



Different Tongues | One Language

Pentecost Sunday provides the Church with the opportunity to reflect on the post-resurrection and post-ascension event when the promised Spirit of God was made available to all believers. Here, Jay Matenga reflects on the missional and ecclesiastical significance of the supernatural gift of language made manifest at this Pentecost occasion for the followers of Christ.

The song sheets and music track were sent out in advance of the week-long international gathering. The song, *Soli Deo* (which means 'only God') was an original composition from one of the organisation's ethnomusicologists (a person who studies music from different cultures). It was set to be the conference's anthem. Although accompanied by guitar, the song felt classical and stuffy on the music track. The solo vocal was precisely enunciated, pitch perfect and melody specific. The rhythm was metronome exact. It did not take long to learn—thankfully. The rest of the set-list read like the top-10 worship hits for the era, plus a couple of new songs to learn. Then there was this *Soli Deo*.

Arriving early to the conference venue allowed some practice time together as a band before the event kicked off. Few of us had met each other before, let alone played together. Email addresses became faces and diversity was immediately apparent at the first practice. I came from New Zealand with my restored Mexican-made Fender 'Tele', gifted to me by a British missionary friend who rescued it from a rubbish dump in Japan. I was asked to play lead guitar because the American music leader (and composer of *Soli Deo*) had already filled my preferred acoustic rhythm guitar slot. Like a good Māori, I figured I'd go with the flow and improvise. I found a spot on the stage and set up my gear.

The music leader/composer was already present. His wife, also from the States, and an English woman, were ready in their back-up singer positions testing microphones with the pianist who came to the conference from Pennsylvania. The next to push through the large ballroom doors was the bassist, a round-faced black Madagascan bigger than me, who carried a valiha (a Madagascan stringed zither) as well as his electric bass. He immediately struck up a friendly conversation with the Pennsylvanian keyboardist, which indicated to me that they shared some history.

A young man's face, Caucasian-toned with almond eyes, peeked timidly through the closing doors and was immediately encouraged to enter by our music leader, speaking Kyrgyz. The relieved young man carried with him an array of flutes and a komuz (a fretless Central Asian triple-stringed guitar). Not far

behind him, carrying his eight-stringed homemade ukulele, was a shy Solomon Islander sporting a big bushy afro that blended into a full beard.

A Korean lady confidently entered next and headed straight to the second keyboard. She was obviously known to the worship leader, his back-up singer/wife, and the young Kyrgyz man who was laying out his flutes. Two West Africans then burst into the room, still midway through an upbeat conversation, but obviously afraid they were late. One of them, a dear friend of mine from Ghana carrying his djembe (a large hand drum), beamed a big smile at me and apologized profusely to the others, while his companion, a Nigerian lady, suddenly became subdued and timidly joined the American and English women ready to sing harmony.

Once we were politely introduced to one another, the music leader asked if we could start with the new song, *Soli Deo*. He passed out music sheets and then played it through for those who had not yet heard it. He played it precisely. I couldn't distinguish the live version from the recording. 'Wonderful words', I thought, but... 'ho hum'. He then vulnerably confessed, "it feels a bit bland". My attention arrested, he continued, "I wonder if we can add an international flavour to it?"

As with any band composition, you first need to lay down a rhythm. The leader's strum was too dominant so he stopped playing his acoustic to see what the Ghanaian and Madagascan would do. They tried their best to replicate the leaders' tempo



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and beat but were clearly uncomfortable. He encouraged them to ignore what he'd done and imagine a beat authentic to them that might match the song. A large black hand smacked the djembe followed by the other in a syncopated pulse. The bass filled the spaces with a slap and slide groove that instantly bedded the composition in rhythmic flair. The rapid high-pitch rhythmic strum of the ukulele added an island flavour to the African back beat and we were getting somewhere. The Pennsylvanian intuited a Caribbean feel and followed the groove with his keys replicating an organ in a stabby style, while the Korean lady played a clipped grand piano melody to the new internationalised rhythm. I fiddled around on my fretboard, trying some reggae style strums and licks and the music leader stopped us abruptly.

He spoke in Kyrgyz to the quiet young man who picked up a short flute that looked like a clay oil lamp. The music leader encouraged us to replicate what we had just done, after a flute intro. A mournful low whistle climbed slowly in long bending minor notes to the starting major key of the song. It felt like a desert whirlwind was building to lift us into a Caribbean dream. Under the flute, the djembe set the beat, the bass slid over it and the song's introduction built slowly, bar by bar. Nodding in time with knowing acknowledgement to the back-up singers, the song's composer started singing, "One sovereign rule and reign..." Instinctively, every band member joined the backup singers on point and in perfect harmony, "Soooooiiiiii Deeeoooooh". It was transcendent.

