

The Pentecost Language

Acts 2:1-13

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Prayer: Holy God, *open our hearts and minds by the power of your Spirit, that we might hear and receive the message you intend for us today. Amen.*

When Jesus was born, the ancient Mediterranean had a true global language, a *lingua franca*: Greek. Almost everyone spoke Greek. It might not have been their first language, but it was easily their second or third.

Think of it exactly like English today. Just as English today is widely used for international business, travel, science and academia, diplomacy, pop culture, and the internet, first-century travelers used Greek. People kept their native local languages, but they learned *Koine* Greek. This was the common, simplified Greek—a kind of street language, if you will, as opposed to the classical Greek of philosophers such as Plato or Aristotle, poets, and artists.

By the way, the New Testament wasn't written in the lofty, elite language of classical Greek. It was actually written in *Koine* Greek—the everyday language of the common people.

So back then, people learned *Koine* Greek to talk across cultures. Because of this, a traveler could move from town to town and always find someone who spoke enough Greek to help them buy food, find a place to stay, or ask for directions.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright points out that this didn't happen overnight. Ever since Alexander the Great conquered the region four hundred years earlier, Greek had become the common tongue of much of the known world.¹

So if everyone already shared a common language, why didn't the Holy Spirit simply allow Peter to preach in Greek at Pentecost? If efficiency were the goal, the Holy Spirit could have enabled Peter to preach in Greek. Instead, the Spirit spoke through many languages, and each person heard the good news in their own native tongue.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 27.

In other words, why was language the gifted power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost?

By the way, this was not the kind of power the disciples expected. You might remember the reading from last Sunday. Just before Jesus ascended, his disciples asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

See, they were still imagining power as a political victory. They wanted the power to defeat their enemies, overthrow their oppressors, and make everyone else submit. They expected the Holy Spirit to bring a conquering power—the kind of power that forces everyone else to speak *your* language.

But Pentecost reveals a very different kind of power. At Pentecost, the Holy flipped the script, if you will.

Have you ever visited a place where you didn’t speak the language?

If you have, you know that feeling of being completely lost. You struggle to read street signs. You fumble just to order a meal. You listen to the conversations buzzing around you, and you can’t catch a single word. It makes you feel vulnerable. Excluded. Maybe even a little stupid—even if you happen to be highly educated back home.

And so, to survive, you do what you have to do: you learn the language. You grab a grammar book, or you hire a language teacher.

But when you learn someone’s language, you do more than memorize vocabulary or understand grammar and syntax, phonology—how to pronounce the words correctly. More importantly, you enter their world. You immerse yourself in the culture. You honor their story.

As theologian Willie James Jennings points out, learning another language requires humility, vulnerability, dependence, and openness to other people rather than domination over them. To learn another language is to place yourself in the hands of other people. To learn a language is to learn a people.²

² Jennings, Willie James, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

This stands directly against the spirit of colonialism—a spirit that demands people abandon their own language and culture to adopt the language of the powerful.

Pentecost moves in the exact opposite direction.

Instead of forcing everyone to speak one dominant language, the Holy Spirit enables the disciples to speak the native languages of the crowd—the languages of Medes, Parthians, Elamites, Egyptians, and Arabs.

Think about the shift taking place here: The disciples are entering the worlds of others, rather than forcing others to enter theirs.

That is exactly why language was the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost.

The Spirit didn't give the disciples the power to dominate people—but the power to understand them, to honor them, and to love them. Through language, the disciples could tell the story of Jesus from *within* the history, culture, and lived experience of completely different peoples. And in return, they got to hear the story of Jesus in fresh, beautiful new ways, as others received it in their own native tongues.

When you look at it this way, Pentecost reflects the very heart of the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ, God entered fully into human life. Christ learned our language. He lived within a specific culture, walked our roads, shared our customs, and embraced the limits of being human. As Willie Jennings so beautifully puts it: “God speaks people fluently.”

And through the Holy Spirit, God calls the church to do the same.

What would it mean for us to “speak people fluently”? What does it take to really understand the language of others?

- It means learning how to listen deeply and love generously.
- It means entering another person's world with humility, like a guest rather than an arrogant conqueror.
- It means not feeling superior to others.
- It means caring enough to understand another person's fears, hopes, history, and experiences.

Across several major world religions, there is a fascinating concept: that certain languages are not just human inventions or simple tools for communication. Instead, they are viewed as inherently sacred, eternal, and divine. In these traditions, translating scripture into everyday, local language might be useful for study, but such a translation is always seen as a lesser human interpretation.

Why? Because the original language itself is considered the literal, unaltered essence of divine revelation.

But the Christian faith has always believed something different: that the gospel belongs in *every* language and *every* culture. Christianity insists that the story of Jesus can be faithfully spoken in every tongue on earth.

This means the gospel belongs equally to Arabs and Jews, Africans and Europeans, Asians and Americans. The story of Jesus is not owned by any one nation. It is not confined to any one culture.

In the last days," God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17)

All flesh. Not just a chosen few. Not just some people. In the original Greek, that phrase literally means "the whole of human nature"—or "every single physical body." Pentecost isn't an exclusive event; it is the story of the entire world being baptized in holy fire.

So, Pentecost belongs to the whole world, because as Diana Butler Bass asserts, *all people are God's people*.³ The fire of Pentecost incinerated the divisions built by empire. Every single boundary... burned.

Church, Pentecost reminds us that the Holy Spirit does not give us the power to build walls. It does not force us into uniformity.

Instead, the Spirit gives us the power to cross boundaries with love.

Today, we are being called out of our comfort zones. We are being challenged to step into new communities—not with judgment, but with humility, curiosity, and compassion. May it be so with us. Amen.

³ Diana Butler Bass, "Pentecost: All Means All," in her *Sunday Musings*, May 24, 2026.