

Gospel Gleanings, “...especially the parchments”



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Understanding: Prophesying's Foundation

Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men. In the law it is written, With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord. Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe. If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those that are unlearned, or unbelievers, will they not say that ye are mad? But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth. (1 Corinthians 14:20-25)

These verses challenge us with some profound insights, perhaps not at all what we might expect. When we first hear the word “Prophesy,” our minds go in several directions. Are we thinking of someone who claims the ability to foretell the future? Scripture continuously surprises and blesses me by its self-definition of terms or words not familiar to me. If I had no sense of this word whatever, simply reading this chapter and observing how Paul uses the word would give me a concise definition of its meaning. Paul repeatedly contrasts “Prophesying” in the chapter with any variety of utterances that the hearer cannot understand. The Greek word translated in this lesson as “understanding” is defined as follows:

(CWSB Dictionary) Literally the diaphragm, that which curbs or restrains. Figuratively, the supposed seat of all mental and emotional activity. In the NT metonymically meaning the mind, intellect, disposition, feelings. Only in 1 Cor. 14:20 translated “understanding.” See Prov. 7:7; 9:4. Phrénes was regarded as the seat of intellectual and spiritual activity. It was the diaphragm which determined the strength of the breath and hence also the human spirit and its emotions. It precisely refers to the ability not only to think, but also to control one’s thoughts and attitudes. It is the heart as the seat of passions as well as the mind as the seat of mental faculties.

Based on this definition, anything that we truly “Understand” we grasp fully, **heart and mind**, emotion and intellect. A bare intellectual sense of an idea fails the test of true “Understanding.” As related to preaching, consider this example. After preaching a funeral service, I have many times had conversations with people who volunteered their appreciation for the comforts of Biblical grace that I preached, asked where I preached, and gave great assurance that they would see me shortly in church. However, I have yet to see them in church on

Sunday morning. They caught a mental glimpse of the comforts of grace momentarily in my funeral message, but they failed to grasp the substance of what I preached in their heart. I’ve talked with many fellow-preachers who have had many identical “Funeral experiences.” I occasionally observe very sincere seeking souls who pick up a mental sense of the truth of Bible grace, but they refuse to allow the comforts of that truth to become established and grow in their heart. They have the intellectual sense of the gospel, but none of its profound comforts. Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed sheds a bright light on this point. When someone hears the gospel (Unregenerate people “...cannot” truly hear it. John 8:43), Satan or one of his minions is ever present to interfere with the healthy growth of the seed of the gospel that was planted in the heart. This lesson also answers the question, “Where is the gospel sown?” “...catcheth away that which was sown **in his heart.**” (Matthew 13:19) Satan doesn’t get upset if a person “Hears” the gospel and gains some intellectual sense of grace. However, he works hard to keep that same truth from the heart, where conviction and comfort will empower the believer to forsake his enticements and turn to the Lord.

In the New Testament, we frequently read analogies that teach us to imitate a “little child.” We’ve all seen the young child (Remember the cliché, “The terrible twos”) who seems to run from one uncontrolled temper tantrum to the next. That childish behavior is definitely not the point of Scripture’s teaching that we should imitate the little child. Paul captures the right teaching.

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Paul wisely reminds us. There are ways that we are commanded to avoid imitating the young child and other ways that we should strive to imitate the child. Scripture never gives a believer an excuse to

remain forever a child in his understanding of Scripture. Most little children think they know everything there is to know, and many believers who perpetuate their spiritual infancy will likewise think they know all about the Bible there is to know, and that they know it better and more rightly than any other person living. In this they reveal their perpetual spiritual infancy, not any degree of spiritual maturity or even spiritual growth. Paul warns us not to imitate the child in understanding. Most young children perceive that they know their world better than anyone else, especially the adults in responsible care of their lives. Every caring parent has heard their child proudly say, "But, Mom, you just don't understand." Implied in this child's cliché is the child's belief that he/she knows more, far more, than Mom or Dad. To be a child in understanding is not necessarily to remain in childish ignorance. It may more rightly mean that we proudly assert our delusional belief that we know more than anyone else, so we stubbornly refuse to listen to anyone who dares to disagree with our ideas.

