

Five Intelligible Words

by John McIntyre
University of Edinburgh, Scotland

1 Corinthians 14:19 “ . . . *but in the congregation I would rather speak five intelligible words, for the benefit of others as well as for myself, than thousands of words in the language of ecstasy*” (NEB).

Or

People today seem to break with the Christian gospel for one or other of three reasons.

They may give up first because they feel quite simply that it is not true. They just cannot believe that, behind this world and all its wild confusion, its sorrow, its pain, its ugliness, there is a God who created it and now sustains it.

Secondly, people may reject the faith because they feel that it is just not relevant. It may have made some kind of sense in days when folks believed in the existence of demons that had to be exorcised; or when they thought of divine powers interrupting the course of natural events. It belongs in another era of demons and ghoulies and things that go bump in the night. But in a world of scientific and the technological sophistication it is not so much a question of Christianity not being true: it is just not relevant.

So there emerges the third reason for which people may reject the Christian faith—this time because it is not meaningful. The words string together all right, but they make no sense. That, I believe, is the point which many people have now reached in their thinking and talking about Christianity. They are no longer asking “Is it true?” or even “Is it relevant?”. They have come to the point of wanting to know—is it meaningful?—does it have any sense whatsoever?

So my question is: how far have we contributed to this crisis of unintelligibility? How far is *our* language, our talk about God, *the* stumbling block for our contemporaries? In the presence of the congregation, says St. Paul, I would rather speak five intelligible words than thousands of words in the language of ecstasy. You cannot, you dare not, try to dodge the thrust of St. Paul’s words by saying that of course he was criticising Corinthians who spoke with tongues. We cannot get out of it with the excuse that we are not charismatics, *we* don’t go in for ecstatic nonsense—not for us the beating of the breast, the rolling of the eyes, the tearing of the hair, the foaming at the mouth, or the utterly unintelligible utterances of the crazed and crazily ecstatic preacher. Some may try it, but we are too civilised for that sort of religious balderdash. We are too genteel to let ourselves in for such indecent intellectual self-exposure. You might even say: *we* are Presbyterians.

You’re right. We are different: our language of ecstasy and meaning-

lessness takes a much more refined form. Our gobbledegook takes a thousand less obvious disguises. But if we are at all honest, we realise that we too can perpetrate a load of religious, old rubbish.

Let me show you what I mean at several different levels, beginning with theology. Without mentioning names, let me quote two modern theologians. They are always fair game for jokes about unintelligibility. It took me ninety seconds to find these two, and that included my travelling time.

Here is my first example of unintelligible non-communication: "The man Jesus does not transcend the limits of the humanity common to him and to us, or become alien to us, when in the acceptance of human essence in its perversion he does not repeat the perversion or do wrong, when in virtue of his origin He cannot will or do it. He is just what we are and how we are. The only difference is that He is it in genuine human freedom." What a lot of gobbledegook for the simple biblical announcement in five words that Jesus was tempted without sin.

Or take my second writer: "The condescension of God would be a mere theophany, a divine miracle to stir our amazement, and thus exactly the very opposite of an existential, absolutely decisive contact, if the self-manifestation of God were not at the same time also a veiling, if it were not a complete entrance into the reality of human life upon earth." What a masterly example of theological conjuring—now you see it, now you don't. What a muddying of the waters which were so clear when the Bible said "The Word was made flesh" or the carol sang: "Love came down at Christmas." Time is running out for us. Unless we stop using the thousand words in the language of ecstasy, deafening people's ears with our orthodox gibberish, then we may well find that they have no longer the mind or the heart or the ears to listen even to our five intelligible words. The patience of the world, maybe even the patience of God, will eventually run out.

So much for theology: what happens at the level of ourselves? Before we become all cosy inside and thank God that we are not as those Pharisees, the theologians who confuse the simple-minded, let us pause to ask ourselves how often you and I prefer the thousand words of ecstasy to the five intelligible words in the intimate and personal situations what confront us daily. Someone has come to you concerning some weakness to which he has succumbed. How do you react? With some high-falutin' ecstatic statement that if he confesses before God, all will be forgiven? Do you pour upon his head all the shibboleths, the pious phrases, the wise saws that we keep in store for such occasions, and which we maybe ourselves do not listen to in a crisis? Or in five intelligible words, do you quietly assure him that his shame is your shame, and his burden is shared by you and you are going to God together?

Or: great sorrow has come to a friend and you wish, in some manner, to express your sympathy. Do you set yourself up safely behind a sympathetic screen of generalities—about all things working together for good to them that love God; about clouds having silver linings; about God mov-

ing in a mysterious way to perform his wonders? A thousand words in the language of ecstasy—when the heart-broken person who has come to you for help wants to hear only five intelligible words of comfort and reassurance that you are standing by him or her.

So at the wider level of church and world, I wonder if it is too late to plead for five intelligible words on church unity, instead of the thousand ecstatic utterances which have become our traditional means of communication. You know what I mean. Church unity, we are solemnly told, is the end product of an intricate process of ecclesiastical joinery and cabinet-making. It is a sophisticated, logical deduction from a few theological axioms and postulates, whose power over the human heart has so far gone unobserved and untested. While all the time the five intelligible words which we all want to hear are: that Christian unity happens when, without reservation, we break bread together, receive the cup together, because cup and bread, like our very selves, are wholly Christ's and not ours; and we are *all* his.

Also on the trouble spots of the world: Beirut, South Africa, Ireland, Iraq, and Iran; and on World Disarmament. Perhaps it is not too late to ask for five intelligible words. Five words that cut through the tangle of Afghan and Russian, of Black and Boer, of PLO and Israelis, of Army and Provos, of IRA and UDA, and the massive build up of nuclear self-destruction; and gather all together within the mercy of God, the power of his forgiveness, and the embrace of his reconciliation.

Or five intelligible words on the world's hunger. Words that plead for a new global economy, a new world-encircling concern, and the spirit of sacrifice which is the only starting point for an effective attack upon hunger by the affluent.

Or five intelligible words on unemployment—not just gobbledegook about economic trends, inflationary spirals, market re-distribution, staffing rationalisation, and long-term trade pick-up: gibberish which mocks the words we ought to be speaking, in sympathy, compassion and practical help; as congregations and in groups trying to be helpful to those who are the victims of one of the greatest tragedies of our time.

Let me close by drawing attention to the two grounds that St. Paul offers in justification of his plea for intelligibility as against ecstasy and gobbledegook. He puts it neatly. It is all to be for the benefit of others as well as for ourselves. First, for the benefit of others, because the supreme responsibility resting upon those of us who hold the Christian faith is that we should communicate it to others. There is no philosopher's stone that turns gobbledegook into a message of comfort, help, encouragement, enlightenment. We owe it to our faith to see that others share it by understanding it with us.

But the second point of St. Paul's has taken on in our time a kind of climactic importance. It is that we have to find those five intelligible words concerning the faith for *our own* benefit. If we remain in the world of ecstatic utterance, the world of gibberish, meaningless verbiage concerning the central things in which we believe: then the danger is that we

shall lose our own personal faith.

So show me a person who is long-winded about his/her faith or unintelligible when they speak about it, and I will show you someone who has lost faith.

Show me a person who is articulate and communicates the gospel with care and concern, with love and sincere simplicity, and I will show you someone who has found faith, and who knows what the Christian message is about. It is about what you say and how you say it—not in a thousand words of ecstasy but in five intelligible words.