

“SPIRITUAL GIFTS” OR “SPIRITUAL PERSONS”? 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1A REVISITED

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Abstract

The precise meaning of τῶν πνευματικῶν has engendered much discussion among scholars. Whereas many translations and commentaries view it as a reference to “spiritual gifts” which presumably would have constituted the subject of enquiry from the Corinthian Church, there are strong indications that, given the rhetorical tone of this intriguing letter, a more viable interpretation and translation of the genitive plural πνευματικῶν would be “spiritual persons”. This paper suggests that rather than assign this alternative interpretation/translation in parentheses or footnotes, as some versions and commentaries have done,¹ πνευματικῶν in the sense of “spiritual persons” should be the substantive rendering in the main text. It is being further argued that we can make a case for the creative use of πνευματικῶν as a sort of double-edged rhetorical tool aimed at addressing an ecstatically inclined elite within Corinth that tended to place a high premium on the special manifestation of “spiritual phenomena”.

1. The Various Uses of πνευματικός in the NT Corpus

As an adjective derived from πνεῦμα (spirit, wind, breath) which in the Septuagint (LXX) mainly translates the Hebrew *ruach*, πνευματικός cannot be attested in any Greek version of the OT. The Liddell-Scott Greek lexicon outlines its various shades of meaning in classical Greek literature, which

1 These versions include: RSV and NRSV; Lang’s translation in his commentary (1994, 162) keeps both in the main text, putting “spiritual gifts” in parentheses: Was aber die geistlichen Menschen (oder die Geistesgaben) betrifft,... Wolff (1996, 282) is even more explicit in translating the verse as follows: Was aber die Pneumatiker betrifft, Geschwister, (so)... Ellis (1974, 129) also presents it as ‘spiritual’ gifts (or persons) in the main body of his interesting article.

includes: wind or air, breathing and exhaling. The only non-biblical usage of the word in a spiritual sense occurs in Plutarch (*Vitae Parallelae* 2.129c). This word features in the NT context as a pointer to that which either manifests/ embodies the spirit/Spirit, or pertains/ belongs to the realm of the spirit/Spirit. But it can also feature as a masculine noun referring to “the spiritual person” or as a neuter noun referring to “spiritual things”. The focus of our present investigation is to examine whether Paul in 1 Cor 12:1 intends the neuter (with the implied meaning “gifts” and parallel to *χαρίσματα* in verse 4)² or the masculine plural (with the meaning “spiritual people”)³.

Of the twenty six occurrences of *πνευματικός* in the New Testament,⁴ embracing both its adjectival and nominal forms, twenty four are used in a Pauline/Deutero-Pauline context⁵, being distributed across Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians. The remaining two are found in 1 Peter, where the author employs them to develop his theology of *βασιλείον ἱεράτευμα* in relation to the addressees. Significantly, fifteen of the twenty-four Pauline occurrences are located in 1 Corinthians, an indication of the special role this word plays in Paul’s discourse with the Corinthian Church.

2 Robinson (1972, 54) quite rightly points out: “There is no expression in the Greek New Testament which can be literally rendered “gifts of the Spirit”. ” See however texts such as Acts 2:38 and 10:45 where there is reference to “the gift of the Holy Spirit”: ἡ δωρεὰ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος Baker (1974, 225) interestingly proposes an alternative translation of *χάρισμα* as “gift of grace” which, in line with Pauline rhetorics, may well point to the source of the gift rather than its nature. Within the Greek NT, the only explicit qualification of *χάρισμα* with the adjective “spiritual” occurs in Rom 1:11 where there is reference to Paul imparting some *χάρισμα πνευματικόν*= “spiritual gift” to his addressees. Scholars who interpret the genitive plural *πνευματικῶν* (1 Cor 12:1) as a reference to “spiritual gifts” therefore base their interpretation on clues from the entire context of 1 Cor 12-14.

3 The issue as to whether τῶν πνευματικῶν in 1 Cor 12:1 should be interpreted as a reference to “spiritual people” cannot also be readily resolved from a philological perspective, considering the ambiguity of the genitive plural expression.

4 The texts are: Rom 1:11; 7:14; 15:27; 1 Cor 2:13 (x2); 2:15; 3:1; 9:11; 10:3; 10:4 (x2); 12:1; 14:1; 14:37; 15:44 (x2); 15:46 (x2); Gal 6:1; Eph 5:19; 6:12; Col 1:9; 3:16; 1 Pet 2:5 (x2).

5 As Painter (1982, 237) puts it: “The word, not found in any Greek version of the Old Testament, is almost a Paulinism.”

1.1. Adjectival Uses of πνευματικός

Paul communicates with the Church in Rome regarding his desire to visit them ἵνα τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικόν Rom1:11 (in order that I may impart to you some spiritual gift).

This statement specifies the nature of the gift Paul wishes to impart as being intrinsically spiritual, since it derives from the Spirit controlling Paul’s own life. The Law’s intrinsic spiritual nature is also expressed as follows: οἴδαμεν γὰρ ὅτι ὁ νόμος πνευματικός ἐστίν Rom 7.14 (For we know that the law is spiritual) This is brought in sharp contrast to the carnal nature of the human being of which Paul is a representative: ἐγὼ δὲ σάρκινός εἰμι.

