

**The Language(s) of God**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Pentecost Sunday**  
**June 4, 2017**  
**Acts 2:1-21**

If you've ever watched a United Nations meeting on television, you can't help but notice all the translators, and all the equipment that is used to help ambassadors from around the world communicate with one another. It's really an impressive sight.

A speaker addresses the convention in his/her native tongue. As he/she speaks, the words are translated into native tongues by a team of linguists and transmitted to unique headsets worn by the assembly of 193 global ambassadors. A speech given in Mandarin can be simulcast in English or French or Spanish or Russian or Arabic or dozens of other languages.

Think about the sheer amount of planning and logistics that go into such a process: technology, human capital, time, cooperation, patience, even luck! At Sardis, we have trouble screening a DVD, or casting a Power Point presentation, or getting a microphone to work. And that's without even worrying about multiple languages.

But even with all of that technology at the UN, there's still a delay, and there's still a common denominator. Somebody has to know at least two languages. And somebody has to be a mediator.

Now think about that first Pentecost. We're told that devout Jewish men from all over the city of Jerusalem were present. We're never told how many men there were, but just for argument's sake, let's assume it was 193 men, who spoke in 193 languages, some of them modern and spoken all over the world; some ancient, and no longer spoken: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Lybia, and 181 other nations and tongues represented.

Each person spoke their native tongue. Think about the sound of 193 people speaking at the same time – even at a normal conversational level, it would be loud. And if they spoke in unison, it would create quite an echo.

But now imagine 193 languages, all rolling off unique tongues. It would sound like a buzz. It would sound chaotic and frenzied and almost furious.

But here's the amazing part: God's spirit appears. And the spirit falls on each person in such a way that each person speaks their own language, and yet each person still understands completely the words their neighbors are speaking.

Back to that UN example: Imagine the person at the podium speaking in Mandarin, and the audience responding in English or Spanish or French or Russian, AND everyone understands each other – no headsets, no translators, no logistics.

Now that's miraculous!!!

“Okay, fine, Bob,” you say, “it's a nice miracle, but why is this communications phenomenon relevant for us this morning?”

The author of Luke/Acts understands the significance of language. This author knows that language, though it has the great power to unify, has for the most part been used to divide or to assimilate or to diminish others.

Language can be a barrier to foreigners in a foreign land – a weapon even. Don't believe me? Try traveling somewhere you don't speak the language, and see how helpless you feel to communicate. Try fitting-in in a place with a noticeable accent. Try comprehending legal code or accounting or medicine or auto mechanics without a knowledge of corresponding vocabulary. Language has even been a barrier to the practice of faith: Greek and Latin were inaccessible to the masses, and yet they were the language of the Church in the middle centuries.

Language becomes a wall, meant to provide privilege to those inside its perimeter, and defense from those outside its perimeter. And even the pursuit of safety through one-ness becomes threatening. The assimilation into one common tongue strangles the creative fruits born out of diversity. The regional tongues of Macedonia and Judea and Canaan and Cherokee, and their customs too, give way to the forceful, more powerful, more pronounced syllables and cadences of Assyrian, and Babylonian, and Persian, and Greek and Latin, and English. The languages of empire, the languages of Caesar swallow up the forgotten languages and customs of the past.

And so on Pentecost, the ruach, the spirit, the sweeping wind of God, that blew across a sea of nothingness in Genesis, and tamed the chaos monster, and provided order to our universe – that same spirit fell upon you and me, and all the believers in Jerusalem.

But this time, the chaos wasn't a sea monster, or some dark, watery nothingness. This time, the chaos was a false sense of order created by the empires of man – empires who proclaimed (and still proclaim) one truth, one language, one privileged class, one people – empires who preach exceptionalism at all costs. But on this day, the ruach blew with force, and the earth shook, and there were tongues of fire, and a thousand languages filled the city. And all were heard. And all had value. And all understood the presence of God in their midst.

Caesar needs one language. His power is diminished, even lost in translation. If Caesar speaks in one tongue, and his empire hears him in one tongue, his voice is like a fist, and there is no confusion, and his decrees ripple through the land with precision. But language is the link in his chain – his power and precision are diluted with every pause for translation.

Contrast that with God's spirit. Its power is demonstrated in its rawness, in its fluidity, in its mysteriousness. Even proclaimed in a thousand tongues, God's presence is still palpable and God's power is still potent.

And the day of Pentecost re-affirms and re-calibrates the order of creation: God's world is once more God's world. And in God's world, it doesn't matter what language you speak; it doesn't matter what your zip code is, or the balance of your bank account, or the color of the skin; it doesn't matter what kind of documentation you have; It doesn't matter how you identify yourself, even its different from what your state ID would prefer; It doesn't matter the person you profess to love, or the past you bring with you, or the burdens you have to carry – it doesn't matter, because God has deemed you worthy, God has deemed you a child of God. And with that designation, you and me, all of us, have access to God's spirit. And we have the power to receive that spirit, and to proclaim that spirit, and to use our gifts to make this world a better place.

Friends, it's the day of Pentecost. And God has put fire in our hearts and flames on our tongues. And regardless of whether our language is modern, or classical, or stilled, or extinct, or even not yet invented – God gives us a voice that is heard, and a voice that is valued. And God gives us ears to listen. We are invited to a Holy dialogue – a place to speak and be heard, and a place to listen and be transformed.

The spirit of the Lord is upon us! Let's talk. And let's listen. And let's be transformed.

Amen.