

“WHY DO YE NOT UNDERSTAND MY SPEECH?”

“Why do ye not understand my speech? *even* because ye cannot hear my word. Ye *are* of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. And because I tell *you* the truth, ye believe me not. Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear *them* not, because ye are not of God.” John 8:43-47

Language is much more than just the sound of the words we speak.

The Dictionary defines language as: “a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which beings express themselves.”

The more complex a language is, the more varied its display of functions and characteristics. The typical functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release. In the case of human beings, language is also a way to belong and be recognized as members of a social group or culture. Language, functionally, is the carrier of both communication and culture.

The loss of a language is not just the evaporation of certain sounds that once expressed the “words” of a language. The loss of a language is also, and more importantly, the loss of the accumulated knowledge and understanding of the world that the speakers of that language once possessed. It is not just vocabulary, but it is also the vision and vocation of the now silenced speakers that vanishes.

A language can be said to be dead when the last speaker of the language dies; however, the process that leads to that finality can be a long and incremental one. Once a generation arises who no longer pass on the language to their children, the die is cast. The death throes of any language are heard when only the elderly are speakers of the language. It is at this critical point that the language is no longer a viable commutable spoken language—it rests now upon its deathbed. A language is lost forever when there is no longer a living speaker of that language.

It is believed, according to some Linguists, that there may have been somewhere over 120,000 languages in the history of the world, yet today, there exists approximately 6,000 known languages. This drastic difference illustrates that thousands of languages have vanished from the earth. This death toll continues to add to its numbers even to this day, as some present-day languages are already in their last stages of morbidity. It is estimated that a language dies every month.

There were two elderly brothers, according to some reports, who lived in a coastal village in Scotland who were the only two people left who could speak a particular dialect of the Scot's language. These two brothers were descendants of a people who made their livelihood from fishing the nearby waters. When those brothers passed and that fishing industry slowly disappeared, along with it went the unique culture of those fishermen. The language they had once spoken ceased, and since then, no one has spoken the dialect in over two generations.

What researchers discovered is that when a way of life begins to disappear, so do the words and the language that describe that life.

Native Americans in South Dakota know that to preserve their culture, they must preserve their language. A society for the preservation of the Lakota language made the following observations: "Lakota, a Siouan language, currently holds an EGIDS level of 'threatened.' The number of first-language Lakota speakers dropped from around 6,000 in 2006 to 2,000 at the start of 2016. That's only one percent of the Lakota population. While there are those who speak the Lakota language, very few are able to speak it with high proficiency, and many of those who can belong to the older generation." They go on to say, "The way to preserve and revitalize Lakota is to teach the language to the younger generation."

To understand why the use of Lakota is fading away, it is important to realize how different cultures affect language change over time. In a situation of cultural parity, each group initially has no desire nor need to become more like their neighbors; also, being separate and distinct presents no erosion to a language. However, the more the groups commingle, the more the dominant culture begins to bleed over into the less dominant culture.

From around the 16th century and before the 17th century, the Lakota were a powerful force, having no problem expanding their territory and defeating other tribes. They maintained their language simply because it was their way of life—unhindered and uninfluenced by others.

When the first few foreign settlers and merchants showed up at the start of the 18th century, the Lakota, at that time, had little reason nor desire to change. Things went smoothly until Fort Laramie was built on Lakota land, and other settlers began moving into the area. The Lakota pushed at these unwelcome guests just as they had done with other tribes before; however, the lure of gold and possession of land increased the flow of settlers until it was the settlers, and not the Lakota, who were the more powerful.

Each group was forced to defend what was their own. A series of conflicts ensued until the U.S. army defeated the Lakota during the Great Sioux War. Thus, after being confined to reservations and eventually having many of the key factors of their old ways of life removed, the Lakota were forced into a situation where cultural parity was removed, and it was beneficial and unavoidable that they assimilate, at least in part, to the American Culture. This, of course, also meant a change in their language that now incorporated the tongue of the English.

While this is not an unnatural phenomenon, as it has happened countless times over the course of history, the American Lakota of today are no longer living in the same way that their Lakota ancestors were living centuries ago, and as a result, their language passed away as their culture passed away.

As one culture consumes another, the language of the consumed culture becomes more like the language of the consumer through a process known as language shift. What languages do or don't survive isn't due to the language itself but rather to the people who speak it. Change the culture, and you change the language, and in order to change the culture, it necessitates a change of the people. Someone rightly said, "The language you end up talking is the life you end up walking."

Language death occurs when speakers of one language come into contact with speakers of another, more "prestigious" language and then gradually drop their language in favor of the new one. A community may remain bilingual, which can last throughout a few generations, but over time, fewer and fewer young people will use their traditional language. Their level of proficiency will also lower with each successive generation until the traditional language is no longer spoken at all.