With the aid of rabbinic exegesis, Paul also develops in 1 Cor 10:1-5 an allegorically-loaded *midrash* on the exodus wanderings of the Israelites under Moses’ leadership. Particularly in 1 Cor 10:3-4, he uses the language of the Lord’s Supper to reinterpret the providential feeding of the Israelites as a truly supernatural event. That which they ate and drank are both described as being spiritual in nature: πνευματικὸν βρῶμα = spiritual food (v3) and πνευματικὸν πόμα = spiritual drink (v4).

In his classic discussion of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15, Paul describes the resurrection body as a spiritual entity: ἐγείρεται σῶμα πνευματικόν which will replace/succeed the natural body: σῶμα ψυχικόν (1 Cor 15:44). This point is reinforced by 1 Cor 15:46 where πνευματικόν is used twice, just as in 15:44.

The writer to Ephesians also views the holistic heavenly blessing that he and the addressees have obtained from God in Christ as something highly spiritual: ἐν πάσῃ εὐλογίᾳ πνευματικῇ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις (Eph 1:3); he urges the addressees, as Spirit-controlled people, to cultivate appropriate worship/fellowship habits, including the singing of “spiritual songs”: ᾠδαῖς πνευματικαῖς (Eph 5:19). This same request is made by the author of Colossians (3:16) who earlier prays that his addressees may be filled, among others, with “spiritual understanding”: ἐν...συνέσει πνευματικῇ (Col 1:9).

As a holy priestly community, the addressees of 1 Peter are also being exhorted to continually yield themselves to God who in Christ is moulding them into a spiritual house: οἶκος πνευματικός so as to offer spiritual sacrifices: πνευματικὰς θυσίας that are pleasing to God. (1 Pet 2:5).

1.2. Nominal Uses of πνευματικός

But its use as a neuter noun referring to “spiritual things” in contrast to the material is also attested.

In Rom 15:27, Paul comments on the kind gesture shown to needy Christians in Jerusalem by Churches in Macedonia and Achaia; he views it as an act of indebtedness for spiritual blessings selflessly shared by the Jerusalem saints: εἰ γὰρ τοῖς πνευματικοῖς αὐτῶν ἐκοινώνησαν τὰ ἔθνη (if the Gentiles/non-Jews have shared in their spiritual [assets]), then it is equally legitimate for these Jewish believers in Jerusalem to benefit materially [ἐν τοῖς σαρκικοῖς] from their non-Jewish colleagues. A similar language is employed in 1 Cor 9:11 where the legitimate but unclaimed rights of Paul [and his co-workers] in return for ministering to the Corinthian believers are expressed as follows: εἰ ἡμεῖς ὑμῖν τὰ πνευματικὰ ἐσπείραμεν, μέγα εἰ ἡμεῖς ὑμῶν τὰ σαρκικά θερίσομεν· (If we have sown spiritual [assets/blessings] among you, would it be too much if we reap your material goods?).

The Corinthian believers, while being exhorted to cultivate the noble pursuit of love, are also reminded to earnestly desire τὰ πνευματικά = “the spiritual [things]”, which some scholars interpret as a reference to “spiritual gifts” as is suggested by the subsequent subjunctive expression μᾶλλον δὲ ἵνα προφητεύητε = “especially that you may prophesy” (1 Cor 14:1).⁶ Paul had earlier on drawn their attention to the necessity of discernment/sound spiritual judgement whereby they can “compare spiritual things with spiritual things”/ “interpret spiritual things by means of the spiritual”: ...πνευματικοῖς πνευματικά συγκρίνοντες (1 Cor 2:13).⁷

In another very relevant context, the addressees of Ephesians are reminded of the spiritual warfare they are engaged in, which involves, among others, contention against evil spiritual forces in the heavenlies: πρὸς τὰ πνευματικὰ τῆς πονηρίας ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις (Eph 6:12).

6 In critiquing this assumption that τὰ πνευματικά in 1 Cor 14:1 is a reference to “spiritual gifts” Robinson (1972, 51) comes up with the intriguing proposal that the Greek expression is not to be equated with χαρίσματα in general. Rather it should be understood in the limited sense of “speaking in spirit”. One is inclined to agree with Robinson, considering the special attention devoted in 1 Cor 14 to the subjects of “prophesying” and “speaking in tongues”.

7 The ambiguity of this Greek expression is reflected in translations such as: CEV[“teach spiritual things to spiritual people”]; NIV[“expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words”]; NAB[“describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms”]

Paul’s correspondence with the Corinthian and Galatian Churches also reveal the use of πνευματικός as a masculine noun referring to the “spiritual person”. Having pointed to the need of interpreting spiritual realities by spiritual means, Paul goes on to contrast the natural/unspiritual person: ψυχικὸς ἄνθρωπος who neither receives nor understands the endowments of the Spirit of God because they are spiritually discerned: πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται (1 Cor 2:14), with the spiritual person who is able to discern all things: ὁ δὲ πνευματικὸς ἀνακρίνει μὲν πάντα (1 Cor 2:15).

Turning specifically to his Corinthian audience, Paul laments that he could not address them as spiritual people: οὐκ ἠδυνήθην λαλήσαι ὑμῖν ὡς πνευματικοῖς...(1 Cor 3:1), but as people of the flesh who behave like babes in Christ.

