PENTECOST, BABEL AND DIVERSITY

Posted on May 19, 2016 by Eddie

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Category: Bible & Mission

The Story of the Bible has an interesting shape. It starts talking about the relationship between God and all of humanity, tracing creation and then the fall. Then for a long, long section The Story only concentrates on one nation, one people group. And then in Acts it starts to broaden out again and by the time we reach the end, all of humanity will be included once more. I tend to visiualise The Story by thinking of it being thick at both ends but thin in the middle.

When you look at The whole Story in this way, something suddenly becomes very clear. At each of the transitions between thick and thin, there is a story about language. In Genesis 11, just before God calls Abraham there is the tower of Babel and then here in Acts we have the story of Pentecost and people miraculously hearing the story of Jesus in their own languages.

I donâ€™t believe this is a coincidence!

Letâ€™s take a trip back to the Tower of Babel. This incident occurred at perhaps the worst point in the history of humanity, when the fall at reached its lowest depths and just before God started his rescue plan through Abraham. Humanity was concentrated in modern day Iraq and they realised that their lives were limited and that no one remembered them when they died. So, they set about building a huge tower to commemorate themselves. God had created humanity to find its eternal significance in relationship to himself, not through bricks and mortar and seeing the tower, God dashed it to the ground and then scattered humanity across the earth at the same time mixing up their languages so that people no longer had a common tongue.

Make no mistake about it, what God did at Babel was a judgement on humanity. But God is remarkable, and that judgement carried with it a huge blessing for mankind. Firstly, in scattering men and women around the earth He helped them fulfil one of His earliest commandments to us. But it is the language issue that I want us to think about. God confused human language so that mankind could never again unite to find a replacement for God, such as the Tower of Babel. But in mixing up the languages God gave to us one of mankindâ€™s most precious gifts, the gift of language and culture.

Language and culture are wonderful. It is hard to separate one from the other, but they bring incredible richness to human existence. Just think about food for a moment. There are the great world cuisines; French, Chinese, Indian and Italian. But what about the humble British Sunday roast? Then there is sushi from Japan, banana foutou from Ivory Coast, hamburgers from the US and so the list goes onâ€¦ Every country has its own favourite food and they are (mostly) delicious. Likewise each culture has its own type of art; music, literature or sculpture. Every culture brings something unique to the sum total of human existence. One of the great wonders of our modern age is that we have access to so much different culture from around the world.

Of course, not everything about culture is worthwhile. A few years ago, we were returning from holiday in France on a cross channel ferry at the same time as hundreds of England football supporters were returning from a big match. A minority of the supporters drunk colossal quantities

of beer on board the ferry, became very aggressive and generally made life unpleasant for the rest of the passengers. Football and large quantities of alcohol are a genuine part of English culture â€“ but not a particularly attractive one.

The bottom line is that culture reflects the human beings who create it. We are created in the image of God and capable of amazing beauty and creativity, but we are fallen and capable of amazing depravity â€“ our culture is just the same.

Just as each culture brings something new to humanity, so does every language. Each language is capable of expressing some things better than all other languages. Why else do coffee shops sellÂ *cafe latte* rather than milky coffee? On a deeper note, each language has the ability to express itself in ways that other languages canâ€™t quite manage. There are subtleties of meaning and inference that just canâ€™t quite be transferred from one language to another without losing something. And this is really important, because that means that each language can say things about God and is capable of praising God in ways that other languages canâ€™t quite reach. When God multiplied the languages at Babel, He also gave us the possibility of understanding Him and praising Him in new ways. Babel was a judgement, but at the same time God blessed humanity immeasurably and revealed even more of himself to us.

Which brings us to Pentecost. Sometimes people say that at Pentecost, God reversed the Tower of Babel, but that is exactly what He didnâ€™t do. At Pentecost, God underlined the linguistic diversity that He introduced at Babel. Everyone in the crowd was able to understand the disciples speaking in his or her own language. The first miracle that the Holy Spirit did was to make it possible for the story of Jesus to be understood in many languages all at once. The Triune relational God did nor force conformity on his followers by making them all hear his message in one language, He encouraged diversity by allowing them to hear in their own language. From even before the Christian church was called Christian, it was Â multi-lingual.

This theme of using different languages was later taken up by the Gospel writers, who wrote the stories of Jesus down in Greek. Jesus almost certainly spoke Aramaic when he taught, but the Gospel writers chose to record his words in Greek so that more people could understand them. Christianity does not have a sacred language, we donâ€™t even have a record of Jesus words in the form in which they were spoken. The implications for this are enormous and reverberate down though history. Just compare Christianity to Islam for a brief moment. Islam has a sacred language, if you want to read the Koran or pray, you have to do so in Arabic. Effectively, all Muslims have to adopt a large slice of Arabic culture from the time of Mohammed. You see this in the way that many Muslims wear Arabic clothing, even if they are not Arabs, adopt Arabic names and so on. Christianity is simply not like that. You can pray in any language andÂ the Bible is the most translated book in the world. There is no Christian equivalent of the pilgrimage to Mecca, where thousands upon thousands of devout Muslims all dress the same and go through the same rituals at the same time. The God of Christianity is a God of variety and the Gospel can be lived and experienced in every

culture on the earth. If it couldnâ€™t, then Iâ€™d be writing in Aramaic, which would be tough as I donâ€™t speak it and most of you wonâ€™t read it.

There is one further important aspect to draw from this diversion into languages and cultures. If Christianity can be expressed in all languages and cultures, then it is also true that it doesnâ€™t belong to any particular language or culture. No one can say that they own the Christian faith.

This is a repost of something that I first wrote in 2010, but it seems to follow on from my recent posts on Pentecost.Â