

FAITH

Charismatic Misreadings

Romans 12:3 The Measure of Faith?

What is meant by the phrase “measure of faith” in Romans 12:3 is of great significance to the Charismatic Faith & Prosperity movement as they use this to support the claim that every Christian is given the same amount of the faith of God. It is a common interpretation voiced in Charismatic circles but is that what Paul wanted to communicate? Let’s look at it together. I begin by providing some overall context to the Faith & Prosperity Gospel interpretation and then I move on to give three reasons for a better interpretation. We conclude by discussing another possible option and whether there is anything to gain from the Faith & Prosperity Gospel’s reading. Grab yourself some coffee—or, better yet, some tea—and let’s start.



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For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man **the measure of faith.**

Romans 12:3 King James Version

There is a web of interconnected teachings of faith in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel movement—what faith is, how faith comes, how to grow faith, how to release faith, and so on—but they all somehow relate to a few fundamental convictions and a set of key Scriptures. Romans 12:3 is one of those verses that serve as a fixed point in the world of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel.

"For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man **the measure of faith.**" (Romans 12:3 KJV, emphasis added)

Why is this text so important? And why is so much teaching based on the idea that it says "the measure"? To



understand what is going on, we need to know a bit of the context of the Charismatic Word of Faith teachings. First, it is essential to know that this text is read out of their conviction that faith is a spiritual substance, a supernatural power, or a force. In other words, faith is something in and of itself. And this power of faith is something that God also has, uses, and expects all His children to operate in as well. Because their fundamental assumption is that faith is something in and of itself, it makes perfect sense to ask the secondary question of how we can get a hold of this substance of faith. Romans 12:3 in the King James Version provided (what was thought to be) the answer, namely, that every believer already has "the measure of faith". In other words, God has given every Christian the same amount of faith. What is left is to nurture faith by listening to the Word of God and releasing faith through words and actions.

If you haven't thought much about the Charismatic Word of Faith teachings, their emphasis on what faith is might not cause you to raise an eyebrow. However, a closer look will reveal that there are some fundamental biblical problems mixed up in what they teach about faith. I have addressed some key problems in other teachings that you are welcome to check out. Here, I want to test whether their interpretation of Romans 12:3 as saying that every believer has the same amount of faith is a biblically sound and valid reading.

Again, you might wonder what difference it makes to read Paul as saying either "the measure of faith" or "a measure of faith". Is that not nitpicking, like scholastic theologians of history past who argued about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin? Well, no. To put it simply: if all believers start out life with the exact same amount of faith, that means the only reason why some are successful and others struggle, why some are sick and others well, why some are wealthy and others live in lack, why some have mega-ministries while others only pastor a handful of sheep, all come back to this one point: those who struggle haven't made their measure of faith grow and haven't used it correctly. Success or failure, therefore, all hinges on us, and how well we have stewarded the measure God gave us. From this perspective, the only thing that really distinguishes believers is how much effort they put into their faith life.

While this is not the place to unpack the problems with this view (I do that in other places), it should at least be noted that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's teachings on faith are an oversimplification that doesn't do justice to the biblical message of the life of faith nor our lived reality. The movement is also making a categorical mistake when they claim that faith is a substance.

All of what the Faith & Prosperity Gospel says about faith is (of course) not misleading. In fact, there is a number of things to be happy about. Yet there are some fundamental mistakes done with a handful of thematic Scriptures that make believers head into blind alleys. The misreading of Romans 12:3 is one of those. It is therefore important to study this text seriously.

Where I Come From

I have sat under a lot of Charismatic teachings on faith with a willing heart to understand. Later I taught and preached the same messages. But at one point I identified problems with certain interpretations that just don't fit the biblical message.

I have worked several years with the Greek original texts of the New Testament and researched Bible translation problems. Apart from my doctorate in theology, I hold two masters' degrees in the New Testament. That doesn't mean, of course, that I am 100% correct in what I'm saying but it means that what I share here is more than just opinions or loose ideas. All I ask is that you take my comments seriously and reflect on them while it is up to you to make up your mind as to what you believe the Bible actually says.

