

Pentecost as Resistance to Monoculture: On the Inclusive, Hospitable, and Prophetic Community Imagined in Acts 2

Matthew L. Skinner
Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota

At Pentecost, dreams begin to materialize. Vision expands. Salvation spills over the horizon like a breaking dawn, and that horizon's width extends as far as one can see. That salvation, like Pentecost itself, is a divine act. At Pentecost God reaffirms a commitment to a wide-ranging presence and activity. Without the Pentecost narrative, the book of Acts might read like a story about daring heroes, the virtues of persistence, or a young institution's rollercoaster ride toward survival and expansion. Careful attention to Acts 2 reminds us that the book instead aims to tell about God's determination to transform the world—precisely through and around and sometimes even in spite of the communities of believers who experience and live out God's salvation. You cannot talk about salvation in Acts without talking about community.

Salvation, according to Acts, is much more than a message to share or a doctrine to embrace. Salvation is experienced and manifested—in the Pentecost narrative and also beyond—as believers gather. They are different people united by God's Spirit in hospitality, worship, charity, and evangelism. These communities understand that salvation is available to *anyone*, “everyone who calls on the name on the Lord” (2:21); they know that truth in their bones.

There are enough angles into Acts 2 to fill sermons for several months, but the one that seems especially urgent in the current cultural moment is the narrative's particular ways of depicting the communal identity of the people who experience God's salvation. This community, which Acts begins to call “the church” in 5:11, embraces difference. It understands itself as, to use an anachronistic term, a multicultural society. The ligaments of the Holy Spirit hold together many kinds of people, not by stripping away their differences but by welcoming and valuing them. The setting in which the Spirit bursts onto the scene and the ways in which the Spirit makes its presence known through multiple languages reveal that the good news will not belong to one kind of people. No single cultural framework or uniform mode of expression can finally define the gospel or establish a core Christian culture. The church's core is Christ, and nothing else. As a result, the story of Pentecost instructs believers in all times to regard hegemony and hierarchy as not simply counterproductive but hazardous to the church's ability to bear witness to Christ.

The current age presents numerous challenges when we think about difference, belonging, and cultural identity. Some far-reaching issues in the American context include the newness created by local and national demographic shifts, ongoing oppression stemming from the poisonous effects of racism, backlash against groups that settle or provide sanctuary to refugees, mainline denominational declines in membership, white supremacy's ability to worm its way into Christian theology, and weaponized “America First!” language. The Pentecost narrative provides crucial guidance to churches in these divisive days. Preachers have much to gain from interacting with

it as they lead congregations to dream anew about who they are, why they exist, and what ministry they should perform. The story, like the rest of Acts, reminds us that the confession “Christ is Lord” has a way of shaking up the status quo and its primary stakeholders.

Pentecost

We minimize the scope and power of the Pentecost narrative when we speak about nondescript notions of “unity” or refer in generic terms to the gospel’s “universal” reach. In Acts 2 we find a more specific and more generous story. It sets more before us than only the quotation from Joel 2:28-32 with its references to the Spirit coming to “all flesh” and salvation’s availability to “everyone.” Two additional details—the ethnic indicators describing the crowd that gathers (2:5, 7-11) and the astonishing linguistic abilities of the Spirit-empowered speakers (2:4, 6)—provide texture to the passage, allowing it to express thicker descriptions of the gospel’s boundless character and the church as a community of liberal welcome and broad inclusion. The good news of divine salvation is a pan-cultural message and a reality that forms pan-ethnic community.

“From Every Nation under Heaven”

The first detail comes in the description of the crowd that hears Jesus’ witnesses speak. They are Jews who represent the fullness of the Jewish diaspora. The narrator declares that Jews “from every nation under heaven” (2:5) were present in Jerusalem. The term *nation* sometimes sparks misunderstanding. The Greek word is *ethnos*. In this context it does not necessarily refer to various geopolitical entities (like modern “nations” or “countries”) or citizenships. It is more helpful to understand the term as highlighting the audience’s various ethnicities—various ways of construing people’s identities and group-memberships based on a wide range of considerations that might include familial, linguistic, genealogical, regional, and cultural criteria.¹

Acts provides additional specificity—and reminds us that the reference to *every* nation is obviously hyperbole—when the Holy Spirit’s audience begins to speak and names their identities and places of origin. In verses that make pronunciation-conscious lectors tremble before congregations on every Pentecost Sunday, the crowd identifies fifteen regions from three different continents: Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya (the parts belonging to Cyrene), Rome, Crete, and Arabia.

