

# Three Words in First Corinthians

By Carleton A. Toppe

Verbal inspiration, as it is understood, accepted, believed, and taught in our midst, is the mysterious and miraculous process by which God the Holy Ghost inspired men to write His Word. He called the holy writers to write; He supplied the content they were to write (*suggestio rerum*); and He guided them in the choice of the very words they used. “Every thought they expressed, every word they used, was given to them by the Holy Spirit by inspiration” (“This We Believe,” p 4). This verbal inspiration was not a mechanical dictation but a “word-for-word inspiration” (“This We Believe,” p 5), that did not deprive the holy writers of all intelligence and organization, and of individuality of style and diction. It did, however, keep them from error.

As a result, we have a Bible that is true and without any factual error in everything it says, not only in matters pertaining to our salvation but also in so-called non-religious matters (e.g., historical, geographical). The Holy Scriptures are infallible and inerrant in all their statements and in their every word.

The key statements of Scripture on which the doctrine of verbal inspiration rests include the familiar memory passages: “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pe 1:21); “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tm 3:16); “The Scripture cannot be broken” (Jn 10:35).

Among these passages is also I Corinthians 2:13: “Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth.” The final portion of this verse, which the King James Version translates, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual,” is generally omitted from this proof passage for verbal inspiration.

The omission of this concluding participial phrase prompts a question regarding its relation to the main body of the verse. Is it only a relatively obscure appendage, which serves no functional purpose in the crucial struggle for the doctrine of verbal inspiration? As it is rendered in the Authorized Version, it would appear to be not only dispensable but unusable.

Other translations provide more intelligible renderings, but a number of them also raise questions regarding the utility of the concluding words of verse 13 in behalf of verbal inspiration. Consider the following translations, grouped according to types:

## *Type A*

as we explain the things of the Spirit to those who have the Spirit (Beck)  
interpreting spiritual truth to spiritual persons (Modern Language New Testament—New Berkeley Version)  
because we are interpreting spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit (New English Bible)  
interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit (Revised Standard Version)  
as we explain spiritual truths to those who have the Spirit (Today’s English Version)  
explaining spiritual truths to those who are spiritual (Phillips)

## *Type B*

expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words (New International Version)  
combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words (New American Standard Bible)  
adapting spiritual words to spiritual truths (Weymouth)  
using spiritual words for spiritual things (C.K. Williams)  
combining spiritual things with spiritual words (American Standard Version)  
So we use the Holy Spirit’s words to explain the Holy Spirit’s facts (The Living Bible)

## *Type C*

we teach spiritual things spiritually (The Jerusalem Bible)  
giving spiritual truth a spiritual form (Goodspeed)

*und richten geistliche Sachen geistlich* (Luther)  
 comparing spiritual things with spiritual (King James Version)  
*spiritualibus spiritualia comparantes* (Vulgate)

The reason for the divergence of translations is readily apparent from the Greek text. The words in question, at the close of verse 13, are πνευματικῆς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες. Before proceeding to a study of this combination of words, however, a textual variant should be noted: πνευματικῶς for πνευματικοῖς, as found in Codex B (Vaticanus) and in 33, “the Queen of the cursives,” a marginal reading deemed by Westcott and Hort to be of almost equal weight with πνευματικοῖς. This marginal reading could substantiate the translation “spiritually” or *geistlich* in the Type C group.

Two of the three Greek words at the close of verse 13 pose problems for the translator. Πνευματικά is neuter and is commonly translated “spiritual things” or “spiritual truth(s).” (Moffatt translates, “what is spiritual.”) There seems to be no dispute about an acceptable translation for πνευματικά. Πνευματικοῖς, however, has an uncertain gender. It can be either masculine or neuter. If it is masculine, it could refer either to the antecedent λόγοις or to persons; if it is neuter, it could refer to spiritual things (truths). The scholars are divided on this point.

It is συγκρίνοντες that occasions the greatest difficulty. Arndt-Gingrich’s lexicon (Bauer) offers three options and exercises no choice. Under συγκρίνω it lists 1. *bring together, combine* so perh. πνευματικοῖς (neut.) πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες *giving spiritual truth a spiritual form* (s. 2b and 3 below). 2. *compare* b. I Cor 2:13 (s. 1 above and 3 below) may also be classified here: *comparing the spiritual gifts and revelations* (which we already possess) *with the spiritual gifts and revelations* (which we are to receive, and judging them thereby). 3. *explain, interpret* πνευματικοῖς (masc.) πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες *interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit* (s. 1 and 2b above). This lexicon entry is not only ambivalent; in 2b it is also rather strange. Furthermore, it omits an obvious rendering that many Type B translators have used.

Thayer (Grimm) suggests, “‘combines spiritual things with spiritual,’ adapts the discourse to the subject.” The alternate suggestion is basically the same as Arndt-Gingrich’s 3.

Kittel opts for “to interpret,” “to expand,” “to explain,” adding that this meaning is “predominant” in the LXX. He quotes Buechsel with approval: “That the πνευματικά need exposition is shown by the fact that they are the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom (v 7).”

In his commentary, *Paulus der Bote Jesu*, A. Schlatter reflects a similar ambiguity. He gives equal consideration to “*deuten, erklæren*”: “‘*Denen, die die Art des Geistes haben, deuten wir das, was die Art des Geistes hat*’ ”; and to “*verbinden, einigen*”: “*Paulus verbindet das vom Geist ihm gegebene Wissen mit dem vom Geist ihm gegebenen Wort.*” Schaff, editing Kling in the Lange commentary, argues for “explain,” against Kling’s designation of “unite” (namely, spiritual matters with words taught of the Spirit) as the only correct interpretation.

