

Pentecost and Global Vision

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Pentecost is as important for the twentieth century as it was for the first. It represents God's offer of international unity and understanding in a world shrunk by modern methods of transportation and communication. Billions of tourists travel across national boundaries each year. Millions of people migrate from their home lands to places where their language is foreign and their accent is strange. Giant corporations reach to every corner of the globe.

Bringing people together does not always unify them. In fact, bringing people who are different together often causes conflict. Life in a shrunk world has its problems. How does a national labor force troubled by high unemployment assimilate new workers from other countries? How can tourists enjoy other cultures without debasing them? How can an international economic order help poor nations instead of exploiting them? How can the two superpowers occupy the same planet without destroying it?

Clearly the necessity of international unity is undeniable, and Pentecost is a sign and promise of that unity. At Pentecost people "from every nation under heaven" heard the story of God's mighty works in their own language without need for a translator (Acts 2:5-13). The unity of this polyglot crowd is a display of God's power to accomplish his ultimate purpose, to unite all things in Christ, "things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10).

It is important to note the global scope of this unity. The unity which the Spirit gives is not a cozy togetherness among persons of the same culture, race, and social class. It is love among persons who are different. Their languages are evidence of their differences. Language is a necessary building block of culture. A language both shapes and reflects the culture of those who speak it. A common language unites people who understand it and separates them from people who do not understand it. Witness the language of the youth culture which is created primarily to unite those who know it and separate them from those who do not.

A Global Family

The international unity of Pentecost should be understood in the context of Genesis, chapters 10 and 11. These chapters tell how the family of nations was formed from the lineage of Noah's sons and how that family was divided at the tower of Babel. They tell us of God's desire for unity among humankind—but not just any kind of unity. It is a unity in diversity, a unity which is inclusive of all.

Chapter 10 tells us that God has created a plurality of peoples; yet they all are one family. The forming of the nations is seen as fulfillment of creation and of God's mandate "to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28).

The human race grows into a variety of nations and living patterns. Yet all these nations have a God-given unity. Walter Brueggemann has written:

In a sweeping scope, the text insists that there is a network of interrelatedness among all peoples. They belong to each other. . . . We have to do not with a unity to be achieved, but with a unity already given among us.¹

The conviction that God has formed the nations, different as they are, from one human family is echoed in Paul's sermon to the Athenians: "And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him" (Acts 17:26-27).

In this context the building of the tower is an attempt to substitute a self-willed unity for the unity and diversity desired by God. God's scattering of the nations should be seen not only as his punishment but also as a continuation of his purpose for creation:

Seen from this perspective, the fear of scattering expressed in 11:4 is resistance of God's purpose for creation. The peoples do not wish to be spread abroad but want to stay in their own safe mode of homogeneity. Thus the tower and the city are attempts at self-serving unity which resists God's scattering activity.²

At Pentecost, God unites those whom he has scattered, but he does so without destroying their diversity. The Holy Spirit gives the unity needed for dispersion of God's people among the nations. They have been told to be his witnesses to the end of the earth, but they are to wait in Jerusalem until they "are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). So at Pentecost the Holy Spirit brings power for the apostles to move out to witness to God's work in Christ. The ability to understand foreign languages was an appropriate sign of that power.

One of the functions of the Spirit in Acts is to widen the circle of Christian inclusiveness. The Spirit launches the church into mission to people who are socially, ethically, and religiously on the outside. It is the Spirit who sends Philip to the secretary of the treasury of Ethiopia (8:26-40). It is the Spirit who enables Ananias to receive Saul, the persecutor, as a brother (9:10-19). It is the Spirit who moves Peter to violate his religious convictions in order to visit a pagan military commander (10:1-20). It is the Spirit who leads the church into its first mission to the Gentiles (13:1-2).

