

Liberating Pentecost

By [David Henson](#)

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God speaks.

And the people understood.

This confused them.

In a nutshell, this is Pentecost, or at least, the most intriguing detail of the famous Acts story. But too often this significant detail gets lost in the celebration of rushing wind, fiery tongues and the so-called birth of the church.

The disciples had gathered in Jerusalem during the festival of Shavuot. Pilgrims from around the known world had gathered for the celebration when suddenly the disciples burst forth into the packed streets. From the mouths of a bunch of uncouth, uneducated, disreputable Galileans come a multilingual message of all the magnificent works of God. During a festival celebrating the Torah, law of God given and unified in a single language and people, the Divine voice breaks through and speaks in an unmatched diversity of languages.

And each person heard and understood – in their native tongue no less – the message of God. That much is clear from the text.

What confused the people wasn't the message. What confused them was that they all understood it.

And so they ask what does it all mean?

Peter answers with the Christian gospel.

I'm convinced he gave them the wrong answer.

I'm not saying the Christian gospel is wrong or backwards, to be clear. I'm just saying that he didn't really answer their question. The people didn't want to know

what the disciples thought the message of God was. They had already heard and understood God's message in their own languages. What they wanted to know was what, in God's name, did it mean that they could all understand it.

What did it mean that the voice of God had spoken outside of the divine language of the Torah? What did it mean that the message of God had broken through the levees of the religious elites in the Temple and spoken in all the angelic tongues of humanity? What did it mean that the voice of God was not reserved for the imperial Latin of the oppressors?

What did it mean that God spoke in the tongues of the powerless? What did it mean that God gave the divine voice to the languages of a bunch of nobodies?

Let's us not forget the importance and power of language, how forbidding religious language in native and indigenous tongues has marred with cynical imperialism Christianity's history of missionary activity. Let us not forget how oppressive regimes the world over have rubbed out indigenous languages as a means of maintaining power and authority, have forbidden children to speak their mother tongue, have tried to stamp out the language that binds together a rival culture.

Pentecost is about that most Christian of concepts. It is about liberation. In many ways, it continues Jesus' work as the liberator of God's love for all people, his work that circumvented the powerful religious elites who exploited the people of God by holding access to the Temple at arm's length. It continues Jesus' work of transforming the transcendent God into an immanent one.

So what does it all mean?

It means that God has been liberated by Christ.

It means that God still speaks and those who find themselves in imperial cultures might do well to participate in Pentecost with open ears and listen for the voice of God among the powerless, among the oppressed, among the nobodies.

It means to listen, and be changed.

Originally posted at [Henson's blog](#)