

## “FROM BABEL-ING TO BLENDING”

Acts 2:1-12

When President Jimmy Carter traveled to Poland in 1979, the U.S. State Department hired a Russian interpreter to translate Carter’s speeches. Unfortunately, while the interpreter knew Polish, he was not skilled at diplomacy. So, when translated into Polish, Carter’s “I left America” became “I abandoned America.” His reference to “your desires for the future” became “your lusts for the future.” Everyone had a good laugh.

However, what happened at a hospital in 1980 was not as laughable. A young Hispanic man was admitted to the Emergency Room in a comatose state. Unable to speak English, his frantic family described his condition as “intoxicado.” A bilingual staff member at the hospital translated this Spanish word as “intoxicated;” though a better translation would have been “toxic” or “poisoned.” The patient’s actual condition was a cerebral hemorrhage. Yet, because doctors initially treated him for intoxication, the delay left the man a quadriplegic. A jury awarded him \$71 million for medical malpractice. All because of confusion over the one word “intoxicado.”

Confused language is the legacy of the Tower of Babel. Each time you hear the phrase “se habla español;” or puzzle over miniature assembly instructions written in five languages; or see U.N. diplomats wearing translation headphones; or spend money on language programs like Rosetta Stone or the Pimsleur Approach; or even listen to theologians argue for hours over the meaning of a single Greek word; you are experiencing the legacy of the Tower of Babel.

So, what happened at Babel? After the Flood, God told Noah and his sons to **“be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth,”** Genesis 9:1. This was an important command. After all, Noah and his wife, his three sons and their wives, were the only living people left on earth. Not surprisingly, they and their descendants all spoke the same language. As stated in Genesis 11:1—referring to a time perhaps three centuries after the Flood: **“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech.”**

Eventually, however, Noah’s descendants chose to settle in one place instead of filling the earth; and to glorify themselves instead of glorifying God. **“Come,”** they said, **“let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth,”** Genesis 11:4. They were able to live together, work together, and scheme together because they all spoke the same language.

But God had different plans. When prideful man announced, ‘Come, let us do this and do that,’ the Triune God announced, “**‘Come, let Us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth,’**” Genesis 11:7-9.

The Hebrew word Babel means “confusion.” It is the source of our English word “babble:” B-A-B-B-L-E— different spelling, but the same meaning. Imagine how confused those city-planners and tower-builders were when suddenly they could no longer communicate with each other. They grew frustrated, bewildered, suspicious, annoyed, and angry. They threw up their hands and threw down their chisels and separated into linguistic groups; that is, groups defined by language. German. French. Italian. English. Swahili. Polynesian. Arabic. Chinese. And many, many more. According to most scholars, there are nearly 7,000 spoken languages in the world today, not including regional dialects. When my sister returned to Florida after living in Georgia for several years, I thought she was speaking a foreign language.

All of us have been in situations and locations where we’ve overheard people speaking in different languages. At times, didn’t the different language sound like babble, like nonsense. At times, didn’t the language make us feel frustrated, even suspicious? When they laughed, didn’t we assume that they were laughing at us? Since September 11, 2001, hearing Arabic on an airliner has alarmed many passengers. “I wonder what those people are saying? I wonder if they’re plotting a terrorist attack?”

I traveled to the Virgin Islands in 1987, with a layover in Puerto Rico. Every announcement made at the San Juan International Airport was made in Spanish. For three hours I sat on the edge of my seat, straining to listen but failing to understand a single announcement. If more than two people left the gate area, I jumped up assuming a gate change had been made.

Perhaps you’re wondering: Why discuss the Tower of Babel on Pentecost Sunday? Wasn’t the first Pentecost largely about language too? “**Tongues of fire,**” Acts 2:3. “**All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them,**” Acts 2:4. “**Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven,**” Acts 2:5. “**Each one heard them speaking in his own language,**” Acts 2:6. “**How is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?**” Acts 2:8. “**We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues,**” Acts 2:11.

And yet, while both Babel and Pentecost involved language, there were also marked differences between these two pivotal events in human history. In many ways Pentecost was the antithesis or opposite of Babel. For example, at Babel many languages led to many peoples and nations. But at Pentecost, many languages led to one people of God, the Christian Church. Babel was a separating; but Pentecost was a gathering. Babel was about disunity; but Pentecost was about unity. Babel was about pride; but Pentecost was about humility and repentance.

Babel was about glorifying human beings; but Pentecost was about glorifying God. **“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues,”** exclaimed the multitudes. And that “tongues” meant “recognizable, spoken languages,” and not the so-called “speaking in unknown tongues” of the Pentecostal Churches—ironically, a form of babbling—is evident from the context of Acts 2.

According to Acts 2:11, the crowd assembled on Pentecost in amazement because **“each one heard them speaking in his own language.”** And not only did these people hear their own language, they understood what they heard. **“We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues,”** they said. The New Testament often uses “tongues” and “languages” interchangeably, as in Acts 2, because both of these terms come from the same Greek word, GLOSSA; the source of our English word GLOSSARY. Speaking a language requires having a tongue.

With this background then, Babel and Pentecost, what lessons can we learn about the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that First Pentecost—about the way He works; about the way He leads us from confusion to clarity, from unbelief to faith; from disunity to unity; from condemnation to salvation through Christ; from Babel-ing to blending? Consider the following.