Unity and Diversity in the Spirit

Of course our understanding of the Pentecost story depends a great deal on where we place ourselves in that story. Probably most of us usually identify with Peter and the other apostles. If so, the gift of the Spirit is empowerment to speak of God in a way that others can understand even if they are different from us. It may, however, be more appropriate for us to identify with the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and others who heard the news of Christ. If so, the

gift of the Spirit is empowerment to understand those who speak to us of God even if they are different from us.

Both the task of speaking of God to those from other lands and cultures and the task of learning about God from them are important today, and both demand the willingness to think about God, the world and ourselves in new ways. Otherwise, the message we speak will be foreign for them—at best irrelevant, at worst imposing on them our cultural perspective in the name of the gospel. It is difficult to speak of God to others in words they can call their own. If we try, we will be forced to examine the relationship between Christian revelation and cultural, ideological, and social class influences in the shaping of our own faith.

As difficult as it is for us to speak to persons of other lands and cultures, however, it is probably harder for us to listen.³ I remember with regret ways my own insularity has prevented me from learning. In college and seminary I never got to know well the international students who attended class with me. As a pastor I zealously led my congregation in its tasks of evangelism and social involvement on the local level. I was tremendously interested in justice and other ethical issues in my community, my region (Appalachia), and my nation. But I was not much interested in international mission—not much interested really in the world beyond the borders of the United States. Every year my denomination (Presbyterian) had a witness season in which two themes were to be studied: a geographical area (India, South America, etc.) and an issue (poverty, reconciliation, etc.). At my suggestion my congregation always chose the theme dealing with an issue. We never studied a geographical area. We invited an itinerating missionary to speak in our church each year. Otherwise, we did almost nothing to promote enthusiasm for international mission or understanding of global conditions.

Such patterns of ministry confirm an insularity that begins early in life for most Americans. Studies of children and adolescents in the United States show that they trust in the primacy of the U.S.A. and view other nations as strange or hostile.

Beginning at about the second grade, students have already learned a sense of “we” about the U.S. and of “they” about the rest of the world. By the ages of ten and eleven, they have begun to develop ideological formations by which they structure the we-they syndrome. Their primary stance is that we are a place of freedom, opportunity, and can be trusted more than “they.” They also perceive us as Christian . . . [In the early grades, they are] favorable to countries that are seen as being similar to us and both patronizing and hostile to countries that are seen to be strange. By the ages of ten and eleven . . . other countries are judged by whether or not they are communist, and communists are seen as aggressors who want to take over our country. . . . Seventh and twelfth graders have images of Asia and Africa as being only places of disease and poverty and Russia as being only atheistic, anti-Christian, authoritarian and politically evil.⁴

It is the church’s responsibility to help these children and their parents

and teachers break out of their provincialism. We must do this because we are Christians first and Americans second. Our vision must be global because we serve a universal God. He is not God of the few, or even of the many, but of all. As Christians we cannot divide humanity as if some persons are outside his concern or ours.

Our vision must be global, also, because of catholicity of church. The church is inclusive of persons from every social, political, racial, or geographical grouping. The church is universal in nature. No local church is truly the church unless it sees itself as an arm of the universal church. Today the church is present in almost every country. This means that our local ministry is part of a worldwide ministry and our local fellowship is part of a worldwide fellowship.

A global awareness will help us see the interrelation between local mission and international mission. On the one hand we see that international issues have local relevance. There are many ties which bind our congregations and communities to other peoples, countries and churches. Here is a list of a few:

- (1) Most of the vegetables we eat in the winter months are grown in Mexico or Central America.
- (2) The food for the rest of the year may be grown here, but the people who pick it are often the poor from Mexico or the Caribbean; and these migrant workers often live near or pass through our communities.
- (3) Hundreds of communities host refugees, exiles or aliens (legal or undocumented) from some part of the world—though we may not always understand why they have come.
- (4) Farmers in the smallest town know that their income is directly tied to the export of grain, and to whether foreign aid will be made available to nations where people are starving but too poor to buy, and to governmental decisions about whether food will be denied to the Soviets or Nicaraguans for political reasons.
- (5) Banks in even medium-sized cities are tied into huge international consortia so that our local savings may be lent out to a government in South America or a business in Asia.
- (6) The money dropped in offering plates on Sunday may come from the salaries of those who work for companies with operations in dozens of countries, or from the dividends which such companies pay.⁵

Decisions about international issues affect the lives and the local communities of all of us.

