

Paul, the Spirit-People, and People on the Margins

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Abstract

The apostle Paul says that God chose the foolish and the weak to shame the wise and the strong (1 Cor 1:27). He also says that the members of the body of Christ that seems to be weaker are indispensable, and those who are thought to be less honourable are to be given greater honour (12:22, 23). But apparently the Corinthians do not understand this, despite the fact that they are “Spirit-people” (πνευματικοί; see 1 Cor 2:13, 15; 3:1). Drawing on the insights of Craig Keener’s Spirit hermeneutics, this essay will study selected passages in 1 Corinthians and Romans in their own socio-historical contexts, as well as discuss relevant readings of the texts by “Spirit-people” today, who stand in continuity with the Spirit-filled first audiences of Paul. It will be argued that Paul envisions a non-hierarchical, cross-shaped community in Christ, where those living on the margins are loved, honoured and respected. This is, in turn, the pattern that Spirit-led Christ-communities today are called to follow.

Introduction

For me, the most inspiring experience in the Pentecostal church is the ability of its people to receive divine revelation. I am, therefore, intrigued by the meaning and implications of Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 2:10, “God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.”¹ For Paul, the believer is a “Spirit-person” or “person with the Spirit” (πνευματικός; 1 Cor 2:13, 15).² And the Spirit-person knows the things of God through the Spirit (2:11–13). For Paul, they should be able to understand the wisdom of God, which is, in context, about the message of “Christ crucified” (1:18–2:16). As I will argue, the notion of the crucified Christ is counter-intuitive, for it symbolises shame, weakness, and defeat. Sadly, Paul cannot speak to the Corinthians as Spirit-people (πνευματικοί; 3:1) but as “flesh-people” (σαρκίνοις), for their communal behaviours correspond to the latter, not

¹ All translations of Scriptures are mine, unless otherwise stated.

² See Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 133; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 264; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 118; and especially Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence* (Hendrickson, MA: Peabody, 1994), 28–32. I prefer to translate πνευματικός as “Spirit-person” (rather than “S/spiritual”), because it highlights the fact that the person is a “person with/of the Spirit.”

the former (3:1–9). Later in the letter when Paul mentions “the things of the Spirit” (τῶν πνευματικῶν) within the body of Christ, he urges his audience to treat the less honourable with greater honour (12:1, 22–25). Indeed, when one member of the community suffers, he asserts, all suffer together (12:26). It is likely that those less-honourable members included people living on the margins of the society (see below). I will argue that Paul envisions a cross-shaped community in Christ where those living on the margins are honoured and respected. And as Spirit-people today we can experience the reality of Paul’s vision.

In the following section, I will outline the approach of this study. After that I will discuss the different kinds of marginalised people in Paul’s audiences. An analysis of 1 Cor 1:18–2:16 and 12:21–26 will then be performed, and the related themes in Romans will be examined. I will give examples of Pentecostal readings of Paul throughout the essay.

1. Spirit Hermeneutics

In his book *Spirit Hermeneutics*, Craig Keener observes how early Pentecostals modelled the experiential nature of Bible interpretation:

“Early Pentecostals, like many readers in times of spiritual renewal, understood themselves as part of the continuing biblical narrative. They looked to biblical narratives not simply for information about the past... but for truths about how God continues to work with human agents.”³

Keener, however, warns that “[i]nspiration does not make texts any less texts.”⁴ As in, he argues, the meaning of the biblical text in its ancient context is important.⁵ For Keener, the biblical canon “were shaped in particular linguistic or cultural circumstances.”⁶ Having said that, once “we understand what biblical texts communicated in their first context, we must hear their challenge or comfort in our own settings as well.”⁷ My approach in this essay is similar to the “Spirit hermeneutics” of Keener, in that I will pay attention to the historical and cultural contexts behind the biblical texts, as well as the grammatical and linguistic constructions of the texts themselves. Moreover, I will discuss stories of reading the texts as “Spirit-people,” who stand in continuity with the Spirit-filled first audiences of Paul, and are eager to hear what the Spirit has to say today.⁸

³ Craig Keener, *Spirit Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 38.

⁴ Keener, *Spirit*, 126.

⁵ Keener, *Spirit*, 126–32, 142–51.

⁶ Keener, *Spirit*, 151.

⁷ Keener, *Spirit*, 151.

⁸ For a survey of the different approaches of interpretation, see Paula Gooder, *Searching for Meaning* (London: SPCK, 2009). I don’t claim that my approach here is the only or the best one. Nor is it new. It is, rather, a *valid* approach to engage with the biblical texts as Spirit-people.

Furthermore, Keener speaks of the correlation between Bible reading and imperialism.

“Westerners traditionally conducted missions very often from a culturally insensitive and even imperialistic standpoint. Missionaries often imposed their culture, most forcefully where they supposed indigenous cultures inferior and sometimes conquerors introduced forms of Christianity by means of the sword.”⁹

However, for Keener, “hearing Scripture as itself authoritative means that we do not privilege a reading from any one extrabiblical culture.”¹⁰ While Keener’s primary concern is the ethnocentric character of Bible interpretation, our focus here is the equally problematic reading of the texts from a position of socioeconomic superiority. Our study will endeavour to pay attention to people living on the margins.¹¹ And we will begin doing that by examining Paul’s references to these people in 1 Corinthians.

