ACCEPTING, COMMUNICATING OR DOMINATING?

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How language communities interact and some thoughts of what churches need to do.
Category: Observations

I'm in the process of writing an article on languages and language borders (I'll link to it when it is published). This has had me musing on the way in which we see languages and language groups described in Scripture.

In the past, I've written a fair bit about Pentecost and Babel and I don't want to repeat myself too much, so follow that link if you want more...

As a Bible translator, I've often turned to the events of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 to illustrate how any language can be used as a medium for God's message. This is picked up in Revelation 7 where we see people from every tribe, tongue and nation worshipping the Lamb. It's a theme I often turn to in this blog; the church is a multilingual, multicultural community.

However, it is important to note that - as far as we can tell from Scripture - the miracle of Pentecost was a one-off event. Paul seems to have taught mainly in Greek and certainly all of his letters were written in that language, with the odd word of Aramaic or Hebrew thrown in from time to time. Pentecost shows that all languages can be used for God's message, but the New Testament church was born in Koine Greek (I have a book chapter on this coming out soon).

Then we have the events of Babel, in which humanity spoke the same language and attempted to set themselves up in a place that rightly belongs to God. There were no other language groups to relate to at that point, but the attitude was far from positive.

I think we can describe these three schemes as accepting, communicating and dominating and they describe how we can relate to speakers of other languages. Accepting is when we understand that people need to speak their own languages and create space and opportunity for them to do so. British churches who have significant communities of speakers of a particular language need to work out how to do this. Communicating involves finding common ground and creating bridges between different language communities. Dominating is when we insist that only one language is valid in a context; extreme examples of this are the use of Latin in the Western Church in the Middle Ages or the King James only movement which insists on "thees" and "thous". However, if we don't accommodate to visitors and immigrant communities in our churches, we can soon end up dominating without thinking about it.