



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

1 Corinthians 14:6–19

“Tongues and Intelligibility”

1 Corinthians

TRANSCRIPT

Let’s begin our class by looking to the Lord in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the Scriptures. We thank Thee for the possession of them by Thy grace. We thank Thee for the way in which they point us to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We remember that he himself has said they are they which testify of me. And we pray that as we read and ponder the Word of God, not only tonight but in our study of the Scriptures, that we may learn to look for him in the Word of God as we read and study it, then to listen to what the Scriptures have to say about him, enabling us to more closely follow him in our own Christian lives.

We thank Thee for the gift of divine grace and the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for the blood that was shed on Calvary’s cross. We thank Thee for the forgiveness of our sins, which has been made possible by what he has done in his sacrifice. And we thank Thee that that sacrifice is not all that he has done, for he lives to bring to each one of us, who has, by grace, believed in him the experience of eternal salvation. And so we know our Savior also as the Great High Priest who continues to live and pray and work, that everything that he has secured for the church of Jesus Christ for the people of God may ultimately be theirs.

What a confidence, Lord, we have from the Word of God. We give Thee thanks for it. We pray that our study this evening may contribute to the building of us up in our faith. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[Message] Well, it seems as if it’s been a rather long time since we have studied together on Wednesday evening. And I hope you remember some of the things that were said in the message of 1 Corinthians chapter 14, verse 1 through verse 5.

Our subject this evening is “Tongues and Intelligibility.” And, of course, it’s a continuation of what we had said in that last message two or three weeks ago. And I want to spend just a few minutes reminding you of the presuppositions with which I am attempting to expound this chapter.

I stated in the first of the messages that I was presupposing that the tongues are known languages, not unknown languages, not gibberish, not the kind of speech that no one would understand, but cognitive speech, that all of us would understand if we had the capacity for that particular language.

So the tongues are known languages. And I said a few things by way of support of the expositions. I’ll try to say some more as we go along. But I made the point because I think it’s very important that Luke was Paul’s companion. And being Paul’s companion, that he and Paul were undoubtedly acquainted by what each understood by the expression speaking in tongues. And we know from Acts chapter 2 and what happened on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came and men and women spoke with tongues—or men spoke with tongues. I’m not sure a specific reference is made to women—men spoke with tongues and Luke, in that chapter, makes it very plain that the kind of tongues that they spoke were known languages, for he uses a term that is used only of known languages. He uses the common term for tongues, but he also uses the term from which we get the English word “dialect,” incidentally {*dialektos*} and identifies them as the same. And furthermore, in his description of what happened on the Day of Pentecost, he goes on to point out that the individuals there were speaking and saying, “How do we hear everyone speaking in our own language?” So it was not an unknown tongue. It was a known tongue that the individual who was speaking in tongues was speaking. Furthermore, we made the point that the term “unknown” added in the Authorized Version is not found in the Greek text. So when we read “speaking in unknown

tongues,” if you’re reading the Authorized Version, you’ll notice in most of the editions it’s italicized, meaning, of course, that it’s not in the original text.

So in the light of the relationship of Luke and Paul, I made the point that it would be unlikely that they would use that term in a different sense, one meaning what we might call gibberish, an unknown tongue, and the other speaking of a known tongue. I think it’s also important to make another comment I made. I pointed out that one of the finest of our linguists, Eugene Nida, an American Bible Society linguist, who probably is one of the best known of all of our linguists, particularly in connection with Christian things such as the {Weekly} Bible Society, and so on. Nida and others associated with that work of training young men to take a language that’s not been written and reduce it to writing, Nida had a very significant part in that and has been head of the American Bible Society in linguistics.

He, some years ago, analyzed scores—not just one or two, but scores—of texts of tongues tapes; that is, individuals who had taped speaking in tongues. And he concluded that the contents were, to use his term, “nonsense.” In other words, the things that were being said by people who claimed to be speaking in tongues were not languages at all. They did not have the structure of languages. I think that’s rather important.