On one hand, it is a peculiar list. It does not obviously duplicate other known lists of ancient nations or locations of Jewish populations, and its format is irregular. The list makes no mention of Greece, Macedonia, or other places that included thriving Jewish communities, so it is hardly a comprehensive catalog. The order of locations does not follow a clear sequence of directionality, although it comes close to clustering places according to their direction from Jerusalem. If the list conforms to a particular rationale—be it geographic, political, religious, or even astrological—that conformity is not strict and so no one can agree on what the rationale might be.

On the other hand, the list need not be orderly or derived from identifiable sources to make its point. It is representational, not exhaustive, calling attention to Judaism’s wide geographical footprint and the sheer reality of the Jewish diaspora.² More Jews lived away from Judea and Galilee at that time than lived in those regions. Although

modern biblical scholarship has tended to overlook the fact, ancient Jews lived in various cultural settings and described themselves with a variety of national and ethnic terms.³ The Pentecost narrative implies that no single Jewish group represented the soul of Jewish identity; ethnic diversity and a sort of cultural diffuseness were themselves key aspects of that identity. The Spirit speaks to Jews *in* Jerusalem, but the Spirit speaks *to* all of Judaism at once including “residents of...Judea” (2:9). Acts takes Jerusalem, situated in the heart of Judea, and expands it. The city retains its specific symbolic significance for Jewish identity and God’s purposes, but the place actually encompasses an audience from all over. Jerusalem serves as the gathering point for the Spirit’s initial speech; it is not necessarily the place in which all must finally reside or to which all must conform, according to Acts.⁴ As Acts tells the story, one of the marvels of Pentecost is the church’s ability to address the whole of the multicultural Jewish diaspora (through its representatives) at once.

The Pentecost narrative therefore contributes to a declaration that the good news about Jesus is pan-ethnic in terms of how it recognizes and fits within the diverse Jewish populations of its time. The gospel, with its particular origins along the fertile shores of Galilee, in the public spaces of the temple, at the desolate place called The Skull, and in an empty tomb in Jerusalem, is potentially good news for the whole Jewish diaspora. Acts seems to ask: What else would one expect from the Messiah to Israel? No one should assume that this widespread sense of community and belonging was a Christian innovation; a sense of a united identity among an ethnically diverse population was already present in the Jewish context in which the church came into being. It will take a few more chapters for Acts to confirm, when Peter meets Cornelius (10:1-11:18), that the gospel is likewise good news for all peoples, not only “Jews and proselytes” (2:10; cf. Luke 2:10, 30-31; 3:6).

“In the Native Language of Each”

Leaving many observers dumbfounded, the crowd of 120 men and women (1:13-15) who first receive the Holy Spirit speak in languages that the multiethnic crowds already know. Those shocking linguistic abilities provide a second key detail about the salvation the church will announce and embody. Everyone present understands “in the native language [*dialektos*] of each” (2:6).

For a long time, Christians have linked the multilingual phenomena of Pentecost to the story of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9, even though interpreters cannot agree about whether Acts 2 offers clear terminological or thematic echoes of the Babel story, apart from the reality of numerous languages and the potential they might bring for confusion and separation, or for understanding and identity. Unless the list of various peoples and places in Acts 2:9-11 means to resemble the long table of nations presented in Genesis 10, the text of Acts 2, its format, and the ancient literary context present few compelling reasons to read Pentecost in light of Babel. Christian tradition nevertheless has done so, since at least the fourth century and still today when the lectionary appoints the Year C readings for Pentecost Sunday.

Those impulses to link Genesis 11 with Acts 2 can have unfortunate consequences, however, especially when they imagine a movement from a problem to a solution, or from divine punishment to divine restoration. The most misguided interpretations are those that characterize Pentecost as a blessing that *reverses* a curse pronounced at Babel, as if the church expresses God’s desire to return to a world of linguistic

uniformity and conformity, (re)creating a monolithic culture held together by “one language and the same words” (Gen 11:1). Obviously, that is not the story that Acts 2 tells, for no one is compelled or enticed to give up a former language to learn a new one. The Holy Spirit does not prompt Jesus’ followers to address the whole crowd in Greek, even though that was the closest thing to a lingua franca in that setting.

Instead, all the languages belong. The church speaks to the diverse, multiethnic Jewish diaspora in a variety of dialects (2:6, 8). Presumably they heard “God’s great deeds” (2:11) described with regionally recognizable idioms, accents, and inflections. If so, that kind of communication in a multilingual context might allow for more than a clear understanding of a message; the experience can be magnetic and convey a sense of belonging. If you have traveled internationally and, after some time engulfed in another language system, suddenly you hear a stranger speaking your native tongue in a public venue, your ears may latch onto the voice and you may sense an interpersonal connection. Willie James Jennings grasps the theological significance of such an auditory connection when the Holy Spirit makes it:

