

# Editorial: Pentecost, Perplexity and Language Learning

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It is the day of Pentecost. An assorted group of followers of a recently executed Messiah – one of a series of such figures to emerge in recent times in turbulent Judea, but this time rumored to have risen from the dead – are assembled in a house in Jerusalem. They have never read the New Testament, for not a word of it is yet written. They don't yet know one of the most familiar stories of the Christian Scriptures, or how they will become part of it. They have been given no detailed expectations as to what will happen next. When they asked Jesus, immediately before he was taken from them, about whether the kingdom was about to be restored to Israel, his response was: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority."<sup>1</sup> All he would add was that "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Not much to go on if you are trying to imagine what will happen next. What was in the minds of this motley crowd, drawn together in a house in Jerusalem only by their common faith in Jesus and an obscure expectation of supernatural power?

The story of the day of Pentecost is so familiar, so often repeated in sermon, in art, in commentary, in lectionary, in literary allusion, that it takes an effort to imagine what it would be like not to know the story, to have no expectation of the tongues of flame, the wind, the linguistic miracle, just an anticipation of power. When the disciples' imaginations ran ahead, as they must have done daily since the promise of power, what might they have imagined?

We have our own standard cultural images of people energized by power from on high. When someone is mysteriously infused with superhuman power, muscles bulge, shirts rip, and a former weakling becomes able to hurl large vehicles across the street. Formerly average legs become able to run alongside trains or leap from building to building. Senses are sharpened,

forewarning of impending danger, and frail human flesh becomes virtually invulnerable to harm. Supernatural power makes ordinary people faster, stronger, more invincible; it takes away their weakness and shame and results in the defeat of their enemies.

But that's Hollywood, a serious anachronism if we are contemplating first century Jews. Surely their imaginations ran along different lines? After all, it's the Holy Spirit, rather than gamma rays or radioactive spiders, that is to bring the power in this story. Surely the superhero images were far from their minds as they waited in prayer.

Maybe. But maybe not. These Jewish disciples had their own gripping stories about how the Spirit of God came on people with power. When Samson was attacked by a roaring lion, "the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power so that he tore the lion apart with his bare hands as he might have torn a young goat."<sup>2</sup> When he fell into debt because of a lost wager, "the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle."<sup>3</sup> And when his Philistine enemies encountered him bound by two new ropes, "the Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power. The ropes on his arms became like charred flax, and the bindings dropped from his hands. Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey, he grabbed it and struck down a thousand men."<sup>4</sup> Later, when Saul heard of the humiliation being suffered by the men of the besieged city of Jabesh Gilead, "the Spirit of God came upon him [Saul] in power, and he burned with anger. He took a pair of oxen, cut them into pieces, and sent the pieces by messengers throughout Israel, proclaiming, 'This is what will be done to the oxen of anyone who does not follow Saul and Samuel.'<sup>5</sup> The result was a crushing defeat for the besieging Ammonites. Later still, as the sky grew black after Elijah's triumph over the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, "the power of the LORD came upon Elijah and, tucking his cloak into his belt, he ran ahead of Ahab all the way to Jezreel"<sup>6</sup> – with Ahab, it should be noted, covering the 25 miles or so in a horse-drawn chariot. When the Spirit of the LORD comes upon ordinary people with power, they are made faster, stronger, more invincible; it takes away their weakness and shame and results in the defeat of their enemies. The believers' last question to the risen Christ surely offers a clue regarding at least some of what was in their minds – will the kingdom at this time be restored to humiliated Israel, currently occupied by a foreign army? Despite (or perhaps even because of) the fact that Jesus would not commit himself, it is not hard to imagine the possible plotlines that

may have run through at least some minds as they waited for power from the Holy Spirit.

