MULTICULTURAL CHURCH PART 1

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Different languages and cultures were God's idea in the first place. The gospel makes all races equal, but it doesn't make us all the same, differences are preserved.
Category: Observations

Last weekend, I was asked to address a church away-day on the subject of multicultural church. I'm going to post the scripts that I spoke from without editing them or adapting them for a different medium, so they may read slightly strangely. This post is largely theoretical, tomorrow's will be more practical.

In these two talks I want to try and capture something of what is going on in the book of Acts. Acts was written by Luke, who also wrote one of the Gospels and it is, in effect, the follow up story of what came after Jesus ascended into heaven.

The book starts with Jesus speaking to his disciples at the ascension, and ends (rather suddenly), with Paul in prison in Rome. At first glance, the ending may seem rather strange. But Luke knew exactly what he was doing. Letâ€™s read the last few paragraphs of Acts:

> *7Â Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders.Â When they had assembled, Paul said to them: â€œMy brothers,Â although I have done nothing against our peopleÂ or against the customs of our ancestors,Â I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans.Â 18Â They examined meÂ and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death.Â 19Â The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar.Â I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people.Â 20Â For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of IsraelÂ that I am bound with this chain.â€*
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> *21Â They replied, â€œWe have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our peopleÂ who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you.Â 22Â But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.â€*
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> *23Â They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God,Â and from the Law of Moses and from the ProphetsÂ he tried to persuade them about Jesus.Â 24Â Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.Â 25Â They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: â€œThe Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he saidÂ through Isaiah the prophet:*
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> *26Â â€œâ€˜Go to this people and say,*
> *â€œYou will be ever hearing but never understanding;*
> *Â Â Â Â you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.â€*

> *27Â For this peopleâ€™s heart has become calloused;*
> *Â Â Â Â they hardly hear with their ears,*
> *Â Â Â Â and they have closed their eyes.*
> *Otherwise they might see with their eyes,*
> *Â Â Â Â hear with their ears,*
> *Â Â Â Â understand with their hearts*
> *and turn, and I would heal them.â€™*
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> *28Â â€œTherefore I want you to know that Godâ€™s salvationÂ has been sent to the Gentiles,Â and they will listen!â€ Â Â*
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> *30Â For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.Â 31Â He proclaimed the kingdom of GodÂ and taught about the Lord Jesus Christâ€"with all boldnessÂ and without hindrance!*

The book starts off with Jesus and a small group of disciples all of whom were Jewish meeting outside of Jerusalem. Now, to us, Jerusalem seems like a really important place â€“ but at the time, it was just a small provincial city that most people hadnâ€™t even heard of. However, by the end of the book, Paul is in Rome, the centre of the mightiest empire that the world had seen. Not only that, but he declares that because the Jews have rejected the Christian message, it will now go out into all the world. The book closes with Paul preaching boldly right at the heart of the Empire. The book of Acts takes us on a journey from Christianity being a monolingual, monocultural group on the fringes of the Empire, to being a multilingual, multicultural movement which stretches right into the centre of things. It is a momentous journey and it doesnâ€™t always go smoothly. In a couple of talks I want to highlight some of the trends that happened, starting with the day of Pentecost.

ACTS 2

> *When the day of PentecostÂ came, they were all togetherÂ in one place.2Â Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.Â 3Â They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.Â 4Â All of them were filled with the Holy SpiritÂ and began to speak in other tonguesÂ as the Spirit enabled them.*
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> *5Â Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearingÂ Jews from every nation under heaven.Â 6Â When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because*

> *each one heard their own language being spoken.Â [7Â] Utterly amazed,Â they asked: â€œArenâ€™t all these who are speaking Galileans?Â [8Â] Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?Â [9Â] Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia,Â PontusÂ and Asia,Â [10Â] PhrygiaÂ and Pamphylia,Â Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene;Â visitors from RomeÂ [11Â] (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabsâ€"we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!â€ Â [12Â] Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, â€œWhat does this mean?â€*
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> *[13Â] Some, however, made fun of them and said, â€œThey have had too much wine.â€*

This is a familiar story. The Spirit descended on the disciples and they rushed outside and started preaching. Amazingly, everyone heard them in their own languages. This was so weird that people actually thought that they were all drunk â€“ though what kind of booze gives you the ability to speak in all sorts of languages escapes me.

There are two things Iâ€™d like to point out about this miracle.

