THE LANGUAGE OF PENTECOST

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I find it slightly ironic (though unavoidable) that Luke's great story of the gospel being understood in multiple languages was recorded in just one language.
Category: Observations

> *Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearingÂ Jews from every nation under heaven.Â Â When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.Â Utterly amazed,Â they asked: â€œArenâ€™t all these who are speaking Galileans?Â Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?Â Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,Â PontusÂ and Asia,Â PhrygiaÂ and Pamphylia,Â Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene;Â visitors from RomeÂ Â (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabsâ€"we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!â€ Â Â Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, â€œWhat does this mean?â€*
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> *Acts 2:5-12*

This is a well known passage and one that I've quoted and commented on numerous times on this blog. The Pentecost miracle of a crowd people each hearing the gospel in their own language has been well rehearsed and is one of the key passages used to justify the translation of the Bible. Every language is capable of carrying Christ's message. It's an amazing concept and one which any follower of Jesus should be extremely grateful for.

However, in amidst this wonderful miracle of the message being understood in all of these languages stands one stark and slightly contradictory fact. The story was written in Koine Greek, the lingua franca of the Eastern Mediterranean at the time. It seems slightly ironic that this wonderful message of diversity is actually communicated by means of a linguistic juggernaut.

Of course, pragmatically speaking, Luke didn't actually have much choice. He chose to write in the language that would make the message accessible to the greatest number of people. Incidentally, it was also the language that Luke would probably have been happiest using. That being said, I think that there is another issue that is worth highlighting. In multi-lingual situations, languages such as Koine Greek, which are spoken by a wide range of people are an important feature of God's work. Those who advocate for minority language Bible translation stress the importance of people being able to understand the Scriptures in their mother tongue, and they are right to do so. However, if the only expression of Christianity is in minority languages, then it would be more or less impossible to express any sense of unity amongst believers from different language backgrounds. If Christians

from different contexts are to meet and worship together, a common language is a great help. There needs to be a sort of biblical multilingualism. Of course, most people in the world are multilingual, so this is not an impossible concept.

The problem comes when the powers that be and the speakers of the common language insist that their way of doing things should take precedence over everything else. The imposition of a majority language hegemony is the antithesis of the message of Acts and sadly, history is littered with examples just this sort of thing. It is important to negotiate a proper balance so that the rights of the minorities to understand and worship in their own language are not swamped by the majority language, while the ecumenical pull of the majority language is not lost. This is a complicated balancing act which needs to be constantly monitored and revised, but it reflects the constant tension which exists between local expressions of the church and its universal nature.

Just one final thought; Greek was a widely spoken, prestigious language, but it packed no political clout. It was the language of a faded empire. Luke could have written in Latin, the language of the actual Empire of the time, but he avoided doing so. Again, there are practical issues to be considered, but by avoiding a language that came with all sorts of political and military baggage, Luke left space for all of the minority languages that he mentions in this passage. When the language of the empire became the language of the church, minorities were squeezed out.