

Reversal

Pentecost

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Acts 2:1-21

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Remember the first time Pentecost came up while I've been serving here as your pastor? I was called to an emergency in Effingham and your elders had to serve for the service. That meant that one of them had to try to read all those hard names in the Epistle reading—names that I myself don't know if I always pronounce correctly, even after studying Greek for a time. This morning I still can't say that I pronounced them all correctly.

If you have ever tried to learn a new language, you know what it is to try to communicate in a dialect other than your native one. There are mispronunciations, misunderstandings, words with multiple meanings, and words with slang meanings that you might utter unknowingly. It is hard. It is messy. And it takes time.

As we learned from our Old Testament text, all these languages came about as a result of mankind's disobedience to God. Before our text, God had delivered humanity through the great Flood in the ark. Then He had commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth. Just a few generations later, we find that instead of dispersing, humanity was gathering to construct a large tower.

So God gave humanity differing languages so that we would not be able to understand each other. From that time on, there would be mispronunciations, misunderstandings, and messy relationships due to language in addition to the many problems just from sin itself.

Yet today it may seem that this is being reversed. Watching videos on YouTube, there is an option for auto-translation. It is messy and unclear right now, depending on the video you watch, but the time may be coming when it gets more perfected. For example, if you perform a search on the Google website, it gives you the ability to convert words or phrases from one language to another. Over the years since I began learning Spanish in high school to the present, this system has gotten much better. It is still not perfect, but it's coming along.

But is this the reversal of sin and its effects that we know is coming from Scripture? To find the answer, we'll dig into the Epistle text from Acts on Pentecost, another place where language is mentioned.

Verse 1

At the time of our text, “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?’”

To better understand what's going on here, we have to put ourselves into the time of the text. That means—and it will be hard—considering what life was like before the internet. It means thinking what it was like before the wide and easy distribution of books with Guttenberg's printing press in the 1500s. At the time of our text, there was probably very little reason to go into other nations other than for religious customs. That's what we find in our text: a religious festival drawing together many from their own lands and the familiar faces and language they could understand to observe God's command. They would go to the festival and then return so that they could once again be among the familiar.

What a surprise it would have been for them to hear foreign people speaking to them in their own language. What is more, it must have been a surprise for them that these foreigners could speak their own language proficiently enough that they could hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Again, this was before the internet, which means it was before cell phones or iPhones to quickly look up translations. But even more than that, the Galileans these Jews heard—the apostles—were speaking fluently and clearly, without any training. While the technology that we have and use today is getting increasingly better, what happened at this event, if it were to happen today, would even surprise people today. If you've traveled to another nation or country where they do not speak English, you may have been able to find someone or a few people who spoke a little English with whom you could communicate. They probably did not speak it as fluently and clearly as a native speaker, though. Yet that is what happened at this miraculous—yes, miraculous—event!

The Scriptural description of this account makes it clear that it was indeed a miracle. The surprise of those gathered around, and yes, even their reaction, proved that it was a completely unexpected event. And while technology may have advanced since then, the sinfulness of humanity found in the accounts of the Tower of Babel and this one remains even today. Just take a look!

Verse 2

While “all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, ‘What does this mean?’ ...others mocking said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’”

Is this not the first reaction someone or some people you know would have today if this event were to happen? Something God-ly happens, and they have no other idea what to say than to put down the ones speaking their language? Or to joke about their being drunk?

So many sins come from the tongue as the smallest member of the body! Sins of speaking against neighbors because they speak another language, because they have a different color of skin, because they have a different gender—the list can go on and on. What other command were these mockers breaking than the eighth? Were they not dishonoring the name and reputation of their fellow believers? In his writing on the eighth commandment, Luther reminds us that people often speak poorly of others to raise themselves up. Is this account not a case of this? It is almost as if these mocking Jews were saying, “Look at those drunken fools! See how smart *I am* to point it out?!”

Now there are two correct times to point out sin. One is in court to assist in the proper judgment of one on trial. The other is going to your brother or sister in private and pointing out his or her error so that he or she may repent of it and turn from it. Otherwise we are called to speak nothing evil of those around us but only to put the best frame on everything, or else to remain silent, so as not to tarnish our neighbor's reputation.

But the Jews gathered at Pentecost were failing to uphold the apostles' reputations. For this reason, “Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

“‘And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.’”

Verse 3

Today sin continues to pervade our thoughts, our actions, and our words. How often have you broken the eighth commandment just in the last week? How often have you listened to gossip and passed it on, rather than refusing to listen to it or to listen to it and allow yourself to be a tomb from whence the evil word would never be passed on? How often have you put someone else down to make yourself feel better?

From the Tower of Babel to even Pentecost, humanity's action has been the same: pride. Whether the pride of trying to build a tower to heaven or of pointing out another's supposed sin of drunkenness, today we would do no better. Thankfully God's reaction has not been the same. Instead, He first gave a punishment as a result of sin, and then He reversed it through His Son Jesus Christ.

After the pride of the Tower of Babel, God made different languages so that we could not understand one another and so that we would not get into even more sinful trouble. Then He sent His Son, born of a woman, conceived by the Holy Spirit, so that He might take your sin to the cross. Jesus Christ did. He took all of your sin, those of the tongue and body, those of which you are aware and even those of which you are unaware, and He buried them in His own body and His own tomb. But then the reversal. God raised Jesus from the dead, giving assurance that all who would believe in Him would also rise. And then, following our Lord's ascension, He sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, just as He promised. With that sending came the reversal of the many languages. Everyone gathered at Jerusalem could hear of God's great work in their own language.

The reversal has begun, and it will be completed on that great and magnificent last day, when Jesus will return with the whole company of heaven. In that day, all of us who believe will be changed, we will all no longer sin, and we will all once again fully understand each other. For now, we live in the end times. We're at the threshold. Our Lord Jesus is coming and we want to be found in Him. That's why we continue in His Word, continue to take the Sacrament, and with these as our strength, continue to fight against the sinful misuse of our bodies and also our tongues. We fight the good fight of faith, knowing that in our Lord Christ Jesus, we have forgiveness and life everlasting. In Jesus' Name. Amen.