2. People on the Margins in Corinth

Western readers of Paul may assume that the social location of his first audience was similar to theirs. But recent scholars (e.g., Friesen, Longenecker, Cohick, Rhee) agree that the majority of people in the Pauline churches were poor.¹² According to Bruce Longenecker, most of Paul’s first audiences lived at or below subsistence level (65%).¹³ A good number of them lived just above subsistence level (25%), with “some minimal economic resources”; and only 10 percent of them had moderate surplus, which means that they had “a relatively significant level of economic security” but “not without economic risk.”¹⁴ Similarly, Steven Friesen provides similar figures, with about 68 percent of the urban population in the larger cities in the Roman Empire living at or below subsistence level.¹⁵

It should be here noted that often marginalisation, poverty, disability, and social stratification are intertwined. Friesen helpfully mentions that those living below subsistence level consisted of “some farm families, unattached widows, orphans, beggars, disabled, unskilled day laborers, prisoners.”¹⁶ They were despised and exploited by those at the upper end of the social hierarchy. As L. L. Welborn says:

⁹ Keener, *Spirit*, 81.

¹⁰ Keener, *Spirit*, 82.

¹¹ I don’t mean that we should privilege the interpretation of people on the margins (as if it is superior) but that they are highly significant given Paul’s demand for them to be honoured.

¹² Steven Friesen, “Poverty in Pauline Studies,” *JSNT* 26.3 (2004): 323–61; Bruce Longenecker, *Remember the Poor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 44–59; Lynn Cohick, “Poverty and Its Causes in the Early Church,” in *Poverty in the Early Church and Today*, edited by Steve Walton and Hannah Swithinbank (London: T & T Clark, 2019), 21–23; Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 8–14.

¹³ About 30 percent at subsistence level and 35 percent below it. See Longenecker, *Remember*, 295.

¹⁴ Longenecker, *Remember*, 295. In this essay, I use “living at subsistence level” to refer to having the minimal economic resources to support one’s livelihood.

¹⁵ Friesen, “Poverty,” 347.

¹⁶ Friesen, “Poverty,” 341.

“Most of the [ancient] sources consulted... speak of the privation, exploitation, and wretchedness experienced by the poor in the cities of the Roman Empire. Elite authors treat the poor about whom they write with a mixture of contempt, pity, and paternalistic concern.”¹⁷

This reflects the honour-shame culture within the Roman Empire. As Jon Lendon says:

“When a great aristocrat peered down into society beneath him, there was a threshold beneath which, to his mind, honour did not exist; there were people, a great many people, without honour, and best kept that way... The slave is the archetype of the man without honour.”¹⁸

This is vital when we read 1 Cor 1:26–29 and 12:23–25. Paul says that not many of the Corinthians were “wise” (σοφοί), “powerful” (δυνατοί), or “of noble birth” (εὐγενεῖς) (1:26), and that God chose the “foolish” (μωρὰ), the “weak” (ἀσθενῆ), the “low” (ἀγενῆ), and “those who are despised” (ἐξουθενημένα) in the world (1:27, 28). And when Paul speaks of the things of the Spirit (τῶν πνευματικῶν; 12:1), he says that the members of the body of Christ that seem to be “weak” (ἀσθενέστερα) are indispensable (12:22). Those who are “dishonoured” (ἀτιμότερα) are to be given greater honour, and the “unpresentable/unworthy” (ἀσχήμονα) are to be treated with greater respect (12:23).

Scholars today rightly understand the wise, the powerful, and those of noble birth as the educated, the socio-politically influential, and people of high social standing.¹⁹ While the “not many” in 1:26 suggests that there might be some persons of high social status among the Corinthian believers, the majority of them would be, what the Greco-Roman society considered as, the foolish, weak, and despised (1:27, 28)—people of little education or influence.²⁰ Indeed, when Paul later mentions the weak, dishonoured, and unpresentable/unworthy (12:22–23), it is very likely that this refers to people at the lower end of the pecking order. While the unpresentable body parts in 12:23 probably refer to

¹⁷ L. L. Welborn, “The Polis and the Poor: Reconstructing Social Relations from Different Genres of Evidence,” in *The First Urban Churches 1: Methodological Foundations*, edited by James Harrison and L. L. Welborn (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 232. Likewise, Rhee, *Loving*, 22, says, “[The poor] were most vulnerable to food shortages and crises, and infectious diseases, and were subject to the shame, alienation, and the bias and indifference of the rich.”

¹⁸ Jon Lendon, *Empire of Honour* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), 96. I came across this in Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 133.

¹⁹ Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 104; Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 178–181. As Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 259–60, says, “Broadly speaking the Romans divided society into two groups with regard to honor: the *honestiores*, or privileged and ‘honorable’ strata of society, and the *humiliores*, who did not qualify for reasons of birth, lack of wealth, or possibly education to be among the elite.”

²⁰ Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 105–7.

sexual organs,²¹ most likely the metaphor is intended to refer to social stratification.²² As PHEME PERKINS says:

[Paul is referring to] the distinction between respectable, uncovered parts of the body and the disgraceful parts connected to sexuality and bodily waste. Ordinary political discourse treats the civic elite as the head, face, or other respectable body parts. The masses of urban poor or rustic farmers correspond to the ugly, disgraceful ones. The inferior parts should accept their lot and accept the direction and superiority of the head.²³

We can, therefore, say that there were people living on the margins in the Corinthian house churches and Paul had them in mind when writing his letter. By “people on the margins” I mean a mixed and diverse social group within the Jesus-community who were commonly considered to be less important. In the ancient context, this group was by no means a small minority. Its members were marginalised in the sense that they were despised and treated with contempt because of their low socioeconomic status.

3. Christ-crucified as God’s Wisdom and Salvation to those Living on the Margins

In order to understand the significance of Paul’s teaching concerning the foolish, weak, and despised (1:27, 28), one needs to recognise the crucial place of the crucified Christ in 1:18–31. Clearly, Paul’s concern here is the divisions among the Corinthians (1:10–17). But the nature of the divisions is important. Given the Greco-Roman social convention, Ciampa and Rosner rightly say that the Corinthians were probably divided according to “adherence to patrons,” similar to “philosopher/student loyalty.”²⁴ They were divided according to who baptised them or which house church they belonged to. Here Anthony Thiselton’s translation of 1:12 is apt:

“I mean this, that each of you say, ‘I for one, am of Paul’s people’; ‘I, for my part, am for Apollos’; ‘I am a Peter person’; ‘As for me, I belong to Christ.’”²⁵

²¹ Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 605; Fee, *Corinthians*, 613.

