

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## Five Words or Ten Thousand?

*I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all: Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. (1 Corinthians 14:18-19)*

*I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all.* I admire people who have a natural penchant for language. It seems that they can pick up a foreign language in no time. To some extent, Latin, the dominant language of the Romans in the first century, forms the basis for many other languages. One of my daughters was required to learn Spanish as part of her career training. Through Spanish she has picked up quite a bit of Latin "Savvy." In my one bold venture out of this country, a few years back Sandra and I accompanied Greg, Leah, and their son, Noah, to Italy and a Mediterranean cruise. I was quite impressed with Leah's ability to pick up the various languages almost immediately because she knew Latin through her Spanish studies. This might explain some of Paul's exceptional ability to speak many foreign languages, "tongues" in the text. However, in Acts 21:37-40, we read that Paul knew both Greek and Aramaic, an ancient dialect of Hebrew, not at all related to Latin. We learn from Scripture that Paul was a citizen of Tarsus, "...no mean city," as well as a citizen of Rome. One of many traits that gave Tarsus a high reputation related to a university that was located there. Paul likely enjoyed the dual educational status from both his native city of Tarsus and from his training in Jerusalem, "...at the feet of Gamaliel." (Acts 22:3) In his defense on Mars Hill before Greek philosophers, Paul quoted two ancient Greek poet-philosophers, information he would not have gained by merely knowing "Conversational Greek." (Acts 17)

Obviously well educated, Paul didn't use his education as a source of pride or boasting that he knew more than someone else, a sadly common trait of many well educated people in our day. He thanked the Lord that he had the language tools to preach the gospel to people of many nationalities and dialects across the Roman Empire. This is a logical trait for the man whom the Lord called to be the apostle to Gentiles.

*Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding.* In order for a person to speak rightly and to communicate his ideas in a foreign language, he must first know or "understand" that language himself. In our visit to the Mediterranean, I observed a humorous example of this point. While Leah had studied Spanish and had many years' experience speaking to Spanish speaking people, her husband Greg lacked that

background. However, he really wanted to be prepared for his visit to this new region of the world. He bought a "Quick study" language program and spent quite a bit of time with it, hoping to gain enough knowledge of those languages to converse with people in the countries that we planned to visit. On the day of our visit to Barcelona, we spent several hours strolling through the streets of Barcelona to just soak up the local culture. As we approached mid-day, we entered an open square near the middle of the city. We saw a number of nice looking restaurants around the square. One restaurant had a man outside with their menu, encouraging people to come in for lunch. Their specialty was fresh seafood. Since I am allergic to shellfish, Greg wanted to be very sure that their menu would offer me a safe choice of food for my lunch. Bless him, Greg really watched out for me on this trip. He tried to engage the man in the local Spanish language. I happened to look over my shoulder and noticed that Leah was almost beside herself with laughter at whatever it was that Greg was saying to the man. He intended to ask if the restaurant offered seafood items other than shellfish. Instead of telling the man that I was allergic to shellfish, Greg actually told the man that I was an "Old fish." We all had a good laugh and found another very enjoyable place for our lunch. Before we try to speak a foreign language, we must study it enough to understand that language ourselves. That is Paul's point in this verse.

Just five words "...with my understanding" seems like such a limited vocabulary, doesn't it? Perhaps not as limited as you might first think. Spend some time reading over your favorite Bible verses. How many of these verses state the rich core truth in five words? Example; "...by grace are ye saved." In one of my first sermons from this passage, as I was pondering the verse and Paul's contrast between five and ten thousand words, a passage came to mind, "*The Lord is my shepherd.*" (Psalm 23:1). Just five little words, two of which are the simplest of two letter words. I couldn't think of speaking or reading these words in ancient Hebrew or even New Testament Greek. However, I treasure their meaning in the one language that I do understand, English. If I could fully know and understand all the glorious truths set forth by these five words, how rich in faith I would be. I've been

reading Psalm 23 for almost seventy years. With each reading of the Psalm, I still find new thoughts that comfort and enrich my heart. As much as this verse has enriched me, I still grow in my "understanding" of those five little words.

"Understanding," what does this mean? Here is one straightforward definition of the Greek word translated "understanding" in our study verse.

(Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary)  
...the mind, intellect, 1 Cor. 14:15, 19;  
understanding, intelligent faculty, Lk. 24:45;  
intellect, judgment,

Thank the Lord for divine intervention to give us Scripture in a simple and honest English translation. The King James translation accurately and simply mirrors the Greek words behind it. If Paul intended to speak words to other people regarding his Lord, he intended to speak of things that he himself understood. No mystery language for Paul, he would not speak words that needed a translator even for him to understand. He set a right and logical filter on what he spoke in his preaching. He first would understand his words before he spoke them to others.