On the other hand, local ministry has international importance. The way we deal with poverty, racism, the unchurched, drugs, and crime in our own communities affects poverty, racism, and evangelism in other nations. When my wife and I arrived in Indonesia as the second missionary couple to go to that country from the Presbyterian Church in the United States, Indonesian church leaders knew little about our denomination. They knew that we were separated from our northern brothers and sisters in the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A.; and though they had been told that racial issues were no longer a reason for that separation, they were not entirely assured. On our second

night at our new home, the theological faculty gave a dinner for us. After dinner I was asked to tell about myself and answer some questions so that my new colleagues could get to know me. The third question was asked very politely like all the rest: "Mr. Brownlee, would you please tell me your church's policy toward black people?" My whole missionary career was affected by the way I answered that question. On another occasion an Indonesian who had studied in America and experienced discrimination told me, "About a year ago I was watching an American movie which showed a fight between a black man and a white man, and the black man won. When I saw that, I knew that things had changed in America." It was obvious that he had experienced that change as a victory. The struggle against racial discrimination has importance not just for our local communities, but for people throughout the world.

Today the economic issues faced by United States Christians probably have an even greater global importance than racial issues. Our personal and ecclesiastical life styles and the ways we confront problems of unemployment, labor-management relations, poverty, issues concerning food and agriculture, as well as international trade and aid affects the livelihoods of people throughout the world. Our desire for imports like coffee, sugar, or bananas often means that third-world land which has produced rice, wheat and vegetables for local consumption is now used for exports. "Thousands of peasants in Columbia have been driven from their farms to marginal lands or to urban slums to make way for the producers of export crops like cut flowers for the North American market; similarly peasants in Northeast Brazil were displaced in favor of soybeans to feed the cattle of Europe and Asia."⁶

The World Council of Churches' statement on evangelism and mission attests the global importance of local ministry:

The Christian affirmations of the worldwide responsibility of the Church will be credible if they are authenticated by a serious missionary engagement at home. As the world becomes smaller, it is possible even for Christians living far away to be aware of and inspired by faithful missionary engagement in a local situation. Of special importance today is the expression of solidarity among the churches crossing political frontiers and the symbolic actions of obedience of one part of the body of Christ that enhance the missionary work of other sectors of the Church. So, for example, while programmes related to the elimination of racism may be seen as problems for some churches, such programmes have become, for other churches, a sign of solidarity, an opportunity for witness and a test of Christian authenticity. Every local congregation needs the awareness of its catholicity which comes from its participation in the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ in other parts of the world. Through, its witnessing stance in its own situation, its prayers of intercession for churches in other parts of the world, and its sharing of persons and resources, it participates fully in the world mission of the Christian Church.⁷

Escape from Narrowness

A global perspective will also widen our horizons. It helps make us aware of the limitations and blind spots of our own cultural worldview. A global perspective is thus like an historical perspective. It frees us from the biases of the here and now. By understanding other cultures, we are better able to appreciate certain parts, of our own culture. We can be challenged where our own views are faulty and learn from those who have a different perspective.

The most dangerous characteristic of modern, Western society is not its materialism, secularism, or sterility—these might be corrected if we had a little humility—but its arrogant conviction that it is smarter and better in every way than any other culture anywhere at any time. We see ourselves as enlightened: men and women come of age, the products of centuries of progress.

