

# ***The Paradox of Pentecost***

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13

You and I are very privileged in today's world. You might assume I'm saying this in relation to our standard of living, our access to healthcare, to technology, to public and private education, our constitutional freedoms, or with the overall character of our American culture. In all of those categories and more, we are envied by many around the planet.

However, the privilege that exemplifies our status among the world's elite is not any of the above; instead, it's the remarkable dominance of our common language. In the twenty-first century, with the generations that are the most exposed to global diversity and in an era that is trending toward one of the least colonized periods in human history, the dominance of the English language in virtually every aspect of global communications and commerce is unprecedented and astounding.

Linguists claim that no other written or spoken language has ever existed in every country around the globe as does English, where a quarter of the world's population uses it on a daily basis. John McWhorter, the author of a history of language entitled, *The Power of Babel*, underscores this point: "English is dominant in a way that no language has ever been before...It is vastly unclear to me what actual mechanism could uproot English given conditions as they are."<sup>1</sup>

The English language dominates the Internet, as well as global commerce, finance, politics and diplomacy, travel, the film and music industries, and academia.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in "Across Cultures, English is the Word," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2007.

“English has become the second language of everybody,” said Mark Warschauer, a professor of education and informatics at the University of California, Irvine. “It’s gotten to the point of where almost in any part of the world to be educated means to know English.”<sup>2</sup>

In effect, the native tongue for most of us has become the universal language of the twenty-first century.

A good illustration of what I’m referring to is shown in how few of us feel the need to learn a second language. For instance, how many of us here have to speak more than one language on a daily basis? Europeans, by necessity, typically speak multiple languages. Africans use English, Arabic, Swahili, Berber, or some other tongue for inter-ethnic communication in the wider culture, but then use tribal dialects and traditional languages for local life. The same holds true in Latin America and Asia where the population communicates in a variety of spoken tongues. But in the U.S., we can get by with using a single language, with the expectation that wherever we travel or do business around the world, English will be spoken for our convenience. And it usually is. That, my friends, is a sign of privilege!

This status, of course, impacts how others view us. The universality of English reinforces a perception of Anglo- American dominance around the world, which then makes us the target of those who resent our cultural hegemony and the arrogance and superiority that often accompanies it. This shouldn’t surprise us. You and I would view things quite differently if we were required to learn Chinese, or Russian, or Arabic, or even Spanish just to carry out our daily business. Not only would we be inconvenienced, it would

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

change the way we view the world; when you're forced to set aside your own native tongue just to be engaged and understood, then you also lose a part of your status, distinction, identity, and ethnic character as a person. You are not in the mainstream of life; you are creeping toward the margins.

That's what happens. A common language dominates a culture and demands assimilation into the homogenous character of the majority. Those who don't speak the dominant language naturally or fluently are usually at a disadvantage. In fact, it often silences those who may have much to contribute but cannot do so, because they fear being misunderstood or are unable to express their thoughts in a tongue foreign to them. Their world closes in; they are handicapped verbally; the advantages and opportunities that others have aren't afforded to them without some accommodation. The psychological and social impact of this becomes evident when, let's say, you're in an environment where you don't comprehend what's being said and then no one knows how to speak a word of English. It's a strange, disempowering place to be.

But it's not just a loss felt by those along the margins. Those in the center miss out on the images, nuances, symbols, and character intrinsic to another language that may fail to be translated adequately into our own, resulting in a loss of what a different culture might offer in perspective, wisdom, and value. I've experienced this from time to time. When I can't comprehend another person's native tongue, then I cannot think like them using their words and am left to figure out how to translate it into English, which diminishes the impact of what is said or even possibly misrepresents it! But if you know another

person's vocabulary, you can more easily appreciate the depth and breadth and diversity of meaning that gets expressed through words. If we readily understand what another person is saying, we not only get to walk in their shoes, we are able to grasp what's in their head!

For this reason, I'm intrigued by how the story of Pentecost expresses this, particularly because, symbolically, it validates a multilingual world—reversing the character of ancient Babel, which was a world of one dominant language, and all that came with it. When you place these stories side-by-side, what Pentecost did, in effect, was to affirm something that seems counterintuitive and even paradoxical, i.e., that spiritual unity between people exists by recognizing, respecting, and valuing their differences with the multiplicity of views and voices within the human family and not through the power of conformity and assimilation into a single, dominant, and homogenous whole. Our collective strength is found in expressing and valuing our differences, not in conforming to a dominant voice or view.

Let me put this into our own context. There's a movement afoot in this country to legally establish English as the official language of the United States—even proposing it as an amendment to the Constitution. The argument is simple: If you're going to be an American citizen, then you have to learn and speak English. In my estimation, this is not only impractical and coercive; it also illustrates the impact of Babel-like thinking, where the dominant language defines who we are. It's similar to claiming that the aspirations of all Americans should be reflected in the views and values of white, Anglo-Saxon males (since though for most of our history, white males

have dominated everything). Until women and minorities raised their voices, few questioned the inequities this created and how oppressive sexism and racism are, especially in a democracy. Now we are better able to recognize the entire mix of our population—in gender, race, culture, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation—you name it. We don't all speak the same language—literally and figuratively. In the same way, “English-only” merely reinforces the perspective of an archaic and dominant class of people. It isn't fair; it isn't just; it isn't even American!