The Spirit creates joining. The followers of Jesus are now being connected in a way that joins them to people in the most intimate space—of voice, memory, sound, body, land, and place. It is language that runs through all these matters. It is the sinew of existence of a people. My people, our language: to speak a language is to speak a people. Speaking announces familiarity, connection, and relationality.⁵

The problem, therefore, with treating Acts 2 as a reversal or correction of Genesis 11 is that it misunderstands the way in which the Pentecost narrative positively characterizes linguistic and ethnic differences. Exegetes who cling to a Pentecost-fixes-Babel interpretation imply that those differences are *problems* that God eradicates through Christ. Acts does not support that claim. Rather, in the Pentecost narrative, ethnic differences are welcome and celebrated; they will be “a critical component of community, not...an obstacle in its construction.”⁶

It would be a mistake to pit this notion of diversity against a notion of unity, as if unity is rendered unimportant by Pentecost’s many dialects. Rather, the multiethnic fellowship Acts imagines is indeed marked by unity, but it is a unity founded on Christ that values distinctions among its members. As Joel B. Green describes the passage, “Unity is found at Pentecost, but not by reviving a pre-Babel homogeneity. With the outpouring of the Spirit, koinonia is possible not by the dissolution of multiple languages but rather by embodiment in a people generated by the Spirit, gathered in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁷

Trajectories

The dream of a multiethnic community held together in Christ only begins to come into view at Pentecost. The story of Acts 2 sets the larger narrative on a trajectory that continues to extend across a widening horizon. The church begins in Jerusalem as a diverse community but still a community composed entirely of Jews and proselytes. It takes time for this fellowship to expand its vision and reach the insight that Peter voices when he encounters the centurion Cornelius: “God shows no partiality” between Jews and gentiles but welcomes “anyone” from “every nation” (10:34-35).

An important implication of this discovery is that gentiles enjoy full welcome without having to conform themselves to Jewish identity or observe Torah (15:1-35). No people groups within the church enjoy a superior value or special prerogatives. The church encompasses all the groups, creating with their distinctions a unity, a reality that Acts underscores with its focus on the hospitality that Jews and gentiles—as well as occupiers and occupied people—share as a piece of the community’s expansion (10:23, 28, 48; 11:3).

If Acts 2 lays the theological—or pneumatological—foundations for a church that eschews monocultural norms and forges unity without dissolving cultural or ethnic particularity, then we can infer that those foundations rightly support a larger and expansive structure. A church that refuses to abide by cultural or ethnic hegemonies in its membership and values should also reject other expressions of monoculture. Especially in the material from Joel, Acts 2 makes promises that God’s Spirit will not respect other interpersonal barriers, such as those based on gender, age, and class. Yet Acts is not long enough—or the narrative lacks the vision—to zero in on additional divisions or prejudices that the Spirit calls the church to refuse. For example, Acts includes nothing like a Peter-Cornelius discovery concerning the value of women’s roles in the church’s public leadership. Characters such as Tabatha and Priscilla may alert us that those avenues are there to explore, but the narrative shows no interest in following them to their destination. The church continues to realize Pentecost’s dreams for a Spirit-filled community, however, when it makes up for what Acts fails to make explicit. In other words, recognizing that those and other categories cannot become the basis for reckoning value or dignity among different people is equally vital if the church is going to bear authentic witness about God’s salvation.⁸

Implications

Two details of Acts 2—to *whom* the Holy Spirit speaks and *how* the Spirit speaks—therefore make Pentecost a story of widespread welcome and inclusion. This foundational scene characterizes the church’s testimony as summoning all to hear and experience God’s salvation and acknowledging that all are welcome around God’s table. As Peter says after preaching to the assembled crowd, “The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls” (2:39). The Holy Spirit throws the doors open wide; Peter merely stands there and points the way in.

That same Spirit gathers and sustains a community that connects and evinces the differences among its members. The people who gather at the beginning of Acts 2, with all of the various dialects, hairstyles, smells, attire, and dietary preferences that reflect their regions of origin, stick around for a while. It is crucial to note that the Pentecost narrative does not conclude with Peter’s preaching; it continues until the end of Acts 2, where we read a description of networked groups that live out their communal belonging in Christ. These multiethnic believers embody the gospel through mutuality, unity, and charity (2:43-47).

We must resist the temptation to treat Pentecost with nostalgia, as if it belongs to an innocent and naïve chapter of our history, or as if it would not have been disruptive and even dangerous for the church to understand itself as a polychromatic and multilingual society.

The propaganda of the Roman Empire frequently trumpeted Rome’s ability to

effect social centralization and cultural homogenization, asserting that such developments gave evidence of the empire's virtuous and irresistible might. The elites who benefited most from imperial society had a vested interest in promoting Rome as a centripetal force, assimilating various and other dispersed groups into a collective (and dominant) identity.