One of the outstanding New Testament scholars in evangelicalism is Donald Carson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In fact, of the younger men, although he’s getting on a few years now—he’s probably in his early 50s maybe now—but Don Carson is recognized almost everywhere, even among some of the liberal men, as an outstanding New Testament scholar. He has written on this point in some detail. I just want to quote his conclusions on one of the pages of his book called *Showing the Spirit*. He says, “On balance then, the evidence favors the view that Paul thought the gift of tongues was a gift of real languages; that is, languages that were cognitive, whether of men or of angels. Moreover, if he knew the details of Pentecost (he has a parenthesis at this point—a currently unpopular opinion in the unscholarly world, but, in my view, imminently defensible) his understanding of tongues must have been shaped, to some extent, by that event. Certainly tongues

exercise some different functions from those of 1 Corinthians (he underlines functions)—functions, than those in 1 Corinthians, but there is no substantial evidence that suggests that Paul thought the two were essentially different.

I have another friend who is an evangelical scholar, an outstanding scholar, recognized in the scholarly world as well as in the evangelical world, Robert Gundry. And Bob Gundry has also said this, “It is the absence of an interpreter, not the ecstatic nature of the tongue, which makes the tongue unintelligible.”

Then secondly, he makes a point. Finally, Paul’s writing in the middle of his discussion about tongues. There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning. But if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.

Now, Gundry goes on after citing that text says, “That should clear away any vestige of doubt that he thinks of the gift of tongues as miraculous speaking in unlearned human languages. His foregoing comparison between tongues and the sounds of inanimate musical instruments like harps and bugles, merely implies that whatever source they come—whatever source they come, the sounds must be distinct to be meaningful.”

So one other point, I think, is important. Next week in our study, we are going to take a look at verse 20 through verse 25. And in that particular text we have a citation from the Old Testament from the book of Isaiah, verse 21, “In the law it is written, with men of other tongues and other lips, I will speak to this people, and yet for all that, they will not hear me.

Now, it is very plain from Isaiah chapter 28 that the prophet is not speaking about gibberish. He’s talking about the language of foreign peoples into whom Israel, because of their disobedience, into his hands Israel is being given. So the tongues used here in 1 Corinthians 14, are references to languages, cognitive languages that people would understand. They were not gibberish. So I think from those things, as well as some other things as we say as we go through the entire chapter, it’s much safer to think—as we interpret 1 Corinthians 14, to think of known languages.

What is the gift of tongues? It is the ability given by the Holy Spirit, to speak in a language that you have not studied. Now, if that is true, then I can understand why, when people speak in tongues, it was thought to be such a miracle. If I were to suddenly speak to you in Swedish and there were some Swedes here who would smile and say, It’s wonderful to hear Dr. Johnson talk in our own language, well, then you would know I would have the gift of tongues because I’ve never studied Swedish. And so if I were to suddenly begin to speak the language so that they would understand, that would be a miracle. And I were representing Christian faith in the days of the apostles, and that gift was given me under the circumstances in such a way it would testify to the reality of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith, you would be inclined to think there may be something to the Christian faith. It wouldn’t bring you to faith; only the Holy Spirit is able to do that. But it would be surely one of the reasons it might cause us to pay attention to what the apostles and others might be saying.

Now, the apostle in this chapter, particularly in the section that we are looking at tonight, verse 6 through verse 19, is especially concern for edification. In fact, he’s been talking about that through the epistle. If you go all the way back, I believe it is, to chapter 3 in verse 10, he writes, “According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.”

Chapter 8 in verse 10 then we read these words, “For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things sacrificed to idols?”

Chapter 10, verse 23. Verse 23 we read, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.” Build up.

Now, perhaps you’re wondering why I read those first two verses before chapter 10, verse 23 where we heard the word “edify.” And I said that Paul’s concern is for edification. Well, if you’re puzzled why I read that, you’re puzzling also with me because I don’t know why that’s in my notes either. I put that in there, and I see it in my notes, and there must have been some reason for it

because there are two texts, not just one, but I’ve forgotten why it is there. As a matter of fact, I just typed again this morning, but I didn’t bother to take it out.

But chapter 10, verse 23, makes the point. As you read through this chapter, the issue clearly is the issue of intelligibility. Even, incidentally, those who believe that Paul is talking about speaking in unknown tongues admit that the point of the chapter gathers around the note of intelligibility.

