

Other people's languages

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Acts 2 tells of those who, while seemingly drunk with the new wine of the spirit, actually understand one another's native languages. What if we saw here a parable for listening to one another's viewpoints? So often, others' native languages not only leave us bereft of understanding but perpetuate our dislike and distrust of one another.

I once edited a book on "stumbling toward genuine conversation on homosexuality," about the differences we must navigate when addressing a subject that's virtually guaranteed to turn us all into flame throwers. I brought together as many voices as I could. I imagined success, not as voices singing in unison, but as many voices joined in harmony or at least in dissonance within the space of the book. I urged contributors to do what they could to simultaneously present persuasively their own perspectives and to show at least hints of readiness to learn from opposing positions.

One author's trajectory caught my attention. In the book he advocates one position, but in the experience of contributing to the book he met people who thought differently than he did. He found himself reconsidering his original convictions and eventually moved in entirely new directions. Now he sometimes gives public presentations with conclusions that are very different from those he made in the book.

His twists and turns as he determines to follow God's spirit where it leads, even at cost to his cherished preconceptions, are moving. But what moves me most is that he's chosen not simply to disown the ability to understand one "language" after having learned another but to continue to listen to others' convictions, or languages. He even attends settings where his now-abandoned convictions are presented by others. There he seeks to understand what he hears, and to benefit from the hints of truth in others' viewpoints.

He is a committed Christian. I believe it not too wild a stretch to suspect that it is through the wind and fire of the Spirit that he is able to continue to understand even a language no longer his own. I hope he will train many disciples.