Discussing the subject of orderliness/propriety in Christian worship, Paul challenges the one who thinks that he/she is a prophet or spiritual: Εἴ τις δοκεῖ προφήτης εἶναι ἢ πνευματικός (1 Cor 14:37) to assess the divine source of the message he [Paul] is putting across.

In Gal 6:1, Paul appeals to his audience who are supposed to be spiritual: ὑμεῖς οἱ πνευματικοί to deal gently with the wayward/backslidden in an effort to restore such a person, conscious of the possibility of falling into a similar situation.

How then, are we to categorize the statement in 1 Cor 12:1? Is the genitive plural τῶν πνευματικῶν to be regarded in a neuter sense [referring to “spiritual things/gifts...”] or in a masculine sense referring to “spiritual persons”? This calls for an investigation of the rhetorical dynamics of Pauline exegesis against the background of the socio-cultural and religious situation in Corinth.

2. The Use of πνευματικός as a Pauline Rhetorical Tool

It is becoming increasingly obvious in Pauline Studies that any attempt to come to full grips with the import of Paul’s writings cannot overlook his skilful use of rhetorical devices to buttress important theological arguments.⁸ With reference to πνευματικός – whether in its adjectival or nominal form – Dunn (1978, 706) has insightfully observed: “Where the word is introduced at key points in that letter [1 Corinthians] (2:13-3:1; 12:1; 14:1, 37; 15:44-

8 See for example Robbins (1996, 96-104); Osborne (1991, 122-126). A good summary of other relevant literature on this subject is provided by Klauck (1998, 231).

6), it looks very much as though Paul is both taking over and reformulating the language of his opponents, thereby meeting the challenge of what is best understood as an incipient gnosticism expressing an elitist and perfectionist spirituality.” Dunn’s point is supported by Baker (1974, 228-229), Horsley (1976, 269) Painter (1982, 237), Carson (1987, 23) and Horn (1992, 199)⁹ all of whom draw attention to Paul’s rhetorical use of this key word. A critical reading of 1 Corinthians suggests the existence of a “super-spiritual” community within the Corinthian Church that considered itself to be the real πνευματικοί (2:15), τελείοι (2:6) and σοφοί (3:18). It is quite likely that these “enlightened and perfectionist pneumatic believers” took certain liberties and thereby violated the normal standards of propriety in Christian worship. This is substantiated by the context of 1 Cor 11-14 where Paul expresses concern about certain abuses and disorders in the Corinthian Church notable among which are: improper appearance at public worship (11:2-16), misconduct at the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34) and irregularities regarding the use of spiritual gifts (12-14).

Having touched on the sensitive issues of “Head Covering” and abuses at the Lord’s Supper within a multi-cultural Corinthian Christian set-up, Paul introduces a new topic in chapters 12-14 using the genitive-bound prepositional phrase Περί δέ (12:1) as his style of proceeding to answer an important question.¹⁰ Many scholars argue, then, that the corresponding genitive plural πνευματικῶν should be taken in a neuter rather than masculine sense as a reference to “spiritual gifts”. They draw attention to 1 Cor 14:1 where the accusative neuter plural τὰ πνευματικά is employed with reference to those spiritual things [in addition to love] which Paul’s addressees are being exhorted to desire earnestly (ζηλοῦτε). The ability to prophesy should thereby be of high priority: μᾶλλον δὲ ἵνα προφητεύητε= “especially that you may prophesy”. It is further argued in relation to the immediate context of 1 Cor 12 that πνευματικῶν (1 Cor 12:1) and χαρισμάτων (1 Cor 12:4) are being used interchangeably to refer to one and

9 With reference to 1 Cor 14:37, Horn (1992, 182) argues convincingly as follows: “Der polemische Grundton dieser Schlussmahnung lässt die Annahme einer speziellen innergemeindlichen Gruppe, die sich selbst πνευματικοί nennt, wahrscheinlich sein.” [“The basic polemical tone of this concluding admonition makes it probable that we have here to do with a special inner circle within the congregation that calls itself πνευματικοί.”]. For an interesting discussion of Paul’s polemic presentation, see also Robinson (1972, 49-50).

10 The same phrase occurs in 1 Cor 7:1; 7:25; 8:1; 16:1

the same phenomenon, namely: “spiritual gifts”.¹¹ Metz (1968, 423) has accordingly commented that even if χάρισμα which is the common NT term for “gift” does not feature in 1 Cor 12:1, πνευματικῶν can be correctly interpreted to mean “spiritual gifts” since the entire context of 1 Cor 12 deals with this subject. Holtz (1972, 368) has also argued that Paul skillfully connects ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ χαρίσματα (1 Cor 12:31) with ζηλοῦτε δὲ τὰ πνευματικά (1 Cor 14:1) “und damit nachträglich die Erörterung der Frage nach den Charismen unter der Überschrift περὶ τῶν πνευματικῶν zu rechtfertigen scheint.”¹² [“and in so doing, he draws additional attention to the question of the charisms [gifts] which he appears to validate with the heading περὶ τῶν πνευματικῶν”]. Although Holtz (1972, 369) makes room for the possibility that the enquiry in 1 Cor 12:1 may have centred on οἱ πνευματικοί rather than τὰ πνευματικά, he contends that Paul is deliberately employing the masculine form as a rhetorical tool in order to shift the focus of discussion from “spiritual persons” to “spiritual gifts” that in fact required special clarification. In support of Holtz, Baker (1974, 228) also hints at the high probability that the Corinthians who have originally asked Paul about “spiritual people” are now being instructed about “gifts”.