²² See the discussion in Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 605–6, where they argue that Paul is not merely referring to the stratification of the gifts but also that of the society. See also Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 215–6.

²³ PHEME PERKINS, *First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 149. Perkins helpfully refers to Epictetus, *Diatribai* 2.4 AT, where citizens are referred to as parts of a body. Note that in the sub-unit 12:12–26 there is no mention of χάρισμα (“gift”) at all, which indicates that Paul does not specifically have the χαρίσματα in 12:4–11 in mind, such as wisdom, knowledge, and prophecy.

²⁴ Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 81.

²⁵ Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 122. Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 81, agree. Note how the translation serves to express the meaning behind the genitive constructions and the contrastive particles (μέν... δέ). It is unusual to take the first three genitives (Παύλου, Ἀπολλῶ, Κηφᾶ) as possessive (hence “I belong to Paul”...) although it makes sense to translate ἐγὼ Χριστοῦ as “I belong to Christ.”

Therefore, the divisions are not because of doctrinal differences.²⁶ Rather, different groups of people have loyalties to different leaders. For Paul, the solution is not simply a matter of overlooking differences in opinions as long as everyone believes that Jesus is Lord. Rather, the Corinthians need to truly understand the message of the cross (literally “the word [λόγος] of the cross”; 1:18). Let us turn to this matter now.

One can hardly miss the concentrated occurrences of the terms “cross” (σταυρός) and “crucify” (σταυρόω) in 1 Cor 1:13, 17, 18, 23; 2:2, 8. Crucially, Paul says that he proclaims “Christ crucified” and that he decided to know nothing except Christ and him crucified (1:23; 2:2). “Christ crucified” is the power of God and the wisdom of God (1:24). It is the power of God because salvation comes from the cross (1:18, 21). *It is God’s wisdom because the preaching of cross appears to be foolishness to the world*, and indeed, the world did not know God through its own wisdom (1:21). God’s wisdom is set in sharp contrast to the wisdom of the Greco-Roman world. Paul says:

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1:22–24)

In Paul’s day, the Jews had been ruled by idol-worshipping Gentiles for centuries. Given the Exodus story and the successful rule of David in their history, there was an expectation among Jewish communities that salvation would come through a victorious deliverer, someone like Moses or David, who performed mighty deeds and led many successful military campaigns.²⁷ For the Greeks, given their desire for learning and reason, they would likely look for a “wise teacher of philosophical truths” to be the Christ.²⁸ But “Christ-crucified” is bound to be both a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness for the Greeks. The crucifixion was a gruesome shameful instrument the Romans used to punish rebels or anyone who dared to oppose them. It was a symbol of shame and defeat. There was nothing honourable to be crucified, and so for the Greeks it was utter folly. The term “Christ” (Χριστός) denotes the “anointed one,” and it would not make any sense within their religio-political symbolic universe for an anointed saviour to be a defeated criminal on the Roman cross. Indeed, as Gordon Fee says, “Christ crucified” is “a contradiction in terms... Messiah meant power, splendour, triumph; crucifixion meant weakness, humiliation, defeat.”²⁹ This is ultimately a scandal and total foolishness for both Jews and Gentiles alike. Yet this is precisely the wisdom of God, for it is

²⁶ Cf. Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 81.

²⁷ Cf. Hays, *Corinthians*, 30–31; Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 99–100.

²⁸ Hays, *Corinthians*, 31.

²⁹ Fee, *Corinthians*, 75.

through the crucified Christ that he has become for believers “wisdom from God, righteousness and holiness and redemption” (1:29b–30).³⁰

In light of the above, Paul’s words in 1:26–28 make much sense. Paul asks the Corinthians to consider their “calling” (κλήσις), that not many of them were wise or powerful, or of noble birth (1:26). Rather, God “chose” (ἐξελέξατο) the foolish, weak, low, and despised things in the world to shame the wise and the strong, and to bring to nothing things that are (1:27–28). That is, God has chosen those living on the margins—the uneducated, the poor, the low-born, the slaves—to shame the wise and strong. And this is exactly how God’s wisdom manifests itself.³¹ The power of God and the wisdom of God have been revealed through the “scandalous” crucified Christ, with the result that salvation has come to those who believe, not least those living on the margins (1:21, 27–28).³²

4. Spirit-People and the Wisdom of God

We now turn to an important passage for the Pentecostals, namely 1 Cor 2:1–16. Paul says that he did not come to the Corinthians with superior speech or persuasive wisdom (2:1, 4). Rather, he decided to know nothing except Christ crucified. Also, when he was with them, he was in weakness, fear, and trembling, and *in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power*—so that the Corinthians’ faith might not rest in human wisdom (2:3–5). Experientially, Pentecostals know what this means, that it is not by human power but the Spirit of God that divine power manifests.

In 2:6–9 Paul says that the wisdom of God is hidden in mystery (ἐν μυστηρίῳ τὴν ἀποκεκρυμμένην), and the rulers of this age did not understand it. This hidden wisdom of God is, as argued above, the fact that salvation has come through the crucified Christ, and God has *revealed* (ἀπεκάλυψεν) this to believers *through the Spirit* (2:10).³³ Paul goes on to

³⁰ I prefer to translate ἀγιασμός as “holiness,” for it reflects the Old Testament notion of being set apart for God. See also Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 109.

