UNITY IN DIVERSITY

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Category: Observations

The doctrine of the Trinity shows us that while there is unity; God is one, there is also diversity, Father, Son and Spirit are distinct persons each with their own role in the divine economy. This notion of unity in diversity which is important why the one Bible can be translated into multiple languages. The book of Acts marks a transition in the life of the church from a small group of Jewish disciples who were united, but not diverse, to a large, very diverse, but still united group. This transition wasnâ€™t easy and at times it was resisted by believers from a Jewish background (Acts 15:1, Galatians 2: 11-14). However, the growth in diversity was given clear divine sanction through the Holy Spirit speaking to the church (Acts 15:28), through Peterâ€™s vision in Acts 10 and above all through the miracle on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

When the Spirit descended on the disciples in the upper room, they immediately dashed outside and began to tell the people about what God was doing. The crowd, gathered from across the Jewish diaspora, all understood what the disciples were saying in their own language. There was one message, but it was understood in a variety of languages; the first miracle of the church age was one of unity in diversity. God made a clear statement that his message could be transmitted in any language and was not restricted to the Aramaic that Jesus had used.

The impact of the Pentecost miracle increases when one considers that in one sense it was not even necessary. The people who heard the disciplesâ€™ message were all Jews who were in the city for the feast of Pentecost. Some of them would probably have been there since Passover, six weeks earlier. They had taken part in temple ceremonies and were able to function in a Jewish milieu without too many problems. In all probability, the majority of them would have understood the disciplesâ€™ speeches without any divine translation. That God chose to work this particular miracle at this point in church history underlines the importance of diversity to the Christianity. From the very outset, at Godâ€™s initiative, it has been normal for the Christian message to be conveyed in a variety of languages.

Given the parallelism which exists between the Pentecost narrative in Acts and the Babel story in Genesis, it should be noted that the existence of multiple languages in the first place is due to Godâ€™s intervention. According to the Genesis account, God multiplied human languages so as to prevent humanity gathering together to rebel against him. However, while it is clear that the proliferation of different languages has restricted human communication, it is also clear that the diversity of language and culture brings a number of benefits. Linguistic and cultural variety brings different styles of poetry and music, regional cuisine and many other advantages of a multicultural world. However, from a theological perspective, the most important aspect of linguistic variety is that each language brings its own understanding and expression of the divine nature. The diversity which was initiated at Babel was sanctified at Pentecost.

The unity in diversity which typifies Christianity contrasts dramatically with the essential uniformity which is a feature of Islam. Allah is One, without the inherent variety of the Triune God of the Bible.

As a result, Islam is transmitted in one language - Arabic - and converts have to adopt some aspects of Arabic culture in order to be faithful Muslims. Though it is true that there have been situations where Christians have imposed a national or regional culture on others in a similar way to Islam, this is not inherent to the nature of Christianity.

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Variety is intrinsic to the Christian religion because it is intrinsic to the Christian God. Bible translation is one aspect of this variety.

I'm aware that I've posted things along these lines before, but this is what I'm working on at the moment and it is rather dominating my thoughts.