Metz, Baker, and Holtz have, along with many other scholars, unfortunately overlooked the dynamic rhetoric of 1 Cor 12:1-3 which is actually focused on persons rather than “gifts” per se. In considering the logical flow of Paul’s argumentation, it is more convincing to picture 1 Cor 12:1-3 as a rhetorical block focusing on an elitist group of self-styled πνευματικοί whose claims and behaviour Paul alludes to in order to establish a case in 1 Cor 12:4ff. His list of charisms in 1 Cor 12:4-11 for use in the Corinthian Church, as determined by the Holy Spirit, rather than being the possession of a “spiritually privileged few”, is strengthened with the expression: ἐκάστῳ δὲ δίδεται ἢ φανέρωσις τοῦ πνεύματος (1 Cor 12:7). We can argue further that, from a rhetorical standpoint, Paul responds to περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν, interestingly translated by Carson (1987, 23) as “the question of spirituals” by setting the ecstatic speech of these Corinthian

11 The following are simply representative of such a viewpoint: Conzelmann (1975, 204); Dunn (1978, 707); Hays (1997, 207); Collins (1999, 447); Fee (1987, 575-576); Carson (1987, 22)

12 Holtz (1972, 368). This is also supported by Ellis (1974:128) who contends that “Paul uses the term πνευματικά along with χαρίσματα to refer to gifts, i.e. charisms or empowerments, given to the Church from God...”

“spiritualists” in antithesis to Holy Spirit controlled speech: ἐν πνεύματι θεοῦ λαλῶν... (1 Cor 12:3a). Moreover, the constructions in Rom 1:11: ἵνα τι μεταδῶ χάρισμα ὑμῖν πνευματικόν = “that I may impart to you some spiritual gift” and Rom 12:6: ἔχοντες δὲ χαρίσματα κατὰ τὴν χάριν δοθεῖσαν ἡμῖν διάφορα = “having gifts that vary according to the grace given to us” seem to indicate that χάρισμα-χαρίσματα can either stand on its own to denote “[grace] gifts” as in 12:6, or be qualified with the neuter adjective πνευματικόν, as in 1:11, to specify the type of gift being imparted.¹³ It seems quite logical to argue that, as in Rom 12:6, χαρισμάτων in 1 Cor 12:4 is an independent substantive reference to grace-originated [spiritual] gifts and not necessarily synonymous with τῶν πνευματικῶν in 1 Cor 12:1.

Fee has also come up with an interesting proposal that instead of debating the gender of πνευματικῶν, attention should be devoted to Paul’s immediate and overall concern, namely the determination of the Holy Spirit’s activity. Fee suggests accordingly that Paul “uses *charismata* for the specific manifestations of the Spirit’s activity... When the emphasis is on the manifestation, the “gift” as such, Paul speaks of *charismata*; when the emphasis is on the Spirit, he speaks of *pneumatika*”¹⁴ The ingenuity of Fee’s suggestion notwithstanding, it is still difficult to postulate a qualitative or quantitative distinction between the Spirit as the source of *charismata* and also as the One who inspires *pneumatika*.

If the genitive plural πνευματικῶν in 12:1 is to be understood as a reference to “the things of the Spirit” and linked to its accusative plural counterpart in 1 Cor 14:1, it would also be quite plausible to argue for an inclusive reference to persons in whom these spiritual manifestations are actively at work.¹⁵ This would be more in keeping with the rhetorics of 1 Cor 12:1-3 which appears to be a ‘double-edged sword’ aimed at human channels of spiritual phenomena.

In response to this *pneumatika-charismata* debate, Wolff (1996, 282) has made the following significant remark:

Paulus vermeidet die Pneumatiker-Terminologie weitgehend und gebraucht statt dessen die Begriffe “Gnadengaben” und “Geistesgaben”, um die Korinther von ihrem übersteigerten Pneumaverständnis wegzulenken, den

13 For an interesting discussion, see Ellis (1974, 129) and Robinson (1972, 54).

14 Fee (1987, 576).

15 Collins (1999, 447); Morris (1971, 166).

göttlichen Gabecharacter der Geistwirkungen zu verdeutlichen und deren vielfaltiges, über Glossolie und Prophetie hinausgehendes Ausmass in der Gemeinde aufzuzeigen. Aus diesem Grunde wird auch sogleich das Bekenntnis zum Kyrios Jesus als das Wesensmerkmal jeder Wirksamkeit des Geistes vorangestellt.¹⁶

Wolff's intriguing comment underscores the noble attempt made by Paul to shift the addressees' attention from preoccupation with persons that parade their spirituality for self-gratification and self-projection, as in 1 Cor 12:1, to a humble recognition that God is the source of the Church's spiritual endowments. It is this same God who through the Holy Spirit, enables the Church to confess Jesus as Lord.