Three Reasons

I will present three reasons why "a measure of faith" is the better interpretation. The meaning is well captured in the following translation made by the New Testament scholar James Dunn: "each has been given some measure of faith".¹ We will start by considering the Greek text, then we will look at the verse and its closest parallel texts and

μέτρον
πίστεως

"Each has been given some measure of faith"

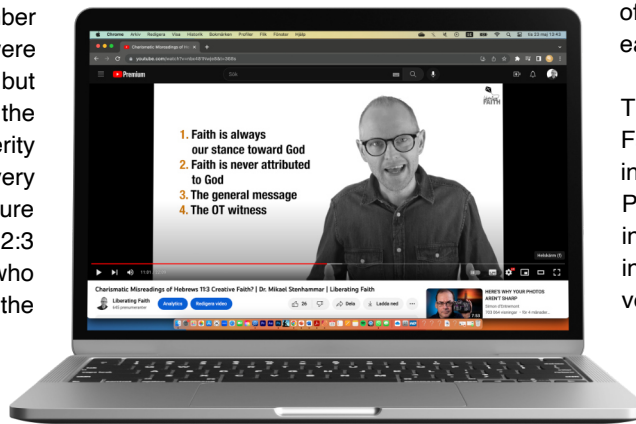
James Dunn



finally the larger passage of Romans where this text is situated.

#1 The Original Greek

When you seek to interpret a Bible verse one helpful way is to start to cross out interpretations that you easily spot as improbable. Once you have done so, you have started to draw closer to what it possibly means. Following this route, I will start by pointing out that Romans 12:3 does not say “the measure of faith”. There you have it. You can stop here and do something else if you want. It is a misleading rendering by the King James translators (we remember that the biblical authors were inspired by the Spirit but translators cannot claim the same). The Faith & Prosperity Gospel’s claim that every believer has the same measure of faith based on Romans 12:3 simply won’t do. Anyone who takes a little trouble to check the Greek text, even with the use of concordance or an interlinear, will find that the original Greek text says “a measure of faith” rather than “the measure of faith”.



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Let me show you why it should be translated “a measure” and not “the measure because the Greek text does not use the definite article (“the”) before “measure”. Here is how the original text works. The phrase “a measure of faith” literally says this:

metron *pisteos*
measure **(of) faith**

Notice that there is no article before *metron*. It is important to remember that Greek doesn’t have a word corresponding to the English indefinite article “a”, so when a noun is indefinite the definite article is simply left out. This is why it should be “a measure” and not “the measure”.

Had Paul wanted to say “the measure” in the definite form, he would have added the Greek article *to*, something which the apostle knew very well how to do. Paul did exactly that in Ephesians 4:7: “But unto every one of us is given grace according to **the measure** [*to metron*] **of the**

gift of Christ [*tes doreas tou Christou*]” (KJV, emphasis added). This is how it looks:

to *metron* *tes* *doreas*
the **measure** **the** **gift**

tou *Christou*
the **(of) Christ**

Notice here that Paul wanted to communicate “measure” in the definite form (“the measure”) and therefore added the Greek article *to* (see also 2 Cor. 10:13). And that is how the King James Version renders it too. So, in short, if Paul wanted to say “*the* measure of faith” in Romans 12:3 he could easily have done so.

Those who want to support the Faith & Prosperity Gospel interpretation could point out that Paul does use the definite article in verse 6 which seems to include a parallel thought to verse 3:

“Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in **proportion to our faith**” (Romans 12:6 NKJV, emphasis added)

In Greek it says:

ten analogian *tes pisteos*
the proportion **(of) the faith**

James Dunn, an authority on Paul, makes these helpful points in his commentary on Romans:

“[the phrase] describes how the prophet functions, or, more precisely, how the act of prophecy comes about—that is, by the prophet speaking forth in proportion to his faith = his dependence on God (the usual sense of [*pistis/faith*] throughout Romans).”²

In other words, just because “proportion” is in the definite case shouldn’t make us think that everyone has the same proportion. If that was true, why would Paul even use the term proportion which by itself indicates that there are differences of faith.