³¹ Yung Suk Kim, *Christ’s Body in Corinth* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 36, 38, provides an interesting perspective. He suggests that the dominant ideology in the Roman society was about a “hierarchical unity” where the poor and the slaves were disadvantaged; but Paul deconstructs this ideology of powers through the image of Christ crucified in 1 Cor 1:27–31.

³² Fee, *Corinthians*, 78–83; Perkins, *Corinthians*, 56–57; Hays, *Corinthians*, 31–32.

³³ Hays, *Corinthians*, 45; Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 129. By the way, Ciampa and Rosner seem to say that the revelation was specifically given first to the apostles (“The ‘revelation’ is . . . the disclosure of God’s full purposes in the cross . . . to the apostolic preachers” [emphasis added]), who then pass on to those who love Jesus. It is true that the revelation was first given to the apostles. But given the references to the “Spirit-people” (i.e., “people with the Spirit”) in 2:11–16, most likely Paul thinks that all believers are empowered by the Spirit to understand the revelation regarding Christ-crucified. Indeed, no-one can comprehend the things of God except through the Spirit, Paul says (2:11), which implies the ongoing revelatory work of the Spirit for all believers.

say that no-one comprehends the things of God except through the divine Spirit (2:11).³⁴ As Hays says, “God’s Spirit alone discloses that the word of the cross is the truth about God.”³⁵ In 2:14–15 Paul contrasts the Spirit-person (πνευματικός) with the *psychikos* (that is, “natural person,” as in ESV; ψυχικός).³⁶ The *psychikos* does not accept the things of the Spirit, for they are foolishness to him/her; but the Spirit-person discerns all things (2:14–15). Sadly, Paul cannot speak to the Corinthians as Spirit-people but as “flesh-people” (σαρκινοί) (3:1), for their communal behaviours (jealousy and dissension) show that they are fleshly (σαρκικοί) (3:3).³⁷ This means that, for Paul, believers are supposed to be the only ones who can comprehend the wisdom of God that is expressed in the crucified Christ, for they are people with the Spirit—that is, Spirit-people. Having said that, they are capable of behaving in a fleshly manner, in contrast to the Spirit-inspired life that is shaped by Christ-crucified. In 3:5–23 Paul returns to the issue that has prompted him to speak of the crucified Christ and the Spirit, namely, the fact that some Corinthians consider themselves to be “Paul people,” “Apollos people,” or “Peter people.”³⁸ Now, Paul tells the Corinthians that they, together as a community, are God’s temple, and that the Spirit dwells in them, which means that they are holy (3:16–17). Divisive behaviour is of the flesh and incompatible with what it means to be cross-shaped Spirit-people.

Several important corollaries can be derived from our analysis so far.

First, God has given his Spirit to all believers, regardless of their social status. As opposed to the social convention of the world, the elite and the wise are not in a privileged position. Indeed, just as it seems ridiculous that God has chosen the foolish, weak, low, and despised things in the world (1:27–28), the things of the Spirit are foolishness to the *psychikos* (2:14). This means that people on the margins are not passive participants of God’s salvific purpose. In a real sense, their calling is a display of God’s wisdom.

Second, our discussion has shown that “Christ-crucified” is not merely a message, or doctrine, to be believed in. For sure, Christ died for our sins and salvation is now available to those who believe (1:18, 21; 3:15; 15:3). But the cross is also about how believers should live, not least collectively as a believing community. As Ciampa and Rosner say, being people of the Spirit is

³⁴ The things of God in 1 Cor 2:11 probably include the “depths of God” (τὰ βάθη τοῦ θεοῦ) in 2:10, which, in turn, can be found in Jewish apocalyptic literature. (See Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 129.) This, of course, coheres with the theme of revelation and disclosure of hidden things in 2:1–16.

³⁵ Hays, *Corinthians*, 45.

³⁶ I will leave the *psychikos* (ψυχικός) untranslated. It seems that neither “natural person” (ESV) nor “unspiritual” (NRSV) sufficiently expresses the meaning of the Greek term.

³⁷ Space limitations mean that we cannot discuss the possible differences between σάρκινος and σαρκικός in 3:1, 3. But see the discussion by Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 288–9.

³⁸ See especially 3:5–9, 22.

to “appropriate and live in accordance with God’s saving work through Christ by God’s Spirit.”³⁹

Third, Paul’s exhortation is more than a call to unity within the community. (Of course, unity is in itself important.) Paul’s primary concern is Spirit-people behaving as if they are flesh-people, which is incompatible with the self-giving, cross-shaped, Spirit-led pattern of (communal) life that Paul envisions. This cruciform pattern is characterised by a non-hierarchical social convention, one where people on the margins are not inferior participants in God’s salvation.

Fourth, early Pentecostals understood the implications of the Pauline view of a non-hierarchical social system. In her superb study of African American readings of Paul, Lisa Bowens says that black Pentecostals think deeply about their faith and engage with the apostle intellectually and theologically (as opposed to the not-uncommon caricature that they don’t think).⁴⁰ A prominent example is William Seymour. According to Bowens, Seymour believed that the “bodily manifestations of Spirit Baptism” (such as glossolalia and divine healing) “have communal body implications for the larger body of Christ” and “one of those ramifications is racial unity”—indeed, the “Spirit makes racial unity possible and obliterates racial hierarchy”!⁴¹ As a poor black American from Louisiana ministering in early 20th-century, Seymour would have been at the bottom of the social ladder.⁴² Yet his Pentecostal hermeneutics led him to advocate for racial equality.⁴³ Not surprisingly, Seymour based his conviction on 1 Corinthians 12.⁴⁴ To this Scripture we now turn.

