from 30–300). What we need is an account of the corporate agency that does not *solely* rely on the neurology and right intentions of each and every individual member. Thus, shared agency needs to be supported by further apparatus. In order to maintain group unity in action there needs to be organisational structures in place.

b. Charismatic Gifts, Group Action and Organisational Structure

Instead of drawing on the psychological literature on intentionality and joint-attention, Cockayne examines the recent philosophical work on group-agency. This literature explores how businesses, governments, organisations and other large collectives can be considered agents and held responsible for their actions, even when individual members may disagree with or be unaware of how their actions are contributing to the whole (List and Pettit, 2011). Due to the spontaneity and improvisation of charismatic gifts, it is commonly the case that an individual is unsure how the internal prompting – their testimony, word of knowledge, unknown tongue, or other charismatic gift – will be received, responded to, or contribute to the life of the community, but trust in the (often

hidden) unifying action of the Holy Spirit. Unity is achieved not only by the individual participant's intentionality, which requires that each person knows something of how their gifts are contributing to the whole liturgy. Instead, it is through the internal and external promptings of the Holy Spirit (functioning as a kind of "system-level feedback" centre) that the actions of the members are united (Pettit 2010, 261; Cockayne 2019, 118).¹⁷ The concept of group action allows for charismatic gifts to enable church unity even if the individuals themselves are not fully aware of how their various activities of speaking, praying, listening, receiving, affirming, dancing, clapping, or hand-raising are contributing to the overall liturgy.

List and Pettit argue that the criteria for group agency does not require anything "heavily metaphysical," given the correct functional and organisational structures. Thus, without positing the emergence of a group-mind, groups can have representational states or 'beliefs', motivational states or 'desires', and the capacity to 'act' in their environment to bring these 'beliefs' and 'desires' about (List 2018, 297–98; Pettit 2010). Whilst some metaphysical weirdness or mystery is not an *a priori* problem in articulations of church unity, our model needs to also cope with the individual differences and liturgical dissonances that occur within the church. On List's and Pettit's account whether a church counts as an agent depends on its organizational structure and not (as in joint-agency describe above) solely upon the intentions of the individual participants (List and Pettit 2011, 60–79). Again, this can be made to fit with Paul's image of the church as the Body of Christ, since human bodies require the parts of the body to be structured and organised just right if co-operative action is to become a single group action. Importantly for the present discussion, this means that organizational structure is not anathema or stifling to the gifts of the Spirit, but is a way for the Spirit's anointing of individuals to reach beyond that individual and unify the church into a corporate agent who as a group can receive and enact various gifts.

List's and Pettit's account of group-agency describes two ways that an individual may contribute to a group action; an active role and an authorizing action. How might the account of group-agency help unpick charismatic gifts as a group-activity? In charismatic liturgies, a person might play an authorizing role (e.g., silent prayer, praying in tongues under one's breath, saying 'Amen', raising one's hands, clapping, or kneeling), or an individual may play an active role on behalf of the group (e.g., giving a word or picture from God to the whole congregation, praying on behalf of the whole congregation to God, laying hands on a person for anointing or healing). Importantly, this structure is not a static hierarchical one. Participants can switch between active roles or authorising roles

¹⁷ What it means to have the Spirit acting as a kind of system-level feedback in this context is that the Spirit is co-ordinating the action of different members, and guiding each person's actions in a way that is sensitive to and unifies the actions of the whole group.

frequently. So long as there are roles for all participants, then group agency is achieved regardless of the particular polity of the denomination.

In some churches, particular gifts are reserved for ordained or anointed individuals. In recognising such anointings or ordinations, other church members are playing an authorizing role in that individual's ministry. In the act of authorizing an individual to represent them, the community performs a collective act of discernment that the Spirit is speaking to or moving in the congregation through this representative. In other churches anyone can (in theory at least) respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit at a given time and take on an active role, which again must be authorized by other members or leaders. In such churches, participants step in and out of active and authorizing roles more frequently, and at points the two roles may overlap (such as in the act of anointing itself). However, in all churches at least some charismatic gifts (i.e., encouragement and helps) are open to all believers. Discerning and responding to who is in an active role and who is in an authorizing role at any one given time requires practice in the kind of improvisational responsiveness to both the Spirit and one's fellow participants to achieve well.

In any case, the structure achieved by these different roles means that we can say that the individual who is playing the active role is not the primary recipient of the gift, but the gift is given to the community that this individual is representing. In this way one's fellow congregants may serve as " 'icons' . . . so that an the appearance of individualism is belied by the actual group-based ritual-engendered" spirituality of charismatic gifts (Bregman 2001, 140). The participation of every member of the community is central to the reception of charismatic gifts. According to Albrecht and Howard, the "emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and particularly the place of the gifts of the Spirit, obliges Pentecostals to understand themselves less as an ordered structure and more as a fluid, co-participating organism" where participating in the shared charismatic gifts is a central means of participating in the body of Christ (Albrecht and Howard 2014, 243; Suurmond 1994, 23).

Due to the fluidity of these roles and the ultimate reliance on the Holy Spirit's action, it is not the case that by authorizing one person to be a temporary representative the group is in fact a redundant concept (Cockayne 2019, 109). The unity of the group is not solely found in the singularity of the one representative, since there may be many representatives at any one time and who they are may change rapidly. The unity is found not in any one human representative, but in the one Spirit who is the primary agent of the charismatic gifts, which are received and enacted by the community in their various and changing roles (Cockayne 2018, 470; Cockayne 2018b, 471). By emphasising the Spirit's *agency* as co-ordinating and unifying liturgical group actions, this theory of ecclesial unity does not reduce the Person of the Holy Spirit into an impersonal force or

collective glue (Cockayne 2019, 114). Instead, unity is achieved because the gifts are actions of the one Spirit through the gathered community. The unity between individuals to perform a group action, and so be a single 'body', is not achieved automatically or by human will alone, it is achieved through a learnt and practiced responsiveness that facilitates empowered actions. As Pettit emphasises, groups, "do not emerge without effort; group agents are made, not born." (Pettit 2010, 253). Charismatic gifts are one important way that the Spirit makes, builds-up, and unifies the Body of Christ.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the opaque connection between charismatic gifts and church unity in 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 is illuminated if these gifts are viewed as a form of liturgical group action. It was seen that charismatic gifts are a part of the improvised script of Christian worship, that conscripts individual and group narrative identities into the cosmic narrative that centres upon the incarnation of Christ and the sending of the Spirit. In this sense, charismatic gifts are liturgical. Already it can be seen how charismatic gifts may contribute to the unity of the church through the formation of a collective identity amongst the universal and invisible church. To fully understand the unifying nature of charismatic gifts, however, I argued that charismatic gifts are not only rites performed by individuals within a larger liturgical setting but are group-acts. Charismatic gifts are not merely given to and performed by individuals for the good or building-up of a group but are given to the church as a group to receive and perform together. Charismatic gifts are one way that the church learns, guided by the Spirit's prompting, to act together as the Body of Christ.

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