

The Curse of Babel Undone

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Scripture 1: (Gen. 11:1-9 ESV)

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech."

So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

Scripture 2: (Acts 2:1-10 ESV)

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians-- we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

Sermon:

Pentecost is the “birthday” of the Church. It is the day when God's Holy Spirit poured Himself out and into all of God's chosen people {and was originally a festival commanded to celebrate the grain harvest, tradition arose for it to also commemorate the LORD's giving of Torah to Moses¹}. It was a miraculous day: a day filled with “signs and wonders”; and we believe that these signs were caused on account of Jesus Christ, as a testimony to His deity, His Lordship, and as testimony to His great work of reconciliation and our salvation.

When you think about Pentecost, what part of it grips you the most? Is it:

- the 3,000 souls who were added to the Kingdom of God;
- the Gospel content of Peter's sermon;
- the surprised and skeptical responses of Peter's audience; or was it,
- the miracle of “speaking in tongues”.

I expect that many people would say the last because it was an astonishing and amazing miracle, but it should not be gripping for the reasons that we commonly (and wrongly) think.

- “Speaking in tongues” is a flashy and showy expression of divine power.
- “Speaking in tongues” is an ability that is desired, even coveted, by many Christians.
- Biblical “speaking in tongues” is often misunderstood by most of its proponents: by those who encourage it and by its practitioners.

The Apostle Paul wrote a considerable amount concerning the gift of “speaking in tongues” to the church in Corinth (1 Corinthians, chapters 12-14), spending three chapters interacting with the practice. He:

- calls it a desirable “spiritual gift” (12:8-10);
- describes it as a sign for non-believers (14:22);
- asserts that he wishes everyone would speak in tongues, yet also that it is better for us if we prophesy instead (14:5);
- suggests that whenever someone speaks in “Tongues”, they speak directly to God and utter “mysteries in the Spirit” (14:2), instead of building up the Body of Christ through the encouragement and consolation which is given by prophesy (14:3-4); and yet, while he
- commands us to not forbid “speaking in tongues” (14:39), he also tells us that the gift will eventually cease along with the other supernatural gifts of prophesy and knowledge (13:8). Historically, we have interpreted this ceasing to be on account of the gifts no longer being necessary evidence for our faith; no longer needed to confirm a messenger or his message.

Now, what is the big deal about “speaking in tongues”? Why do we make such a fuss over it? What are we misunderstanding?

¹ <https://www.ifcj.org/learn/jewish-holidays/what-is-shavuot-the-jewish-pentecost>

First, we need to consider what “speaking in tongues” is not. Then, we need to consider what is the problem that makes the gift of “Tongues” beneficial. Lastly, we need to consider what the miracle of “speaking in tongues” actually is and how it corrects that problem.

So first, what “speaking in tongues” is not. Biblical “speaking in tongues” is not nonsensical. It is not verbalizing gobbledy-gook, nor is it unintelligible gibberish. It is not chaos or confusion. Nor is it something that, in my opinion, is commonly happening in the lives of Christian believers today, just as we no longer have new examples of supernatural prophesy {prophesy, as in “oracles of God”: foretellings, divine pronouncements and judgments; not prophecy, as in prophetic truth telling by the proclamation and exposition of Scripture (i.e. preaching)} or supernatural knowledge {immediate (as in not mediated through natural instruction or explanation, whether recent or ancient) knowledge or understanding that is miraculously imparted directly into the mind by the Holy Spirit}, because there is no new, or continuing, divine revelation after the Apostolic era ended {since the close of the canon of Scripture and the death of the last Apostles}. However well intentioned they may be, I sadly believe that most practitioners of “Tongues” unintentionally deceive themselves and others by it, as a false sign of piety and/or divine favor. The popular **performative** evidence of “Tongues” presence is too often used to build up the individual speaker (1 Cor 14:4) as an exemplar of faith, while its absence may be used to tear down those who do not experience this “gift”; suggesting that they lack strong faith or even salvation (as not being a true Christian). I knew an inmate down in Florida who desperately wanted to “speak in tongues”, because he (wrongly) believed that it would prove that he was “Saved”.

Second, the problem which the miracle of “Tongues” addresses is a problem of communication. There are too many languages. Seriously, how were the Apostles supposed to take the Gospel to the “end of the earth” (Acts 1:8) when there are so many different peoples and languages in the world? How were they supposed to communicate the Gospel? How were people {*ethnos*} supposed to understand them? Thus the supernatural gift of “Tongues” was initially necessary. However, perhaps more important than just the practical, the miracle of “Tongues” {the technical term is *glossolalia*; derived from the Greek term *glossa* which refers to the taste organ, to people groups united by a shared language, and as a referent to verbal language and which forms the root of the word “glossary”} was a sign of God undoing the curse of Babel.

Now, I expect that most of us have never thought about it too deeply, but the immediate consequence of the “Tower of Babel” story from Genesis: our social division and the “confusion” of our language; largely explains why the world is the way that it is. Furthermore, the supernatural explanation of this cause is the most reasonable.

The linguistic publication “Ethnologue” estimates that there are presently 7,117 living languages (not including unique dialects). It also estimates that there have been approximately 31,000 different spoken languages in human history². Therefore, it is a practical impossibility, functionally improbable, for Christians to assume that we can translate the Gospel into every spoken language through our own efforts. Nor should we assume that if we do so, then we will hasten the LORD's return (Is 11:9; Hab 2:14).

Yet, how was such linguistic diversity achieved? Even assuming the consistent process of verbal micro-evolution's, something undeniable, then theoretically, we should be able to trace every human language back to one, single, original (lowest common denominator) verbal language. But, we have not and we will not; all verbal language is not commonly related.

We have identified “language trees” which connect related and derivative languages: such as how French, Spanish, and Italian are each related and each is derived from Latin; or, how English, German, Dutch, and the

2 <https://lighthouseonline.com/blog-en/how-many-languages-are-there-in-the-world/>

various Scandinavian languages each share common linguistic roots in one “Proto-Germanic” language³ {or, how the similarities between the Semitic languages of Hebrew, Akkadian, Arabic, and Syriac have helped us to recover, learn, and understand so many other recovered texts from the ancient world}. Meanwhile, speakers of such related languages may reasonably and functionally communicate with one another, without knowing the other's language (like Spanish and French), but it is very difficult to communicate across different roots (like between English and Latin) without knowing the other language well.

- If every verbal language had the same original root and every existing language was derived from it, then every language would be related and cross-communication should be more easily relatable.
- If our human origin, as according to the Bible, is true, then our first parents would have taught their children one common language and there should have been no natural desire or need to deviate from it.
- If other theories concerning human evolution were true, and our earliest ancestors evolved somewhere in the heart of Africa and then spread across the globe; then that common origination point would still suggest one single, common, and original spoken language from which all others are derived.
- If recent studies concerning the human genome seeking to support theories of human evolution (thus carrying anti-Biblical presuppositions), have correctly identified the existence of an individual whom they label as “Mitochondrial Eve”, who once lived in Africa, and who is considered to be the one singular, common, female ancestor of all humanity now living⁴ then this would also support a single, common human origin and language. They also conclude that, “Mitochondrial Eve wasn’t the first or only woman on Earth at that time. Rather, she was the point from which all modern generations of humans appear to have grown. Evolutionary biologists think this is due to an evolutionary ‘bottleneck’ – which occurs when most of a species suddenly dies out, possibly due to a sudden catastrophe, bringing the species close to extinction. If Mitochondrial Eve was one of the few women to survive then this could explain why her ‘matrilineal’ mitochondrial DNA ended up being passed along so many generations.”; a circumstance which can be reasonably related to Scripture when we consider that the Flood narrative left us with only three immediate-future mothers and a circumstance which would also have a reasonable probability to further shrink in subsequent generations.

Natural separations between people groups (like distance or other natural features like rivers, mountains, forests, etc), reasonably explains why different dialects develop but, if there is only one original source, then some similarity or point of connection should remain; unless of course, God did something to actively divide and “confuse” us. Unless you are JRR Tolkien, people do not invent new languages just because they want to. All verbal language is clearly not related, therefore the cause of such diversity must be unnatural; supernatural; of God.

So, what happened, really? How did we get to this point?

Look at Genesis 11, “*Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.*”; around three generations after Noah {0. Noah, 1. Ham, 2. Cush, 3. Nimrod who built Babel in the land of Shinar (Gen 10:8-10)} the people said to one another, “*Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.*”. This one people, united together in one purpose set out to build a great tower; as a monument to their own fame and glory.

3 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scandinavian-languages>

4 <https://www.yourgenome.org/theme/evolution-of-modern-humans/>

Although this may not seem like it should have been a big problem, but it was. They were seeking their own glory rather than God's; these people were actually sinning against the LORD by disobeying the command to Noah, to *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”* (Gen. 9:1 ESV) from Genesis 9:1. God had told them to multiply and fill the earth, but now instead, they were building a city and a tower so that they would not *“...be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”* Humanity was once again in active rebellion against the Sovereign LORD. Whereas the first time, in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve thought that they could *“...be like God...”* (3:5), now there was a sense that humanity would decide to “invade” heaven, and perhaps even try to take God's place.

So God said, *“Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech.”* Stop and think about that. Our Creator, the LORD God, when He saw our realization of human capability and knowing the full extent of our capacity, He understood that **nothing** would *“be impossible”* for us and that this would be a very “bad thing”, on account of our sinful hearts. Instead of being just “totally depraved” (where sin touches every part of ourselves and our lives), we would become “utterly depraved” (where we would become as sinful as possible; where our whole humanity would be corrupted entirely and nothing good would remain within us).

- Imagine a sheet of paper, singed around all four edges, dried, crinkly, and fragile – that is like “Total Depravity”.
- Imagine a sheet of paper, consumed by a flame so that all that remains is merely dust and ash – that would be like “Utter Depravity”.

Therefore, in judgment for the sin that humanity was committing by choosing to avoid *“[filling] the earth”* **and** as an act of His gracious mercy to protect us from becoming “utterly depraved”: preventing us from becoming sinful as is humanly possible; God *“confused”* our language and made it so that we could not *“understand”* one another. Immediately, we lost the ability to comprehend each other's words and their meaning.

This is the problem which the miracle of “Tongues” will restore: our confusion and lack of understanding.

- Where humanity was united together by a common purpose and a common language just a moment before, now humanity was divided by language **and** mutual misunderstanding. Everything was suddenly “lost in translation”.

How many problems in the world are the consequence of one or both of these things: the failure or deficiency of language or by simply misunderstanding one another?

How many of our own, personal, conflicts are the sad and unfortunate result of them, too?

Regardless, even as harsh and hard as it may seem to us sometimes, God does temper His judgment with mercy in grace, because of His love for us.

Therefore, the city and tower were called Babel (later Babylon) because Babel sounds like the Hebrew word for “confusion”: *belahl*; and *“...the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.”*; again proving that God's purpose and decree will not be thwarted by the disobedience of His creation.

Next, we move forward in history to the first Pentecost after Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues

as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” The disciples were all filled by the Holy Spirit as He “corrected” their speech! The Holy Spirit expanded and restored their ability to communicate, but still, they had not experienced the fullness of this in action, yet.

“Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians-- we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.””

So, what does the Pentecost narrative really tell us about the miracle of “speaking in tongues”?

It **was not** a miracle of speaking. It **was** a miracle of speaking **and** hearing. Furthermore, no one was needed to interpret what they were saying because everyone heard the disciples speaking in the hearer's original, native language! Now something we must realize about First Century people, especially First Century Jews living in Israel: we must realize that most people were multi-lingual. Most people could at least speak, and they often could also read and write proficiently in two, three, or more languages:

- Aramaic, the language of their earlier {Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian} conquerors and overlords (itself a Semitic language and thus close analog to Hebrew), was the language spoken most commonly by people in the home {This was an important detail that Mel Gibson got right in his movie, “The passion of the Christ”; most dialogue was in Aramaic.}.
- Hebrew, the language of Scripture, was commonly read and understood in Judean Synagogues, but beyond its' religious use, it was generally not used for regular communication.
- Greek was used across the Roman Empire as a universal language, the *lingua franca* of the day, for trade and record keeping. Greek was also the language used by Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora for their religious practice, using the Septuagint as their Scripture in synagogue.
- Latin, the language of the Roman overlords, was spoken by many within the Legions and almost exclusively among those working in the Roman government. This language was associated with authority. It commanded respect and required the attention of subordinates, because no one expected those possessing political power to condescend and speak to the “common people” using their “common tongue” {Latin: *vulgar*}, lest that encourage the promotion of egalitarian ideals through suggesting a kind of “equality” between “Us and Them”.

During the First Century, most people in the Roman Empire could speak Greek (at a minimum) proficiently, understand Latin well enough, and were perfectly fluent in their particular “native tongue”. I am certain that, although people could communicate and make themselves understood, plenty of information got “lost in translation” even still, because some ideas and concepts just can not cross language boundaries. If you ask Angie Hunter, I wager that she would quickly think of a half dozen ideas or concepts that do not easily cross between English and German.

Lastly, a generally accepted principle of communication is that, “Your first language is your best language.”, referring to the first language you were exposed to and possess full, native proficiency⁵. This is the language which a person best understands, which is why they all heard the disciples in their “*own tongues*” during this miracle on Pentecost. This is the first of two ways in which the curse of Babel was reversed; everyone now has the opportunity to hear and receive the Gospel in the language that they understand best.

Now to be clear, on account of verse 4, I do not suggest that the disciples were speaking in Aramaic or Greek as their audience heard them in Egyptian or Latin or some other native language. Instead, I honestly believe that they all were speaking fluently in languages that they did not know the day before. I believe that they now spoke with perfect understanding for both the speaker and hearer by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Although I do hesitate to suggest precisely how this miracle manifested itself, it is clear is that there was no confusion, division, or chaos in their speech or in their message. No one needed an interpreter and the Gospel was proclaimed with perfect clarity while everyone speaking and hearing could understand it perfectly. Certainly, there was no unintelligible gibberish.

Although some may suggest that the Pentecost “Tongues” miracle was unique while the Corinthian expression of “*speaking in tongues*” should be more normative, Paul clearly explains how to know whether this miracle of speech is from God or not: whether or not it is understandable by someone and whether it may be accurately interpreted or translated. {It should also not be offered as a “new” revelation and it cannot contradict any other revelation of Scripture.}

“If any speak in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn, and let someone interpret. But if there is no one to interpret, let each of them keep silent in church and speak to himself and to God. Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said. If a revelation is made to another sitting there, let the first be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged, and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” (1 Cor. 14:27-33 ESV)

- This would be like if we had someone who grew up in the Louisiana bayou and someone stood up and began speaking in French Creole, someone else who could not otherwise have known it. Then our member from Louisiana would be able to understand them and could interpret what was said for all the rest of us with the speaker confirming it.
- This would not be as if someone stood up and began speaking utter nonsense {or in some theoretical “angelic language”}, followed by someone else standing up to interpret it, but without anyone ever having known or understood anything that was said.

After that Pentecost, our ability to effectively and truly communicate was restored, especially as regards God's truth of Christ, but this was not the final or total fulfillment. It was just a foretaste, an appetizer, and a promise of the perfect linguistic restoration which will one day come after Christ's return. This miracle was no different, in that sense, from any of Jesus' miracles of healing, exorcism, provision, and resurrection. It showed both the now and the not yet. Therefore, we must still await the Consummation and our ultimate restoration with the New Creation to come.

The second way that we see God's curse of Babel undone on Pentecost is through our union into Christ which defies all linguistic, cultural, and ethnic barriers. The disciples audience had been gathered together in Jerusalem from all across the Roman Empire because they were:

⁵Davies, Alan (2003). *The Native Speaker: Myth and Reality*. Multilingual Matters. ISBN 1-85359-622-1

- first, drawn together as Jews, in one common purpose to worshipping the LORD on a “High Holy Day”;
- second, they became united into their newfound faith in Jesus Christ through the disciples testimony, spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit, and by His effectual call and the regeneration of their hearts;
- and third, they were sent out (dispersed) again, take the Gospel all over the face of the earth; separated by distance but united forever in Christ Jesus.

So, this first Pentecost was an echo of Babel, in reverse. After Babel:

- human language became confused and God's message of salvation could not be understood;
- humanity became divided by language and through misunderstandings;
- humanity was dispersed across the earth forming nations and peoples, fostering rivalries, animosities, and hatreds born out of their newfound confusion and misunderstanding.

But now, after the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit on Pentecost:

- language ceased to be a barrier for understanding to those called by Christ God's message of salvation;
- despite our remaining differences in language, God's chosen people: the Church, the expanded Israel; are now united through the Gospel and reconciled by our shared faith in Jesus Christ;
- despite our ethnic differences, being members of different nations and peoples, continuing to speak different languages, followers of Christ have been dispersed all across the earth and yet we are united together into the one universal {catholic} Church.

Now ethnicity, language, and culture: all the many different things of diversity; no longer matter and are no longer relevant or effective as things which divide us, because we are united into Christ Jesus and there is now nothing that His Church cannot do.

The Church is united as the one Body of Christ through this indwelling by God's out-poured Holy Spirit. Even though we continue to speak different languages and although there is nothing supernatural in our modern Bible translation efforts⁶, those efforts still require great courage and spiritual wisdom, guidance, and talent to ensure that the Gospel is being transmitted faithfully. Now, as then, God gifts certain people with an affinity for languages that enables them to be great communicators in multiple tongues, so that by the work of His Spirit and His ministry of reconciliation, the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is now able to be heard and understood in every tongue and in every place in the world.

Thus the miracle of “speaking and hearing in tongues” on Pentecost gives us hope for the future, for Christ's consummation and return, when we shall see (like John) the entirety of God's people united in faith, “...and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”” (Rev. 7:9-10 ESV)

No more confusion, only understanding. No more division, only union in Christ.

AMEN

⁶ <https://www.wycliffe.org/>