5. Greater Honour to the Dishonoured

“Now concerning the things of the Spirit” (περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν), Paul says at the start of 1 Corinthians 12.⁴⁵ This indicates that Chapter 12 is about the matters pertaining to the

³⁹ Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 129. Ciampa and Rosner also helpfully mention that 1 Cor 2 “establishes a framework of later material on the Holy Spirit in the letter in chapters 12–14 and 15:42–57.”

⁴⁰ Lisa Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 212–3.

⁴¹ Bowens, *African*, 213.

⁴² Of course, the Spirit was at work before the Pentecostal movement. About a century before Seymour, Zilpha Elaw was one of the early black preachers in the US. Bowens documents Elaw’s divine encounters, similar to the experiences of the Pentecostals after her. As a black female preacher in the 19th century, Elaw was certainly among the most marginalised and was rejected and scorned by her white audiences. But she boldly proclaimed from 1 Corinthians 1:27 that God had chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty. See Bowens, *African*, 115, 118, 122.

⁴³ A similar example of Pentecostal hermeneutic can be found in Narelle Jane Melton, “Lessons of Lament,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20 (2011): 68–80. Melton notes that “the global roots of Pentecostalism began with the marginalised”; but unfortunately “the margins of lament have disappeared” in “the church today” (pp. 75–76).

⁴⁴ More specifically, on 1 Cor 12:12–14. See Bowens, *African*, 213.

⁴⁵ Although it is possible that the τῶν πνευματικῶν in 12:1 simply means χαρίσματα (12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31), it is better to translate it as “the things of the Spirit” or “the matters concerning the Spirit,” rather than “spiritual

manifestations of the Spirit. There are varieties of “gifts” (χαρίσματα); but it is the same Spirit, same Lord, and same God (12:4–6). In 12:12–31, Paul focuses on the “body” (σῶμα).⁴⁶ He bookends this sub-unit with instructions about diversity and unity. This highlights the key point of his argument: the body is one and has many members, and the members have different gifts (12:12, 27–31). But importantly, Paul says:

“For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (12:13).⁴⁷

This verse is highly significant because it shows that Chapter 12 is not only about unity and diversity. What undergirds Paul’s thoughts here seems to be the Spirit-inspired cross-shaped social convention and communal behaviour that the apostle mentioned in 1:18–2:16. Slaves and the freeborn had vastly different social statuses. And there were ethnic tensions between the Jews and both the Greeks and the Romans.⁴⁸ Paul was aware of the social divisions and stratification in the Greco-Roman world and how they were at odds with the message of the crucified Christ. In light of this, the “in one Spirit” (ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι) and “we were *all* baptised into one body” (ἡμεῖς πάντες εἰς ἓν σῶμα ἐβαπτίσθημεν) signify the Spirit-inspired non-hierarchical and mutual relationships between the different members of the body of Christ.

This brings us to 12:21–25. As mentioned, the weak, dishonoured, and unworthy in 12:22–23 most likely refer to people at the lower end of the social ladder—those living on the margins. Here, the πολλῶ μᾶλλον at the start of verse 22 (immediately after the ἀλλά [“on the contrary”]) is important. The expression πολλῶ μᾶλλον means “by much more” and is often untranslated. Here the translation by Timothy Brookins and Bruce Longenecker is helpful:

“On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are actually *much more* necessary.”⁴⁹

Similarly, Fee says:

gifts.” It is true that the “gifts” are a big part of what Paul says about the things of the Spirit. But Paul probably had broader issues in mind (e.g., the matter in 12:2–3). For a similar point of view, see Fee, *Corinthians*, 576; Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 909–911; Ciampa and Rosner, *Corinthians*, 561–2. Also, along with most interpreters, here I take πνευματικῶν as neuter, not masculine (“Spirit-person”). See Timothy Brookins and Bruce Longenecker, *1 Corinthians: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), 62.

⁴⁶ The term σῶμα appears 18 times in 12:12–31.

⁴⁷ ESV.

⁴⁸ As we know, the Greeks occupied Israel’s land after the Persians, and then it was the Romans’ turn. Cicero viewed Judaism as a “barbarous superstition” (*Pro Flacco* 67; see also 66–69). See James Jeffers, *Conflicts at Rome* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 10.

⁴⁹ Brookins and Longenecker, *1 Corinthians*, 72. *Emphasis added. Contra* Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 1006.

“[On the contrary,] those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are the *more* indispensable.”⁵⁰

This coheres with what we have argued regarding the counterintuitive nature of the message of the cross. The salvation brought about by the message of Christ-crucified is meant to transform communal attitude and behaviour within the body of Christ. People on the margins are to be honoured and respected—they are very much *indispensable*.⁵¹

Needless to say, when there are divisions in the community, the weak, dishonoured, and unworthy (the uneducated, the poor, beggars, and people living with disabilities) will suffer more than the elite. They do not have the same resources to mitigate the adverse economic realities of urban life. The mutual honouring and respect advocated by Paul would result in not only unity but also collective resilience in times of hardship (12:25). Hence, Paul says in 12:26:

“If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is glorified, all rejoice together.”

All of these are “concerning things of the Spirit” (περὶ δὲ τῶν πνευματικῶν), and are based on the fact that *in one Spirit* believers have been baptised *into one body* (12:1, 13). And it is the Spirit-people, not the *psychikos*, who are able to understand and live out this countercultural communal lifestyle.

