



# The reversal of Babel: Questioning the early church's understanding of the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts as a reversal of the curse of Babel

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This article questions whether a further gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts is the reversal of the curse of Babel and thus the rationale for multicultural local churches in an intercultural and globalised world. Using a non-empirical research design, including a literary survey of the Old Testament and New Testament texts and commentaries, the authors examine the significance of the division of language by God at Babel in the Genesis record. The inherent creational *imago Dei*, genetic and Noahic unity of all humans makes reconciliation, relationship and intercultural communication possible. This is followed by an examination of the impact of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit's gift of tongues is found to symbolise the unifying of divided languages and cultures. This leads to the conclusion that the primary purpose of the gift of tongues was not centred on the controversial debate around glossolalia but rather on personal spiritual transformation and intercultural transformation. The Trinitarian nature of God enables all humans, made in his image, to once again be one in Christ. The centripetal gathering of all people at Babel, which led God to centrifugally scatter nations through language, was reversed in Acts 2 by God. This empowered the early church to go out centrifugally to all cultures. The conclusion is drawn that Acts 2 reverses the communication breakdown of Genesis 11 and, in this way, becomes the theological underpinning of multilingual and multicultural churches. Multicultural churches are thus not simply because of the prevailing winds of globalism in our day.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Acts 2 reversing Genesis 11 impacts the discipline of Ecclesiology from a missional perspective (multilingual and multicultural churches, heterogeneous local churches). The article deals broadly with Pneumatology and the Pneumatological rationale, as well as intercultural studies, intercultural communication, intercultural pastoral care, conflict resolution and globalism. Heterogeneous local churches call for a change in the discourse (which is both possible and necessary in a globalised world) of the traditional homogenous church growth principle. This article has broad overlap with some social science theory related to communication, culture and anthropology and offers interesting biblical-cultural insights probing the biblical text.

## Introduction

'Ever since the early church fathers, commentators have seen the blessing of Pentecost as a deliberate and dramatic reversal of the curse of Babel' (Stott 1990:68). In our endeavour to benefit from the reversal of the curse of Babel through Pentecost, we note that the division of languages originates with God at Babel and that the healing of that division began with the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church. In his commentary on Genesis, Mathews (1996:475) observes: 'Luke's report of the founding of the church at Pentecost has been interpreted by some commentators as an intentional echo of Genesis 10–11'. The importance of this deliberate echo of Babel at Pentecost is foundational to this article. It is the purpose of this article to discover how much validity these interpretations of this link between Babel and Pentecost have, especially as more and more churches find themselves in the melting pot of the global village. Chan (2005):

The forces of postmodernism, post-colonialism, pluralism, multiculturalism and globalization have created in our collective mind-set a greater awareness of the disharmony within the human race. The church is also affected by these changes, especially as the face of Christianity gradually becomes less white and more non-white worldwide. (p. 1)

First, we will examine the Genesis record – specifically Chapters 10 and 11 of Genesis – to ensure this article is rooted in the biblical text. Then we examine Acts 2 and re-examine the Genesis text, to see if the author of Acts was referencing Genesis 10–11.

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## Babel in context

The creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 reveal a God who delights in, and values, both unity and diversity. God's creational design is far from mass-produced uniformity. In the 'melodious mélange' of Genesis 1, the Creator seems to delight in making opposites (heaven and earth, day and night, male and female) – 'but opposites that complement, not clash, opposites that harmonize not antagonize' (Rhodes 1998:20). It is this providential planning of opposites that begins to point to the creativity behind the unity in cultures and the diversity between cultures. In fact, intercultural communication can be said to begin between the sexes and progress outwards from there to the ends of the earth.

So how do we define culture? The term 'culture' is the label, arising out of studies in anthropology, which is Kraft (2009):

given to the structured customs and underlying worldview assumptions which govern people's lives. Culture (including worldview) is a people's way of life, their design for living, and their way of coping with their biological, physical and social environment. (p. 401)

Culture is also dynamic.