But perhaps others were thinking along different lines. Perhaps they had begun to have a better grasp of where Jesus' teaching was headed. Perhaps they had paid careful heed to the second part of Jesus' response to their last question to him: "you shall be witnesses...to the ends of the earth." Perhaps it put them in mind of other precedents from their heritage of faith. Samuel, for instance, giving Saul a promise remarkably similar to the one they had just heard: "you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person."<sup>7</sup> Or Isaiah, prophesying about one who would "give decisions for the poor of the earth," for

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him –  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of power,  
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the power to prophesy to all people, maybe with the miraculous accompaniments that bore witness to the power of the Spirit in Jesus' own ministry, was to the fore in the minds of many of the gathered disciples.

Whatever their precise expectations, there was surely little to prepare them for what actually happened, events that certainly left the resulting crowds in a state of bewilderment:

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears

them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”<sup>9</sup>

Note that while the rushing wind and the tongues of fire have come to prominence through later artistic representations of Pentecost, what receives by far the greatest emphasis in the text itself is not these phenomena (each mentioned once in passing and not returned to) but the connection between the crowd’s bewilderment and their hearing of the disciples speaking their languages, of Jewish disciples reaching out to each of them in their own mother tongues. The multiplicity of languages is mentioned no less than four times, the last three of which all emphasize the crowd’s perplexity at hearing their own languages spoken. And it is a good perplexity, a perplexity that breaks through comfortable expectations and makes space for something new.

Again, we are too familiar with the story to catch the amazement without an effort of imagination. It is easy to forget that this gracious multiplication of languages as a response to receiving power from the Spirit was both unprecedented and unnecessary. It was unprecedented because the result of the Spirit of the LORD empowering his followers had never looked quite like this in any of the familiar stories, whether of the military might or prophetic authority varieties.<sup>10</sup> (To catch a sense of the oddity of this tale, consider an aspiring scriptwriter approaching a Hollywood studio with an idea for a new movie. A mild-mannered insurance salesman is exposed to strange cosmic radiation, undergoes mysterious changes, and from that day forward when times of crisis arise he finds himself ... able to speak Norwegian. Would you invest in the script?)

The linguistic fireworks also appear to have been unnecessary, at least viewed in pragmatic terms. It is easy to assume that the multiplication of tongues was an emergency miracle, designed to overcome language barriers and enable an immediate offer of salvation without having to wait for more pedestrian processes of language learning and translation. Two points count against that idea. First, according to the historians, people from the places listed in verses 9-11 would have been familiar with Aramaic (those from the

east) or Greek (those from the west).<sup>11</sup> Second, and more obvious from the text itself, as soon as the crowd is gathered Peter gets up and preaches a sermon to the assembled multitude. There is no suggestion that this sermon underwent miraculous translation, yet it is to the sermon that three thousand respond by submitting to baptism.

Why break the mold in such a dramatic fashion if there was no pressing pragmatic need to do so? Why did Pentecost, the birthing of the Christian church, take this form? This is obviously a very big question, unlikely to be exhausted by a single answer, but let me hazard a response that has a bearing on how we think about languages and language learning. My suggestion is that God is both practicing and modeling what he has been preaching.

Of the many prior texts to which one could turn, let me mention just two. At the heart of the Old Testament, according to Jesus, is the twofold command to love God with all of one's heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The latter command appears in Leviticus 19:18, and is rapidly followed by what appears to a specific application of it, the only such echo in the surrounding text. Verse 34 urges "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt." Love your neighbor as yourself – and in particular, love the foreigner as yourself. Place this alongside another key summary statement, this time from the New Testament. Jesus' articulation of the Golden Rule states: "in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit models an attitude that resonates with these texts and undercuts pragmatic approaches to linguistic diversity. It is an attitude that says to foreign hearers, 'even if you can get by in the local language, even if I could require you to master a second language in order to hear what I have to say, I am going to reach out to you on your terms, in your tongue, in the language the speaks to your heart.' It is the ethical opposite of the all too common attitude that says: 'I can get by with my own language, so there's no pragmatic need for me to learn anyone else's; if they want to hear what I have to say it will be on my terms, in my tongue, and I won't be the one taking extra linguistic trouble and making myself vulnerable.'