6. Spirit-People and Body Parts

Before wrapping up our study of 1 Corinthians, we should consider some examples of contemporary reading of the text. According to my proposed Pentecostal hermeneutics above, believers today read the Scripture as Spirit-people in continuity with Paul’s first audience. Given the “body” is a prominent theme in 1 Corinthians 12, not surprisingly theologians of disability studies find this text relevant, not least those whose loved ones live with disabilities. And it is no coincidence that their readings resonate with our findings above, because the same Spirit continues to speak. For instance, Brian Brock and Bernd Wannewetsch say the following concerning the non-hierarchical mutual relationship within the Christ-community:

⁵⁰ Fee, *Corinthians*, 613. *Emphasis added*. As David Alan Black, *Paul: Apostle of Weakness* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 81, says, “The weaker members not only have a proper place in the church, but are in fact ‘much rather necessary,’ for all the member of the body are interdependent and interrelated.”

⁵¹ See also Kar Yong Lim, *Metaphors and Social Identity Formation in Paul’s Letters to the Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017), 176–198. Lim puts it beautifully, “Those marginalized—the weak, who were invisible and hidden behind the powerful and elite and the strong—had now been given a voice, a face, a place of belonging, and a sense of identity. Paul’s vision of social identity for the Christ-community is nothing short of radical,” 197.

“[The] starting point for discerning the Spirit’s gifts must be an engagement with *socially constructed* realities—the codes of honor and decency thrown up by every human generation.”⁵²

“[Paul’s church refuses] to reintroduce the ordering of social hierarchies learned in the world, and does so through the empathetic practices of caring for one another.”⁵³

Amos Yong, a Pentecostal theologian, observes:

Paul’s insistence that even the weakest members of the body of Christ shouldn’t be despised challenges the stereotypical thinking of non-disabled people. Accordingly, an ecclesiology of weakness would resist conventional ableist marginalization of people with disabilities as weaker, less respectable, or less-than-necessary members of the church with little to contribute.⁵⁴

Yong continues to say:

But I’m making a stronger claim: that the many gifts of the Spirit are manifest through all members of the body, regardless of their ability or disability. In fact, it is more in keeping with Paul’s theology of weakness that the more powerful manifestations are mediated through those whose abilities are less noticeable or who are thought to be lesser candidates for God’s work from a worldly or “normal” point of view.⁵⁵

Yong’s perspective reading challenges prevalent perceptions of normality today. Arthur Dewey and Anna Miller make a similar point and suggest a similar connection between 1 Cor 1–4 and 1 Cor 12 to this essay.⁵⁶

“Paul’s theological formulations regarding divine wisdom and the body of the Anointed in 1 Cor 1–4 and 1 Cor 12 may indeed have radical potential for unsettling standard constructions and hierarchies regarding the disabled in antiquity and today.”⁵⁷

⁵² Brian Brock and Bernd Wannewetsch, *The Therapy of the Christian Body* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 111. Emphasis is in the original. Brock’s son, Adam, has Down syndrome and autism.

⁵³ Brock and Wannewetsch, *Therapy*, 111.

⁵⁴ Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disabilities, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 93. Yong’s brother, Mark, lives with Down Syndrome. I note that Yong’s view of the resurrection is disputed (pp. 118–142). See, for example, R. T. Mullins, “Some Difficulties for Amos Yong’s Disability Theology of the Resurrection,” *Ars Disputandi* 11.1 (2011): 24–32. I won’t engage in the debate here due to our limited space.

⁵⁵ Yong, *Disabilities*, 94. Yong also says, “We are not saying that the many gifts of the Spirit are given to the stronger members of the body so that they may minister to the weaker members, and thus that people with disabilities are need only as recipients of the ministry of such gifts.”

⁵⁶ Arthur Dewey and Anna Miller, “Paul” in *The Bible and Disability*, edited by Sarah Melcher, Mikeal Parsons, and Amos Yong (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2017), 391–5.

⁵⁷ Dewey and Miller, “Paul,” 395.

Furthermore,

“[Paul’s words ask the readers] to look again at just those people in everyday life who are routinely judged, and rejected, as weak, low, and lacking in respect of honor . . . [Paul] insists that divine favor resides with just these members of society that are rejected by the world. God chooses the crucified and the weak as the site to manifest true wisdom and genuine salvation.”⁵⁸

In light of the above, we may conclude that Paul envisages a Spirit-inspired cross-shaped Jesus-community (a body of Christ consisting of Spirit-people) that honours those living on the margins. Importantly, Paul’s view is not that the strong and privileged should simply show compassion to the poor and oppressed. And it is not simply that every person in the community is equal, although that is true in itself. Also, there is no evidence at all that Paul intends the powerful to lift the powerless to a powerful position. Rather, the dishonoured are to be honoured. People on the margins are to be treated as if they are the centre, as just the crucified Christ is at the centre of the gospel. After all, the shameful death at the cross is the site of resurrection. The seemingly defeat of the death of the anointed one is the very place of God’s victory. The goal is not that everyone becomes powerful, but that the community treats everyone with honour. Only the Spirit-people, not the *psychikos*, can truly understand this. In continuity with first-century Jesus-followers, we have found that believers today share Paul’s conviction of the meaning and implications of the cross, not least Pentecostals like Seymour and Yong.

7. Embracing the Powerless and Mutuality

We need to turn briefly to Romans to complete our study.⁵⁹ Apart from 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Romans and have the most frequent and concentrated use of the word group “S/spirit” (πνεῦμα, πνευματικός, πνευματικῶς) in the Pauline corpus (see Rom 8:1–17; 1 Cor 2:1–16; 12:1–13; Gal 3:1–6; 5:16–26).⁶⁰ This means that Romans and Galatians are highly significant when it comes to Pauline pneumatology. But we note that Romans correlates with 1 Corinthians in ways that Galatians doesn’t—namely, that both Romans and 1 Corinthians mention that the Spirit searches all things/the heart (Rom 8:27; 1 Cor 2:10), and that there are many members in the same body (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:12–30). Therefore, the rest of this essay will be devoted to Romans.