It also only reflects a mindset characteristic of Babel, not Pentecost. What the spirit of Pentecost undoes is the privileged status of those who dominate the world, which was what the story of Babel was all about.

Now I realize, I'm may be making a leap that might be hard to follow with only a cursory reading of Genesis 11. On the surface, it appears that the story of Babel is only about the development of language in the postdiluvian world. But even biblical literalists would have a hard time making that claim when in the previous chapter it describes the various descendents of Noah as speaking in their own languages (Gen. 10:5, 20, 31), meaning there were plenty of languages and dialects present. It's not about languages, per se.

What the story of Babel is about is what languages represent, i.e., power, privilege, and status. This is what lies at the heart of the sins and idolatry of Babel. It's what the common language represented in this story and, in turn, what struck fear into the hearts of those who ruled the world.

The substance of this story—the curse of Babel, as you will—was about human arrogance and pride.

The story itself is about the building of a magnificent city and tower that reaches to the heavens in a Promethean lust for power and greatness:

Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.

In other words, it was exactly what happened every time a dominant dynasty ruled the region—from the Babylonians and Assyrians all the way back to the Akkadians and Sumerians. The great kings and dynasties of Mesopotamia down through the ages raised their magnificent cities on the backs of those they conquered and enslaved. Typical to their time, they constructed glorious ziggurats, or pyramid-like towers, as gateways to the gods and to impress upon the world that they were invincible and intimidating to defeat. This was the legacy of kings and empires.

As history proved, however, even the greatest of dynasties eventually collapsed—destroyed and pillaged by its successor. Thus, the very destiny they feared—being scattered across the face of the earth—was a consequence and fate of their hubris—the arrogance of power captured in the image of Babel’s tower with the result of being diminished as a people, assimilated into other cultures and forced to learn their languages and speak their tongues. That’s the moral of the story of Babel—the arrogance of the dominant leads to their demise; the great ultimately being diminished to the same level as their slaves.

The paradox of Pentecost undoes all of this. The greatest human legacy isn’t when the ruling powers are concentrated in the

center or at the top of the pyramid where everyone conforms to their language and values, but rather when power is disbursed and accommodated to the broadest representation of people—to each nationality and race. When the disciples gathered at Pentecost, if it were a Babel-like experience, then each person would have had to comprehend the disciples' Hebrew or Aramaic, since that was the original language spoken by Christ; that should have been the language all of us down through the ages should have had to learn. Instead, it happened in quite the opposite way:

How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya...[those from] Rome,...Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.

What they were discovering is that God's greatness is not displayed in the conventional notions of human power and glory—not through one culture dominating all others—but by every culture, language, and people having access to truth and being able to express it on their own terms. Every language could speak of the glory of God and of the beauty of redemptive life. Every person could understand and find their own voice in the equal company of others. Aramaic, Greek, Hebrew, or Latin were no longer dominant, as the power to proclaim was disbursed outwardly to others.

That's a metaphor for how the truth of God and the enduring values of humankind sustain us. In the eyes of God, no language, culture, nationality, or political system is supreme over all others and singularly capable of defining what's right and true in this world. "Exceptionalism" is only in the eye of the beholder! The paradox of Pentecost shows us, what's right for the wellbeing of this world is

inherently expressed through our cultural differences, our individual distinctions, and our varied interests, views, and perspectives—not, as we often think, in our commonness or in the interests enforced by those who rule the world. That is the spirit—the Holy Spirit—that inspired the multilingual, multinational, and multiethnic realities of our faith—a faith designed to transform the Babel-like imperial thinking of our world!

Honestly, I think we need to recover that Pentecostal vision for the way the world should be, particularly in this country. I sensed this a week or so ago, when I read about the final sections of the Freedom Tower at the World Trade Center being raised into place, making this the tallest edifice in the western hemisphere at the symbolic height of 1776 feet. It was built as a monument to the greatness of this country and our defiance toward terrorism—a tower rising near the heart of Wall St. and out of the ashes of 9-11.

Despite that tragic memory, I couldn't help but make parallels with the story of Babel—the dynastic hubris of humankind. Is this what makes us great as a nation—symbolized by this magnificent skyscraper, rising up toward the heavens to mark our greatest city? Is that what American “freedom” is to us now—a symbol of Promethean power and defiance to all who would threaten us?

Then, I thought about another generation and time, where the better symbol of what hope and promise this country affords was across the bay on Ellis Island, with the spirit of many peoples with their diverse languages and the Statue of Liberty nearby, ushering in the world's “refuse” and “tempest tossed”—as much an embrace of the world's diversity as was symbolized by Pentecost and the origins of

the church. Have we lost that sense of what made this country great, or of what our faith inspires? Is that not a better representation of the true freedom of our history and the truth of God in the face of humanity's pride and arrogance?

I should hope it is and will continue to be. It's precisely what you and I must delineate in an era that presents its own fateful future. Who are we? What do we value? Who or what are the gods that appeal to us today? Are they found at Pentecost or Babel? at Ellis Island or Wall Street? Will they bring us together or divide us? That's the paradox our faith brings to these times if it shapes the destiny we choose. If it does, then we will embrace the good it inspires and the beautiful hope it promises in words that we will all understand and comprehend and recite with joy.

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