We witness a Biblical reference that is similar in nature to the above; "Also in those days I saw the men of Judah who had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod (or the language of one of the other peoples mentioned) and were unable to speak the language of Judah" Nehemiah 13:23-24.

Jesus asked, “Why do ye not understand my speech? *even* because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of *your* father the devil...” John 8:43-44.

The NIV states John 8:43-45 as, “Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!”

Jesus reveals to His audience in John 8 that the reason they cannot understand His words is because they speak more fluently the language of their father, the devil, than the language of God. This is quite amazing as Paul declares in Romans 3:1-2, “What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit *is there* of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God” (Oracles = Words of God).

The Jews had become victims of the “process of a language shift.” Even though they had been entrusted with the oracles of God, they had allowed themselves to fall prey to the beggarly elements of the world and, consequently, had found themselves unable to understand the language of God—thus Jesus’ query to them regarding their inability to understand His words.

What is true of the Jews of John 8 is also true among certain of the present who have been given the Words of God as pertaining to salvation and holiness, and like their John 8 counterparts, they also experience difficulty in understanding the Language of God. To understand how they, too, have undergone a “process of language shift,” several sequences of the process must be examined.

Biblical doctrines are meant to be the language of the Church, and the Church’s culture is formed through divine habits of those doctrines. However, external influences, such as societal changes or cultural shifts, can impact a church’s adherence to its doctrines. As the world around them evolves, churches may feel pressure to adapt their beliefs to remain relevant and inclusive.

In their attempt to stay relevant and attract a wider audience, some churches may prioritize cultural relevance over doctrinal integrity. This shift in focus will result in doctrines being sidelined or modified to fit the changing external cultural landscape.

The influence of popular trends and movements, both within and outside of the church, can sway churches away from maintaining their doctrines. If, for instance, a particular newly praised outreach trend gains momentum and acceptance, some churches may feel compelled to align themselves with it, even when there is apparent bruising of some long-held doctrinal standards.

Modern culture, with its emphasis on individualism and personal freedom, can clash with the strict adherence required by some doctrinal teachings. Churches may be tempted to compromise in order to appeal to a wider audience.

When churches neglect to prioritize the teaching and reinforcement of their doctrines, it becomes easier for them to fade into the background. When these movements become active in a church, their language and culture are at risk; even though the movements may be slow and incremental, their influence on the church's culture and language is exacting, nevertheless.

Holiness of life and deed forms the overall culture of the Church. To understand the connection between a church's loss of holiness and a people's loss of language, we must first grasp the significance of holiness. Holiness represents purity, righteousness, and a sacred connotation. It is the embodiment of divine presence and moral integrity. When a church loses holiness, it loses its fundamental mission of being a sanctuary for spiritual growth and connection with the divine.

Language is not merely a means of communication. It is a profound vehicle of meaning and a reflection of the culture and values of a community. Just as a church embodies its holiness through the lives of its members, language expresses the essence of a people's identity. When a community loses its language, it loses a vital part of its cultural heritage and the richness of its collective experiences.

The loss of holiness in a church often stems from a neglect of spiritual practices, a drifting away from core values, or a focus on worldly matters. Similarly, the loss of language in a community may arise from the influence of dominant cultures, migration, or cultural assimilation. Both instances result from a gradual erosion of identity and a disconnect from the roots that once grounded them.

When a church loses holiness, it becomes a mere building devoid of spiritual vitality. It loses its ability to inspire and guide people on their faith journeys.

Similarly, when a community loses its language, it loses the ability to preserve and transmit its unique traditions and narratives, weakening its cultural legacy for future “generations. Surrounding a single language with a multiplicity of foreign languages is usually detrimental to that single language.

A church's holiness lifestyle serves as a foundation for spiritual growth, just as a community's language serves as a foundation for cultural preservation and the formation of collective identity. Without these foundations, the church risks losing their distinctiveness and becoming adrift in a sea of indifference.

The connection between a church's loss of holiness or a people's loss of language extends beyond their respective domains. It carries implications for life as a whole. These losses signify the erosion of values, the undermining of holiness standards, and the crippling of divine awareness.

Once there is generational slippage of a language where only a portion of the language fails to be passed on, then that portion may never be regained. The consequences will be an incomplete language whether that generation is aware of it or not. Likewise, when a generation of the church does not receive the completeness of Biblical doctrines, that generation may continue forward, unaware of their incompleteness.

Give ear, O my people, *to* my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth.

I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old:

Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

We will not hide *them* from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.

For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children:

That the generation to come might know *them*, *even* the children *which* should be born; *who* should arise and declare *them* to their children:

That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments. (Psalms 78:1-7)

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