The history of the charismatic movement indicates a need, in my opinion, on the part of those who are part of that movement for rethinking of a number of things concerning the claims that they have made. It is often claimed by at least a number of the charismatic people, and some of them teachers, that tongues are a criterion of the spiritual life, and that it is in evidence of a special degree of spirituality if an individual speaks in tongues.

Now, the apostle makes it very plain that that is not a biblical doctrine. It’s not true to Christian theology. Notice what he says in chapter 12 in verse 30, “Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” Now, Greek has a way by which, in framing a question, they can make the hearer know the kind of answer that one expects. Now, we can do that in English, too. You don’t think that the San Francisco 49ers are better than the Cowboys as a football team, do you? Well, what kind of answer do you expect of that? No, of course not.

Well, the Greeks have a way of expressing that, too. If they use the little particle *me* with one of their questions, it expects a negative answer. That’s what they use here. So I am going to render it that way. All do not have the gifts of healing, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? It is true that the apostle says, All do not speak with tongues, do they, and tongues is a criteria of spiritual life, then it’s obvious from that statement that there’s something that is amiss. Because if it’s a criterion for spiritual life, it should be open to all, should it not? I think the New Testament would support that. But he says, “All do not speak in tongues, do they?” It is not the criterion of spiritual life. In the early days, when men spoke in tongues in the miraculous sense, that was not a sign that they were mature spiritually. It was a miracle, designed to give testimony to the

Christian faith—some say to the apostles, but it’s probably better to say simply to the Christian movement.

So the apostle is not to be understood as contending that tongues are a criterion for the Christian life. As a matter of fact, tongues are not a criterion for anything. They are useful in the Lord’s work in a stage of the Christian growth in the testimony to the salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ.

Now, to show you specifically that they are not a criterion for spiritual living, notice what Paul says in verse 19 of this chapter. “Yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding that I may teach others also than ten thousand words in a tongue.” So we are to think then as the gift of tongues as a gift that was given historically for a specific purpose, a supernatural miracle designed to give testimony to the progress of the divine revelation at that particular point.

Today, it is also common, particularly among some of the charismatics, to claim that the gift of tongues is like the reverse of the Day of Pentecost. And the purpose of the gift of tongues today is to gather Christians together, to bring them together, just as on the day of Pentecost. They all began to speak in tongues, because the church was unified, so the gift of speaking in tongues is to be a unifying force in Christianity. It’s very common for some of the charismatics to make that claim today. I don’t want to say that all do, because I don’t think they do, but some do and some important ones. For example, one of them has written this with reference to it—this testimony is from a Protestant charismatic leader whose experience of the baptism of the Spirit, as he understands the term of speaking in tongues, led him to make comments like this and to change his fellowship as is reflected by this.

He says, “I now love those whom I previously rejected. Only when such personal prejudices are removed are we free to see Christ in our brothers. Then the Holy Spirit is able to teach us what he wants to through them. Oh (now, this is what is so interesting about it to me because he not only has now an open spirit towards other Christians that he did not have an open spirit with before, but he has even opened to the doctrines of other churches than the Protestant faith of which he was

apart. He says,) Oh, what an enrichment it has been to meet with Catholics and be introduced to some of the treasures of Catholic life. The Virgin Mary has come alive, and I feel I know her now in the same way as my evangelical heritage helped me to know St. Paul. (That’s a very interesting comment because, as you know, if you read through the New Testament, very little is really said about the Virgin Mary, and exceedingly little about anything that she has said. And yet he makes this statement. Further, he says,) the sacraments have come alive, too. Not as lifeless mechanical rights, but as effectual signs to use the language of the Reformers as signs that work when there is faith. Holy Communion is for me like an oasis in a parched desert.”