The first is that it was a miracle of understanding, not of speaking. The people listening all heard in their own languages â€“ it doesnâ€™t say that the disciples all spoke in different languages. As far as we can tell from the text, Peter and the others were all speaking in their normal language â€“ which might have been Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek depending on the context.

The second point is that this miracle wasnâ€™t actually necessary. All of the people who Peter was speaking to were Jews who had travelled over to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost â€“ they had been getting by in Jerusalem for weeks already. As seasoned travellers and traders they would speak Greek and as devout Jews they probably had some Aramaic or Hebrew. Peter could easily have communicated with all of them in one way or another. But God performed a miracle so that each of them could hear the gospel

There is a clear conclusion to be drawn from this; right at the start of the Christian age, God did not try to make everyone speak or listen to the same language â€“ he performed a miracle so that people could hear in their own language. Different languages and different cultures are all part of Godâ€™s plan for his church.

Revelation 7:9,10

> *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language,Â standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*

> *They were wearing white robesÂ and were holding palm branches in their hands.Â* [10Â] *And they cried out in a loud voice:*
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> *â€œSalvation belongs to our God,*
> *who sits on the throne,*
> *and to the Lamb.â€*

Get this â€“ there will be people from every tribe, tongue and nation around the throne in heaven, so weâ€™d better get used to it now.

BABEL

When we think about the miracle of Pentecost â€“ where God made it possible for people to hear his message in different languages, it also brings to mind the story of the tower of Babel, where God mixed the languages up.

> *Now the whole world had one languageÂ and a common speech.Â* [2Â] *As people moved eastward,Â they found a plain in ShinarÂ and settled there.*
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> [3Â] *They said to each other, â€œCome, letâ€™s make bricksÂ and bake them thoroughly.â€*
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> *They used brick instead of stone,Â and tarÂ for mortar.Â* [4Â] *Then they said, â€œCome, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens,Â so that we may make a nameÂ for ourselves; otherwise we will be scatteredÂ over the face of the whole earth.â€*
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> [5Â] *But theÂ LordÂ came downÂ to see the city and the tower the people were building.*[6Â] *TheÂ LordÂ said, â€œIf as one people speaking the same languageÂ they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.Â* [7Â] *Come, let usÂ go downÂ and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.â€*
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> [8Â] *So theÂ LordÂ scattered them from there over all the earth,Â and they stopped building the city.Â* [9Â] *That is why it was called Babelâ€”because there theÂ Lord confused the languageÂ of the whole world.Â From there theÂ LordÂ scatteredÂ them over the face of the whole earth.*

To get the full sense of what is going on here, we need to read back a couple of chapters. When Noah and his family came out of the Ark, God said this to them:

> *9:7Â Now be fruitful and multiply, and repopulate the earth.â€*

However, rather than repopulate the earth, they all gathered in one place and decided to build a city with some sort of huge religious monument â€“ exactly what it was we donâ€™t know. However, the important thing to note is that they were disobeying God in two ways; firstly, by not filling the earth as he had commanded and secondly by trying to build this monument in defiance of God. Godâ€™s response is fascinating â€“ he didnâ€™t blast them with lightning as I might have done â€“ he came down and confused their languages. Immediately they had to stop building â€“ they couldnâ€™t understand each other â€“ and they scattered over the world. Godâ€™s action forced them to obey the command that heâ€™d given in Acts 9:7 â€“ they finally got on with Godâ€™s command to fill the world.

God judged the people â€“ but he did so in a way which helped them obey him â€“ I think this is amazing.

OK, weâ€™ve had two stories, one from near the start of the Bible story and the other from close to the end. One thing ties them together; multiple languages. In Genesis, God came down and confused the languages so that people couldnâ€™t understand each other and in Acts, by the work of the Spirit, he made it possible for people to understand the Apostlesâ€™ message, but he didnâ€™t get rid of the multiple languages. He kept the differences. Right at the beginning of the church, God is saying that all of these different languages are perfectly adequate for the spread of the Christian message.

Babel made the idea of multilingual â€“ and multicultural â€“ societies possible.

Acts says that the church should be multicultural. Acts 2 is the first step on the journey that leads to Rome and the multicultural church we see at the end of the book.

WHY DOES ALL THIS MATTER?

All this is interesting (I hope) but why should we bother about it? I think there are a number of things that we need to think about that are important to our life in church.