For our purposes, we note that all who are led by the Spirit are children of God (υἱοὶ θεοῦ), and indeed the Spirit bears witness that they are God’s children (Rom 8:14, 16). They have

⁵⁸ Dewey and Miller, “Paul,” 394.

⁵⁹ Unfortunately, space limitations disallow an in-depth study.

⁶⁰ Here I have considered both the number of occurrences and how close the words appear. The terms appear many times in Ephesians, but they are fairly spread out.

received the Spirit of adoption, by whom they cry *Abba*, Father (8:15). For Paul, Spirit-led children of God are being conformed to the image of the Son (8:29). Christ is, of course, the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; cf. Col 1:15), and believers are said to be transformed into his image through the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). The term “image” (εἰκῶν) recalls Gen 1:26–27 where it says that human beings are made in God’s image. Therefore, as I have argued elsewhere, Rom 8:29 speaks of “the process of transformation into God’s image, which has started in this age and will be consummated at the final renewal of the entire creation.”⁶¹ And believers are God’s image-bearers and his “representatives, or vice-regents, on earth.”⁶² How does this conformity and representation of Spirit-led believers work in this age? The answer lies in the transformation of the Jesus-community. In 12:2 Paul urges his audience not to be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of the mind. The language of transformation (συσχηματίζω, μεταμορφόω) here reminds us of the notion of conformity (σύμμορφος) in 8:29. And the transformation of the mind in 12:2 echoes the Spirit-inspired mindset and the mind of the Spirit in 8:3–8, 27. These intertextual and thematic links indicate that the renewal of the mind is empowered by the Spirit. Indeed, Fee thinks that “the Spirit is presupposed everywhere” in 12:1–2 regarding the renewal of the mind.⁶³ At any rate, all members of the body of Christ are God’s children and they are led by the indwelling Spirit (Rom 8:9, 14). The (Spirit-led!) renewal of the mind sets the stage for an extended exhortation *regarding life in community* in 12:1–15:13.⁶⁴ For Paul, the Spirit-led children of God are to reflect his glory in their communal life as his image-bearers.

Four comments will be made to highlight how this Spirit-led community functions as a non-hierarchical family that bears witness to Christ through mutual love and honour.

First, the filial relationship with God paints a vivid picture of the family of God in Romans. God is the Father and believers are his children (8:14–15). Christ is the “firstborn among many sisters and brothers” (ἐν πολλοῖς ἀδελφοῖς) (8:29). But note that there is no hierarchy among the siblings within this family. *All* believers are God’s children, and they have *all* been adopted into God’s family (8:15). All are led by the Spirit (8:14), or, in the language of 1 Corinthians,

⁶¹ Siu Fung Wu, “Reimaging Home: Reading Romans in Multicultural Australia” in *Reimagining Home*, edited by Darren Cronshaw, Rosemary Dewerse, and Darrell Jackson, (Morling Press: Macquarie Park, 2019), 217. See also, Siu Fung Wu, *Suffering in Romans* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 159–62, and especially Haley Goranson Jacob, *Conformed to the Image of his Son* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 251, who says that “believers are called even in the present to represent God within creation”.

⁶² Wu, “Reimaging,” 218; Wu, *Suffering*, 170–73. Jacob, *Conformed*, 264, puts it this way: “Mankind’s position on earth as God’s vicegerents to his creation is now restored, though now through the image of the Son of God, who reigns as God’s preeminent vicegerent.”

⁶³ Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 598. See also the detailed discussion by James Bond, “Renewing the mind” (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 2005), 80–131. The discussion in pp. 80–102 is particularly interesting, where Bond concludes that the believer’s “transformation into the image of Christ” has “both present and future implications” (p. 102).

⁶⁴ For a more detailed exegetical argument on this, see Wu, “Reimaging,” 219–220.

they are all “people with the Spirit” (Spirit-people). They are siblings in Christ, and no-one is above or below others regardless of their abilities/disabilities or social status in the Roman Empire.

Second, the powerful and privileged have the responsibility to embrace the disempowered. In the face of inter-group conflict, Paul urges the community to welcome the one who is weak in faith (τὸν ἀσθενοῦντα τῇ πίστει) (14:1). Importantly, Paul specifically says that “the powerful” (οἱ δυνατοί) ought to bear “the weaknesses” (τὰ ἀσθενήματα) of “the powerless” (τῶν ἀδυνάτων). Scot McKnight rightly observes:

Paul contrasts the *Dunatoi* and the *A-Dunatoi*. The powerful vs. the unempowered (or disempowered) . . . *Dunatoi* and *A-Dunatoi* are status terms in the Roman world (where status was everything). That is, in Rome one knew the elites (senators, equestrians) from the nonelites, and the competition among the elites was beyond noticeable . . . Notice it is the Strong who are told to “welcome” (14:1; 15:1, 7). Why? Power and privilege and status and location are on their side. It is the Weak who need to be welcomed. The act of the Strong welcoming the Weak is a Christoform act of crossing boundaries and turning no status into in-Christ-status. It is to say, “Because we are Strong and have Privilege and Power, we will not broker our Power to divide the faith community, but we will disempower ourselves to empower each sibling at the table and so live out the gospel of Christ.”⁶⁵

Since there is no hierarchy among the Spirit-led children of God, when there are conflicts the privileged are to embrace the disempowered. This coheres with Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians, where the dishonoured are to be honoured precisely because they are Spirit-people.