I was particularly interested in the expression the sacraments have come alive. Now, the Roman Catholic Church’s sacraments, all of those sacraments are means for the forgiveness of sins. Now, if it is true that I am forgiven part of my sin by my baptism, by the daily sacrifice of the Mass, by the oil of extreme unction, by the other of the sacraments, then we have a serious problem in the New Testament because the New Testament makes it very plain that the forgiveness of sins is related to what Christ has done on Calvary’s cross alone. We are not saved for any sacraments. We observe two sacraments. We observe the Lord’s Supper and baptism. Those sacraments do not remove sin. They are expressions of faith. They are expressions of what has already come to us through faith and faith alone. We’ve made a lot of this. We have to keep making a lot of it because so deeply imbedded in the minds of so many people is the sense, the idea, that we receive the forgiveness of sins through baptism, through sitting at the Lord’s Table, and, of course, the Roman Catholics, with their other member—with their other sacraments as well.

What we see in something like this is Galatianism still with us. Because, remember, the Apostle Paul stated in Galatians chapter 1 and through the epistle that if anyone adds to the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, such a sacrament, such an ordinance as circumcision, then he has destroyed the gospel. In fact, he says, such an individual who preaches we’re saved through Christ plus the observance of circumcision is preaching a different gospel. That’s the most serious kind of thing we could have. Paul says such an individual has fallen from grace. He’s not actually in harmony with the

system of salvation by grace. We are told by many today, “No, we are still in grace, but we believe that forgiveness comes through sacraments.” That’s what the Protestant Reformation was all about, Luther and Calvin and others knew very well what the Roman Catholic Church taught. But they came to believe from the study of the Scriptures that men are saved through Christ alone.

Jim Packer and others have talked about the gospel of the five “onlies.” I made reference to that. By faith alone, by grace alone, by Christ alone, by the Scripture alone, and to God alone be the glory. In other words, our salvation is traceable to God and not to something that God has done plus what we have done. So when we read individuals saying that it’s through speaking in tongues that we have now come to embrace the unity of the church in a new way and, therefore, the Virgin Mary has come alive and I may feel I know her in the same way as my Evangelical heritage helped me to know St. Paul, that is surely something that we must avoid at the peril of our spiritual lives. Think about that. The Apostle Paul has given us, what is it, thirteen letters for us to know him. In addition, Luke has given us a history of the Christian faith that we might know Paul. But here is a brother. I take his profession at his word. That the Virgin Mary with just a few statements in the Word of God attributed to her, he has come to know her just as he has come to know St. Paul. I can only say he’s not reading his Bible very much insofar as the letters of the Apostle Paul are concerned.

So I think that’s significant. I won’t say anything more about it. I know you’re surprised I won’t, but, nevertheless, I’m not going to say anything more about it. I do think it’s exceedingly important, and I think that many of our evangelicals today do not realize just how important it is for us to contend for the purity of the grace of the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now, we’re going to turn to the chapter—and I want you to take chapter 14 and follow along with me as I read verse 6 through verse 19. The apostle in verse 6 says,

“But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? (Notice the note on intelligibility) Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they

make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, (notice words. Not sounds, words, words) how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them *is* without significance. (Notice he’s talking about languages. He’s not talking about gibberish. He’s talking about languages) 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.

Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. What is *the conclusion* then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.”

That would seem to indicate something that is characteristic, I think, of this, that the use of tongues is especially useful in prayer and in the fellowship of the local church. You’ll notice he mentions it as if it’s prayer, pray in tongues. Verse 16,

“Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say ‘Amen’ at your giving of thanks, since he doesn’t understand what you say? For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified.

I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

Now, there’s one thing that I didn’t say and I should have said, and I should have said right at the beginning, I don’t understand everything about speaking in tongues. Let me say it again. I don’t understand everything about speaking in tongues. I’ve never heard anyone supernaturally speak in a language that they have not understood before, that they have not studied. So there are things about this chapter I do not understand. I know you say that doesn’t seem like the Dr. Johnson to act humble at all. I’m sure that that may impress you that way, but I want to assure you, I don’t understand everything about this chapter, perhaps you’ve already discovered that, but I’m saying it anyway so it will be on the tape, and it will be there when I’m long gone. Dr. Johnson did not understand everything about 1 Corinthians 14.

