

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Trumpet with an Uncertain Sound

Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine? And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. (1 Corinthians 14:6-9, KJV)

If we were to read Verse 6 isolated from its context, we might wonder what Paul intended by the words. Read in the context, any question dissolves, and his intent is quite clear. The dominant message of the verse and the chapter appears repeatedly throughout the chapter. The public worship gathering of a church should be simple, its message clear and understandable to all in attendance. A New Testament church is not to be a place where every member forms his own private opinions or interpretations. It is a place where authoritative teaching is heard and affirmed by people of one mind and in one accord, in one accord with each other, with the Lord, and with the church's established statement of its faith. It is definitely not to be a place where an unknown message is delivered in an unknown language or where controversy and confusion rule over "...*the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" (Ephesians 4:3) For Paul, affirmed by the Holy Spirit's inclusion of his words in Scripture, four vehicles of communication are key; 1) revelation, 2) knowledge, 3) prophesying, and 4) doctrine. Speaking in tongues does not appear in the list. Again we notice that Paul views tongues in this chapter as speaking in a foreign language, not as a spiritual gift or as some form of mystical utterances.

"Revelation," the Lord directly "Revealing" truth otherwise not known or knowable, was indeed given to the apostles and perhaps a few others in the first generation of the church. When Paul taught Timothy, he did not teach Timothy to rely on revelations from the Lord. He taught the young preacher in the next generation of the faith to "*Consider what I say...*" (2 Timothy 2:7), to "*Study to show thyself approved unto God...*" (2 Timothy 2:15); not a word about special private revelations. Invariably when someone thinks he has received a special direct revelation from the Lord, he will rely on that presumed "Revelation," even if it is shown to contradict Scripture. He will "Wrest" the Scriptures to make them appear to harmonize with his "Revelation," not examine his supposed "Revelation" to be sure it is valid and from the Lord, confirmed as truth by its harmony with Scripture. In effect, he will rely more on his private "Revelation"

than on Scripture itself. This principle equally applies to the preacher who boasts that he gives no meditation or thought to his sermon in advance. He merely walks into the pulpit and relies on the Lord to give the "Revelation" of his sermon. This claim contradicts New Testament teaching; it does not manifest a high faith. The age of such revelation ended with the first generation of believers in the New Testament. Subsequent believers are directed by Scripture to rely on Scripture, not seek private revelations to replace Scripture and a faithful believer's conscientious study of Scripture. A private revelation is no different than a "private interpretation," something that even the writers of Holy Scripture were not permitted to do in their writing. (2 Peter 1:20-21) If the Holy Spirit did not permit private interpretations by the writers of Scripture, it should be no surprise that He also does not approve a private revelation by a believer. **We have God's revelation; we call it Scripture.**

...except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? We have all heard the child who bangs the keys of a piano because he loves the sound. There is a world of difference between the child randomly banging the keys of a piano and a skilled musician playing a piece from one of the classics. And this distinction is the point of Paul's teaching. He uses musical instruments to show us the essential need to be simple, clear, and communicative in our words, never private or mystical.

For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? Obviously in first century war strategies, commanders used a trumpet to communicate their orders to soldiers in battle. I didn't serve in my country's military, but I am aware that, perhaps at this time more symbolic than essential, our military services still use trumpets to communicate special messages on appropriate occasions. You need only attend the funeral service of a military figure at a national military cemetery to understand this point. If you were attending the final ceremony for a loved one, how would you react if the trumpet player started playing "Yankee Doodle" instead of "Taps"? Or even more a match to Paul's point, how would you

react if the man playing the trumpet started randomly blowing sounds, similar to the three-year-old at a piano keyboard?