Each refrain of "Soli Deo" echoed the crew of Harry Belafonte's famed Banana boat. Line by line the song picked up momentum and instruments found their rightful place. The flute became a piccolo and I my fingers danced higher up the fretboard hammering and bending strings between the melody as the song lifted. The singers injected harmonic emotion around the lead voice that was freshly animated. Together we had created something special and we all knew it. Hearts swelled, tears formed and at the end of the song we simply stood in humbled silence. Soli Deo.

The Scene

For eons the human world has existed as a cluster of separated realities, in many cases rarely interacting. People groups migrated and developed societies that were both radically different but in important ways similar. Their contexts helped fashion their priorities. Their view of the world evolved according to the evidence in front of them and the collective memory behind them. Christians believe that this was all the result of a singular event separating one people into many. The story is told in Genesis 11:1-9.

At one time all the people of the world spoke the same language and used the same words. As the people migrated to the east, they found a plain in the land of Babylonia and settled there.

They began saying to each other, "Let's make bricks and harden them with fire." (In this region bricks were used instead of stone, and tar was used for mortar.) Then they said, "Come, let's build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous and keep us from being scattered all over the world."

But the Lord came down to look at the city and the tower the people were building. "Look!" he said. "The people are united, and they all speak the same language. After this, nothing they set out to do will be impossible for them! Come, let us go down and confuse the people with different languages. Then they won't be able to understand each other."

In that way, the Lord scattered them all over the world, and they stopped building the city. That is why the city was called Babel, because that is where the Lord confused the people with different languages. In this way he scattered them all over the world.

The Separation

Psalm 133 proclaims, "*How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers (and sisters) live together in harmony!*" The entire Bible, from cover to cover, rests on this one single fact: the entire human race was designed for Shalom, harmony.

But something went tragically wrong. The first humans desired to make up their own rules and ate of some fruit that supernaturally opened up their minds and released them to be judges of what was good and what was not. And that, the Bible declares, is the source of all the conflict in the world.

If your judgement is different from my judgement, or your preference is different from my preference, then who is right? Differences become entrenched and my will pitted against your will creates 'discord'.

It's amazing how often we use musical metaphors when talking about relationships. *Discord* literally means "a group of musical notes that give an unpleasant sound when played together". It's yukky. Whereas we would rather have *harmony*, which is "a pleasant musical sound made by different notes played or sung together". It's lovely.

In the Bible, discord is commonly known as sin—an influence that destroys relationships. It's yukky. Whereas harmony is known as shalom—a state of peace, balance, unity, reciprocity, growth and supply, etc. It's... lovely.

But surely the people of Babel were unified before God created discord among them? Yes, it seems they were—around the project at least. In this sense they were unified in their sin.

This is one of the earliest Biblical examples of human social organisation. Following the fall, the only way to get people to work together effectively is to unify them by a common project—whether that project is building a family, a civil society, a business, going to war or... a project of outright rebellion like this one. Every project follows a vision, and a vision arises to fulfil a deep desire in those who conceived of the vision.

In the case of the people of Babel, they were the first X-Factor, Britain's-Got-Talent, or American Idol type of wannabees. Their deep desire was to be famous, to establish something to be remembered by. The root of such a desire is the pursuit of immortality. Furthermore, there were two things the people of Babel did not want: 1) they did not want to obey God's command to fill the earth, and 2) they did not want to die in another flood-judgment, the story of which immediately precedes Genesis 11. So, they designed a flood-proof tower so they could stay where they were and be known for achieving it.

What was resulted from this collective resistance to God's commands? God gave them the gift of tongues. Note what it says in Genesis 11:9, *"the Lord confused the people with different languages. In this way he scattered them all over the world"*.

Why on earth would God want to do that? That's just plain mean. Imagine, walking down your drive to get your morning paper and you hear your best buddy across the road greet you with a cherry, "Ata marie, e hoa ma!" ('Good morning my friend' in New Zealand Māori) What? What is he saying? So you say back to him, "What are you saying?" But he looks at you like you are crazy because he heard you ask, "Apa yang kau katakan?" ('What did you say?' in Baha Indonesian).