All right. We’re going to look now very briefly at these sections. And, first of all, verse 6 through verse 9, the apostle emphasizes the necessity of intelligibility. I’m reminded of Vernon McGee when he came to this chapter. He said, “To sum up this chapter what Paul said to the Corinthians was ‘Cool it. Cool it.’” Well, I think there was undoubtedly some of that in Paul’s thought. The Corinthians were so caught up in the miracle of speaking in tongues that it was necessary for Paul to give them some instruction. So, first of all, then the necessity of intelligibility in verse 6 the statement is made, “But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching?”

In other words, in the speaking in tongues, I am to come to you in these particular particulars. Unless I speak to you in revelation, or knowledge, or prophesying, or teaching. Gibberish would be of no value at all. It may give people the impression there’s something spiritual here, that kind of language, but Paul is concerned about intelligibility, and he goes on to illustrate with his illustrations.

Notice verse 7, “Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played?” So the

apostle illustrates by his own speaking in verse 6, by music in verse 7 and 8, by languages in verse 10, that nonsense does not edify, that one must, as he says, make distinctions.

I cannot play an organ. I cannot play a piano. I cannot play any musical instrument. But if I were to sit down as a person who had those skills and not make distinctions in the notes, you wouldn’t understand what I was trying to play, and you wouldn’t like that kind of music. That the heart of music is the distinction of the notes that makes it pleasant to our ear; that makes it music.

Languages—the same way. If I were just to utter syllables, it would not make any sense. It is the way by which we put those syllables together and the Southern accent that one ought to have when he uses those syllables as well. So the apostle is using just simple illustrations to point out that nonsense does not edify. Gordon Clark has an interesting chapter or so in this, and he illustrates the point that nonsense doesn’t edify by saying, “If a bugle is so badly blown that the soldiers cannot tell whether it’s reveille, taps, or chow, what good is the bugle? There must be a recognizable message, an intelligible discourse—an intelligible speak or *{logos}*, word, only such can edify. However, such the speaker himself is edified it follows that his mind was involved and that he understood what he said.”

And, finally, the conclusion in verse 9 of this little section. He says, “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.”

Tongues, then, in the sense of unknown tongues would be lexically uncommunicative. Now, the apostle goes on in verse 10 through verse 17 to talk about an underlined intelligibility and edification. Paul’s emphasis on intelligibility is so plain that one of the commentators—in fact, Dr. Clark made the point that his emphasis on intelligibility becomes almost tedious he mentions it so much. So he picks it up again. There are maybe so many languages in the world, and none of them was without significance. Now, notice he’s talking about languages, languages that are spoken, known languages. This is his illustration of what he is talking about. Therefore, if I don’t know the meaning of the language, I should be a foreigner to him who speaks and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. In other words, to put it in the language—put it in a sentence like one of the other

commentators did, edification presupposes understanding. Edification presupposes understand. If we are edified, then there has to be an understanding of what is being spoken. So the requirement for knowledge is edification, understanding.

Now, Paul, in verse 13—I perhaps ought to read—well, I think—I don’t know whether I’ve read 11 or 12. Let me read, “Therefore if I don’t understand the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me.” That seems to be very plain. Even so you, since you’re zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.

And now verse 13 through verse 15, we have what may be called a prayer for interpretation. “Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.” Now, the question about he when he says pray that he may interpret can be understood in two ways, but most likely, what this represents, according to the majority of the commentators is that the individual who’s speaking in tongues is the one who prays that he may interpret those tongues. The speaking—let me just say this. The interpretation may be misleading. This term that is used and translated here, “interpret,” is a term that in the Old Testament—in the Old Testament Greek text, in the great majority of cases is to be translated “translate.” And so it is not so much interpretation as simply translating of the things that we have in the New Testament. We have it in that sense, too. But we also have the root in the sense of interpret. But it is possible, and, in fact, many feel it’s likely that this “interpret” is to be understood as “translation;” therefore, let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may translate; that is, he may be given the power to translate.

Now, evidently this is intelligible speech because it’s something that can be translated. Is not that true? Could you translate gibberish? Gibberish doesn’t mean anything. So how could you translate it? You cannot translate that. If you talk about translation or even interpretation, you have to have speech. And that’s why, it seems to me, that this chapter, when it uses the term “speaking in tongues,” it’s talking about known languages, so it’s language that may be interpreted. Gibberish doesn’t have meaning, and so he could not be talking about that.

