

No.18. *The Miracle of Tongues Speaking (7)*

In our last study it was emphasised that great stress is laid by Paul in this passage on the importance of *understanding & coherence* in the worship of God so that the edification of the church will result.

Hence, the first main point made was that genuine spiritual edification can only result from the understanding of divine truth. Paul refers a number of times in this passage to edification being received, but Scripture makes it clear that it is divine truth, the word of God that edifies, Acts 20: 32.

In the second place, we noted that the tongues speaker was edified by an understanding of the truth that he spoke, v.4. Remember that the words *unknown tongue* mean nothing more than a “foreign language”. Thus, the gift of speaking in a foreign language without having learned it included the ability to understand it. Thus, the one who delivered God’s word in a foreign language was edified for he understood what he was saying.

In this connection we wished to consider v.14 but time did not permit us. It is claimed by the modern tongues speaker that this verse supports their claim that the one who speaks in tongues does not understand what he or she is saying. Using this verse it will be taught that in the tongues-speaker his “spirit” expresses itself to God in a supposed heavenly tongue, but the mind or understanding remains unfruitful. Thus, the Pentecostalist will teach that the interpretation is for the benefit of the speaker as well as the hearer. But this is not what this verse teaches.

First – this view of this verse is based on a false division between the spirit and the mind, and the N.T. does not support such a division or dichotomy. See Mark 2: 6-8 – the word *perceived* is from the same root as “understanding” or *mind* in 1 Cor 14: 14; and the word for *spirit* in Mark 2: 8 is the same as in 1 Cor 14: 14. Mark 2: 8 shows that Christ knew in His spirit what the scribes were thinking. While the scene in view pertains to the supernatural, the principle is clear – Christ possessed rational knowledge in His spirit, proving that the human spirit does not merely consist of the emotional. Rather, between the mind and the spirit there is the communication of rational thought and understanding. Thus, when in his spirit Paul prayed in a tongue, it did not mean that he had no understanding of what he was saying.

Second – his understanding being unfruitful means that when he was speaking in a language foreign to others he was not conveying or communicating truth to them. The words “my understanding is unfruitful” relate to his understanding or mind being a source of spiritual help to others *when he spoke in an intelligible language*. But if he spoke in a language that others did not understand – even though he understood it – then his mind would not prove to be fruitful to them. He would not benefit others when he prayed in a foreign tongue for they would not know what he was saying. From his mind no fruit or benefit would be conveyed to his listeners. Thus, he states his conclusion in v.15 – in exercising his spiritual gift he would do so as to be understood.

Thus, Paul places a tremendous emphasis in his teaching that the exercise of the spiritual gift must be to the end of having understanding of truth conveyed to the listener. This is the essence of his argument throughout this passage. Note some of the outstanding verses.

(a) V.6 – in part (a) of the verse Paul underlines that if he visited Corinth using languages that were foreign to them it would be totally useless. In part (b) he is obviously stating that he would only benefit them if he brought them revelation, knowledge, prophesying, doctrine – but obviously in a language they could understand.

Then, in v.9 there is the clear application of what he says in v.6. In v.9 the Greek word translated “*easy to be understood...*” means, *intelligible*. The point is that the tongues they were using were unintelligible, and they were only speaking into the air.

He illustrates his point in v.v. 7, 8 by his reference to musical instruments. His point is – who but a fool would choose to listen to a jumbled cacophony of sound or rush out to battle at the uncertain or *indistinct* sound of a trumpet? If an intelligible performance is required of a musical instrument – and it is – how much more is it required of a living person? Then v.10 – the world is full of “voices” or *sounds* but none is “*without signification.*” That is *soundless* – not conveying some understandable & intelligible sound. The world of nature is full of sound and it all has a meaning & conveys intelligible sounds to the ear.

(b) V.11 – more application of his point that there must be understanding given in the Church. Paul asserts that if he does not understand what he is saying and his hearers do not understand, then both are *barbarians*. The term “barbarian” is very strong and emphatic. The word denotes one whose speech is rude & harsh. It is a word whose meaning is contained in its repeated syllable *bar-bar*, signifying one who speaks a strange or foreign language. In N.T. times it came to represent any foreigner ignorant of Greek language and culture. It was an honour to be a Greek and a misfortune to be a Barbarian – this was the thinking in the use of this word. But Paul uses it here to stress the unseemliness of church ministry that did not convey understanding & intelligible information.

(c) V.v. 16, 17 – here the *unlearned* is not the unsaved. See v.v. 23, 24 where the *unlearned* and the *unbeliever* are distinguished. Hence, in v.16 the *unlearned* has reference to the ability of a man to comprehend or not what is being said. The inference is that the “tongues” in view are foreign languages, languages that any man, had he sufficient instruction or learning, could understand. However, not having had the opportunity to learn the language being used, he does not understand. The speaker may offer thanks very competently, v.17, but the listener is not edified for he does not understand. V.v. 19, 20 then, amplify the point of the need for the use of an intelligible language in order to benefit the church. Paul had the ability to speak in various tongues or languages. But in the church context it was his rule to speak so as to be understood.