#2 The Message of the Verse

Forgetting the technicalities of Greek grammar, considering the message of the verse is enough to see that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's interpretation is improbable. Let's look at it from the New King James Version:

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one **a measure of faith**. (Romans 12:3 NKJV, emphasis added)

Notice how Paul starts by pointing out the grace given him. This indicates that Paul considers himself having a certain grace from the Holy Spirit that not everyone else shares. That is, the grace, anointing or spiritual gift—whatever you want to call it—on Paul's life was not equally shared among the believers. You might say it this way, that Paul has a certain measure of grace and it is through this measure that he addresses the believers. So, since he starts off by acknowledging different measures of grace, it makes sense that he then connects that with different measures of faith.

Also, Paul's overall aim is to nurture humility resulting in unity. Humility is based on thinking in line with the reality of God's giftings of grace and faith. Humility doesn't come from everyone having equal gifts but from living within the sphere God has assigned. And that brings me to the closest parallel text in 2 Corinthians:

We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits [*to metron*] of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. (2 Corinthians 10:13 NKJV)

This text is interesting, not only because Paul uses the same Greek word *metron* with the definite article *to*, but more importantly because the message itself pertains to how apostles have been apportioned different spheres of ministry. The idea of different giftings of grace and faith by the Spirit for different spheres of ministry seems to be the message both here and in our text in Romans. This message resonates well with how Paul speaks about the Spirit distributing gifts according to His will in other places (see 1 Cor. 12:4–11). It is worth noting that scholars

believe Paul wrote Romans while in Corinth, a church that clearly struggled to maintain unity amidst the diversity of gifts.

Scholars whose field of research is Paul also point to another parallel text to Romans 12:3, namely 1 Corinthians 7:17 (NKJV): "But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches." The point made here is that God distributes His grace and gifts differently, and it is the responsibility of every believer to live and serve accordingly. This message is also echoed by Peter in 1 Peter 4:10 (NKJV): "As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

Craig Keener, the well-respected New Testament scholar, writes that the measure of faith "refers not to a given amount of faith but rather faith for a given ministry in the body (12:6–8)."³ Ben Witherington, another giant among New Testament experts, makes the following comment that is in line with our reading: "'Faith' here does not refer to saving faith but to some particular or special kind of faith, such as faith for healing and the like (see 1 Corinthians 13), faith that gives one the power to do special things."⁴

From these considerations about the verse and its parallel texts, it is safe to conclude that the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's interpretation of Romans 12:3 represents a reading of a foreign meaning into the text rather than faithfully drawing it out.

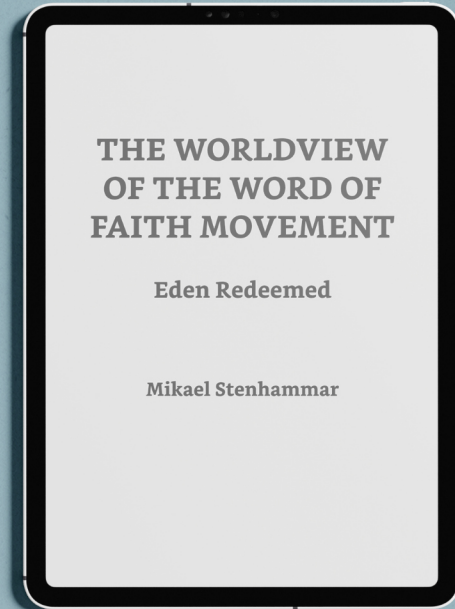
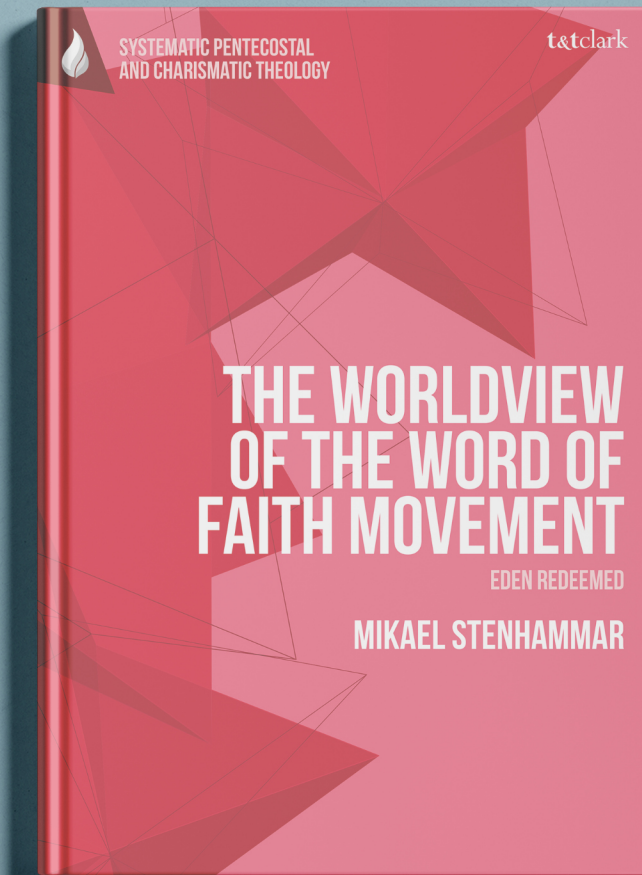
#3 The Larger Context

