

In Our Own Native Language

Genesis 11: 1-9, Acts 2: 1-21

Dr. George R. Sinclair

When I was in high school *Senor* Lett tried to teach me Spanish. I say he *tried* because getting Spanish into my brain was like pouring *concreto*. I've been to Mexico twice and amused locals were kind enough to direct me with sign language.

In college my German professor found my brain little more porous. Then came Hebrew which not only looked like chicken scratch but the chickens walked backwards. Thankfully there was Greek which provided words which actually looked like words, some even sounded like words. While I managed to stumble through the class, I am not a Greek-speaker. When I translate, I need lots of time and many aids. I am an English-speaker—through and through.

There are between three and ten thousand *living languages*. Estimates range widely and the term *living* fits because languages are not static. They come, morph, and sometimes disappear. World-wide, there are just under two-hundred nations; one-hundred and ninety two are members of the UN. Imagine that: ten thousand languages; two-hundred nations. Why so many more languages than political entities? Perhaps language resists the blender of state sponsored homogenization. Language tells us where we're from. Southerners routinely appreciate what others call *provincial* or *parochial*. "Where are you from?"
"I'm a native of . . ."

Paula and I both grew up in the South. When we moved to Illinois, one church member routinely, and with a twinkle in his eye, asked Paula to say a few words—Wendell loved Paula's accent. When Paula and I moved from the Midwest to the foothills of North Carolina we noticed that folks in the foothills had their own unique accent: whyite, nite, bryhite, rhyce; and our favorite, Jesus Chryst. A friend there once asked me if I had been to *the fare*. I said I didn't know there was *a fire*. And he said, "No, *the fare*, at the campgrounds with the Tilt-a-World. Was I going to *the fare*?"

Language is a primary cultural marker. Language tells us where we are from, that we are natives of *somewhere*. Language tells us that we are *us*. Language also tells *us* that others are *not us*. Language both unites and divides.

The story of the Tower of Babel tells of a time when there was "one language" for the whole earth. One language allowed collaboration, cooperation, coexistence, coordination, coalition, which we imagine are better than combat, conflict, competition, and domination. When people get together, good things can happen.

I'm glad I can drive across the Bay. Cooperation and taxes made that possible. Getting together has benefits. The people in Genesis with one language appeared well intended, "Let us build ourselves a city." Cities are good. The City Builders also wanted a tower with "its top in the heavens." The City Builders respected heaven. They wanted to be close to heaven. They wanted heaven on their side. They also wanted to "make a name" for themselves. What could be wrong with that? Cities advertise; we see that all of the time. Is that a bad thing—might be good for business; for growth, job creation, opportunity? "Making a name" is something cities do. It's what nations do—churches even. We want to make our name known. Is that a bad thing?

According to Genesis, the City Builders thought that making a name for themselves would keep them from being "scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." The City Builders worried about being "scattered."

"United we stand, divided we fall." There is strength in numbers and when numbers unite. Good things happen when humans work together; things like security or a nice bridge; a handsome church

building; a powerful nation. At the moment I've forgotten his name, but you remember the Revolutionary War leader who said, "Gentlemen, we either hang together or we hang separately." Fear of being scattered or hung will make people unite. Why not one world; one language; one city with a tower to the heavens? Sounds like a plan. But as with everything human, togetherness has a downside. God saw it right away, "The LORD *came down* to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built."

God "*came down to see.*"

Surely God has great eyesight. Was the city with the tower that puny? Or, perhaps, inspector-like, God came down for a closer look, "Um, what's going on down there? What are they up to? Better take a closer look." So God "*came down.*" And what God saw, God didn't like, "They have all one *language*; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing will now be impossible for them." "They have all one *language . . . nothing will be impossible* for them."

A people united with one language can pretty much do whatever they want. Is that so bad? Isn't that what parents want for their children—independence? Your child graduates and you get a raise? She gets a job and there's one more off the payroll? Why wouldn't God want one language? Sounds like a good thing, you know, like the UN; The World Council of Churches; The World Bank; The EU. Why does God worry when people unite: one language, one culture; one world? What's the harm?

