

## A Miracle of Communication

Acts 2:1-21

Language can be a barrier in communication. You and I know that's true. I know the truthfulness of this statement by firsthand experience. My daily life develops around people whose language is not my mother tongue. I say this because there are times when I want to express feelings and ideas and I am not sure if I successfully convey the whole meaning of what I want to say in a clear way.

But let me tell you this, the problem of communication is not only among people who speak different languages. I know people who speak the same language, and they have a difficult time understanding each other. For instance, my wife and I speak the same language and honestly, I don't know what the word "fine" means when she says it.

- Honey, are you OK? Sure, I am "FINE."
- What's going on? "NOTHING."

Nothing, that's a dangerous one. It's hard for me to tell what "nothing" means. By experience, I can tell you that when the word nothing comes out of a woman's mouth, 1 out of 3 times, nothing turns out to mean something else. It's difficult.

If you want to see the face of a clueless man, tell my wife to ask for my opinion. If you want to see me speechless, tell my wife to say the magic words: "*What do you think honey?*".

Most of the time, I don't even know what to say. When she asks for my opinion, I usually have to make a split-second decision. Should I say what I truly think or should I try to figure out what she wants me to say? By the way, I am not proficient at figuring out what my wife wants me to say. So, if it takes me too long to say anything, she will say, "Never mind." And when I do say something, she says, "Nah!!!! You know nothing." Then, nothing means nothing.

I am telling you, it's difficult!!! She fries my brain. Well, I hope you know I am joking, right? My beautiful wife is not like that. She's worse! That's another joke.

I can keep on going, but I am sure that you understand what I am trying to say. At times, language can be a barrier in communication. However, even people who speak the same language can have difficulty understanding each other.

Getting to serious matters, *what are some of the stumbling blocks in our communication with others?*

Today, one of our Bible readings comes from Acts 2. In this reading, we see people speaking in several languages. Even though there is a multiplicity of language being spoken, people are hearing and understanding each other.

Now, there is another story in the Bible that expounds upon the subject of language and communication. I am talking about the account of "The Tower of Babel." The story begins with

a remarkable affirmation, “*The whole earth had one language and the same words*” (**Genesis 11:1**). Yet, we just said that speaking the same language does not mean that everybody is on the same page.

At first glance, when you read Genesis 11, the text seems to imply that because everybody spoke the same language it was everybody’s idea to build a tower with its top in heaven. However, the building of such a project in the ancient world was usually done by slaves and other disadvantaged people. We have proof in our Bibles that this was the case. The Hebrew people were overwhelmed with hard work in Egypt, as they were forced to build supply cities (Exodus 1:11).

So, I kind of doubt that it was the consensus of everyone to build a tower with its top in heaven. To me, the idea probably came from an elite group that was afraid of losing control and domination. The idea came from those who were in power.

By reading Genesis 11, one can get the idea that languages came into existence as God *punished* humankind for its pride. Certainly, human pride is at the core of the Tower of Babel narrative. Yet, fear is the other main human emotion described in the second part of verse 4 where we learn why these people wanted to build a tower. “*Let us make a tower ... let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered...*” (**Genesis 11:4**).

The people were not only prideful but also fearful. Actually, those two emotions fed on each other. Being scattered threatened the sense of superiority of some people. Therefore, the building of the tower became a necessity. The efforts and unity of these people were fostered by fear and unhealthy pride.

Understanding the passage of the Tower of Babel this way gives us a different perspective on the reason why God confused their language. The passage is not about God being afraid of human achievement and great projects. In fact, there is humor and irony in the text.

The people wanted to build a big tower, but the project was so small that God had to come down to see what they were doing. So, God’s concern was not human achievement, but the unhealthiness of the unity people sought. It was a unity forced by fear and harmful pride.

God confused the language of people as words were being used maliciously. If we look at the Tower of Babel account from this perspective, we know that languages came into existence not as an act of *punishment*, but as an act of liberation.

It is not a secret that when conversations are shaped by fear and arrogance, a breakdown in communication is inevitable. Every time we focus on our own desires and we try to make a name for ourselves, our communication with other people is extremely difficult, or it becomes impossible. Trying to impose our way of life, our viewpoints, and so forth, is always a hindrance in mutual understanding.

*Have you ever experienced a conversation where the people involved spoke the same language, but they were not able to understand each other? Why do you think this happens?*

I believe the Bible calls us to have a different kind of communication. God's desires is for us to have healthy, respectful and fruitful conversations. Paul wrote to the church in the city of Ephesus, "*Let come out of your mouth only what is good for building up*" (Ephesians 4:29).

If you want to have fruitful conversations with your spouse, a family member, coworker, business partner or the like, season your speech with "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, authenticity, gentleness, and self-control.*"<sup>1</sup> In case you didn't pick it up, I just asked you to spice up your conversations with the fruit of the Spirit.

Of course, you cannot do this on your own. That's the work of the Spirit in your life. Your part in this work is to open yourself for the Holy Spirit to fully possess you.

Pentecost tells us that we don't have to master the same tongue/dialect in order to understand each other. Pentecost tells us that godly communication and mutual understanding takes place when our speech is under the influence of God-Holy Spirit. Every time our speech is stimulated and shaped by fear, pride, bias, bitterness, and a *me-first* mentality there is a communication breakdown.

"In Babel the people were initially united and in the end dispersed over the face of all the earth because of the multiplicity of languages and failing communication. In Jerusalem people came together from the ends of the earth and communication was flowing, despite the many languages."<sup>2</sup> Communication in Jerusalem was possible because people were filled with the Holy Spirit.

In our world today, we need less people speaking from their corner of fear and pride. The world needs people overflowing with the power of the Holy Spirit. People that are not afraid of diversity and are ready to speak the language of the Spirit to Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia.

Let me translate these places in contemporary language. God wants you to be filled with the Holy Ghost so you are able to speak the language of the Spirit, not of fear and pride, to Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. We could add Pakistan, North Korea, the migrant workers in our midst, as well as every nation and tribe in the world.

That's Pentecost: God speaking the language of every nation. The church moving from Jerusalem to the end of the world speaking the language of the Spirit, not of fear, pride, or coercion. Pentecost is about God providing the way for effective, sincere, and mutual communication.

One of the things I really like about the Tower of Babel story is that God recognizes that every time we are able to speak the same language, which through the lens of Pentecost we know is the language of the Spirit, we can accomplish great things. When our conversations are nurtured and

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Hinne Wagenaar, "Babel, Jerusalem and Kumba: missiological reflections on Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-13." *International Review Of Mission* 92, no. 366 (July 2003): 406-421. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed June 1, 2017).

shaped by God-Holy Spirit, we won't seek to dominate but to integrate. We won't seek to have our way; we will strive for a better way, God's way.

I honestly see the narrative of Pentecost as a miracle of communication.

It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will come upon you enabling you to envision, dream, prophesy, speak words and live a life flavored with the fruit of the Spirit which is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, authenticity, gentleness, and self-control.*<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 5:22-23 NRSV