At this impasse commentators like Lenski and Tyndale, and a grammarian like Robertson, appeal to “context” to decide the issue; but, of course, Kling, Schaff, Buechsel, *The Interpreter’s Bible*, Godet, and Schlatter, among others, are also claiming that the context vindicates *their* judgments.

Certainly context is determinative. It cannot be assumed that the meaning of a word may be ascertained by reference to its etymology and its supposed root-meaning, nor is the past history of a word an infallible guide to its meaning. The meaning of a word must be sought from words in combination. Both in interpretation and in translation it is the grouping of words that is of semantic significance.

The context arguments advanced by those who favor a translation like the RSV’s “interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit” include the following. 1. Ἐν τοῖς τελείοις, which begins this paragraph (v

6), is parallel to *πνευματικοῖς* and thus recommends a translation referring to persons. 2. In this chapter Paul is indicating how his secret wisdom may be imparted; the concept of “explaining” or “interpreting” is in keeping with this presentation. 3. The instrumental understanding of *πνευματικοῖς* is contrary to Paul’s preceding use, not of an instrumental dative, but of a construction with *ἐν* (*ἐν λόγοις*.) 4. Verse 14 has a natural antithetic force, and therefore it is properly preceded by a reference to persons of a different type, the spiritual persons in verse 13. 5. The LXX uses *συγκρίνειν* in connection with visions, which also require interpretations, as did Paul’s supernatural revelation; hence, usage favors the meaning “interpret”

Those who favor a translation like the NASB’s “combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words” also appeal to the context 1. *Λαλοῦμεν* in verse 13 recommends “words” rather than persons. 2. The NASB translation is “*eine neue Erklarung und Begrundung zu Vers 1.*” 3. The word *λόγοις* is used in the same verse in which *πνευματικοῖς* occurs. 4. There is nothing in the context about “men”—since *λόγοις* is used in this verse, “men” would have to be inserted to avoid misunderstanding.

Because they consider the LXX precedent a major argument, the “thoughts (truths)—words” proponents point out that the original import, the natural meaning of *συγκρίνω* is “combine” (combine with discernment), and that the meaning “interpret” is foreign to the New Testament and to classical Greek. They also point out that in the LXX *συγκρίνειν* is never used for interpreting anything besides dreams.

The context appears to favor the “thoughts (truths)—words” combination. Even Kittel holds that the three words “develop in some way the thought that Paul proclaims revelations given by the Spirit in words taught by the Spirit,” although he prefers the signification “to interpret,” “to explain” for *συγκρίνειν*.

Examining the context supplied by chapter 2, we note that “speech,” the oral declaration of the gospel, is Paul’s concern in the opening verses of the chapter. In verse 4 he declares that his speech and his preaching were Spirit-wrought (“my speech and my preaching was...in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”). In verses 6–12 he explains how it is possible for him to “speak the wisdom of God in a mystery.” The Spirit revealed this “hidden wisdom” to him. In so doing, the Spirit supplied the material for his message. Then clearly, unmistakably, he asserts, in verse 13, that the words he uses to convey God’s revelation are taught by the Spirit (“Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth”). This is verbal inspiration. “*Paulus war in der Gestaltung des Worts der Geleitete*” (Schlatter).

Verse 13, the immediate context of *πνευματικοῖς πνευματικὰ συγκρίνοντες*, also contains the very word *λόγοις*, that comprehends the thought of the apostle in the preceding verses of the chapter. Paul wants his readers to note his words and to respect them because they are divinely taught and conveyed to him, and through him to them. Not only the message is God-given; the words are also. The “thoughts (truths)—words” translation of the final segment of this verse accords with this emphasis in *λόγοις*.

Linguistically it is also most natural to associate *πνευματικοῖς* with *λόγοις* and with *ἐν διδακτοῖς* (*λόγοις*). Robertson agrees: “The presence of *λόγοις* inclines one to the notion that Paul is here combining spiritual ideas with spiritual words.” *Λόγοις* is the immediate antecedent of *πνευματικοῖς*. If *πνευματικοῖς* is to have “men” as its antecedent, it must reach back to *τοῖς τελείοις* in verse 6 for it. Yet it appears to be only a para-antecedent, at best “a dative of remoter object” (Buechsel).

In answer to Buechsel’s contention that the instrumental understanding of *πνευματικοῖς* is contrary to Paul’s preceding use, not of an instrumental dative but of a construction with *ἐν*, it may be pointed out that *ἐν λόγοις* is an instrumental construction. Blass states that “in the genuinely instrumental sense the dative has been sharply curtailed in the NT by the use of *ἐν*” (195).

While the “thoughts (truths)—words” combination supports the doctrine of verbal inspiration, it is hardly demonstrable that all Type B translations wear the white hats and all Type A translations wear the other kind. Beck, for example, is a true believer in verbal inspiration, yet he translates as the NEB and RSV and TEV do, none of which is notably congenial to the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Nor does Luther’s translation lend support to the “thoughts (truths)—words” translation, although he may have been influenced by the Greek text he used. The Authorized Version translators, likewise Bible-fearing divines, may have been influenced by the Vulgate’s *spiritualibus spiritualia comparantes*. On the other hand, *The Living Bible*’s flat-out verbal inspiration rendering was hardly to be expected.

*Summa summarum*: the context recommends the translation, “combining spiritual thoughts (truths) with spiritual words,” but the failure to translate thus is not proof positive of vacillation in the doctrine of verbal inspiration—and vice versa.