

PREFACE

Please turn to the fourth chapter of Nehemiah.

Governor Nehemiah was surrounded by enemies. Many did not want him to complete the work assigned to him by God: to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Chief among his opponents were Sanballat, effectively governor of Samaria, and Tobiah. The strengthening of Jerusalem would erode some of their political power in the region. So they actively conspired to stop the work on its walls by any means—even by violence.

So instead of stopping the dangerous work, Nehemiah armed those doing the work, and he established a method to rally the men to any place on the wall being threatened.

Read Nehemiah 4:16-20.

Sidebar: Just as an aside, I want to make sure we pay due notice to what Nehemiah said in that last statement. It is indicative of the faith of the man that he did *not* say, *...rally to us there and together we will fight the enemy*. No, Nehemiah said, *...rally to us there and our God will fight for us*.

More to the point of our current lesson, Nehemiah kept a trumpeter at his side to sound the alarm whenever the wall was threatened. Now just imagine how that would have worked out if the musician, when told to sound the alarm, decided to render some lyrical, *pianissimo* lullaby. First off, most working on the wall would not even have heard it—and if they did, would stand there scratching their heads as to its purpose. *Is it the alarm—or is the musician just serenading the governor as he eats his lunch?*

The apostle Paul, using three such musical illustrations, makes the point in our passage that edification comes by way of a clear, strong, understandable voice—not by way of incoherent babbling.

Read 1 Corinthians 14:6-13.

v6

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching?

Paul opens this paragraph with what all our common versions translate “Now,” or “But now,” but which commentators suggest means something like “But as it is” (Fee), “Let us look at the facts” (Garland). That is, beginning in v6 he shows evidence to substantiate, to illustrate what he has been saying thus far in vv1-5.

Note: This series of illustrations works regardless your position on tongues. Whether you believe the NT reference to “speaking in tongues” always means speaking in a known but alien foreign language (as in Acts 2), or elsewhere refers to Spirit-talk in the language of heaven (as Paul describes in this chapter), the principle set forth in these verses holds true. Even if your position is that the gift of tongues ceased after the first century (one held by many), the principle still applies: *Know your audience; speak in a manner they will understand.* That is precisely what took place in Acts 2.

Here Paul sets up a hypothetical situation in which he visits their church and speaks to them (implied) only in tongues. If he did there would be no profit, no benefit to them, because they would not understand what he was saying. Commentators struggle to find deep meaning in Paul’s choice of the gifts “of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching.” But it would seem that he is simply using them as examples of speaking that is intelligible, standing against the unintelligible tongues. What is the point of it all if no one understands what you are saying?

v7

Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp?

Our common versions offer variations on the first word of v7—*homos*—translated in the NASB “yet.” The NIV is helpful with its typically verbose “Even in the case of...” Paul proceeds to illustrate his point with three musical examples. His use of “lifeless”—inanimate—to describe the instruments reflects common usage of the time (see Euripides, Plutarch, the LXX).

if they do not produce a distinction in the tones,

The word “distinction” can also be translated “separation”—that is, if one is just randomly running one’s hands over all the strings of the harp, the result is not a pleasing melody (separate notes), but just painful cacophony: mush.

I am reminded of Rush Limbaugh, who just this last Wednesday passed away at the age of 70 from lung cancer. He had been totally deaf for a number of years. With the aid of a cochlear implant some of his hearing had been restored. When it came to music, however, his memory had to come into play. He reported that if the song to which he was listening was familiar to him, he was able to hear the tune, but if the song was unfamiliar, he could not make out the distinctive tune, but heard only harsh, irritating noise—which is what unintelligible tongues are in comparison to the clear speaking of prophecy, teaching, etc.

v8

For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle?

Now the apostle offers an illustration of more critical importance than just musical entertainment. From time immemorial military commanders have used various means to signal their troops—to send orders of movement, or just call them to arms. A piercing sound by the trumpet or bugle was and has been a common means to both signal action and rouse the fighting spirit of the men. This was how Nehemiah signaled to the men rebuilding the Jerusalem wall that they were to rally to the spot where those opposed to that work were causing trouble.

The word translated “indistinct” in the NASB (*adelon*) is, I think, best in the KJVs: “uncertain.” That’s the idea: hidden, unseen, concealed, not manifest. In the only other instance of this word in the NT, Jesus used it to describe the Pharisees.

Read Luke 11:43-44.

The reason for a bugle in battle is for it to deliver a recognizable call to the combatants. Trained soldiers know what to expect, so when they hear something they cannot recognize, there results only confusion, inaction, and, perhaps, death.

Gordon Fee points out a good contemporary analogy. It’s been many years since I’ve attended a live performance of a symphony orchestra, but I believe my memory serves that there are two things that occur before the entrance of the conductor. One person plays an A (440), to which everyone tunes their own instrument. Either before or after this (it’s been *many* years), the sound from the stage dissolves into a sea of cacophony as individual musicians woodshed troublesome passages, or just warm up their chops and their instruments. The result is a symphony of disordered bedlam—mush. But then the conductor mounts his podium, taps his stand for attention, and with a dramatic downbeat suddenly, almost miraculously, all that disorder is turned into order as all those individuals coalesce into a unified whole, following the music and their leader.

And at once cacophony becomes music.

So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

If the orchestra is not unified under the score set before it, how will anyone hear the message of the music? And, of course more to the point, if one does not speak in a distinct, understandable language—clearly, assumed to be a public gathering such as corporate worship or instruction—then no one will know what you are saying. What is the point if there is no edification?

Here Paul uses the organ of speech—the literal tongue—as just another of the musical instruments he has mentioned above. “Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?” (Fee)

For you will be speaking into the air.

One is reminded of what Paul wrote in Chapter Nine.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:25-26.

The idea of a roomful of people babbling incoherently just to prove their own “spirituality” is antithetical to kingdom life. There is an American idiom that might also apply to the Corinthian congregation: “speaking just to hear oneself talk”—that is, just amusing yourself and no one else. That may be appropriate in the private prayer closet, but not in corporate worship.

But we would be remiss if we didn’t extend this principle. One does not have to be “speaking in tongues” to be unintelligible.

The principle applies any time one believer is speaking to another—even when a believer is speaking to a nonbeliever—perhaps more so. There have been times in this room when I am met with with one or more faces expressing, predominantly “What in the world are you talking about?” At such times I know either I have not expressed myself well, or I have introduced a concept that requires more explanation. In either case, I have probably not spoken with “clarity”—“speech that is clear” (v9).

There is a reason we do not conduct the Sunday worship service in the language of “Lower Slobovia” ([imaginative creation of cartoonist Al Capp](#)). No one here speaks that language. What would be the point? And there is a reason we do not include a time for everyone to speak, at will, in “tongues.” No one here speaks that language. What would be the point?