Now shift your thinking back to the first century. You are a soldier, and you have memorized every trumpet sound and signal. The moment you hear the trumpet sound a certain message you immediately recognize it and know exactly what your commander has ordered you to do. But what do you do if you hear that same trumpet sounding random notes that have no corollary whatever to the signals that your commander has established and that you have learned? Paul warns us with this analogy regarding what a man speaks in church. If he speaks in a foreign language, a language that you do not understand, he may well be saying good things, but you have no clue what he is saying. How can you change your life in any way based on his teaching if you don't have a clue what he said? You can't change your life any more than that first century soldier can act decisively and in harmony with his commander's orders if the sound you hear is not clear and understandable.

Think for just a moment. If the supernatural gift of tongues, that specific gift described in such simple details in Acts 2, were the issue of Paul's teaching here, nothing that he writes in First Corinthians 14 makes any sense at all. In the true Biblical description of the Lord's miracle-gift, the Holy Spirit provided immediate translation from one known human language to another known human language. If the Holy Spirit continued that miracle at the time of Paul's writing to the Corinthians, there would be no confusion. Everyone present would hear and understand. This is the mirror opposite to Paul's description of the actual situation. No miraculous translation existed. For the church to understand what a man spoke to the members in an unfamiliar language, they need a translator. No translator, says Paul, no speak.

So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. "...easy to be understood." Every word a preacher speaks must pass comfortably through this filter. Jesus directed Peter to feed both His sheep and His lambs. (John 21:15) Sometimes preachers may forget their obligation to the Lord's "Lambs" in the flock and speak good words that are so complicated that only another preacher can truly understand what he is saying. While not speaking in a foreign language, the man does contradict the spirit of Paul's teaching in this chapter to speak words *"...easy to be understood."* I've heard preachers sing their sermons so that I couldn't understand what they said. I've heard preachers grunt or "And uh" between every few words to the extent that I couldn't understand what they said. I've heard preachers shout every word of their sermon in a shouting monotone that my mind couldn't follow what they said. Any of these habits or any unusual speaking or other behavior in the pulpit that

distracts the mind of the hearers and prevents their "Easily" understanding what the preacher is teaching fails Paul's requirement for *"...easy to be understood"* preaching in this chapter.

A preacher may speak in a professional, communicative manner, but still describe his teaching with complicated reasoning or technical terms so that the lambs in the congregation cannot understand what he teaches. I often audit and scold my own preaching, as well as other preaching, and urge simplicity in understanding before attempting to teach a lesson. Complexity can easily become as difficult to understand as a foreign language or other speaking habits that impair simple, clear understanding. Fifty years ago people read far more than they do today. I recall talking with an older and wise man who told me that he spent the last winter reading the whole of John Gill's New Testament Commentary. In one winter! Have you ever seen this writing? When this man went to church, he had already trained his attention span to listen attentively for one or two hours with no hindrance. In today's world of television shows with commercial interruption every five or ten minutes, the average person's attention span, no mystery, is limited to about five or ten minutes. Instead of preaching for an hour and a half on Sunday morning, the wise preacher should probably preach about half that time. Even so, he should break down his teaching into brief simple points that fit into his audience's attention span. We can complain about diminished attention spans, but our complaint does nothing whatever to expand the attention span of our audience. If people do not hear or follow our teaching, we *"...speak into the air."* Sound Biblical preaching truly engages their minds with what we teach.

...how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air. To speak in an unknown language or to speak so people find it difficult to understand is no more profitable than going all alone to the middle of the forest and speaking with no other human present, speaking *"...into the air."*

Take careful note. Paul's stated objective is for people in a congregation to know what is spoken, to know what the speaker says and what he is trying to communicate to you. A preacher's primary objective in speaking to a congregation should be to communicate his thoughts and studies to the people in the simplest manner possible. Once in my ministerial youth I had spoken from a passage that was far too difficult for my understanding. I left my thoughts confused and complex. Few people, if any, understood what I meant. A wise father in the ministry took me aside later and gave me brief but wise words, "Never teach a text of Scripture so as to leave it on its all fours." His point was right and important. Strive for simplicity, not complexity. Avoid your own version of an unknown tongue. Seek rather to prophesy, to speak words easy to understand. If you have occasion to "Blow" a gospel trumpet, be sure people get the message.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor