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# 1 Corinthians

**There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them *is* without significance. 1 Corinthians 14:10**

Paul continues with his dialogue concerning the speaking of tongues with a thought that looks back on what he has said and forward to a continued discussion about tongues in the church. In verses 7 and 8, he mentioned instruments and the sounds they make - literally, "their voice." Then he compared those things to tongues, or languages by saying, "So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air."

Just as a trumpet that isn't given a specific tune will fail to assemble the army, so a language spoken that no one understands will fail to edify the people. But this is the purpose of languages. They are given to instruct, warn, comfort, etc. All languages have purpose and no word in a language can be without meaning. Rather, there must be a thought connected to it or it is a useless sound; not a part of the language. In other words, thoughts are connected to words which are invented in order to convey those thoughts.

Understanding this, Paul says, "There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world." The word translated here as "languages" is literally "voice." It is the same word used to describe the sounds of the instruments in the previous verses. It is used to describe the words of the prophets (the voice of the prophets) in Acts 13:27; the outcry of an assembled crowd (the voice of the crowd) in Acts 19:34; the voice of the Lord in Acts 22:9 (which was only understandable to Paul and not those around him; it being the Hebrew language); the blast of the trumpet (the

voice of the trumpet) in Revelation 8:1; and even the sound of the wings of the locusts (the voice of the wings) in Revelation 9:9. All of these, and many other examples, show that translating the word here as "language" is a general idea, not what was specifically on Paul's mind.

He has shown that there are many "voices" in the world such as trumpets, flutes, languages, etc. And so he is tying this word "voice" to all of those things. The intent of his words is "anything that makes an understandable sound." This is certain because he finishes the verse with, "and none of them *is* without significance." Whether it is the voice of the trumpet, or whether it is the spoken Hebrew language, the voice is what conveys the meaning. This is why earlier he used a variety of words to describe sounds (see the analysis of verse 7).

The idea is conveyed by the voice. If there is no understanding of the voice, then there is no grasping of the intent behind the voice. His words in this verse almost make a playful sound. Vincent's Word Studies translates the idea as, "So many kinds of voices, and no kind is voiceless." There is intent in Paul's words and there is a "voice" behind the intent of them. They are specific and they are calling out for reason.

Why then the minute parsing of his thoughts? Because his thoughts are what drive proper theology, and they are what are intended to drive proper conduct in the church. Unfortunately, it has become the standard to ignore such exacting analysis and to make stuff up which is completely unbiblical. Thus congregations and church meetings devolve into anything but sound theology and proper conduct.

Life application: Paul expects every word uttered in a church to be a word which is understandable and which will edify the congregation. If they don't meet these requirements, then they are not in accord with the Bible which was given by the Spirit of God, and thus they are not of the Spirit of God.

**Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks *will be* a foreigner to me.**

1 Corinthians 14:11

"Therefore" is given for us to look back and consider what was said in order to understand what will now be conveyed. Paul has written about different instruments, each which conveys its own distinct sound. He then discussed the individual tunes which an instrument can make. He also noted that there are many languages in the world. Each has its own voice which is unique and which can be comprehended by anyone who understands that voice. Chinese is not Russian; Navaho is not Spanish; English is not Vietnamese; etc. Unless one understands the voice of the language, it is simply unintelligible noise without meaning or cohesion.

However, to a person who understands the language, each word identifies something which can be described by the word - nouns, verbs, conjunctions, etc all begin to form a cohesive thought which conveys a reasonable, understandable message to those who know that language. Based on this, Paul gives his "therefore" by saying, "If I do not know the meaning of the language..." The word "voice" is used here. It literally says, "the power of the voice." The "power" is its meaning, and the "voice" is what is being relayed. If one doesn't know the meaning behind what is being relayed (think of the battle trumpet that sounds out a tune you have never heard), then "I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks."

This term "foreigner" is the Greek word *barbaros* (barbarian, hence a foreigner). Here it is not intended as a deprecatory phrase as it often is, but rather it is indicating unintelligible words. The Greeks viewed any foreign language as harsh or rude in comparison to their language. Thus they applied the term "*bar bar*" to them. It indicated any language that wasn't Greek; known languages which to them seemed like unintelligible sounds. This is what Paul is conveying here. He is saying that even though the language is a real language with an actual "voice," it is simply a confused sound if it isn't understood by the hearer.

Paul is *not speaking* of made up, incoherent sounds without meaning behind them. He is speaking about the *perception* of those sounds by the hearer who doesn't understand them. Thus, he is not speaking of a personal "prayer language" or a supposedly "Spirit-inspired" language that only God knows. He is speaking of a real language spoken by another group which is not understood by the hearer. To confirm this, he completes his sentence with "and he who speaks *will be* a foreigner to me." Just as the sounds of the speaker are unintelligible to the hearer, even though the speaker obviously understands them (because they are the "voice" of the speaker; meaning an understandable concept put into real words), the hearer will interpret the speaker as a *barbaros* (foreigner) for failing to understand the words.

This occurs around the world about 10 jillion times a day. People get frustrated at others who don't speak their own language, and hearers get frustrated at those they don't understand. For particular emphasis, go to France and test this concept there. They have a special knack for treating foreign speakers, particularly English speakers, in a most frustrating way.

Again as has been noted, Paul has consistently spoken of real languages that are spoken by real people groups and which have real meaning. Nobody in their right mind would speak unintelligible garble at the office among their coworkers. Nor would they do it while at a city council meeting. They would be both humiliating and humiliated. As this is so, why would you act in such a manner in the holy congregation of the saints?

Life application: When you are in church, speak words which have meaning and which edify the congregation or don't speak at all.

**Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual *gifts*, *let it be* for the edification of the church *that* you seek to excel. 1 Corinthians 14:12**

"Even so" relies on what he just said and leads into the rest of this verse. Taken as a whole, it thus reads:

"Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks *will be* a foreigner to me. Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual *gifts, let it be* for the edification of the church *that* you seek to excel."

Again and again in Chapter 14, Paul has attempted to wake up the believers in Corinth (and thus us!) to pursue that which is useful and edifying rather than that which is self-centered and merely for show. The abuse of speaking in tongues was such that it had become a complete distraction to what would otherwise be a normally functioning church.

If speaking in a tongue which no one understands means that we remain a foreigner to those around us, then we should pursue a gift other than speaking in tongues. Paul is trying to be diplomatic about the issue without directly bringing insult upon those who continued to speak in tongues. The purpose of tongues was to demonstrate to the Jewish believers that God was working through the name of Jesus (Acts 2), and to convince them that He is the fulfillment of their Scriptures, their worship, and their hopes.

A further demonstration of tongues was again given to show them (through Peter's visitation to the house of Cornelius in Acts 10) that the Gentiles had been accepted by the Lord as they were. It was to show that they were brought into the same New Covenant as the Jews without converting to being Jews or observing the Law of Moses.

The only other time that tongues were mentioned in Acts (the account of the establishment of the church) is in Acts 19. Certain believers had been baptized into John's baptism, but not into Jesus' baptism. When they were baptized into Jesus, they received the gift of tongues. This was done to show them the difference between the two baptisms. This was in Ephesus that it occurred and the congregation at Corinth would probably have heard this exciting news.

Because of the grand nature of what transpired, the now-established church continued to force the use of tongues where it was no longer needed. Thus Paul is spending an inordinate amount of time on the issue in order to get them to grow up and stop acting like children (verse 20). Nowhere else in the New Testament are tongues mentioned in this type of context, and the word "tongues" is only used again in Revelation under a completely different context.

And so, without trying to humiliate these immature believers, he is attempting to get them to stop with unneeded tongues and to pursue greater gifts. Tongues were a gift given as a sign at the establishment of the church. They were never intended to be used in the church age in the manner that they are being used by the Pentecostal movement of today. If believers would simply read the Bible, study the words of Paul, and apply these studies to their lives, they would see that the use of tongues was a specific gift with limited purpose. Other than for times when translation between languages is needed, tongues are something Paul actually argues against in the now-established church.