If 1 Cor 12:4 and 14:1 would seem to zero in on spiritual gifts, it could also be argued that 12:1-3, 7-30 as well as the entire chapters 13 and 14 affirm the comportment/ character expected of groups and individuals in whom such gifts are manifested. Orr and Walther (1976, 276) have interestingly conceded, in their Anchor Bible translation notes on 1 Cor 12, that it is possible to interpret τῶν πνευματικῶν (12:1) as a reference to 'persons' rather than 'gifts', since the "discussion that follows is concerned with persons as much as the gifts they receive"¹⁷ Although the rendering, "Now with reference to the spiritual gifts", appears in their main text, this concession is undoubtedly a pointer to the ambiguity characterizing τῶν πνευματικῶν, which can be taken as an ambiguous phrase with a grammatically indeterminate gender.¹⁸

16 "Paul avoids, to a very large extent, the terminology of the pneumatics and employs instead the concepts of "gifts of grace" and "gifts of the Spirit". This is in order to draw the Corinthians away from their extremist views on spiritual manifestations, and to clearly show the divine-gift character of the Spirit's operations in the Church, which are so diverse that they cannot be confined merely to glossolalia and prophecy. It is for this very reason that the confession of Jesus as Lord is clearly spelt out as the essential vehicle through which the Spirit operates" (my translation).

17 Orr and Walther (1976, 276); Horn (1992, 184) argues explicitly in favour of the masculine interpretation as pointer to spiritual persons: "Das mask. Verständnis ist hingegen durch 3,1 und 14,37 bezeugt und als term. techn. in der Gemeinde vorgegeben [The masculine understanding/interpretation is, on the other hand, demonstrated by 3,1 and 14,37 as an existing terminus technicus in the congregation]" (my translation)]."

18 Collins (1999, 446) rightly argues that from a grammatical standpoint, τῶν πνευματικῶν can be masculine, feminine, or neuter. Horn (1992, 183) also remarks: "Philologisch ist eine Antwort kaum zu finden. [From a philological perspective, a solution can hardly be found (my translation)]".

Taking 1 Cor 12-14 as a rhetorical unit, we can also make a case for the use of πνευματικῶν-πνευματικός : 12:1/14:37 as an *inclusio* with reference to “spiritual persons”. Precisely, Paul skillfully opens his discourse on gifts and their bearers with reference to “Pneumatics” about whom enquiries have been made (12:1); he recapitulates the subject at the end of his discourse, this time challenging the one who considers himself/herself to be “spiritual” to assess the divine source of his[Paul’s] message (14:37). We can even argue for a systematic link between this rhetorical use of πνευματικός introduced with the phrase Εἴ τις δοκεῖ...εἶναι... [If any one thinks that he/she is...] and:

3:18: εἴ τις δοκεῖ σοφὸς εἶναι [If any one (among you) thinks that he/she is wise]

8:2 : εἴ τις δοκεῖ ἐγνώκεναι τι [If any one imagines/presumes to have known something].

Paul thereby pounces upon the catchwords πνευματικός, σοφός, and γνῶσις which the “Pneumatics” were apparently employing for themselves. It is noteworthy that in 2:15 as well as 3:1, Paul seems to be turning the person-related word πνευματικός around by loading it with a truly christian-spiritual connotation and challenging the addressees to so conduct themselves in order to merit being addressed as mature christian πνευματικοί rather than as νηπίοι ἐν Χριστῷ = “infants in Christ” (3:1).

To further substantiate our preference for the rendering “spiritual persons” in 1 Cor 12:1, we also need to take a closer look at the religio-cultural background of the situation being described in 12:1-3.

3. The Religio-Cultural Background of 1 Corinthians 12:1-3

Many scholars consider 1 Cor 12:2 as a reference to the addressees’ heathen past. Precisely, Paul seems to be alluding to their previous participation in traditional religious cults that would have laid emphasis on ecstatic phenomena. Although the Corinthian congregation was heterogeneous and would have included persons with a Jewish background, the majority were likely to have been Gentile converts to Christianity. These were most probably familiar with cults in which ecstasy was the norm. With regard to the issue whether some, if not all, of these converts had been transposing their former beliefs and practices into their newly-found Christian faith, Paul takes pains to remind his Corinthian audience of how they formerly allowed

themselves to be driven by spiritual forces that, according to ancient Jewish polemic, were “dumb idols”¹⁹ and therefore powerless in relation to Israel’s one true God. The rare passive participle ἀπαγόμενοι suggests a situation of having been “helplessly carried away” into a state of ecstasy, characteristic of Graeco-Roman religious experience. In spite of the controversy surrounding its interpretation and translation, the cognate expression ὡς ἂν ἦγεσθε²⁰ reinforces the idea of being under the full control of divine powers at the pagan cults. As Conzelmann graphically puts it:

The phrase certainly implies that they were not their own masters; but this can just as well mean being dominated in a general way by demons, the actors in the pagan cult (see 8:1-6; 10:20), as being swept into ecstasy (1975, 205).²¹

Even if we cannot dump all the Corinthian Christians in one basket in regard to a former attachment to some ecstatically-loaded mystery cults, we can still appreciate Lang’s contention that:

Die Wirkung der Ekstase war in der hellenistischen Welt allgemein bekannt. Die Korinther standen früher ganz im Bann ihrer heidnischen Götter, die bei Festen (z.B. des Dionysos) in orgiastischen Umzügen gefeiert wurden (1994, 163).²²

19 For a good discussion, see: C. Wolff, *Der erste Brief des Paulus an die Korinther*, 283; R. F. Collins, *First Corinthians*, 447.

