ACTS AND MISSION 5: PENTECOST

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Category: Observations

Yesterday's blog post placed the story of the day of Pentecost in the context of the whole canon of Scripture, today I'd like to zoom in a little and to look at it in the context of the book of Acts.

The first thing I want to highlight is that the miracle of the day of Pentecost wasnâ€™t actually needed.

The story of Pentecost is well known, so I wonâ€™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, itâ€™s one I really wanted to see repeated in my life. But as Iâ€™ve already said, it wasnâ€™t actually needed.

The key here is the people who were listening to the disciples; Luke describes them as â€œGod-fearing Jews from every nation under heavenâ€ . 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 disciple's 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 Iâ€™ll list them in ascending order:

- It drew a crowd. Itâ€™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 Godâ€™s people, filled by his Spirit, have the responsibility to follow in Godâ€™s footsteps and to reach out to the world in his name.

So, the Spirit descended on the disciples, they reached out and preached in the streets in all sorts of languages, 3,000 people became Christians and the church was now a glorious multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual group.

Thatâ€™s a great story; but unfortunately,Â the New Testament picture is somewhat different in a few crucial respects. Yes, the disciples rushed out an preached in all sorts of languages (or were understood in different languages) and many people became believers (the term Christian is not appropriate at this point in the story). However, as we've already noted, the people who joined the disciples were all Jewish, this was not really a multi-ethnic group.

Even then, there were tensions. We read in Acts 6 that there were disputes between believers who had origins in Palestine and those from the diaspora. Not only was the church still Jewish, but it was also riven with division.

So we move on to Acts 8 when Philip preached to the people in Samaria. These were people closely related to the Jewish nation but with some unorthodox ideas. The notion of preaching to them was so radical that a couple of apostles had to come out from Jerusalem to make sure that Philip hadnâ€™t gone off the rails. Perhaps it's just as well that the Ethiopian eunuch went straight home and didnâ€™t have to face an examination by the apostles in Jerusalem.

In Acts 10, Peter had to have a vision repeated three times before he grasped what God was saying to him and even then he faced flak in Jerusalem for sharing food and the message of Jesus with a Gentile.

It isnâ€™t till we get to Acts 11 that we find believers deliberately and systematically sharing the message of Jesus with Gentiles. Even then, the authorities in Jerusalem sent Barnabas down to check that nothing was amiss and it wasnâ€™t till Acts 15 that the church finally agreed that foreigners could really be part of the group of believers. Even so, if you read Galatians 2:11-13, you can see that racial tension continued in the church for quite a while.

The day of Pentecost opened up the door to the reality of a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual church, but it took a lot of struggle and argument before the believers saw that they needed to walk through the door.

This is important because the struggles that the disciples faced in the book of Acts are still very much with us today. The Christian church is the most diverse body on the planet; representing people from every nation on the planet, but it can be difficult to make this diversity work on a local basis.

Sadly, there are no miracles which will make the church more diverse; only the gritty work of sharing, learning, making mistakes and forgiving one another. It isnâ€™t glamorous, but it is the way forward for the church in our increasingly diverse world. Once again, Iâ€™d really recommendÂ Turning the Tables on MissionÂ as a resource for British Christians who want to look at this area.

Just one final thought; part of the problem of integrating people into the early Church lay in the fact that the Jewish people saw themselves as being better than others; a privileged race. We wouldnâ€™t be guilty of that, would we?

This is an amalgam of two blog posts which first appeared in May 2016.