There are at least three ways a global perspective challenges the arrogance of our society. First, Christians in other countries can help us see new meanings in the gospel. There are Christian values which we may have neglected because of our cultural biases: the importance of community (to balance our individualism), harmony with nature (to balance our desire to master and use nature), the importance of an unprovable understanding of matters of ultimate value (to balance our emphasis on a provable understanding of matters of secondary value).

Second, Christians in other cultures can help us in our efforts to make the gospel relevant to our own culture. They can do this because they assume that their cultures are not Christian. They understand that a relevant gospel challenges the world-view of its hearers. It raises questions about things which we take for granted, even about things which we highly value. People who live in Muslim or Buddhist societies understand that the gospel brings a word of judgement on those churches does not call into question basic assumptions of our society. Christians who live in Marxist countries understand the tension between their faith and Marxism, but Christians under capitalistic systems often experience no tension. Perhaps we can learn from Christians in other countries how to bring the light of our faith to bear on a society which is out of joint.⁸

Third, if we have a global perspective we will be aware of how luxuriously we live in comparison with most of the people of the world. That means that we see the world and the gospel from a privileged position. We do not understand the world or the Bible as they are understood by the poor. We like policemen because they protect us. Many of the poor fear policemen. When we read the story of the good Samaritan, we identify with the Samaritan or perhaps with the priest or Levite. The poor identify with the man who was robbed and beaten.

Most rich people do not think they can learn from the poor. We assume that they are poor because they are stupid. There are, however, mothers in Indonesia who feed their families on 5¢ per person per meal. Tests by the Protestant hospital in Yogyakarta showed that the children of some of these mothers are as healthy as any children in the world.

Might not these mothers have something to teach American families which find it hard to make ends meet with \$30,000 or more per year?

As a boy I was often told that you could tell the blacks were happy even though they were poor, because they were always singing and joking. That view is naive because it takes no account of the suffering and vulnerability of the poor. It is also perverse because it is used to justify injustice. Yet that naivety and perversity is perhaps not as dangerous as the myth that the poor are not happy at all and cannot be happy until they become rich. The myth is a form of self-deception by those of us who are not poor. It is our way of assuring ourselves we are the fortunate ones, the ones who are living well and have nothing to learn from those who are poor. We should not romanticize the situation of the attitudes of the poor. Their plight is often miserable, and some of them are selfish, bitter and violent. Yet many of them possess a resiliency, a hopefulness, a vitality, and a joy which are possible only for those who are not anxious about their lives (Matt. 6:25).

We can be thankful for the world's cultural pluralism which enables persons from different countries to enrich and correct each other. It is important to affirm the value of this pluralism at a time when the power of Western technology and economic institutions are pushing the world toward global uniformity. Genesis 10 and 11 should make us wary of any movement toward a monochrome culture which swallows all other cultures in the name of better technology, greater efficiency, and higher profits. Our American ideal of a melting pot in which all peoples are made alike should be replaced with the image of the salad bowl in which variety is affirmed. Cultural differences should be seen not as barriers to relationship but as possibilities for enriched relationship. Just as in the Trinity the Godhead is neither confused or divided, God's will is that human beings should not all be made alike nor be separated and autonomous. The human community should be a diversified unity.

NOTES

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982) 93.

² *Ibid.*, 99.

³ Brueggemann points out that while *shema* in Genesis 11:7 is usually translated "understood", it can also mean "listen", *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴ Program Agency, *Education in a Global Age*, (United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., 1980), 20-21.

⁵ From Walter L. Owensby, "Preaching with a Global Perspective", in *The Pastor's Letter* 4, (September 1983).

⁶ "First Draft of the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy" *Origins, NC Documentary Service*, 14, 22/23 (November 15, 1984) 370.

⁷ *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation*, published with the cooperation of the Division of Overseas Ministries, National Council of Churches, U.S.A. 43.

⁸ See Lesslie Newbigin, "Mission in the 1980's", *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 4, 4, (October 1980) 154-155.