Robert Gundry, one of the outstanding evangelical New Testament men of our day, has made some points with reference to the words that I think are worth mentioning. And if I can find them here, I will point them out to you because Professor Gundry has some—I think some excellent things to say with reference to this question. He makes a couple of important points, and then he says in one of his final points, finally Paul’s writing in the middle of his discussion about tongues, “There are doubtless many different languages in the world and none is without meaning, but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me should clear away any vestige of doubt that he thinks of the gifts of tongues as miraculous, speaking in unlearned human languages. He’s foregoing comparison between tongues and the sounds of the inanimate musical instruments like harps and bugles, merely implies that whatever source they come from, the sounds must be distinct to be meaningful.”

The argument of Paul does not indicate that tongues are non-languages like musical sounds, rather the reverse. Tongues must be distinctly spoken languages, just as notes from harp and bugle must be distinct to be effective. Paul’s application of the term “words” to “glossolalia.” Glossolalia is a term that means to speak with tongues, and it’s just the general expression. It’s commonly used today. Glossolalia is speaking in tongues. *Lalia* comes from the Greek {*laleo*}, to speak, and *glossa* comes from {*glossa*} which means tongue. So it’s tongue speaking.

Paul’s application of the term “words” to “glossolalia” further favors this understanding. And evidence is piled upon evidence when Paul applies Exodus—Isaiah chapter 28 to glossolalia, for that Old Testament passage refers to the foreign language spoken by Assyrians and perhaps other invaders. We have good reason, then, to doubt that either Paul or Luke meant ecstatic utterance when referring to speaking in tongues. Indeed, their apparent attempt to distinguish it from ecstatic utterance should make us hesitate to compare Christian glossolalia with ecstatic utterance in the Hellenistic religion of the day.

So in verse 13 then, “Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret (or translate). For (he goes on to say) if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful.”

Now, what does he mean when he says my understanding is unfruitful? He means simply that he’s unfruitful in communicating the truth that has been given to him, so unfruitful in that sense. So, as he says, my understanding is unfruitful. It is not of benefit to those to whom I’m talking and, thus, it’s not fruitful in the lives of those to whom I am ministering. It’s very interesting to read some of the things that have been done with speaking in tongues, and I have some illustrations. And I want to say right now that when I use these illustrations, these are illustrations that have come from well-known men, but the actual documentation specifically of these occurrences I don’t have, but they’ve been spoken.

One of them, I know, was spoken to me by John Walvoord, the president of Dallas Theological Seminary for many years. So I will give his illustration. He tells of a young seminarian. And as I remember, it was in California, who decided that he would attend one of the charismatic churches and he would speak in tongues, but the way in which he would speak in tongues is he would memorize one of the Psalms in Hebrew. And as I remember, he memorized Psalm 1. And in the meeting, he was able to stand up on his feet and pretended to be speaking in tongues as he recited the Psalm. After he had finished he said the interpreter woefully failed to translate what had been spoken, and it didn’t have any real connection at all with Psalm 1, which he had cited in the Hebrew language.

Well, Donald Carson also has an illustration in his book. He says a few years ago a friend of mine attended a charismatic service in rather cheekily—you can tell that Donald Carson is a Canadian. He doesn’t use English as we do. We don’t use cheekily much. We say he was a cheeky fellow. Emmitt Smith is kind of a cheeky fellow when he attacks the line of the opponents of the Cowboys, but cheekily recited some of John 1:1 to 18 in Greek as his contribution to speaking in tongues in the meeting. Immediately there was an interpretation that bore no relation whatsoever to

the Johannine prologue. Two people with the gift of interpretation have on occasion been asked to interpret the same recorded tongue’s message. And the resulting different and conflicting interpretations have been justified on the grounds that God gives different interpretations to different people. Dr. Carson says, “This is preposterous if the interpretations so widely dissimilar, because it would force us to conclude that there’s no univocal cognitive content to the tongues themselves. They can be translated in any different way you may please.”