The phrase "a measure of faith" is part of the larger argument Paul is making in Romans 12:3–8.

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, **as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith**.⁴ For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function,⁵ so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.⁶ Having then **gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us**, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in **proportion**

God gives different believers different faith for different gifts, all for the blessing of the one church.





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William Atkinson, London School of Theology, UK

"This is a critically important book from someone once intimately involved in the Word of Faith movement. Stenhammar explains this growing worldwide movement by reference to its worldview, while being acutely aware of its inherent dangers. Essential reading for anyone looking for a comprehensive understanding."

Allan H. Anderson, University of Birmingham, UK

to our faith;⁷ or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; ⁸he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:3–8 NKJV, emphasis added)

There is much to say about this passage, but for our present concern, it is sufficient to emphasize Paul's overall desire to see harmony among the believers. His main aim in writing this letter is to create unity between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish believers in Rome. He wants to ensure that God's gifts do not become causes of pride and division.

The diversity of gifts of grace and faith should serve the unity of the body of Christ; unity in diversity is his overarching message. Since Paul's exhortation for unity is based on the recognition that God distributes gifts differently, it makes little sense to argue for the Faith & Prosperity Gospel interpretation that everyone has the same amount of faith.

Another point of interest is that Paul closely connects faith with the empowering grace for ministry that believers have received. It is not about a certain amount of faith given to every believer, but rather there is a measure of faith for serving the body of Christ. He emphasizes the intertwined relationship between faith and grace, not only in our verse but also in verse 6: "Having then gifts differing according to the **grace** that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our **faith**" (NKJV, emphasis added). From this we learn that gifts function, like everything else in the kingdom of God, by grace **through** faith (see Eph. 2:8).

The point Paul is making is simple and powerful: God gives different believers different faith for different gifts, all for the blessing of the one church. Of central importance is to recognize that God is the wellspring of all grace and faith. That we must recognize God as the ultimate source is a point that Paul drove home with force in the verses just preceding chapter 12:

"For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?" ³⁵"Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?" ³⁶For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:34–12:1 NKJV)

A point I believe Paul is making is that we are to live in the reality of knowing that we are not the source. As Paul said elsewhere:

For who makes you differ from another? **And what do you have that you did not receive?** Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Corinthians 4:7 NKJV, emphasis added)

Because God is the source of all gifts through faith there are no grounds for personal boasting (a key theme in Romans).

James Dunn helps us again to understand what Paul is after. His comments serve as a good summary:

"throughout the letter Paul uses this key word [faith/*πιστις*] of the human act and attitude of believing, as the means through which God effects his saving work...This trust, which is the common denominator of all Christians (= believers), Paul clearly sees as variable in different believers (4:19–20; 14:1)...Here there is no sharp distinction in fact between 'saving faith' and 'miracle-working faith' (as in 1 Cor 12:9). Both indicate that measure of reliance on God which enables *charis* [grace] to come to expression in *charisma* [gifts]. It is the confident trust in God which recognizes that all faith and grace is from God which prevents the misjudgment of [pride]."⁵

What About "The Faith"?

