PENTECOST: THE UNNECESSARYÂ MIRACLE

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Category: Observations

The day of Pentecost was a hugely important event in the life of the early church and one which has specialÂ resonance for those involved in Bible translation and cross-cultural mission. However, it's also an event that you can only really understand properly when it is read in its context in the book of Acts. This is the first of a series of blog posts on Pentecost which will highlight some of the things that are often missed when people talk about this passage.

The first thing I want to highlight is that the miracle of the day of Pentecost wasn't actually needed.

The story of Pentecost is well known, so I won't post the whole text. Briefly, the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples and they immediately rushed out into the streets to talk about the greatness of God and, amazingly, people from across the known world heard the disciples, a bunch of Galileans, speaking in their different languages.

This is an amazing miracle and having sweated to learn an African language without any books or courses to help me, it's one I really wanted to see repeated in my life. But as I've already said, it wasn't actually needed.

The key here, is the people who were listening to the disciples; Luke describes them as "God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven". They were people from the Jewish diaspora who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, perhaps some had stayed on after Passover a few weeks earlier. The key is that they were observant Jews who had taken part in temple worship. In other words, they understood enough of the language of the temple to get by. So if God had not performed the miracle, the bystanders would still have understood what was going on. Perhaps they would have struggled with the odd phrase, or with the disciples rustic accents, but they could have understood.

But God did the miracle anyway. Why?

I think there are three reasons why this miracle happened and I'll list them in ascending order:

- It drew a crowd. It's clear from the narrative in Acts that the miracle brought in a lot of people to listen to what was going on, even if some of them accused the disciples of having too much to drink (if drinking too much could give you fluency in other languages, there are a lot of language schools around the world that would need to shut down).
- The miracle of Pentecost shows that the Gospel message can be transmitted and experienced in every language and culture on the planet. This is revolutionary and sets Christianity apart from every other religion on the planet. The very fact that we read an English bible and sing worship songs in English is dependant on this.
- Most importantly, however, this miracle shows us the sort of God we have. Yes, the crowd could have understood the message in Aramaic, but God spoke to them in their own languages anyway. This is what God is like; he reaches out to us, where we are. He is the one who created us, who looked for Adam in the garden after the fall, who chose Abraham and

Moses and who ultimately came down to earth to live, die and rise again for us. The whole story of the Bible is a story of God reaching out to us and Pentecost is one more example of this.

There is a further implication of this;Â we, as God's people, filled by his Spirit, have the responsibility to follow in God's footsteps and to reach out to the world in his name.