I often ask my students: what would we have others do to us in linguistic terms? Typically, we would have them learn our language and talk to us in ways that we understand, we would have them respect our ways of speaking, we would have them take us into account and take our stories and our culture seriously. So what does the Golden Rule suggest to us? How might

we love strangers as ourselves? How might we take a hint from what God modeled at Pentecost? Martin Luther drew an apt conclusion, chiding his countrymen for chasing after foreign consumer goods but failing to engage with foreign languages. Not so with the Holy Spirit, he urges: “the Holy Spirit is no fool. He does not busy himself with inconsequential or useless matters. He regarded the languages as so useful and necessary to Christianity that he oftentimes brought them down with him from heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

If this is so, then here is an argument for foreign language study that should be heard far more often and more forcefully, especially at Christian colleges. Perhaps the most basic reason for learning the languages and cultures and others is neither purely intellectual nor predominantly pragmatic. Perhaps language learning should not *at its heart* be about enhancing career or study prospects, polishing our brains, strengthening national security or economic competitiveness, or making travel more educational, valid as all of these motives may be in their place. Perhaps the central reason for strengthening the place of foreign language learning in our schools and colleges is an *ethical* reason, a surprising stance modeled for us at the very birth of the Christian church (an event which, according to one historian of linguistics, brought about “the first great expansion of the linguistic horizon” of Western culture).<sup>13</sup> What the gratuitous perplexity of Pentecost teaches us, I suggest, is that an education that does not seriously engage with the languages and cultures of others is not just pragmatically, or intellectually, but *ethically* and *spiritually* deficient, rooted as it is in a failure to love others as ourselves, to do to them as we would have them do to us. This runs deeply counter to the basic instincts and priorities of Western culture – but then since when did the Holy Spirit go with the flow? Bombarded as we are with pragmatic considerations in a world that often just wants to find the most efficient route from A to B, we, our students and our administrators would all benefit from meditating on the healthy perplexity of Pentecost.

## Introduction to volume 5

Volume 5 of JCFL brings new topics, new writers and also new editors. We are grateful to Donna West for her work on volumes 3 and 4. Dianne Zandstra has taken on the role of assistant editor as of the present issue, and Olga Leder has also joined the editorial team to assist with the management of the journal. Both teach in the Spanish department at Calvin College.

The volume begins with David Weeks’ well-received keynote address from last year’s NACFLA conference. His article addresses a theme

that threads it way through several parts of this volume. Like the editorial and Jennifer Beatson's Forum contribution he focuses on the aims and justification for foreign language learning at Christian colleges. Anyone having to argue the case for a strong foreign language program is particularly directed to those pieces. The two articles that follow also have some interesting thematic commonality. Both deal with the labyrinth as a theological symbol; Galen Yorba-Gray studies its use in the work of Juan de Mena, while Leonard Marsh finds it playing a significant role in a work by Gustave Flaubert. Sandi Weightman's essay on Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda explores the connection between religious discourse, emancipative ideals and gender construction. Cynthia Slagter returns us to pedagogical questions, and to a recurring theme in these pages: how do we help students learn about cultural otherness? Irene Konyndyk's timely reflections on learning disabilities in the foreign language classroom and Herman De Vries's stimulating extended review of Guy Cook on language play complete the rich and varied, yet also interconnected, fare that makes up the fifth volume of JCFL. We commend it to you in the hope that it will provoke fruitful reflection and faithful practice.

*David I. Smith and Dianne Zandstra*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:7. All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version, © Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

<sup>2</sup> Judges 14:6

<sup>3</sup> Judges 14:19

<sup>4</sup> Judges 15:14-15

<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 11:6-7. See also Judges 3:9-10: "But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him."

<sup>6</sup> 1 Kings 18:46

<sup>7</sup> 1 Samuel 10:5-6

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 11:2

<sup>9</sup> Acts 2:2-12

<sup>10</sup> There are clear, if complex, parallels between Luke's Pentecost narrative and the Babel narrative on Genesis 11; there is, however, little reason to suspect that