

Preaching Pentecost in a Pluralistic Age

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Acts 2:1-13

This text from Acts 2 is one of the most well-known stories in the New Testament, placed by the liturgical calendar as the story that narrates the birth of the church at Pentecost. Indeed, images from this text dominate the church's celebration of Pentecost. The liturgical color of Pentecost is red, the color of fire having become the color of the Spirit; church sanctuaries are hung with banners decorated with yellow, orange, and red flames; and it is an almost required part of any Pentecost Sunday service for one or more of the scripture lessons to be read in a language other than English, thus reenacting the rich chorus of languages that were heard on that Pentecost day.

Given the church's familiarity with this story, the preacher may often assume he or she knows this text better than may actually be the case. In thinking about Pentecost and the Acts 2 text, then, a good beginning point is to ask whether one's familiarity with Acts 2:1-13 stands in the way of a full encounter with the message of the text. That is, are we so familiar with the contours of this text that we have stopped paying attention to the details? Is our "knowledge" of this text based more on our recollections of what this story says than on the actual words of the text?

My own "knowledge" of the Pentecost story is a case in point. Were I asked to summarize the Acts 2 text, I would (as I have) speak about the symbolic drama of the descent of the flames of fire, the Holy Spirit's gift of speech to the gathered Galileans, and the amazement of the crowd that so many languages were being spoken. Yet on Pentecost Sunday 1994 I heard a sermon on Acts 2 in which the preacher mentioned in passing that she had only recently noticed the precise wording of v. 6, "each one heard them speaking in the native language of each." The preacher pursued some other point in her sermon, but (my apologies to the preacher) I continued to reflect on v. 6, to which I, too, had never really attended. I realized that I had always focused so emphatically on the apostles' speaking, that I had paid little attention to the crowd's hearing.

Sermon after sermon, lesson after lesson, has focused on the wonder of the gift of language in this text and how this gift of the Spirit shows the universal possibilities for the spread of the gospel. The emphasis is almost always on the apostles' Spirit-filled gift of *speaking*, so that what the crowd actually hears is often left behind. When the interpreter listens to what the crowd in this story says, however, instead of giving pride of place to the apostles' speaking, one moves closer to the heart of this Pentecost story. Acts 2:1-13 does not highlight the *universality* of the language of the gospel, but its *particularity*.

"In our own languages we hear them speaking"

Acts 2:1-13 divides into two parts: vv. 1-4, which focus on the apostles' reception of the Spirit and the ability "to speak in other languages"; and vv. 5-13, in which the focus shifts away from the apostles to the crowd. The visual drama is all in the first part, and vv. 5-13 seem somewhat anticlimactic after the arrival of the Spirit. Yet it

is in those verses, almost half of which catalogue all the nations and tongues represented in the assembly (vv. 9-11), that the purpose of the gift of the Spirit is found. Acts 2:1-13 contains no account of the words spoken by the apostles; it places all its emphasis on the crowd's report of what it hears.

The key to the Pentecost story is found in the crowd's words of amazement in vv. 7-8. First, the crowd marvels that Galileans are speaking these languages (v. 7). The speakers come from one region and normally speak one language, yet their utterances on this day are not limited by their geographical origins. Second, the crowd marvels that each one of them is able to hear the gospel in his or her own language (v. 8). The Galileans' speaking was not a babble of foreign languages, but their speaking was an opening up of the gospel for the languages and lives of all who were present. The catalogue of the nations in vv. 9-11a gives concreteness to the crowd's claims. The full geographical, cultural, and ethnic diversity of the nations of the Near East (e.g., Parthians, Medes, Mesopotamia, Judea), northern Africa (Egypt, Libya), Asia Minor, and Europe (Rome) is represented in this list. One cannot imagine a more diverse gathering of people than the one Luke describes with the words "every nation under heaven" (v. 5), yet each member of this diverse crowd was given the gift of the gospel in his or her own language. As testament to the scope of this miracle, the crowd's words end with the same wonderment with which they began, "in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power" (v. 11).

When read from the perspective of the particularity of language, a new image of Pentecost emerges. The point of this story is not that through the Spirit the different populations of the world begin to speak the gospel in their own languages and thus give birth to the church universal (which often seems to be underscored when scripture is read in different languages on Pentecost Sunday). Rather, Luke takes great pains in vv. 5-13 to emphasize that the Galileans speak in the world's diverse languages. The Galileans are empowered by the Spirit to speak in the world's languages so that the gospel, "God's deeds of power" (v. 11), could be heard by everyone. The world was not required to learn the "authentic" language of the gospel, but the gospel was available in whatever languages were needed to effect its hearing.

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The Spirit-filled linguistic miracle of Pentecost thus provides a critical vantage point from which to reexamine questions of pluralism and diversity in the life of the Christian community of faith.

1. The Galileans' ability to speak in the particular languages of their listeners opens up an important angle on questions of diversity. It suggests that the task in proclaiming the gospel is to follow the lead of the Spirit in Acts 2 and allow the gospel to find its own home in diverse people's own languages, not require them to speak "our" language. This linguistic diversity has taken a variety of forms in the history of the church. On the most obvious level, the drive to translate scripture into the vernacular is an attempt to follow the lead of Acts 2 and deny any single language its place as the "official" language of the gospel. Contemporary English-speaking Christians may so take for granted the variety of English translations available that they forget that in the history of Christianity, translation into the vernacular was often a politically charged and risky act. When Jerome's translation of Daniel was read publicly, there was a move to stone him because it differed from the "real" scripture.