A community that signaled its openness to a deliberately multiethnic and multilingual identity might have looked strange in such an imperial setting. In some places, the community's neighbors might have found it threatening, especially if it empowered those in the fellowship who lacked power in the wider social context. Things are not so different today, particularly when elements in the wider population cling to their cultural capital out of fear that it is becoming diluted or stolen from them.

Monoculture is boring, but that is not what makes it pernicious. Rather, it can deny the full dignity of all members of a community. At a national level, attempts to maintain a monoculture or preserve specific cultural privileges make dominance and control key aspects of our social dynamics. A monoculture denies freedom and wholeness. It insists that only specially credentialed people can set the terms for what all of us might hope for. At a congregational level, it denies people the opportunity to bear witness to the risen Christ out of their own particular identities and experiences. It urges a church to settle for an ethos of even-keeled tolerance instead of transformative hospitality. It scoffs at our boldest dreams about the future God will bring forth and calls them delusions.

With all of the ethnic segregation in our denominations and congregations, Acts 2 calls the church to examine its assumptions about community and belonging. With all of the colonial residues in churches' theology, liturgy, and educational practices, the Pentecost narrative calls the church to repentance. As Justo L. González observes: "[H]ad there been an 'Aramaic only' movement in first-century Palestine, Pentecost was a resounding no! to that movement. And it is still a resounding no! to any movement within the Church that seeks to make all Christians think alike, speak alike, and behave alike."⁹ Thus, one enduring consequence of Pentecost is that the church's identity is necessarily ecumenical, for in the church, God brings all kinds of people together into a single yet diverse community in which no one group needs to set aside its ethnic identity to dissolve into another's. For believers, whose outlook is shaped by the prophetic dreams and visions of the Spirit, no one expression of personhood and culture occupies first place. That place belongs to Christ.

The Pentecost narrative also shapes our visions of justice and advocacy in the public square, reminding us that justice is, as an aspect of the *oikoumenē* God desires, always pan-ethnic. In other words, justice refuses to let one group of people, however they might define themselves, suffer at the hands of or to the advantage of another group. The policies for which a congregation advocates, the benevolence it provides, the outreach it conducts in its neighborhood must all reassert the fundamental Christian claim that God calls a diverse array of peoples, neighbors both old and new, into a liberative coexistence in Christ.

Churches that creatively embrace a Pentecost ecclesiology will inevitably offer a counter-narrative in a society that is addicted to assigning value and privilege based on various ethnic dividing lines. When the dominant cultural value is dominance itself, the multiethnic and hospitable church finds itself in a prophetic role. While not every congregation will embrace its prophetic vocation through explicit political

activism, no congregation should overlook its commission to bear a distinctive witness, even if such generous ecumenism becomes divisive in the current climate. The present cultural landscape compels churches to tell a clear counter-narrative and to embody a distinctive set of values. It would take a team of sociologists to figure out how and when it became controversial or partisan to put an “all are welcome here” sign in front of a church or house, but suddenly that time is upon us. Congregations that boldly and without apology commit themselves to such a multiethnic identity and hospitality preach the gospel. That has always attracted attention.

Notes

1 Comprehensive descriptions of ethnicity require many pages because they require navigating many debated points. Few would argue, however, with the basic claims that ethnic categories are socially constructed, changeable, and complex—and that they figure deeply in many construals of individual and group identity. Specific discussion of what ethnicity *is* easily provokes disagreement, which is not made any easier by the ways that considerations of “ethnicity” often steer into the highly problematic category of “race” and the insidious legacy of racialized theories.

2 Gary Gilbert sees Acts 2:9-11 as similar to lists of nations in Roman literature meant to declare Roman authority over the world, meaning that the events of Pentecost imply God’s superior authority. Gilbert also offers an overview of various hypotheses that interpreters have proposed concerning these verses (“The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response,” *JBL* 121 [2002]: 497-532).

3 Cynthia M. Baker, “‘From Every Nation under Heaven’: Jewish Ethnicities in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (ed. Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 79-99.

4 It bears noting that the overall narrative of Acts may decenter Jerusalem and the city’s prominence in the church’s existence, but Acts never rejects Jerusalem’s value or condemns the city.

5 *Acts* (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 28.

6 Eric D. Barreto, “Crafting Colonial Identities: Hybridity and the Roman Empire in Luke-Acts, in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament* (SBLRBS; ed. Adam Winn; Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 117.

7 “‘In Our Own Languages’: Pentecost, Babel, and the Shaping of Christian Community in Acts 2:1-13,” in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 199.

8 See Demetrius K. Williams, “‘Upon All Flesh’: Acts 2, African Americans, and Intersectional Realities,” in *They Were All together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (SemeiaSt 57; ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 289-310.

9 *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 39.