20 For a good summary of the discussions, see: G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 576-578. Although the text appears to be corrupt at this point, the total context favours an interpretation pointing to the addressees’ complete domination by meta-empirical powers.

21 Pearson (1973:48-49) also argues persuasively: “That demonic forces are referred to here is evident from the use of the key expressions ἦγεσθε and ἀπαγόμενοι to which in an opposite sense can be compared the phrase in Romans 8.14, πνεύματι θεοῦ ἄγονται... Thus 1 Corinthians 12.2 refers to demonic powers, and to the control these powers had exercised over the lives of the Corinthians before they had become Christians... For Paul is saying that this demonic variety of ecstatic speech as such is not capable of leading men to confess Jesus as Lord; on the contrary, such ecstatic speaking could also lead to cursing Jesus.” Pearson (1967, 301-305) discusses this subject in an earlier scholarly article.

22 The powerful effect of ecstasy was well known in the Hellenistic world. The Corinthians formerly owed full allegiance to their heathen deities in whose honour festivals (e.g. that of Dionysus) characterized by orgiastic processions, were celebrated” (my translation). See also Pearson (1973, 47).

It would be valid to argue that Paul uses this brief but poignant reminder to establish an important point in 1 Cor 12:3, namely: that there is in fact a qualitative distinction between the Holy Spirit's activity and other forms of spiritual manifestations arising from attachment to pagan cults. This is particularly relevant to his mention of τῶν πνευματικῶν in 1 Cor 12:1 where he is more likely to be referring to persons who enthusiastically demonstrated their spirituality along lines similar to ecstatic devotees of pagan mystery cults. These, according to the rhetoric Paul presents in 1 Cor 12:3, would not avail themselves to the Holy Spirit's leading and thereby be endowed with the ability to truly confess Jesus as Lord.

Scholars have debated extensively on the expression Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς. Whereas one school of thought views it as a hypothetical statement presented to illustrate the real point that only the Holy Spirit can inspire the believer's confession of Jesus' Lordship,²³ another school of thought considers it as a reference to that which actually took place at the pagan cults, namely the cursing of Jesus under the influence of demonic powers.²⁴ The first viewpoint, in my opinion, does not sound as convincing as the second, considering the context of 1 Cor 12:2 which seems to be pointing to a previous worship life-style still held on to by a group of self-proclaimed super-pneumatics who were probably disrupting normal Christian worship through their ecstatic utterances. The reference in 1 Cor 12:4 to χαρισμάτα [grace] gifts is then meant to underscore the fact that genuine Holy Spirit-controlled endowments can be manifested in the Corinthian Church.

Paul's use of τῶν πνευματικῶν in 1 Cor 12:1 should then be regarded as a rhetorical tool aimed precisely at those who presumed to have been so spiritual (being given over to excessive ecstasy) that they deviated from the true framework in which spiritual gifts should be exercised in the Church. Serving as an appropriate rhetorically-loaded heading, the expression περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν does indeed govern the wider context in 1 Cor 12-14 where Paul painstakingly addresses human channels of spiritual manifestations in order to argue for that which will truly result in the entire

23 Conzelmann (1975, 204) for instance argues: “ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς...is an *ad hoc* construction on Paul's part to form an antithesis to κύριος Ἰησοῦς”; a good summary of scholarly opinion representing this school of thought is provided by Fee (1987, 579). Another major discussion of the subject is undertaken by Maly (1966, 82-950).

24 For a good summary including Schmithals' Gnostic influence hypothesis and Bassler's view of total control by the δαίμων in pagan cults, see Fee (1987, 579-582); also: Conzelmann (1975, 205); Collins (1999, 446); Wolff (1996, 285).

Church’s οἰκοδομή. This point becomes all the more relevant when one considers the divisive character which the Corinthian Church had unfortunately assumed.

4. A Suggested Translation of 1 Corinthians 12:1a

In the light of the foregoing, it can be argued that translations of 1 Cor 12:1a that place emphasis on “spiritual gifts” have not done full justice to the issue at stake. Considering the rhetoric of 1 Cor 12:1-3 where Paul appears to be presenting a case against deviants from decent-orderly Christian worship, a legitimate translation of 1 Cor 12:1a would be:

“In regard to the enquiry you made about the so-called *spiritual persons*”.

In supplying a footnote to indicate another possible rendering of πνευματικῶν, our preference would be the following:

Or “*spiritual matters*” (*persons, worship comportment, gifts...*)

Despite its failure to zero in specifically on “spiritual persons”, the main advantage of such a footnote rendering lies in its ability to capture the entire scope of the phenomena being addressed in 1 Corinthians.

5. Excursus

5.1. Some Translations of 1 Corinthians 12:1a

KJV: Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren...

RV: Now concerning spiritual gifts...

RSV: Now concerning spiritual gifts...

NRSV: Now concerning spiritual gifts...

GNB: Now concerning what you wrote about the gifts from the Holy Spirit...

NIV: Now about spiritual gifts...

JB: Now my dear brothers, I want to clear up a wrong impression about spiritual gifts...

NJB: About the gifts of the Spirit...