This is seen with perfect clarity by his words that, "since you are zealous for spiritual *gifts*, *let it be* for the edification of the church *that* you seek to excel." Rather than making a self-centered show which edifies no one, he asks them to seek gifts which actually edify the members of the church. The word "gifts" is inserted by the translators. Literally it reads "since zealous you are (for) spirits..." As Vincent's Word Studies notes -

"Paul treats the different spiritual manifestations as if they represented a variety of spirits. To an observer of the unseemly rivalries it would appear as if not one spirit, but different spirits, were the object of their zeal."

In other words, instead of looking at the gifts of the Spirit as having one intent and purpose, which is the edifying of the church, they were looking at the "gift" of tongues as a case of "I have the Spirit because I can speak in a foreign language." Add in a "ne ni ne ni boo boo" and you can see the attitude of these immature believers. It is an attitude which continues to permeate immature believers and churches in an ever-increasing manner since the establishment of the Pentecostal

movement. It demonstrates a departing from sound doctrine intended for edification and a return to the immature behavior of the dysfunctional church of Corinth.

Life application: Conduct in the church should be "Edify!" not "Look! How spiritual am I!"

**Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.**

1 Corinthians 14:13

It needs to be remembered the context of who Paul is writing to and under what circumstances. He is writing to the church of the Corinthians at a very early date in church history. In that congregation, there were Jews and Gentiles alike who had come to know Christ. It is certain that the majority of the Jews felt the prayers to God should be in their language.

Learning to speak Hebrew is not an overly difficult task. Even today, many Jewish people can read and speak the language, but they have no comprehension of the words. They often participate in the reading of Scripture at certain special times during the year, but they are only spoken words without meaning to their minds; the sounds are unintelligible.

Today, we have the same thing come up in churches from time to time. Lutheran churches may have a prayer written by Martin Luther read aloud. It will be in the original German and almost any competent English speaker can read the words in German because they are the same letters. Maybe the person even took a year of German in High School. If so, their pronunciation will be even better. But there is no understanding at all of what the words mean. This is what Paul is speaking about - real languages being spoken during the church service. The only problem is that they are unknown tongues to the people's ears.

Understanding this context helps us to grasp what Paul is saying. "Therefore" rests upon his words concerning the understanding of the "voice" of a thing, or

even a language which is heard. For the benefit of the person who is listening to a Hebrew prayer, passage, or other communication, the speaker should pray for the ability to interpret the words he is speaking. If not, then the people who are listening will never come to understand the meaning of what has been said. They will remain un-edified in their thinking and the words will have been wasted breath.

The gift of interpreting what is spoken will come as the speaker learns the language. This should be his prayer. In essence, "Lord, give me the understanding of these words so that I can properly interpret them for the benefit of the others who hear them." In this, all will be edified through those spoken words.

Life application: Let it be the goal of all Christians to speak edifying words to those in the congregation. If we are given something to speak which is written in Spanish, German, or Japanese, we should pray that we can not only read it, but interpret it as well. Otherwise, the words have no substance behind them for those who hear.

**For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.**

1 Corinthians 14:14

Some translations insert the word "unknown" before "tongue" to provide a sense of clarity. Paul just spoke in the previous verse saying, "let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret." This, as noted, refers to someone praying in a known language. Paul, now using the first person, says that if he prays in a known language that he doesn't understand, then "my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful."

As seen in the analysis of the previous verse, this is not an uncommon thing. People read prayers in other languages often in churches. If they don't know the meaning of the words, then there is no comprehension of what is being said. His words in the coming verse will continue to explain the need for understanding, both in prayer and in song. Songs, maybe even more than prayers, are often sung

in other languages. It is nice to hear them and they may be great melodies, but unless the words are known, there is no comprehension of what is being sung.

If there is no understanding, then there is no fruit for the mind. There is no growth, no development, and no edification. Paul is continuously bringing his words back to development and growth in Christ. His instruction shows a desire for Christian maturity, not immaturity. If the congregation continuously focuses on tongues, there will be no growth. Instead, there will be a weak and ineffective group that is bent on self-centeredness and division, which is exactly what was to be found in Corinth.

Life application: There are several purposes for gathering in a church setting. We are there to praise and worship the Lord, we go to fellowship with others, and we also go in order to receive instruction and grow in our walk with the Lord. By clinging to childish habits in the church, we will continue on in immaturity. Let us endeavor to grow and develop in Christ each time we assemble as a body.