Before we close this study, it is important to point out that there is a group of scholars who, despite the lack of a definite article in Greek, prefer to interpret Romans 12:3 as Paul somehow implying a shared measure of faith equal among all believers. Their argument, drawing from the motif of unity, is that the one faith shared among all believers is the standard by which we are to measure ourselves and thus giving no ground for pride. The distinguished exegete Douglas Moo represents this view in his commentary on Romans: "It is that faith which believers have in common as fellow members of the body of Christ that Paul here highlights as the standard against which each of us is to estimate himself."⁶

You can be sure what something doesn't mean without having to provide the right answer at the same time.



This kind of interpretation would be the main reason for the New International Version's rendering:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, **in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you** (Romans 12:3 NIV, emphasis added)

The New Living Translation makes the same choice:

Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, **measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us** (Romans 12:3 NLT, emphasis added)

What these translations do is to interpret Paul as saying that to avoid pride, we are to measure ourselves "by the standard of our God-given faith" (footnote in NLT).

Though this might at a first glance look as a support of the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's interpretation, the scholars who contend for this interpretation would still disagree because their focus is on the faith and *not* on the measure. They interpret faith as the common content of the Christian faith, the faith that is believed by all Christians, i.e., the gospel. That is, their interest is not in the quantity but in the quality and content of the Christian faith. So, this reading, though exegetically weaker in my opinion, still stands apart from the measure of the faith of God as the Faith & Prosperity Gospel would have it.

We must not feel pressured to settle on what exactly Paul meant. We are not obliged to provide a watertight interpretation of any text just because we identify how a Faith & Prosperity Gospel interpretation is misleading. This is, in fact, a very liberating truth: you can be sure what a verse does *not* mean without having to know what it actually means. How so? For example, I can be absolutely certain that 137.93 divided by 22.8 does not equal 1. Of that, I am a hundred percent certain. But to find the right answer, I need to do some hard calculations. This simple point illustrates that you can be sure what something doesn't mean without having to provide the right answer at the same time.

I don't know if that is such a blessed insight to you as it was for me because when I started to see problems with how some Bible verses were interpreted in the Faith & Prosperity Gospel, I used to get the thought in my head, "Ok, so what does it mean then, genius?" Such thoughts often paralyzed me and hindered me from moving onward because I was not able to establish what they meant, only that some interpretations were impossible. Also, in discussing verses with friends, they sometimes expressed similar attitudes. The underlying assumption was that you shouldn't say something is wrong unless you can also provide a better alternative. But that's not the case.

Any Baby in the Bathwater?

Is there anything we can gain from the Faith & Prosperity Gospel's understanding that God has gifted every believer the same amount of faith, and now it is up to us to make this faith grow? Leaving behind all the misunderstandings about what faith is and misguided assumptions about how faith works that are wrapped up in their interpretation, we can, at least, say that they are right to point out our responsibility in nurturing faith and that faith doesn't remain strong automatically. We cannot just lean back and say, "If God wants me to have strong faith, in His sovereignty He'll make sure I'll get it." That's not the life of faith. What we need to learn from Abraham—whom Paul already spoke about in chapter 4 of Romans—is that he was active in keeping his faith in God strong (4:18–21). That is our calling too, and our human agency in the life of faith is something which the Faith & Prosperity Gospel gets perfectly right.

Main Takeaways

To summarize what we have covered: The original Greek of Romans 12:3 simply says "a measure of faith," and there is to my knowledge no convincing argument to be held in support of "the measure of faith" interpretation.

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel interpretation derives from a conviction that faith is something in and of itself, a spiritual substance or force that God Himself has and which He has shared with every believer in equal

The Faith & Prosperity Gospel interpretation derives from a conviction that faith is something in and of itself.