And then Jim Packer in his book—and Dr. Packer is rather sympathetic to the charismatic movement. In his book entitled—I’ve forgotten the exact title of it, but I’ve got it in my notes somewhere, but I don’t have time to look at it. Something like something with the Spirit, but he’s rather a sympathetic with what’s happening with the—what has been happening in the charismatic movement, although he says that you cannot find it in the Bible, but, nevertheless, it seems to do people good, which is—I’ve talked to Carson—says in commenting on it is a way to alienate both sides of the controversy. You can say it’s not in the Bible, but at the same time that will—that will satisfy the people that say it’s unbiblical, but you can say it’s good and that will satisfy the other and if you say it’s good, that will not satisfy those who believe that it’s not good. And if you say it’s not in the Bible, that won’t satisfy those who believe that you ought to follow what the Bible says. So he said that’s just a good way to alienate both sides of the people in the controversy.

But in his book he says referring to an individual that he’s discussing in a paragraph, that Kildal—that’s his name—tells how the Lord’s Prayer in an African dialect was interpreted as a word concerning the second coming. Then he goes on to say an Ethiopian priest whom Packer had tutored went to a glossolalic gathering which he took to be an informal multilingual praise service, and made his contribution by standing and reciting Psalm 23 in Ge’ez, the archaic tongue of his native cognate worship. At once it was publically interpreted. But as he said to me, (Packer) the next day, in sad bewilderment, it was all wrong. Kildal also reports that of two interpreters who heard the same tape recorded glossolalia, one took it as a prayer for guidance about a new job offer, and the other as thanksgiving for one’s recent return to health after a serious illness, told us that there was a

clash here without hesitation or defensiveness, the interpreter said that God gave to one interpreter one interpretation and gave to another another interpretation.

Well, now I don’t think it’s possible for us to believe that a person in a tongues meeting should stand up, speak in tongues in what sounds like gibberish, and then to have the interpreters say it may mean this or it may mean that. That surely is not what Paul is talking about when he’s talking about intelligibility. So as he says then but understanding is unfruitful. The mind is involved, but unfruitful, producing no fruit in others until the tongues, the prayer, if they’re in the form of a prayer, are interpreted. And Paul asks, what is the conclusion then? Spirit and mind are not distinguished here when he says what is the conclusion, then I will pray with the Spirit. I will pray with the understanding of mind. You know, the apostle makes it very plain in 1 Corinthians chapter 2 that the spirit, the human spirit, what things a man knows—well, let’s see, back in chapter 2, verse 11—I think I can find it quickly—the apostle writes these words, “For what man knows the thing of things of man except the spirit of the man which is any.” In other words, the spirit is that capacity in which we have for knowing. So Paul is not trying to distinguish between the two.

I will pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit. I will also sing with the understanding. Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “amen” (or amen) at your giving of thanks since he does not understand what you say?

In other words, we must have intelligibility in the tongues speaking. That would require, if it is in a tongue not known by the audience, that would require interpretation or translation. Then of course, individuals may say “amen.” I know it’s characteristic of Christians even in our meetings to say amen when they don’t ever understand what’s going on at all. I’ve been in many meetings, particularly in certain kinds of meetings in which—if you make any decisive statement, you usually can find someone saying amen. They may not understand—in fact, often it is very true, they do not understand the theology that is being expressed, but they say amen, nevertheless. But Paul is saying, if you’re going to say amen, you have to understand what is being said. It has to be a language. It has

to make what we would call cognitive sense. So how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say amen at your giving of thanks? That’s an interesting statement because in Hebrew practice, amen signified so be it, true, faithful, something like that. Because the word amen (*{am-ane’}*) is a word that means “something to believe.” And amen has come to mean so be it. And we use it in that sense. We say amen, so be it.

