LANGUAGES AND THE KINGDOM

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A quote from a commentary on Acts Chapter Two which sums up much of what has driven my whole adult life.
Category: Observations

I love this longish quote from A Theological Commentary on Acts by Willie James Jennings. It should inspire every missionary and Bible translator and should challenge those who speak majority languages about their attitudes. The passage is discussing Pentecost.

"The gesture of speaking another language is born not of the desire of the disciples, but of God, and it signifies all that is essential to learning a language. It bears repeating: this is not what the disciples imagined or hoped would manifest the power of the Holy Spirit. To learn a language requires submission to a people. Even if in the person of a single teacher, the learner must submit to that single voice, learning what the words mean as they are bound to events, songs, sayings, jokes everyday practices, habits of mind and body, all within a land and the journey of a people. Anyone who how has learned another language other than their native tongue knows how humbling learning can actually be. An adult in the slow and often arduous efforts of pronunciation may be reduced to a child and a child at home in that language may become the teacher of an adult. There comes a crucial moment in the learning of any language, if one wishes to reach fluency, that enunciation requirements and repetition must give way to sheer wanting. Some people learn a language out of gut-wrenching determination born of necessity. Most, however, who enter a life-time of fluency, do so because at some point in time they learn to love it.

They fall in love with the sounds. The language sounds beautiful to them. And if that love is complete, they fall in love with its original signifiers. They come to love the people - the food, the faces, the plans, the practices, the songs, the poetry, the happiness, the sadness, the ambiguity, the truth - and they love the place, that is, the circled earth those people call their land, their landscapes, their home. Speak a language, speak a people. God speaks people, fluently. And God, with all the urgency that is the Holy Spirit, wants the disciples of his only begotten Son to speak people fluently too. This is the beginning of a revolution that the Spirit performs. Like an artist drawing on all her talent to express a new way to live, God gestures the deepest joining possible, one flesh with God and desire made one with the Holy One.

Yet here we can begin to see even more clearly the ancient challenge and the modern problem. The ancient challenge is a God who is way ahead of us and is calling us to catch up. The modern problem is born of the colonial enterprise where language play and use entered its most demonic displays. Imagine peoples in many places, in many conquered sites, in many tongues all being told that their languages are secondary, tertiary, and inferior to the supreme languages of the enlightened peoples. Make way for Latin, French, German, Dutch, Spanish and English. These are the languages God speaks. These are the scholarly languages of the transcending intellect and the holy mind. Imagine centuries of submission and internalised hatred of mother tongues and in the

quiet spaces of many villages, many homes, women, men and children practising these new enlightened languages not by choice, but by force. Imagine peoples largely from this new Western world learning native languages not out of love, but as utility for domination. Imagine mastering native languages in order to master people, making oneself their master and making them slaves. Now imagine Christianity deeply implicated in all this, in many cases riding high on the winds of this linguistic imperialism, a different sounding wind. Christianity was ripe for this tragic collaboration with colonialism because it had learned before the colonial moment began to separate a language from a people. It had learned to value cherish, and even love the language of Jewish people found in Scripture - but to hate Jewish people.

Thankfully this is not the only story of Christianity in the colonial modern. There are also the quiet stories of some translators and the peculiar few missionaries who from time to time and place to place showed something different. They joined. They, with or without *natural language skill* sought love and found it another voice, another speech and another way of life. They showed something in their utter helplessness in the face of difference: they were there in a new land to be changed, not just to change people into believers. They were there not just to make conquered Christians but truly and deeply make themselves Christian in a new space that would mean that their names would be changed. They would become the sound of another people speaking the wonderful works of God. However, these stories remain hidden in large measure from the history of Christianity that we know so well, which means we often know so little of Christianity."

If you've grasped that quote; you've grasped what's driven me for my entire adult life.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8wrvbs9l8Q