

# THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING INTELLIGIBLE

*By D.A. Carson*

Doubtless the apostle Paul would applaud the importance of being earnest, but in 1 Corinthians 14 he elevates the importance of being intelligible.

At one level, of course, this chapter is about tongues and prophecy and kindred matters. But its interest to us, so far as these notes go, lies in the extraordinary degree to which these subjects are evaluated by appealing to the virtue of intelligibility.

In the first five verses, the relative superiority of prophecy over speaking in tongues turns on this point. Prophecy is understood by the church, and therefore edifies the church, while tongues-speaking, at least when the phenomenon occurs apart from interpretation, is useless in this regard.

The next verses (14:6-12) develop various subsidiary arguments and analogies to make the same point. A bugle that plays indecipherable tunes leaves its hearers paralyzed by indecision: no one knows whether what is sounding is reveille, or charge, or retreat, or taps. “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” (14:9).

In verses 13-19, Paul specifically applies what he has said to praying in tongues. In the church, how can those around you honestly say “Amen” if they don’t have a clue what you are saying (14:16)? Then the apostle administers this frank evaluation: “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” (14:18-19). Wherever it is that Paul is speaking in tongues with such proficiency, it appears to be somewhere other than in the assembled congregation. Here he is about as close as he can get to banning tongues-speaking within the congregation, without quite going that far. And his reasoning is profoundly tied to the primacy of being intelligible. Certainly verses 20-25 have challenged interpreters. But whatever the exact significance of the quotation from Isaiah 28 found in these lines, the general conclusion Paul draws is clear enough. Just as intelligibility is of great importance with respect to *believers* who hear anyone speak in the assembly, so also is intelligibility of vital importance to the *outsider*, the unbeliever, who comes into the congregation.

The importance of being intelligible surfaces in several other passages in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. It is worth reflecting on several of them.

1. *Paul draws a sharp distinction between manipulative eloquence and plain speaking in the Spirit's power* (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Not a few public orators in Paul's day were praised rather more for the way they said things than for what they said. The modern ecclesiastical equivalent, I suppose, is the church service and sermon praised for polish and style, regardless of content or degree of fidelity to Scripture. Paul does not want style to steal from gospel truth, the central message of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (2:2).

2. *Christian ministry is properly characterized by boldness of speech* (2 Cor. 3:12). In the KJV, the relevant verse reads: "Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech." The final clause properly means "boldness of speech" The idea is that since we already have access into the presence of God, already perceiving something of His glory, our proclamation is bold, clear, plain. We are not in the situation of Moses who had to hide the glory: in Christ the veil is taken away (3:14). Thus our bold intelligibility in service of the Gospel is a function of the enormous privilege we enjoy of being where we are in the stream of redemptive history. One thinks of Paul's counsel to Titus: "... in doctrine showing integrity, reverence, incorruptibility, sound speech that cannot be condemned..." (2:8).

3. *Paul sees his ministry as bound up with demolishing arguments that reflect positions that are disobedient to Christ* (2 Cor. 10:4). He writes, "casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (10:5). The context shows that Paul is not primarily thinking of taking captive every individual or private stray thought – as if he were simply urging Christians to think holy thoughts. Rather, he intends to assault the strongholds of unbiblical, anti-gospel positions, these fortresses of intellectual blindness. And he will do this, by God's help ("with divine power"), by demolishing "arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God," by "bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (10:5).

True, Paul is never narrowly rationalistic. He insists on the need for the Spirit's work, and he magnifies virtues such as love, joy, and peace. But he underlines the intelligibility of godly Christian witness and corporate church life. For he knows that God is a talking God, and that for the Good News to be announced and proclaimed, intelligible and truthful speech must prevail in assemblies that profess to reflect the God of truth.

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