

After Babel

Acts 2:1-42

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When a preacher stands to speak he or she experiences an odd half-moment of doubt, or what is technically known as a “sinking feeling.” In this half-moment the preacher notes the disparity between the setting in which the sermon was originally composed and the reality of the event itself. The first question to arise is, Do my words fit this occasion? Will my hearers understand me? Do I understand them?

A contemporary philosopher has written at length on what he calls “right speech.” He says,

Pseudo speech is speech which externally says the same thing as...right speech. Only it is not told to the right person in the right place and the right time....The world is full of misplaced and mistimed speeches. It lives by the few speeches made at the right time in the right place (Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, *Speech and Reality*, 179-80).

One thinks of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain getting off the airplane after concluding a nonaggression pact with Hitler, speaking about “peace in our time.” Great speech. Wrong time. Wrong place. As an example of right speech, one thinks of Martin Luther King, Jr., at the Lincoln Memorial. “I have a dream”—spoken precisely at a time of awakening hopes when America could still dream. It wouldn’t work today. “We don’t want dreams. We want jobs,” the hearers would reply.

The more cataclysmic the crisis, the more urgent the hour, the more compelling is the need for right speech. Without the word the event remains meaningless. It might as well have not happened. After all, what does an empty tomb signify without the proclamation, “He is not here; he is risen!”? Of what importance is it that Jesus read a messianic Bible passage in the synagogue unless he adds a sermon to it, a sermon that begins “Today”? “Now!”

Of what interest is it to us that 120 people had a religious experience twenty centuries ago that was witnessed by some Parthians, Medes and Elamites? Really. To paraphrase Harry Emerson Fosdick, “Only the preacher comes to church with a burning desire to know whatever happened to the Elamites.” No, Pentecost is a religious curiosity until you add the sermon, “Men and women of Israel . . . this concerns you!”

It’s a partnership: the event calls forth a word, and the word makes sense of the event. Indeed certain families and good friends have between them code words and expressions that, when uttered—usually around the dinner table or a campfire at the beach—call up worlds of experiences. When I get together with one of my dearest friends from college, my wife complains that we do not speak in sentences. We sit up all night throwing out individual words or names and reliving the experiences those names re-create.

The church has always trusted in this partnership of event and word. If there were stage directions for the Incarnation, they would read, “Enter God, *talking* . . .” The prophet Jeremiah ridicules the gods of the neighboring tribes:

Their idols are like scarecrows
in a cucumber field,
And they cannot speak.

It's not surprising that the advent of the Holy Spirit and the new age should be accompanied by a new language.

The church has always cared about language. It took the Hebraic story of salvation and translated it for a Greek culture. It translated its scripture into every imaginable language and dialect. Its preachers still agonize over each word—will the research chemist in the front row find this useful? Will the teenagers in the balcony hear this?

Of course we face obstacles to communication, but I am convinced that they are no greater than those faced by the Pentecost Christians. We may say, "Ah, but we live in an age of pluralism. What about MTV and the New Age religions? If Paul could come back to earth and read the dozens of books on *angels* that are flooding our malls, or drop in on a congressional prayer breakfast, or listen to the genuine dissatisfaction we have with the materialist bent of our lives, he would say to us what he said to the Athenians, "I perceive you are *very* religious!"

The difference between the Pentecost church and ours is this: they began with the assumption that the Holy Spirit would break through the obstacles with the word of God; we believe that our political and cultural differences have overmatched the word of God. The little pilot lights have gone out. The mighty *ruach* by which God created a world and a church is still. Our mothers and fathers of the Pentecost church believed that the Spirit had overcome the confusion of Babel. For us, who have learned to live with and celebrate pluralism, it's back to Babel. The poet Yeats wrote in "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

Marriage counselors tell us that the most common presenting complaint is "We have a communications problem," as though it were a matter of technical difficulties or trouble along the line. But communications problems in a marriage or in a church are often love problems, for love always finds a way of communicating itself. What unifies us and keeps us talking to and praying for one another? We have unity in Jesus Christ, the "this man" of whom Peter speaks in his sermon. What we have never had in the church is unanimity—not in Jerusalem, not in Nashville, Chicago, or New York. Which is to say, our church can never find the soul of its unity in any ideological position—right, left, or center—but only in the gospel.

There are those who believe that our racial and gender differences make it impossible for us to serve the gospel together. They think we are doomed to a long season of loveless conflict in the church until the church inevitably pulls apart into groups clustered around social and political issues.

The old formulas of grace, faith, and salvation seem to be losing their powers of coherence. I have observed among some seminarians an unwillingness to acknowledge the centrality of *this* Jesus Christ in the religion called Christianity. The poet is right. Things do fall apart. The center . . . well, what center?

This is the traditional moment in the sermon when the preacher says, "We've got to get back to Pentecost, back to the original unity of the church, back to the bedrock

of faith. What we need is their spirit!” But, one does not go *back* to the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is always out in front of the church calling it forward. The Spirit is always blowing exactly where the Spirit wills, transcending our forms and violating our rubrics. The Spirit doesn’t want us to imitate the Palestinian church of the first century; the Spirit wants to lead us and our church into the twenty-first century.

But things fall apart. God’s good creation lives a half-step ahead of chaos. At the end of the primeval history in the eleventh chapter of Genesis the author leaves us with an unforgettable image of dissolution. People of all nations talking past one another in unknown tongues. Babel. Babble. Babel—about boundaries and borders, tariffs and trade, homelands and sanctions; not peace but the shape of the peace conference table . . . Babel. Into the confusion that exists after Babel, the author of Genesis focuses on one solitary person in whom God will bless all people: “Now the Lord said to Abram”

So Peter’s Pentecost speech pierces the confusion of the event by focusing on one person:

. . . Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst . . . this Jesus . . . you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

It’s as if in this sermon the Parthians, Medes, Elamites step off the treadmill of history for a moment and join hands in a vast circle and look to the center. Included in that circle are liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, feminists and traditionalists, gay and straight, high church and low, Second World and Third, ghetto and suburbs. And behold there at the center—”this Jesus.”

In him, the center holds. Pentecost is not about enthusiasm or the techniques of church growth. It is not about the good old days and unanimity. It’s not even about the triumph of consensus. It’s about *our* sons and daughters prophesying!

The forces of Babel are arrayed against us and displayed within us. No amount of social or ecclesial engineering can defeat Babel. Human eloquence fails against Babel. The voices of reason drown in Babel. The African-American preacher never tires of saying, “God can make a way out of no way.” That, finally, is the real miracle of Pentecost. In Jesus Christ the center of our discourse with one another—not to mention those who mock us—holds. Even when things seem to be flying in every direction, the center holds. The same Holy Spirit by which God raised Jesus from the dead and placed him at the very center of our church is still moving among us. It’s true. We do live after Babel, but also after Pentecost.