It is very important in Hebrew thought. And it’s interesting that it has come over into the Christian church here in evidence of the close relationship between them. Some of the things that were said in Hebrew thought were he who says amen, to him the gates of paradise are open. Whoever says amen shortly, his days shall be shortened. Whoever answers distinctly and at length, his days shall be lengthened. So when Paul writes, “How will he say amen at your giving of thanks (it’s an evidence of the Jewish influence now in the Christian church) For you, indeed, give thanks well but the other is not edified.” In the meeting, there must be intelligence. Yet in the church I would rather speak five words—let me read verse 18. “I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

I don’t understand specifically what Paul means when he says, I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all. My feeling is I would like for him to mean, I am engaged in evangelistic activity all over the Roman Empire. And upon many occasions, God has given me the speech of the people that I may preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. I don’t know that that can be supported at all. Others tend to think Paul is talking about his own private life. The tongues in that private life would be tongues of adoration, speaking of the greatness of our great triune God. That’s possible, of course. I don’t really know, so I’m going to have to say, I don’t know precisely what Paul means by, I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all. He certainly would be praying more than most of the people to whom he ministered. If he was speaking about his preaching activity, then, of course, that would be very interesting, and it would indicate that he was given the gift to speak in tongues, that he did not know that the gospel may be given.

If his mind was not involved in tongues, no one could know what was meant. He would not have meant anything if he was just talking about—talking gibberish. So the fact that he meant something would seem to indicate it was a language. He says I will also pray. I will also sing. Those are two of the principal ways in which tongues was used. And then in these two verses he talks about the necessity of understanding again, the Jewish custom of saying amen demands understanding. And finally in verse 18 and verse 19, for our time is just about up. “I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.”

Now, in these words, the apostle seems to practically rule out the possibility of his own speaking in tongues in the church. He says, I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. He may have been speaking in private, of course, or in other public meetings, but Paul was concerned about intelligibility and edification, that I may teach others.

Dr. Ironside in his book on 1 Corinthians makes a comment about Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He says, “I’m afraid that many of my ministerial brethren must imagine that when Scripture tells them to feed my sheep, it means feed my giraffes for they put the food so high that people would have to be giraffes to reach it.

“Scripture says feed my sheep. Always put the food down where the sheep can get it. It should be the ambition of the preacher of the Word to use language so simple and so plain that everybody can understand.” And then he tells a story—I think I referred to this previously, but it’s in his exposition of 1 Corinthians 14 where he says that a few months previously a lady had brought to him a little boy, about ten years of age, and she said, I want my little grandson to meet you. And she said, I hope you won’t be offended by what he said. I had been telling him about you and he wanted to hear you. He said, “Why, Grandmamma, he’s not a great preacher. I can understand every word he said.” [Laughter]

And Ironside said, “I replied, Well, my dear madam, I consider that a great compliment. I hope that you’ll always pray that when I stand up to minister the Word, I may do it in such a way that the youngest child may understand.”

How true that is. Feed my sheep. Paul is concerned with instruction, yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding that I may teach others also than ten thousand words in a tongue.

What does that tell you about his regard for tongues as a means of edifying the local church? I think it’s very plain that he does not think much of it. He thinks far more of the five words that might instruct others. So in the verses then one lesson with startling force comes out. Whatever the place for profound personal experience, the assembled church is a place for intelligibility. Please remember that. When the church meets, we are to have intelligibility, the truth of the Word of God proclaimed, intelligibility. Edification depends utterly on intelligibility, on the Word of God understood and in the ministry of the Word of God in the local church. Here is a week of many hours. Figure it out, seven days, twenty-four hours a day, and Sunday morning, the minister of the Word of God in most of our churches has 25 minutes or less of the proclaiming of Holy Scripture.

How important it is to give intelligible discourse concerning the Word of God that we may be taught as Paul says. Paul puts it on a rather modest level, this speaking of tongues. He gave gibberish no level at all, as far as I can tell. May God help us to learn the lesson that in the meetings of the church, we are concerned for intelligibility. We’re concerned for understanding. We’re concerned for the Word of God and give the minister of the Word of God in your church, whatever it may be, the opportunity to expound the Scriptures so that we may be built up in our faith. Let’s close in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for Thy Word. We thank Thee for this difficult chapter, but we thank Thee for the message that comes through by the apostle’s words to us that it is so important for us to have intelligible discourse in the pulpits and in the classrooms of the local

church. We pray for Believers Chapel to that end, that that may be true now and in the days that lie ahead.

For Jesus’ name. Amen.