*...that by my voice I might teach others also.* Not only does Paul filter his teaching to contain only words and ideas that he understands, but he also confines his words to things that his audience will understand and learn. He intends to teach others the same truth that he has learned of God's joyful gospel. For the moment ignore the mystical "Tongues" of charismatic Christian culture. Think in terms of our native English language. How well must a preacher "Understand" a Bible lesson or doctrine to enable him to teach it clearly and simply to others? A few years ago a preacher confessed to me, "At one time I thought I understood Bible justification, but I don't understand it at all now." Despite this honest confession, the man was constantly teaching in his public preaching on themes that related intimately and directly to Biblical justification. If he didn't understand the topic, how could he possibly teach anything sensibly and soundly to others? What he was teaching was in fact confusing and often contradictory, both to Scripture and to sound logical reasoning from the Scriptures. Imagine Paul's reaction to such words from a man who claims to be a preacher of the gospel. I didn't answer the man, but the thought crossed my mind when he spoke those words, "If you don't understand Bible justification, you need to stop preaching, and get your head and your heart in the Bible till you do understand it."

While Paul makes his points in this context relative to various human languages, the point sets an example for every preacher. Have you ever heard a sermon that may have well been true, but the preacher failed to make his points simply and clearly so that the congregation would understand? If most of the people scratched their heads and

wondered if they were hearing an explanation of some complex scientific principle that they'd never heard of before, the preacher needs to apply Paul's "...by my understanding" and "...teach others" points in this lesson. Until the preacher so thoroughly understands the meaning of the Scriptures or the doctrine that he wants to teach that it is second nature to him, he cannot teach it to others in a clear or simple manner. And edifying wisdom dictates that he should delay speaking about it and continue his study till he understands it and can teach his ideas to others simply.

This problem with complexity in the pulpit is long-standing. I recall as a young man in the faith more than once hearing a man speak to the church for the better part of an hour, and I couldn't understand what he was teaching at all. He sat down at the end of the sermon with me wholly puzzled at what he believed and what he was trying to teach. I was further puzzled when an older, more experienced member of the congregation would say to me, "I didn't understand a word he said, but that was really a deep sermon." I have come to a very different assessment of such a sermon. It wasn't a deep sermon; it wasn't a sermon at all in terms of its ability to edify the congregation. Most such sermons need many more hours of study and meditation by the preacher before he speaks a word to anyone about his thoughts. If we apply Jesus' food analogy to preaching, "Feed my sheep," many a potentially good dish was served too soon before all the flavors and seasonings had time under heat to blend together. The "Cook" threw the right ingredients in the pot, turned the heat to high, and, as soon as the pot boiled, he served it to the people. If he had slowed down, put the pot on the back burner, and turned the burner to simmer for several hours, the dish that was barely edible might have been a near-gourmet meal. A sermon delivered without prolonged and prayerful meditation is similar to the prematurely served dish.

*...than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.* How long might it take for a preacher to speak ten thousand words in a sermon? And if the preacher didn't understand those words, how long would the poor people in the pew think they were sitting there before the man finally sat down? It might surprise the congregation, but a wise preacher would honor the Lord far more if he stood up, spoke five words with his understanding, words that also teach the congregation, and sat down. Some ancient historical records indicate that John was the only one of the twelve apostles to live out his natural life rather than dying a martyr's death for his faith. According to the record, when John was so old that he couldn't walk to the church where he lived, some of the members would go to his home, and carry him in his chair to the church. When asked by the pastor if he had anything to say to the church, it was reported that this apostle of love would remain seated in his chair and simply, quietly say, "Little children, love one another." Hmmm.

Five words; did you notice? How well do we truly understand these five words? What impact would our lives have on others if we manifested that “Understanding” in every word and action we take?

No preacher can “*teach others*” anything that he doesn’t already know and understand quite clearly. Like the man who continued to preach on Bible themes related to justification, even after confessing that he didn’t at all understand that doctrine, whatever the man speaks void of his own understanding will only confuse his hearers. The Bible requirement for acceptable preaching is edification, and no edification can possibly occur apart from a sound understanding of the truth considered. I honor the kind sincerity of many dear people who believe in “Charismatic tongues” in our day, but I would try kindly to remind them of Paul’s teaching in this chapter. If you do not understand the words, you cannot speak them, and you cannot teach others. Preaching and Bible teaching, according to Paul, must occur in the context of the preacher/teacher’s clear understanding and his conscious choice of simple words to simply and clearly teach others. Whether we are dealing with this idea and practice or with our own attempts to preach something before we fully understand it, both practices contradict Paul’s teaching and send us back to the inspired textbook, the Bible, to learn God’s way to teach, to feed, His hungry sheep.

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Worship service each Sunday                      10:30 A. M.  
Joseph R. Holder    Pastor