NEB/REB: About gifts of the Spirit...

NASB: Now concerning spiritual gifts...

NAB: Now in regard to spiritual gifts, brothers...

Moffatt: But I want you to understand about spiritual gifts...

The Amplified Bible: Now about the spiritual gifts (the special endowments of supernatural energy...)

LB: And now, brothers, I want to write about the special abilities the Holy Spirit gives to each of you...

CEV: My friends, you asked me about spiritual gifts...

Luther Revidierte 84: Über die Gaben des Geistes aber will ich euch, liebe Brüder...

Einheitsübersetzung: Auch über die Gaben des Geistes möchte ich euch nicht in Unkenntnis lassen, meine Brüder.

Gute Nachricht: Brüder und Schwestern! Ich komme nun zu den Fähigkeiten, die der Geist Gottes schenkt, und sage euch, was ihr darüber wissen müsst.

Francais Courant: Parlons maintenant des dons du Saint-Esprit: Frères, je désire que vous connaissiez la vérité à propos de ces dons.

Bible de Jerusalem: Pour ce qui est des dons spirituels, frères, je ne veux pas vous voir dans l'ignorance.

Louis Segond: Pour ce qui concerne les dons spirituels, je ne veux pas, frères, que vous soyez dans l'ignorance.

TOB: Au sujet des phénomènes spirituels, je ne veux pas, frères, que vous soyez dans l'ignorance.

Maredsous: En ce qui concerne les dons spirituels, je ne veux pas, frères, que vous soyez dans l'ignorance.

Bayard (2001): Les expériences spirituelles? Mes frères, ne restez pas dans l'ignorance, je ne le veux pas.

Reina-Valera Revisada 95: No quiero, hermanos, que ignoré is acerca de los dones espirituales.

Version Popular: Hermanos, quiero que ustedes sepan algo respecto a los dones espirituales.

Biblia Sacra Vulgata: de spiritalibus autem nolo vos ignorare fratres

Most of the above versions render τῶν πνευματικῶν as: “spiritual gifts” [KJV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, JB, NASB, NAB, Moffatt, CEV]/ les dons spirituels [Bible de Jerusalem, Louis Segond, Maredsous]/ los dones espirituales [Reina-Valera, Version Popular)].

Quite a number of versions specify that as “gifts of/from the (Holy) Spirit” [GNB, NJB, NEB, REB]/des dons du Saint-Esprit [Francais Courant]/ die Gaben des Geistes [Einheitsübersetzung, Luther]

The Living Bible (LB) renders it as “the special abilities the Holy Spirit gives...” supported by Gute Nachricht: “...den Fähigkeiten, die der Geist Gottes schenkt...”

The Amplified Version places in parentheses “the special endowments of supernatural energy” without explicitly identifying the Holy Spirit as the source.

Interestingly, whereas TOB renders it as “phénomènes spirituels”= “spiritual phenomena” presumably interpreting τῶν πνευματικῶν as a neuter genitive plural, Bayard (2001) opts for “les expériences spirituelles”= “spiritual experiences”. These two translations do not, however, specify whether the “spiritual phenomena” or “spiritual experiences” are synonymous with “spiritual gifts”.

It is significant to note, however, that the Latin translation (Biblia Sacra Vulgata) renders it as “de spiritalibus...” [“concerning the spirituals/spiritual manifestations”], parallel to the accusative neuter plural “spiritalia” in 1 Cor 14:1 and quite distinct from “divisiones gratiarum” [divisions/varieties of gifts: 12:4] or “charismata maiora” [the greater charisms/gifts: 12:31].

All the above sample translations in Latin, English, French, German and Spanish clearly show the challenges involved in translating 1 Cor 12:1a with focus on πνευματικῶν. Going by our previous discussions, it can be argued that TOB and Bayard (2001) have been quite innovative in their translations, moving away from the traditional assumption that πνευματικῶν refers categorically to “spiritual gifts” or “gifts of the (Holy) Spirit” or “special abilities given by the Holy Spirit”. Even though they have not made explicit reference to “spiritual persons” in their translations, they have brought us closer to the challenges that occasioned Paul’s rhetorically loaded

statements in 1 Cor 12:1-3.²⁵ Similar to TOB and Bayard (2001), we can argue in favour of the Latin translation that it has demonstrated a better sensitivity to the nuances of the Greek text than many other versions.

5.2. *A Look at Some Translations in Ghana*

Akuapem-Twi Full Bible:

Na nea *ε*fa honhom fam [akyede] ho de, anuanom, mempe *σε* mekora mo so.

[And regarding that which pertains to the spiritual[gifts], brethren, I do not want to hide the facts from you].

Asante-Twi Full Bible:

Na de *ε*fa honhom fam [akyedeε] ho deε, anuanom, mempe *σε* mede biribiara mesie mo.

[And regarding that which pertains to the spiritual[gifts], brethren, I do not want hide anything from you].

Asante Twi NT & Psalms:

Me nuanom,
 merebkyere *mo nsem a ε*fa Honhom Kronkron akyedeε no mu. Anuanom, mepε *σε* mohunu mu nokore.

[My brothers and sisters, I am going to teach you matters concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Brothers and sisters, I want you to know the truth in regard to this very issue].