Luther thought harm came because we are, as he put it, "curved in" on ourselves. Calvin worried because we are prone to idolatry. Said otherwise, like a giant magnet or centrifuge, a city with a tower draws all things to itself. Contrary to God's command to "multiply and fill the earth," the City Builders stayed put. They feared being "scattered." Consequently, God did the very thing the Builders feared most—God "confused their language" and "scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city." God, so it would seem, rejoices in diversity, multiplicity, difference; and, an earth filled with many nations and peoples.

In your mind's eye flash forward to the Jewish harvest festival known to us as *The Day of Pentecost* which was celebrated seven weeks after Passover. The Day of Pentecost marked God's mountain top revelation to Moses—the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. On the Day of Pentecost, Luke tells us that "they were all together in one place." *They* would be the apostles, certain women, including the mother of Jesus, along with his brothers and some other believers, about one hundred and twenty persons in all. *They*, these first followers of Jesus, "were all together in one place" when they had the audio-visual experience of a lifetime.

The audio was "a sound like the rush of a violent wind;" and the video "divided tongues, as of fire." Wind and Fire. If it reminds you of Elijah, it should. Remember Elijah? How could you forget—we spent all last summer talking about Elijah and Jezebel! Remember; Jezebel put a contract on Elijah, so he fled into the wilderness forty days and forty nights until he came to Horeb, alternately known as Sinai "the mountain of God" where he hid in a cave? Remember that—Elijah of old and his AV experience?

In a re-run of God-on-Mt. Sinai, when God hid Moses in the rock, God passed by Elijah, "There was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting the mountains and breaking the rocks, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence." After the wind and the fire it became still, like after a big storm. Elijah was surrounded by the sound of sheer silence. As he sat in the silence, he listened. "He wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave."

Elijah heard a voice. Like a child with his hand caught in the proverbial cookie jar, Elijah does what caught people do: he dances as fast as he can: "I've been very jealous for you, Lord. And it's gotten me in all kinds of trouble. I'm the only preacher left. And they want me dead." God was not amused or maybe he was because God sent Elijah straight back to *Jezebel-land* where Elijah anointed a new king and his own prophetic successor from among seven thousand faithful left standing.

In his Pentecost story, Luke calls on this deep memory of prophetic call. With wind and fire, Luke locates his readers with the prophets of old who like Elijah prepare the way for the Lord. As with Elijah, the audio-visual gets their attention. And like Elijah, they are sent to announce God's Word. Luke says it this way, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit did the impossible. The Spirit made one hundred and twenty ordinary people into one hundred and twenty prophets of Jesus. That is the miracle of Pentecost—the Spirit making ordinary people into prophets. On the Day of Pentecost, the church is born. God does the impossible. God makes young and old, slave and free, men and women into prophets—sending them, sending us to proclaim Good News in all the world, so that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Here's the thing and the tricky part about what proclamation does or what it doesn't do. Proclamation does not level off, tear down or otherwise destroy cultural differences. God likes difference; otherness; color; variety; oddity; peculiarity; diversity; plurality; call it what you will. All of those who overheard the prophets in the Upper Room—and the people who overheard were from every nation under heaven; east, west, north, and south; folks from every compass point—those who heard the prophets each heard in their "own native language." Luke repeats that phrase three times in six verses, "How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own *native* language?" How does each hear? Because God does the impossible. In a world made increasingly small by technologies and global trade; and, in a world made increasingly volatile by scientifically driven tower-making, few questions are more important: "How is it that we hear, each of us, Gospel words, in our own *native* language?"

Let me hazard a partial answer. If hearing the Gospel does not destroy "native language," if hearing the Gospel allows us to keep our "native language," then Christian prophets should take great care when they cross borders and encounter other cultures. Cultural and ethnic boundaries exist for a reason—God's reason. We are red and yellow and black and white for a reason; we speak German and Spanish; Arabic, Chinese and English for a reason. God loves diversity. Just think of the natural order—the wonderful world of color and texture. God loves diversity—even hearing of Good News—"each in our own *native* language." God makes all things possible not by our ability to make the world one, but by giving us his Spirit so we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and each of us hears "in our own native language." Amen.