Languages and Cultures are Important to God

Different languages and cultures were Godâ€™s idea. It was him who mixed the languages up at Babel. Not only that, but in Acts he emphasised the different languages by making people hear the message in their own language. He didnâ€™t need to do this, but he did. Language and culture are Godâ€™s idea in the first place and he values them. So, if they are important to God, we have to take them seriously ourselves.

They Are Important to Us

Our language and culture are incredibly important to us. This is something that people who live in majority cultures donâ€™t always appreciate. If you are an English speaker in the UK, you are used to having your language and culture in focus. You donâ€™t generally have to reach for Google translate to follow what is going on around you. Even if you go abroad you will find waiters and people in railway stations who speak English â€“ you never really have to work hard. Because of this, it is hard for us English speakers to really grasp how important language and culture is to people who are minorities amongst us. (Note, it is possible for people to belong to a minority culture in one place, while being a majority in another).

If we truly love one another in our fellowship, we will take steps to ensure that the language and cultures of all church members are respected in some way. For us English speakers, that means stepping back and allowing things to happen that may not feel very comfortable to us. It might mean having to dance (or at least, shuffle) a little, it might mean singing unfamiliar songs, who knows? But if we love our brothers and sisters as brothers and sisters we will appreciate their culture and language and will want to honour them.

We Learn Best in Our Language and Culture

OK, this is a massive topic and we donâ€™t have time to do it justice. There is a lot of evidence out there that people learn best when things are presented to them in their own language and in a way which respects their preferred learning styles. I can give you some references for stuff on the web if you are really interested in following this up.

However, I think there is something more important than the scientific and educational evidence â€“ there is the book of Acts. When the disciples preached, God performed a miracle so that all of the people there could hear the message in their own language. If thatâ€™s the case, it simply isnâ€™t acceptable for us to say â€“ â€œlet them make do with Englishâ€ .

For the most part, we donâ€™t need miracles to make it possible for people to learn more about their faith in their own language â€“ a bit of technology and a little bit of organisation are generally all that is required.

I know of a church in Lancashire that has started providing simultaneous translation of their sermons into Parsee because of the number of Iranian refugees who have become believers. This is a fairly easy solution â€“ but it only works if you have one large, minority language community. Other solutions are out there:

Language specific home groups or Alpha courses. One on one mentoring in a particular language (perhaps with an interpreter to help things along). Reading groups looking at a book together in a specific language.

Each church is different and each one needs to adapt to the language needs of their congregation in different ways. But if this was important to the Holy Spirit, itâ€™s not something that we can afford to ignore.

We Each Bring Something New

Why do we drink cafÃ© lattÃ© rather than frothy milky coffee?

In the end, itâ€™s the same thing, but lattÃ© sounds much better.

This is a silly example, but it points to a deeper truth; everyone who speaks more than one language knows that some languages express things better than others. Itâ€™s just the way that things are, the different nuances and implications which come out when speaking one language just arenâ€™t there when you speak another.

There is an interesting example of this from the book of Acts. The early Christians were Jewish and talked about Jesus as Messiah â€“ or Christ in Greek. However, this Jewish term meant nothing to Gentile believers, so they started talking about Jesus the Messiah as Lord. Or Jesus Christ, the Lord.

Using the world Lord, rather than Messiah implied all sorts of things about Jesus reign over our lives that just werenâ€™t there in the Jewish concept. Not only that, but it was the confession that Jesus is Lord that led the Christians into conflict with the Roman Empire who said that only Caesar is Lord! Adopting new cultural vocabulary opened up whole new areas of discipleship â€“ and persecution for the church.

Likewise, different cultures bring something new to the church. It isnâ€™t just that your fellowship meals are richer than they would be if you only had English people bringing quiche â€“ each culture in the church has the capacity to bring something new that widens your experience and your worship. Different styles of music, different ways of praying, ways of showing deeper reverence or ways of showing more freedom and spontaneity. Every culture does things slightly different and we can benefit from them all.

The point is that a multi-cultural church has the capacity to be far richer than one which is monocultural. If we are prepared to learn from each other and to share with each other, we can all bring something to the table which will deepen our experience and worship of God â€“ and that can only be a good thing

The New Testament makes it clear that the church is to be united. Christ has broken down the barriers between the different races. But that unity isnâ€™t achieved by ironing out and removing our cultural differences. In fact, the church is at its best when we express and learn from the differences. That is your challenge.