Fante Full Bible:

Na sunsum mu
 akyedze *ho dze, enuanom, memmpε de hom ye ho atam.*

[And in regard to gifts that are spiritual, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant]

Fante NT (Interconfessional Revised Edition):

25 The translations of TOB and Bayard (2001) seem to better approximate the real sense in which the accusative neuter plural τα πνευματικά (1 Cor 14.1) should be understood.

Na, enuanom,

mennkepe de sunsum mu akyedze ho asem ye biribi a hom nnyim.

[And, brethren, I would not like you to be unaware of matters regarding gifts that are spiritual].

Dangme Full Bible:

Ye nyemime! Jehane lee i suɔ kaa i ke nye maa tu munyu nge nike ni hi ne jeɔ

Mumi Klɔuklɔu ɔ ngo ɔ a he. I suɔ kaa nyee le anɔkualɛ ɔ ne kɔɔ ni ne ɔme a he

[My brothers and sisters! Now I want to talk to you about the gifts that come from the Holy Spirit. I want you to know the truths about these things].

Ga Full Bible:

Hi agbene, anyemimeɪ, misumo ake mahɛ nyele noko ye mumonnii l e ahe.

[But now, brothers/sisters, I want you to know something about spiritual things].

Ga Revised NT:

Agbene, anyemimeɪ, miisumo ake maha nyele mumɔNnii ahe nɔ ko.

[So now, brothers/sisters, I want to let you know something about spiritual things].

Ewe Full Bible:

Ke le gbɔgbɔ me nunanawo Nuti la, nɔviwo, nyemele didim be, mian ye ame manyanuwo o.

[But in the case of spiritual gifts, brothers/sisters I do not want you to behave like ignorant people].

A very interesting pattern emerges from the above translations: the Fante full Bible (published in 1948), the Fante NT (Interconfessional Revised Edition published in 1982), and the revised Ewe full Bible (published in 1931) are obviously inclined to the translation “spiritual gifts”. The Asante Twi NT and Psalms (published in 1996 by the International Bible Society), and the Dangme full Bible (published in 1999) even specify them as “the gifts of/from the Holy Spirit”. Noteworthy is the fact that the full Ga Bible

(published in 1909) and the revised Ga NT with orthographic changes (published in 1977) render πνευματικῶν as “spiritual things/phenomena” [quite similar to TOB], thereby broadening the scope of interpretation. It is equally significant to note, however, that the Akuapem Twi full Bible (first published in 1871 and fully revised in 1964) and the Asante Twi full Bible (published in 1964) go in for “that pertaining to the spirit”/ “spiritual matters” putting “gifts” in square brackets within the main text. It is highly probable that similar to the Ga which can be described as a noble attempt to demonstrate original scholarship, the translators/revisers of the full Akuapem Twi and Asante Twi versions recognized the difficulty posed by the Greek text but opted to render τῶν πνευματικῶν in a neuter sense rather than in a masculine or feminine sense that would have referred to “spiritual persons”. But that “gifts” [*akyede/akyedee*] have been put in square brackets shows that the issue was not considered to have been resolved completely.²⁶ Nonetheless, these translations have at least succeeded in underscoring the caution we need to exercise in opting for a straightforward rendering of “spiritual gifts”, given the dynamics of Paul’s argumentation in 1 Cor 12:1-3. All the same, neither these captivating translations nor the others, have been able to consider “spiritual persons” as a viable possibility, or even offer it as an alternative in footnotes. In this, they were following many English, French, German and Spanish versions that did not adequately explore the grammatically indeterminate gender component of τῶν πνευματικῶν, the rhetorical nuances of 1 Corinthians as a whole, and the religio-cultural Sitz im Leben of 1 Cor 12:1-3.

5.3. A Suggested Akan Translation of 1 Corinthians 12:1a

In the light of the foregoing, the following translation [in Fante, the author’s mother-tongue] should be considered as legitimate:

Na dza hom bisae faa nkorɔfo a wobu hɔnhɔ sunsum mu abemfo no dze, mepɛ dɛ hom tse ase pefee dɛ...

26 Or was this done in concession to influential English versions? For an insightful comment on the mistranslation of πνευματικῶν by some key English versions as “spiritual gifts”/ “gifts of the Spirit”, see Robinson (1972, 54-55). In another interesting study, Nichols (1986, 49) draws attention to the unavoidable task which faces exegetes and translators in doing full justice to the interpretation of περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν. The placement of alternate renderings in parentheses or footnotes is at least a pointer to the caution we need to exercise in translating these four Greek words.

[And in regard to the enquiry you made about those who consider themselves as the spiritually developed elite, I want you, brothers and sisters, to understand clearly that...]

We could then put the following alternative rendering of πνευματικῶν in a footnote:

anaaso sunsum mu ndzamba

[or “spiritual things”/ “spiritual phenomena”].

6. Concluding Remark

Discussions regarding the interpretation and translation of 1 Cor 12:1a have shown that the issue as to whether τῶν πνευματικῶν should be viewed as an unquestionable reference to “spiritual gifts” deserves serious rethinking. There are indications that, given the rhetorical tone of Paul’s argumentation in 1 Cor 12:1-3 and considering the situation being addressed at key places in this letter, a more viable interpretation and translation of τῶν πνευματικῶν would be “spiritual persons”. This is in fact what we would recommend in the main text.

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