What does it mean to be a child in malice? Children interacting with other children often disagree and argue, sometimes fiercely. However, they do not typically nurse a grudge or dwell on their friend's critical words long after the incident has ended. They get over strife quickly and go right back to their child's play with that same friend. In malice, little children could teach many adult believers a world of wisdom.

...in understanding be men. Consider Paul's contrast between children and men in this lesson. If the child tends to view life from a self-centered myopic view, how should a mature "Man," a strong and growing-in-the-faith believer, view life? Once rather early in my education a wise man described a truly good education, "A good education doesn't give you all the answers. It tells you where and how to find them." How often in both formal and personal studies I've thought of that insight and appreciated its wisdom. If the child in the faith thinks he knows it all, the wise man in the faith knows that he doesn't know nearly as much as he needs to know. His willing and honest acknowledgement that he needs to know more will put him graciously at the feet of other believers who teach him things in the faith that he doesn't even know that he didn't know till he sat at that believer's feet and listened with both heart and mind. Simply put, the believer who refuses to listen and to learn programs himself to be a perpetual infant in the faith, while the believer who acknowledges his need and seeks to learn from others sets himself on a course to grow in the faith and in his fruitful life to the honor of his Lord. This is Paul's emphatic teaching regarding qualifications for a man whom a church might consider for the ministry. So long as the man is a "novice" in the faith, he is utterly unqualified. His childish pride and ignorance will feed his delusional sense of superior knowledge. In

the end his pride will capture him in the snare, "...condemnation of the devil." (1 Timothy 3:6). While proudly thinking he knows more than any other believer, especially those older ministers who might serve as wise mentors in the faith, the child, the novice in the faith will open-eyed step into the devil's machinations, blinded by his pride in his deluded belief that he knows more than others.

Wherefore tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not: but prophesying serveth not for them that believe not, but for them which believe. There may be a hint in these words to the miraculous gift that existed in the early days of the church, before they ceased. (1 Corinthians 13:8) On the Day of Pentecost, Peter and the others who spoke with the miraculous divinely translated tongues in some seventeen different languages could not have spoken to a more unbelieving and hostile audience. Some in the audience were so hostile in fact that they accused Peter and the others of being drunk and out of control with alcohol. However, the accusation fell on its face when those in attendance considered what really happened. A number of men, all Galileans, and all speaking in the Galilean dialect, were heard by men from seventeen different dialects, each hearing simultaneously in his own dialect, even as they realized that the believers were speaking in their native Galilean tongue. (Acts 2:7-13) If I turned on a Christian radio or television program and heard a man speaking in French or German, but I also fully heard his meaning in concise English, I'd become an instant believer! Wouldn't you? What the Lord designed for us is not another miracle of speech, but simple, clear teaching that imparts and enriches my "*Understanding*" of the gospel. "*...prophesying...*" Is "...for them which believe."

...he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth. Paul describes two very different—in fact, opposite—scenarios in a public church gathering. In one gathering, an unbeliever attends the service. The man who speaks speaks in a foreign language, a "tongue" utterly unknown by the audience in the church. The man observes. People gather and put their lives on hold (In the first century, they put their lives on the line for their faith) to hear what this man says. But they can't understand a single word the man speaks. The unbeliever at this church gathering leaves thinking he has just spent time with a room full of crazy people. How could they learn anything from a man who spoke in a language that not a one of them could understand?

In the second scenario that Paul describes, an unbeliever attends a public church gathering. In this gathering, the man who speaks speaks in the known language of the people. He speaks with conviction and with understanding, and he speaks in a language that the people also understand. He

gives these people important information about God and about how God commands them to live their life in a hostile world. The unbeliever leaves this gathering “convinced” and convicted with what he has heard and understood. The gospel righteously judged his thoughts, even to the “secrets of *his* heart.” As a result of his new understanding of what these people believe, this person has been transformed from an unbeliever to a believer. Instead of leaving the meeting with the head-scratching “These people are crazy,” he leaves the meeting with a far different confession. He falls on his face and worships God. He leaves and publishes his experience to others, “...that God is in you of a truth.”

Which of these experiences most reflects how a visitor might react to our form of church worship on Sunday morning? Which culture should we strive to duplicate as we gather for our public worship and fellowship?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

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