Language is the gateway to reality and pretty soon you start seeing the world very differently and it is mighty uncomfortable living alongside each other without the ability to clearly communicate, as some of you might know. *"In this way he scattered them all over the world."*

The Seeking

Why on earth would God want to scatter the people? For the earth's sake.

"Nothing they set out to do will be impossible for them!" the Lord exclaimed in verse 6. Consider our world right now. How much change have we seen in the last 100 years? It is accelerating so fast it is dizzying. Do you think the rapid change that is happening is costing the earth? Yes, it is. The climate change debate aside, the earth is suffering from the innovations of humanity and so is humanity. I don't think we have yet seen the full extent of the damage that sin-influenced humanity can do when it works together to do it, but we probably will.

So, God gave the gift of tongues, and brought confusion as a judgement for their rebellion and a stop-gap for their destructive potential. It was actually a mercy, a gift. Can you see that? He stopped our ancestors' destructive potential. We would not be here today if He had not. It was a mercy, a kindness. In Romans 2:4 Paul notes that *"God's kindness leads you toward repentance"*.

We now fast-forward through history over to Acts 17 where the Apostle Paul is preaching to the people of Athens. There he explained God to the Greeks in a way they could understand from their Greek perspective, in their Greek language (Paul could speak at least Greek, Roman and Hebrew). Speaking of God, Paul said to them,

...he himself gives all people life and breath and everything else. From one person he made every nation of people, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that people would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being'. Acts 17:25b-28a

Why on earth would God want to do what he did at Babel? For your sake and the sake of people everywhere in every nation on the earth. *So that* we would seek him and find Him because He's actually right here, wherever you are reading this.

He was here in Aotearoa New Zealand when Māori spiritual leaders were trying to find Him, long before the missionaries came. Māori Anglican theologian Reverend Māori Marsden is quoted as saying, "before the missionaries came we saw the foot of the mountain. When the missionaries came and gave us the Scriptures, the cloud lifted off and we were able to see the whole mountain."

While people might earnestly seek God, they do not fully find God until someone introduces them to Jesus. If they respond positively to Jesus, as the perfect representation of God in human form, turn from the influence of sin in their lives and choose to follow Jesus as Lord, then they are granted access to the Kingdom of God, where the confusion and separation resulting from the Babel incident is undone. We might still speak with different tongues but we are instantly welcomed into a new Kingdom where there is one language—the language of love.

The Sealing

On the day of Pentecost one thousand nine hundred and eighty-eight years ago (thereabouts) God undid Babel. Acts 2:1-13 explains,

On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire

appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.

They were completely amazed. "How can this be?" they exclaimed. "These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages! Here we are—Parthians, Medes, Elamites, people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, the province of Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and the areas of Libya around Cyrene, visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans, and Arabs. And we all hear these people speaking in our own languages about the wonderful things God has done!" They stood there amazed and perplexed. "What can this mean?" they asked each other.

But others in the crowd ridiculed them, saying, "They're just drunk, that's all!"

50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus, 10 days after the ascension of the resurrected Jesus, and all the disciples were rolling around drunk? I don't think so. This was the day the Hebrews traditionally celebrated the end of the harvest season by presenting an offering of first fruits to God.

In many ways, God turned traditional Pentecost on its head. Rather than marking the end of the harvest, as was the tradition of the Pentecost, this event marked the beginning of a harvest—of people. Furthermore, rather than humans giving gifts of first fruits to God, in this case God gave the gift of first fruits to the disciples—the Holy Spirit, a seal or promissory note giving assurances that there was more to come. Furthermore, because of the gift of the Holy Spirit the disciples would be among the first fruits, following Jesus *the* first fruit—the first one to rise from the dead with the assurance that those who believe would certainly follow in His footsteps (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

This was the start of the Kingdom of God that Jesus had promised, a Kingdom governed by the Spirit of God for the glory of the Father with Jesus as its King. This global Kingdom is manifested locally through what we commonly call "church"—Christ-followers gathering together to live out the ethics of the Kingdom. In other words, to evidence God's shalom, which is living together and communicating via the language of love.

Just as the spectators looked on and asked, "*What can this mean?*", people around the world should be asking the same when they see us loving one another in authentic and practical ways. In John 17:21-23 Jesus gave the disciples his core mission strategy when he prayed, "*Father make them one so that the world will know*".

Our loving unity should encourage the world to ask, "*What can this mean?*", providing us with an opportunity to explain.

