

The tongues of Galilee

A sermon on Acts 2

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On the day the church was born, every Christian spoke in tongues. For my Pentecostal friends, this is a fact of fundamental theological significance.

In Acts 2 the gift of tongues which spread through the first Christian gathering like wildfire was anything but a private spiritual experience; it was a public gift of comprehensible communication.

They see the ability to speak in a new language as evidence that a person has received the baptism of the Spirit. Within Pentecostalism, this experience frequently involves the gift of a “prayer language” which is deployed for personal edification.

But in Acts 2 the gift of tongues which spread through the first Christian gathering like wildfire was anything but a private spiritual experience; it was a public gift of comprehensible communication. The very first gift the Pentecost

Spirit saw fit to give believers in the nascent church was the capacity to declare the wonders of God in the mother tongues of their neighbors:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? (Acts 2:1–8, NRSV)

From set apart to sent out

This moment in Acts 2 represents a profound turning point in the history of Israel. As a community, Israel had long had a formal process for incorporating converts to their faith. But religious practice in ancient Israel was not especially evangelistic. The emphasis of the Law lay on holiness, on practices that set the people of God apart. There was a sense that the community of faith was continually under threat from hostile outside forces that sought to undermine its distinctive identity. Actions from Ezra's fiery indictment of intermarriage to Joshua's infamous conquest killings are explicitly tied to concerns about corruptive proximity. Circumcision itself, the fiercely defended marker of covenant community, anchored the identity of the people of faith in a symbol of apartness.

But on the day of Pentecost, something remarkable happens. The defining marker of the emergent people of faith shifts from apartness to sentness. In stories such as the Acts 10 account of the conversion of Cornelius's household, the newest members of the Jesus covenant community are known as such when they start to *speak*. The sign of their inclusion in the new covenant community is their capacity to do what the first Christians did and declare God's wonders in a new tongue, a new language (see Acts 10:44-48). Far from fearing outside contamination (a fear that lingers within Peter until a vision from God finally shakes it loose), the early church itself quickly becomes a kind of holy contagion. Its members are marked by their sentness, their embrace of a mission that moves them toward their neighbors instead of away from them. Their identifying marker is the distinctive speech of a people equipped to cross divides, to make disciples of Jesus from every tribe and nation.

The church of Acts is designed from the ground up for a missionary existence. It is the communion of those sent to declare the wonders of God in every tongue, to speak until the whole world is brought to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus the resurrected Christ.


From sent out to set apart

The early Anabaptists burned with the same evangelistic fire that characterized the early church. They were radical disciples who made radical disciples of their neighbors. Their voices were so bold and so persistent that in some cases it took tongue screws to shut them up.

But sustained persecution eventually had its desired effect. Tongues got quiet. And over time, a community that began its history in courageous embrace of sacrificial sentness began to settle into contentment

with simple apartness. Jewish markers of circumcision and dietary law found fresh equivalents in distinctive dress and practices.

The twentieth century saw renewed interest among Anabaptists in missional efforts globally, but with an undeniably mixed legacy. We are only beginning to recognize the damage done when the world-changing gospel is wedded to cultural colonization. In too many cases, the Jesus introduced to far corners of the globe was a fair-skinned Jesus dressed in plain clothes, a Jesus who could not dance, a Jesus who spoke not Aramaic or Spanish or Swahili but only English or Pennsylvania Dutch.



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In all corners of the Christian church, not simply among Anabaptists, export of culture has been confused with witness to Christ.

Recent years have seen fresh conversations in the field of global missions. We have begun to understand that the burden is on those who carry the gospel to new places to learn the language and culture of those they dwell among. Anabaptists have rightly been quick to observe that the radical kingdom vision offers challenge to every culture's practices and values that lie outside the

beauty of Christ. But nevertheless, the Christian gospel is fundamentally incarnational and as such must always be grounded in particular times and places. If Jesus shows us one thing, it is that God loves skin—in its many shapes and shades. The good news of a God who took on flesh and dwelled among us must be proclaimed in all the colors and melodies and flavors of those among whom that God has come to live.

In a curious twist, however, even as the church's awareness of the importance of cultural contextualization is growing with respect to global mission, the logic of incarnation often encounters its greatest resistance closest to home. It's one thing to affirm that God values the mother tongue of a villager half a world away. But for many of us, it is the changing mother tongues of our own neighborhoods and communities that are hardest to accept. This is true even—sometimes especially—of the changing mother tongues of our own children.

The challenge young adults present to the church in every generation is not unrelated to the challenge global diversity presents to the church:

Who gets to hear the wonders of God declared in their own mother tongue? Who gets to see the good news of Jesus incarnated in their own clothes? Who gets to hear the Spirit singing to their own melodies and rhythms?

The truth is, no presentation of the gospel is culturally neutral. The status quo of the church in every time and place was designed with some-

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one in mind. This is not evil but a necessary aspect of an incarnational faith. The problem is not that every proclamation of the gospel is particular; the problem is how often we forget this fact. We entrench the song or the flavor profile of people of a single tongue and stop asking who it serves. We become more fearfully caught up in preserving our preferred gospel shade than passionately preoccupied with the mission we are sent out to accomplish.

In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul declares: “I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. . . . I act like I’m outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, so I can recruit those outside the Law. . . . I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means. All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it.” This is the face of Pentecost faith. This is an incarnational mindset. This is what it looks like to form a church identity marked by sentness. It is a radical, sacrificial vision of a people willing to be continually pressed and reshaped into the many forms and colors of a God who dwells among people.

When the Spirit comes, everything changes

The church at the start of Acts 2 was not so different from most congregations I know. It is small, just 120 members on a day when everybody shows up. It is made up for the most part of people who share the same ethnic background and grew up in the same small towns, people with a common culture and a common history. They are gathered in a room, saying their prayers, no doubt expecting that tomorrow will look much like today.

This is where the story starts. But when the Spirit comes, everything changes. When the Spirit comes, the community of the faithful gathered is transformed into the community of the faithful sent. When the Spirit comes, an interrelated clan of Galileans erupt outward to sing the praises of God in the mother tongues of the peoples of every quarter of their city.

After Pentecost, there is no church except the missionary church. Nobody stays inside the room. Nobody gets to say, “The tongue of Galilee was good enough for my parents, and it’s good enough for me.” To be a Spirit-filled follower of Jesus is to be equipped, empowered, and sent to declare the wonders of God in the mother tongues of every corner of the earth—beginning with the tongues spoken on our street corners, beginning with tongues spoken in the corners of our homes.

The challenge young adults pose to the church today is not to become statically “millennial” (or whatever come next) but rather to become dynamically incarnational. It’s a challenge to reclaim our core identity as a people who are both anchored in a story and continually in motion, constantly being sent, always taking on new tongues. It’s a challenge to embrace our call to genuinely missionary existence, even close to home. It’s a challenge to make the gospel-word flesh, to make it bone and sinew of our world, even as we resist conforming ourselves to the world’s fallen patterns. This is a paradox, undeniably, but it is the paradox of Jesus, who walked our roads in first-century sandals, who declared God’s truth in first-century words.

The mission field is all around us, streets crowded with nations and with generations who have never heard Christ’s power proclaimed in the cadences of their language, never heard God’s mercy sung to the rhythms their feet move to. The burden is on us, the church of every age, to ask the hard questions: Whose mother tongue is being spoken among us? Who is hearing the wonders of God proclaimed in the language of their hearts? Are we in the twenty-first-century church 120 Galileans enclosed in a room, speaking only to each other? Or does our life together give evidence that we remember who we are—a people with one great commission and the tongues of Pentecost?

About the author

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