Third, Paul envisions a transforming community of mutual love and honour. The Greek term for “one another” (ἀλλήλων) appears frequently in 12:1–15.⁶⁶ It is not only that siblings in Christ are equal. Their relationship is also characterised by mutuality—“one-another-ness.” Importantly, they are to love one another and outdo one another in showing honour (12:9); and they are to rejoice and weep together (12:15). While the emphasis of 1 Corinthians is that, as Spirit-people, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are more indispensable (1 Cor 12:22; see above), Romans stresses the mutual love and honour between

⁶⁵ Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 534–545, Kindle. The Christoform focus is supported by Paul’s words in Rom 14:7–9: “For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.” (ESV)

⁶⁶ Rom 12:5, 10, 16; 13:8; 14:13, 19; 15:5, 7.

the Spirit-led children of God. Again, it is not so much about showing compassion to those living on the margins (although that is fine in itself). Rather, it is about mutual love and embrace.⁶⁷

Fourth, all of this is based on the fact that the Jesus-community is called to represent God in the world as his image-bearers—through the Spirit’s transforming work. It is their non-hierarchical love-centred Spirit-inspired relationship that bears witness to the Creator God. This is an alternative community existing within the Greco-Roman society. In a world where everything is about power and status, Paul urges his audiences to embody the countercultural cruciform pattern of Christ by embracing and honouring each other, not least those living on the margins. This is how the world can see the resurrection power of God.

8. Bearing God’s Image Together

We have studied 1 Corinthians and Romans in their historical and social contexts. And we have applied “Spirit hermeneutics” to see how today’s readers read the texts through the Spirit’s leading. Now I will conclude with an example of how I find myself reading Paul in continuity with his first-century audiences. I am part of a multicultural Christian community, where there are people from all walks of life, including asylum seekers from the Middle East. Zoe is an asylum seeker who spent eighteen months at the Christmas Island Immigration Detention Centre.⁶⁸ It was there that she came into contact with Christians and became a follower of Jesus. She joined our community after arriving at Melbourne. In the meantime, she applied for a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). After five years of waiting, she was granted the SHEV. It was a joyous occasion when we heard the news. But the SHEV will expire in five years, and currently there are stringent criteria for a permanent visa. After speaking with a migration lawyer, Zoe discovered that the chance of getting a permanent visa would be slim. So, despite many years of waiting, there is no certainty of whether she will stay in Australia or be deported. When she shared her predicament with the community recently, our hearts sank.

Australia is notorious for its Euro-centric immigration policy, which has a long history, notably expressed in the “White Australia policy” of the *Immigration Restriction Act* in 1901. Recent speeches from Senator Pauline Hanson (1996) and Senator Fraser Anning (2017) reinforce

⁶⁷ Speaking as scholars located in Malaysia, Ezra Kok and Lim Kar Yong remark that, in Asia, “it is commonplace to scorn or despise anyone perceived to be lower in social status, wealth, and honor.” Their interpretation of Paul is that he would tell “those of higher social status not to harbor the thought of superiority over others.” Ezra Kok and Lim Kar Yong, “The Agape Meal,” in *From Rome to Beijing*, edited by K. K. Yeo (Lincoln, NE: Kairos, 2013), 8376, 8385–8391, Kindle.

⁶⁸ Zeo is not her real name. For privacy reasons, her name and the name of the community are not disclosed.

such a mentality,⁶⁹ with the latter insisting that immigrants should “predominantly reflect the historic European Christian composition of Australian society.”⁷⁰ Granted that their views do not represent everyone, they do represent the voice of at least some Australians, and their political offices put them in a position to influence public opinion and public policy.⁷¹

In light of this, a Middle-Eastern woman without a permanent visa is very much living on the margins of Australian society. This, however, does not mean that Zoe has no social standing. In fact, she is highly respected and valued in her workplace. But as a society and in terms of social policy, she is put in a disadvantaged position. Yet through his wisdom God has chosen her—even though she is not powerful or of “noble birth”!—to be a recipient of the salvation found in the crucified Christ and risen Lord. Indeed, in the eyes of the world, she is weak and unworthy to be treated equally as others. Yet, she is a child of God, and a Spirit-person (person with the Spirit).

What our community does is to embrace, respect, and honour her as a person made in God’s image. We try to be the kind of non-hierarchical community that practises mutual love, honours the dishonoured, and listens to the Spirit. But as it turns out, it is Zoe who blesses us more. Recently, I messaged her to say that we had been praying for her visa situation. Her response was: “I’m experiencing God’s love in every second of my life. The day I took step to this journey I trusted him . . . and I can experience him in the most difficult situations so far.” This is strength in weakness and a demonstration of God’s power in human powerlessness (2 Cor 12:9–10). In a real sense, Zoe represents God as his image-bearer in this out-of-joint world, for her story reflects the glory of God. Personally speaking, it is a profound Spirit-led experience to hear Zoe’s testimony. For through her I see the unfathomable power of God. The Pentecostal in me says, Hallelujah!

⁶⁹ Hanson’s speeches can be found in <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/pauline-hansons-1996-aiden-speech-to-parliament-full-transcript-20160915-grgv3.html>; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-15/pauline-hanson-aiden-speech-2016/7847136>. Accessed on 6th August, 2021. In her speech in 1996, Hanson said, “I believe we are in danger of being swamped by Asians” and she wanted the policy of multiculturalism to be abolished. In her speech in 2016, Hanson changed her tone and said that she welcomed migrants, but she seemed to insist that cultural diversity caused “disruption.” She also said that Australia is “in danger of being swamped by Muslims.”

⁷⁰ SBS News, n.d., “Senator Fraser Anning’s maiden speech,” accessed September 19, 2019, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/full-text-senator-fraser-anning-s-aiden-speech/ba0d8a0e-702b-4bed-971e-7f9556a13aea>.

⁷¹ For a concise discussion on “whiteness as a racial position,” see David Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 310–8. For an informed critique of immigration policies in the West, including Australia, see Mark Glanville and Luke Glanville, *Refuge Reimagined* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2021), 133–140, 168, 175–177, 231.

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