The Sign

The world is astounded when they see us living together with the language of love, especially when we come from different cultures and tongues. It makes the world ask, "*How can this be?*"

When I pass through airports overseas I love playing 'spot the missionary'. A couple weeks ago I was in Kuala Lumpur and I mentioned this to a colleague. He said, "Oh, that's easy here in KL. You can almost guarantee that any multi-ethnic group walking the streets are missionaries, or at least Christians." And it dawned on me, he's right. Apart from work colleagues who might occasionally socialise together, culturally diverse groups that relate to one another as good friends are more likely to be Christian in largely unevangelised parts of the world. It is a sign. That's changing a bit with the millennial generation in the West and the lowering of multi-ethnic divides like we have here in Auckland and other cosmopolitan cities, but more often than not cultural differences still tend to separate people as they did at Babel.

It is easy to love those like us, especially if we like them, but it is not so easy across the divides of difference, as the media these days loves to point out. Our digitally-connected world is working hard to lower the barriers of difference and combat prejudice in all its forms, but it just keeps rearing its ugly head. It is core to the human condition, it is part of our sin-influenced nature.

At the Pentecost event, when the Holy Spirit was made available to *all* people who choose to follow Jesus, God made spiritual power available to overcome the divisive sin-influence and the Holy Spirit empowered people to love one another regardless of difference. Without the Holy Spirit, made available only to those who are allegiant with Christ, it is impossible to build a Kingdom of Peace. It will never happen. In God it can, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of love—God's love, not some wishy-washy romantic fantasy counterfeit. By releasing the Holy Spirit, God gave the gift of a single language, the language of love, to unite us in spite of the different tongues we may speak. When we love one another we tell the world, by our actions, of the wonderful things that God has done, which then gives us the opportunity to explain to them about the Source of our love: Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, Prince of Peace, the King.

As a sidebar, I need to emphasise that it is evident from Acts 2 that this Pentecost event was a *supernatural* event. The Galilean disciples clearly spoke in languages they didn't know, so that the spectators could hear God being glorified in their own tongues. Elsewhere in the New Testament we hear about a

Holy Spirit gift of a heavenly prayer language, but that's a bit different from the Acts 2 event... beyond the remit of this paper!

My point here is that at Babel God mercifully scattered the people so that they would look for Him. At this Pentecost event God began the great in-gathering from all over the world into His Kingdom. From that time forth the Kingdom of God has been spreading throughout the world with millions upon millions of people from all nations becoming citizens of the Kingdom, learning the Kingdom's language of love. You might say, at this Pentecost event that the Church was born, but I think it is more accurate to say the new Kingdom was inaugurated and that churches, however they are organised, are local manifestations of that reality.

The Sending

So here we are, some nineteen hundred and eighty-eight years later. What does God require of us when we gather together as 'called out ones'? Does he want us to be flashy and big, super organised, well-polished and comfortable so more people will join us? No. Does he want us to be exclusive and restrictive and only concerned for those who fit the narrow prerequisites for who should belong here? No.

God wants us to be language learners. To gather together wherever and whenever we can to practice the Kingdom language of love. It is a language you speak with your actions not your voices. It is a body language. It is complex but so very simple to learn. It starts with preferring others more than yourself.

It looks like this: *"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."* 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. And this, *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love (and love manifests itself as): joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."* Galatians 5:22. And loads of other instructions in Scripture that show us pictures of Holy-Spirit-empowered love in the community of the Kingdom of God.

Can you see the language of love coming through these character traits? They are God's character traits. I define love as a "compassionate intentionality to bless". It is proactive and responsive. It is an act of volition and a heartfelt determination to do good to others, and it is made effective among people who are different from each other because of the Holy Spirit in us. *"For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."* says Paul in Philippians 2:13. With this God sends us out into all nations as witnesses to His love to make new disciples who start out on the journey of love language learning.

You can go anywhere in the world with the language of God's love and be understood and appreciated. This is what the world is yearning for but they do not know how to get it, because they do not know Jesus, the only one who can give it to them.

This is the heart of mission, and there remains too much of the world that still has no understanding of the language of love, not in the Kingdom sense anyway. Not the kind of love that transcends differences. That's what the event at Pentecost was all about—a way for ALL people to find shalom harmony in Christ, in the Kingdom of God.

We may have many tongues, but—Soli Deo/in Christ alone—we bring all our different rhythms of grace into the one song, sung with one language: the language of love. We are part of a love song. May *that* be the hallmark of the manifestation of God's Kingdom, the church that meets wherever you gather. May God gift you the Holy Spirit in abundance so that the world out there will know that you are Jesus' disciples because of your love for one another.

Amen. Go in harmony.