**First, everything that happened on the First Pentecost—from the miracle of languages to the miracle of faith to the miracle-birth of the New Testament Church—was due solely to the work of the Holy Spirit.** The apostles were not interpreters or translators. They did not attend school to learn the languages of the Parthians, Medes, Mesopotamians, or Asians. The gift of languages came upon them as suddenly and miraculously as the confusion of languages came to the residents of Babel. As stated in Acts 2:4, they **“began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”**

In the same way, the three thousand who came to faith that First Pentecost did not repent and believe on their own. This too was the work of the Holy Spirit. When the multitudes asked, **“What does this mean?”** in Acts 2:12, Peter replied in Acts 2:16-17, **“This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I**

**will pour out my Spirit on all people.’ ”** Clearly, Peter attributed the miracles of that First Pentecost to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

So also every blessing of faith, salvation, and sanctification in our lives is due solely to the power and work of the Holy Spirit. We did not find Christ on our own. The Holy Spirit led us to Christ. We did not believe in Christ on our own. The Holy Spirit created faith within us; and then, like those tongues of fire, fanned our faith into flames. We did not “see the light” of the Gospel on our own. The Holy Spirit illuminated us. As Luther beautifully explained in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel.”

And Scripture testifies to the saving and sanctifying work of the Spirit in many places. Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3, **“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”** And in John 16:8 Jesus said of the Holy Spirit, **“When He comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.”**

Likewise, Paul wrote in Romans 8:14, **“Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”** He wrote in Titus 3:4-7, **“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”** Then there is this powerful, unmistakable statement in 1 Corinthians 12:3, **“No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”** This is why we often confess in our Sunday liturgy: “O Lord, open Thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.”

**Second, the Holy Spirit works through means; that is, through the very Scriptures He inspired.** This is an invaluable lesson for the Christian Church of all ages and all places; and, regrettably, a lesson we tend to forget—pastors and laity alike. As a pastor, I forget this lesson whenever I think that creating and sustaining faith has anything to do with the way I introduce, present, illustrate, or conclude a sermon.

Likewise, as a congregation we forget this lesson whenever we think that our future and success depend on massive budgets, large congregations, impressive statistics, ideal locations, and state-of-the-art audio and visual equipment. None of these devices or contrivances are where our future lies. Our future and our effectiveness lie in simply preaching the Word of God and letting the almighty, all-wise, and always

present Spirit of God do the work. This is precisely why Paul advised young Pastor Timothy, **“Preach the Word,”** 2 Timothy 4:2.

Peter and the other disciples proclaimed the **“wonders of God”** on the First Pentecost; but they themselves made no one believe. According to Acts 2:47, **“And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”** Who? The Lord. Not Peter. Not John. Not you. Not me.

The disciples were simple, uneducated Galilean fisherman. Their effectiveness as Christian witnesses did not depend on who they were or where they lived or what they owned or how extensive their vocabulary or where they banked. The power to save didn't come from them. It came from the Holy Spirit. In fact, on the day of His ascension, Jesus told His disciples, **“But stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high,”** Luke 24:49. Perhaps you and I should remember this the next time we say, “I'm just a housewife. I'm just a repairman. I'm just a senior citizen.”

Sometimes, when I see illustrations of the **“tongues of fire”** on the disciples' heads, I think of human candles; fueled by the gospel and “set on fire” by the Holy Spirit. And perhaps that is not such a bad illustration. Jesus did say, **“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven,”** Matthew 5:14-16.

When you have the Word of God, you have all you need. You have the power of the Holy Spirit. Is there anything more important for you to know for yourself or to teach to your children? Are you depressed? Go to the Word. Are you worried? Go to the Word. Are you struggling with guilt or temptation? Go to the Word. Because through the Word the Holy Spirit has chosen to work.

**Third, working through Scripture, the Holy Spirit leads us to a oneness in Christ.** Surely this is the very opposite of the separation and confusion at the Tower of Babel. The oneness worked by the Spirit is first of all based on the conviction of sin and the confession of grace. Paul wrote in Romans 3:22-24, **“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”**

Full and free salvation for all people through faith in Jesus is the very essence of the Gospel Message inspired by God the Holy Spirit; a message which declares in any language that it does not matter who you are, where you've been, what you've done—the color of your skin; the size of your stock portfolio; the make and model of

your car; the title of your job. As Peter told the crowd on that First Pentecost, **“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,”** Acts 2:21.

Imagine how startling and uplifting it was for people in the first century A.D. to hear the apostle Paul say, **“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus,”** Galatians 3:28.

And notice how that oneness of faith in Christ immediately showed itself in real, everyday concerns on the First Pentecost, including a oneness in concern, love, and doctrine: **“They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved,”** Acts 2:42-47.

**And finally, the Holy Spirit still gives gifts to the Christian Church.** You may not realize this, dear Christian, but you are a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and to your congregation—your Christian insights and faith; your financial support; serving on the church council, cleaning the church, playing the organ, changing altar vestments, providing refreshments, and more. All of these, and all of you, are gifts of the Holy Spirit; gifts that are the legacy of Pentecost, not the legacy of Babel.

“Come, oh come, thou quickening Spirit,  
God from all eternity.  
May thy power never fail us;  
Dwell in us constantly.  
Then shall truth and life and light  
Banish all the gloom of night.” LH 226:1