

What Does 1 Corinthians 13:1 REALLY Tell Us?

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 28 July 2016 12:19

Untaught* Christians are susceptible to all kinds of errors and heresies. Many are mature Christians, but have never properly understood what scripture says. Because they are mature, they think they are above reproach and cannot make a mistake. Sadly, they are wrong, and we find this with the text in question.

(* In the Christian, 'untaught' can mean a deliberate avoidance of truth and facts; it can mean being badly taught by a bad pastor or by reading prejudiced material; it can mean following deeply held beliefs that do not match with scripture. It is always hard to accept that cherished beliefs are false, but this is what every Christian is called to do – get rid of falsity. Whatever the cause of the wrong interpretation, whether deliberate or misled, it is sinful to misrepresent God's word).

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal." (1 Corinthians 13:1)

Let us get straight to the point – does this verse tell us that angels have some sort of heavenly language? The conjunction, *ean*, transliterated into English, is given as 'though' in our KJAV. It is a 'conditional particle' often used to denote uncertainty or indefiniteness. Therefore, we can also interpret 'though' as 'even if', 'if', or 'in case'. As a conditional particle, it is used of things in the future whether referencing time or experience, showing uncertainty as to whether or not it will take place. Also, in certain texts it refers to what is imagined rather than what is actual. It is like saying *"Now, let's suppose that..."*. It is an illustration, not a present fact.

Given this information, we should refer to 'though' as meaning 'even if', because this is the actual meaning of the conjunction. This immediately changes our perception from a surety to a possibility. This is not surprising, because Paul uses the term to describe something that is rhetorical and not actual. For example, if I say *"If I believed Satan's lies, I would stop believing as a Christian"*, it means I am talking about an act I will not enjoin; it is a "Let's suppose" moment. It does NOT mean it is an action (believing Satan) I will take, but is used to make a point. It is rhetorical.

Paul refers to an imagined situation – speaking as men or as angels. In this text, *tongues*, *glōssa*, can mean either the tongue in the mouth as an organ of speech, or as a human language or dialect (which uses the human tongue). It does not refer to anything other-worldly.

What Does 1 Corinthians 13:1 REALLY Tell Us?

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 28 July 2016 12:19

Thayer's Greek Lexicon says of this word, that it refers to 'foreign human tongues or languages'. Furthermore, he raises the fact that the word can "by a poetical and rhetorical usage" refer to something done by an human being. And, concerning Acts, "of the little tongue-like flames symbolising the gift of foreign tongues."

Thayer adds that when men utter tongues unrelated to human languages, it is because they are overtaken by a Hebraistic spirit of deception: Such tongues are:

"the gift of men who, rapt in an ecstasy and no longer quite masters of their own reason and consciousness, pour forth their glowing spiritual emotions in strange utterances, rugged, dark, disconnected, quite unfitted to instruct or to influence the minds of others."

We see the fact of verse one as being rhetorical in the following verse, where he speaks of things he MIGHT have personally. But, that is not his point. He is saying, rather, that 'even if' he had every bit of knowledge known to God and angels, it would all be worthless if he did not love. It is very clear he is not laying claim to having total knowledge, for instance. That's because he is making a statement about the paucity of Christian virtues and understanding if they are not linked to love.

Secondly, do men speak an 'heavenly language', calling them 'tongues'? Such a notion is implied rather than an accurate interpretation of the word 'angels'. Remember that Paul is saying that "even if I speak", rather than "when I speak".

The meaning of 'angel' in this text may mean an heavenly angel, OR a pastor or preacher, because both are messengers of God. In a number of other texts, 'angel' is used to describe pastors or powerful preachers. Here, though, Paul is using the term 'angel' as a rhetorical opposite to the words of men. This is a very common Hebraic form of argumentation, where extreme contrasts are used to press home a point. In verse one the 'point' is NOT an ability to speak as an angel, but that even with full knowledge, a Christian who shows no love cannot be said to speak from God.

At any rate, the Greek text speaks of these 'angels' as 'messengers' (aggelwn), and this means

What Does 1 Corinthians 13:1 REALLY Tell Us?

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 28 July 2016 12:19

they are not necessarily heavenly angels, but could be human preachers. At most we can say for certain that Paul is saying that if he used every available human language, and spoke with the authority of an angel, his words would be worthless if not given in love (agapao).

Note also the structure of the wording in the text: “and of angels”. This COULD mean that this phrase does not necessarily follow as being the same sentiment as in the preceding phrase. That is, “and of angels” could be a separate statement; the first is about having all the languages of the earth (Paul himself says elsewhere that he does not have them all), while the second is about speaking with all the knowledge and power of God.

The conjunction ‘and’ between “men” and “of angels”, is kai. It is a primary particle and can carry one of several meanings, including ‘even’ (even if), or ‘also’, etc. It therefore joins with the particle ‘though’ (even if). Thus, the two phrases are the same in intent – possible situations not yet occurred, because they are future guesses, or copulative enjoining. Thus, the two phrases may be connected, but they do not necessarily portray the same meanings or intent. Like the conjunction ‘though’, ‘and’ in the second phrase is also indefinite, a mere illustration.