Luther's German translations were greeted by the church hierarchy as highly charged political acts. In many churches today, the King James Version is held as the only true translation, and any variation from that version is held to be heretical. A recent translation of the New Testament into Gullah sparked controversy over whether or not Gullah constituted a "real" language.

Linguistic particularity moves beyond translation of scripture, however. The calendar of saints gives contemporary Christians a glimpse into the diversity of Christian experience across both time and place. The role of indigenous Christian movements throughout the history of Christianity is evidence of the importance of being able to encounter the word of God "in our own native language." Even when Western missionaries tried to form non-Western Christianity in its own image, local cultures influenced the shape of Christian life and worship. The variety of worship forms in Christian churches of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and South America points to the power of the Spirit that was given at Pentecost.

2. The challenge of the miracle of Pentecost extends beyond questions of Bible translations and diversity in worship. At the core of the Pentecost miracle is the question of who controls the gospel message and what indeed "control" of the gospel means. One assumes that the apostles in Acts 2 thought that they were in charge. After all, they had all been with Jesus "during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us" (Acts 1:21). Acts itself can be read according to a "great man" model; the story of the church is told from the perspective of the story of its leaders. Yet the descent of the Spirit wrests control from these men. In Acts 2:1-13, the apostles are powerless in the face of the power of the Spirit.

Acts 2:1-13 thus invites the church to think honestly about the freedom and sovereignty of the Spirit to speak the gospel in new languages outside of conventional patterns. The gift of the Spirit in Acts 2:1-13 was nonnegotiable. That is, the Spirit broke the closed and limited circle of the Galilean apostles wide open and moved according to its freedom, not the apostles' plans. Whatever plan Peter and his colleagues had in mind for the spread of the gospel was rendered null and void by the power and purpose of the Spirit.

Paul recognized the transitory nature of human control of the spread of the gospel. In Cor. 9, he discusses his apostolic rights, freedom, and authority. Yet he subordinates all pretensions about his own power to his obligation to preach the gospel (1 Cor. 9:16). In fulfilling that obligation, Paul "speaks" the gospel in the language of those who need to hear it, "For though I am free with respect to all, I have become a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews . . . I became all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:19-22). These verses do not show Paul to be a chameleon, willing to change as his environment requires, but instead show his awareness that the needs of and for the gospel supersede his decisions about how and where it should be preached. Paul gives up his own power and control of the form and shape of the gospel so that those to whom he preaches can hear the gospel "in the native languages of each."

To discern the workings of the Spirit in the life and proclamation of the contemporary church is a difficult, if not daunting task. And yet Acts 2:1-13 suggests that any and all notions of ecclesial control are ephemeral at best and must be kept open to the movement of the Spirit. The Spirit moved the apostles to speak in languages unknown to them, but known to those who heard. The Spirit is depicted throughout

Acts as breaking down conventional barriers and enabling the spread of the gospel in new languages and places. Indeed, at many junctures in the narrative, the apostles' work is directed by the Spirit, often in opposition to the apostles' own inclinations about the spread of the gospel (e.g., Acts 8:26-40; Acts 10—11). The apostles were often resistant to the Spirit's lead, but they could never stop it (see esp. Acts 11:15-18; 15:8-28).

3. Acts 2:1-13 offers a mirror through which the contemporary church can look at its own resistances to the different languages in which "God's deeds of power" may be spoken today. The particularity and diversity of languages in which the Spirit enabled the apostles to speak stands in sharp contrast to the "orthodox" monotone which often seems required of gospel formulations today. In particular, Acts 2:1-13 raises questions about the church's suspicion of, if not outright hostility to, feminist articulations of Christian tradition.

Why is it so hard to credit that in these articulations, the Spirit is making it possible for the gospel to be heard in language that women recognize and claim as their own? That language will not be heard and recognized as "native language" by all people in the church, perhaps not by some men or even by all women, but the text of Acts 2 should help us see that it does not need to be. In Acts 2:1-13, people heard the gospel *in their own language*. Each of the languages was recognized by those people to whom the language belonged, but not by all the people present that monumental day. If feminist articulations of Christian tradition enable some women to recognize that the good news of God can indeed be spoken in their language, is it not possible that once again the multilingual Spirit is at work?

The application of categories of orthodoxy and heterodoxy skew the conversation. Some people in the Pentecost crowd rejected the Spirit's multilingual witness; they sneered and dismissed the linguistic miracle as drunkenness (Acts 2:13). But those in the crowd who sneered were wrong: the plethora of languages was not drunkenness. It was indeed the Spirit doing something unheard of, something new. Acts 2:1-13, then, invites the church to ask about the cost when we reject the articulation of the gospel in a language that we do not recognize. The cost may be that we lose a glimpse of the Spirit, mistaking for drunkenness what is instead the beginning of a new day with God. Since God, through the Spirit, has entrusted the gospel to a variety of languages, so that "each one heard them speaking in the native language of each," does the church now want to number itself among those who sneer?