To put it into ordinary terms, then, we can say that the meaning of the second phrase “and of angels” is not necessarily the same as that of the first phrase, “of men”. Both phrases are connected by conjunctions, but those two conjunctions are not necessarily the same in aim. Thus, phrase two might be a separate use. If we paraphrase, we might say *“Even if I can speak all the human languages of the world, and I have the direct divine authority of Heaven, these attributes are worthless if I do not show love”*.

In this way we see that phrase one is about speaking languages, while phrase two is about intent and source. In which case, ‘angel’ is not really of prime relevance to the issue, but is just an example of a rhetorical nature, to teach love as the prime issue. This is typically Pauline, which uses contrasts to bring out a point. As such they are not actual, but are argumentational propositions only. To define them as actual is poor exegesis.

I see no evidence at all in the text to suggest that Paul is saying that angels speak in an heavenly language unknown to men. Indeed, such an idea makes the whole thing farcical! What possible reason is there for God to send an angel from heaven to chat to us in a language we do not understand, but then to cause another human being to ‘translate’ (though no-one can verify that his ‘translation’ is correct), even though neither the hearer nor the ‘translator’ understands what is being said? What? It makes no sense whatever.

What Does 1 Corinthians 13:1 REALLY Tell Us?

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 28 July 2016 12:19

Yet, this unverifiable and absurd argument is put forward by those in charismatic, and some Pentecostal, churches, to justify 'speaking in tongues'. Really, they cannot justify what cannot be proved, so it is not 'justifying' but 'rationalising'. To add to their very unspiritual and ungodly notions, they even go so far as to say that 'tongues' as this unproved 'heavenly language' or 'language of the angels' may be used in private prayer and pleadings. There is no such teaching in scripture.

Again, I must underline how silly this is... that a person may pray to God in a language they do not understand, when even a translator cannot prove his translation is true or genuine. Why should God expect us to use unverifiable words when He has already given us ordinary language with which to speak to Him? (Other excuses are used to rationalise use of 'tongues', though the word 'tongues' means foreign languages and does not include an unproved heavenly language. But, these are not part of this article).

In scripture, from beginning to end, NO MENTION is made of God relating to us with an heavenly language we do not understand. Indeed, such a possible language contradicts the ethos of scripture, in which God speaks to mankind in their own languages! Read ANY text where God speaks to men, by Himself or through angels or Jesus, and you will NOT find one single instance of Him speaking in an unknown and unknowable language claiming to be from Heaven. In fact, when Jesus spoke to His Father He used human language!

In human terms, using such an unknown ethereal language is rather like 'double handling' in the world of work. An example is putting many items or objects (let us say heavy boxes) into a warehouse. A short while after, someone comes along and shifts every box to another location within the warehouse, though there is no observable reason to do so. All that happens is that the same items are moved elsewhere, causing double handling and effort for no known reason.

God speaks to us all in our own languages. When we are called to salvation it is not in a supposed divine language but in a language we are familiar with. Indeed, the very existence of a 'divine language' cannot be proved. As with 'double handling' there is no point to it. When God spoke through the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost, the Apostles did not babble in an unknown language of Heaven. No, they spoke in such a way that everyone present (many thousands) heard the Gospel being spoken in their own language! This was EITHER the Apostles speaking in human languages they did not personally comprehend, OR God caused each hearer to hear what was said in their own language.

What Does 1 Corinthians 13:1 REALLY Tell Us?

Written by K B Napier
Thursday, 28 July 2016 12:19

This had a purpose, one that is rarely needed today – speaking to someone foreign in their own language, though the speaker does not understand what he is saying. Thus, I warn anyone who claims such an heavenly language to beware – how do you know your ‘language’ is not actually cursing the Lord? At the very least it is a psychological babble, of no possible use.

The notion that we can speak an unknown heavenly language is not just absurd; it would also be a very inelegant way for God to speak to us. Also, to believe we have such a ‘gift’ is unproved, and opens its user to all kinds of demonic intervention. (As I have noted in other articles, I refer to cases where supposed ‘heavenly language’ utterances are really the languages of dead or isolated tribes, cursing God or Christ, even though ‘translators’ have falsely claimed to translate something else).

To base a whole set of beliefs and actions on just one part sentence, a phrase, is irrational and bound to lead to grave error. Especially when that phrase is rhetorical with imprecise meaning. At any rate, pretending to use a heavenly language is against the tenor and teaching of God’s word. It makes no sense whatever and is biblically illogical. It does not matter if you have held to the belief for many years... if it is unscriptural and biblically illogical, you are wasting valuable time and effort, showing you are susceptible to further error, and unable to apply biblical principles to your situation. Cast it aside and return to normal biblical beliefs based on fixed biblical teachings and meanings. Otherwise, you are refusing to prove the spirits.

(Also see my articles on tongues and other charismatic errors)

© July 2016

---oOo---

{loadposition btm_address}