Diversity between cultures is the norm and, unfortunately, the main issue triggering conflict. Mohler (2015):

A prominent question many worldviews and metanarratives are now wrestling with is the question of human diversity. Diversity is a fact that cannot be denied. The insularity of other cultures – which has always been partial – has now given way to the phenomenon of globalization. It is hard to miss the fact that we are living in an age of increasing diversity; not just the world at large but even in our own nation and communities. (p. 1)

In the intercultural church, this diversity is most evident in the differences between the sexes, ages and cultures to be found in the church. Yet we see that the unity or singularity that was there from creation, lost at the fall and scattered at Babel was then restored at Pentecost, in answer to Christ's prayers in John 17 (cf. Jn 17:21, 'may be one'; verse 22, 'one as we are one'; verse 23, 'complete unity').

Genesis 1–3 reveals the God who creates humans, in his own image, to be capable of relationships. God possibly alludes to the later revelation of the Triune nature of his being, when he as the three persons of the Godhead commune among themselves and say: 'Let us make human beings' (Gn 1:26). While this was the dominant view of the early church fathers, many modern commentators shy away from this view. Regardless of the Trinitarian debate, the text 'us' points to multiple participants in creation. Genesis (1:27–28, 5:2, 6:3, et cetera) shows that humanity was created to be in communion with God and one another, a communion that both reflects and glorifies the Triune communion (cf. Jn 17:20–26). This is the biblical and theological foundation for later revelation on intercultural communication and fellowship.

We thus need to note that from the outset the human race is one. Each and every one of the diverse peoples of Earth

belongs to one family. God's singular act of creating male and female progenitors of all peoples is foundational to our theology (Gn 1–2). Because God is the creator of all human beings on Earth, we are all his offspring. As his offspring by creation, every human being is our brother and sister. We are equally created by him and like him (the image of God). We are equal in his sight in worth and dignity and thus have an equal right to respect and justice. Historically, if God has made us all from a singular set of original parents, then no individual, culture or 'race' may consider themselves or itself above others. In the New Testament (NT) Paul proclaims to the racially proud Athenians: 'From one man he made every nation (ethnos) of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth ...' (Ac 17:26ff; cf. also Rm 2:29–30).<sup>1</sup>

Van Engen (2004:2) speaks of 'the complementarity of universality and particularity in God's mission' being his universal love of all humanity (Jn 3:16) and his particular love for individuals within all cultures. He observes (Van Engen 2004) that:

... three times in the first eleven chapters of Genesis we are told that God is the creator and judge of all peoples. All people are created in Adam and Eve; all people descend from Noah; all people have their languages confused and are then spread out over the entire earth after the Babel episode. In each case, there is a recognition of the particularity and difference of various peoples – as is signalled by the inclusion of the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 – yet in each case this multiplicity of peoples are collectively and unitedly said to be the object of God's concern. (p. 2)

Even the call and blessing of Abraham in Genesis 12:3 involves him being a blessing to the plurality of nations.

From Genesis 12 onwards we see that God is concerned for all nations and all peoples. He is declared to be the Lord of all nations (Dt 10:17; Dn 2:47; cf. 1 Tm 6:15). However, God specifically selected the nation of Israel to be his covenant people, not out of favouritism, but to provide in Israel a channel of God's grace, to 'bless' all nations. This purpose was made explicit in the call God gave to Abraham. Many times, in the Old Testament (OT) and NT we see God as provider, from Abraham on Mt Zion to NT believers (Gn 22:8; Is 43:20; 1 Tm 6:17; etc.) even in his ample provision made for the foreigner, alien and immigrant. Strangers amidst God's people were to be loved in the name of the Triune God (Ex 22:21; Dt 14:29; 16:11,14; 24:17.) Even the later temple worship ('a house of prayer for all peoples') was for all nations. Davis (2003):

Because he is the God of history, we affirm his sovereignty over all nations. Because he is the God of provision, we affirm his constant and providential care of the nations. (p. 106)

So, the *locus classicus* for any biblical discussion of human diversity and culture is Genesis 10 and 11. The Genesis 10 passage is known as the Table of Nations, and Genesis 11:1–9 is the story of the Tower of Babel.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

## An exegesis of the Table of Nations

In Genesis 10 we have what appears to be an incongruous juxtaposition of the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel story. We have here what happened to the sons of Noah after the deluge. These passages seem at first glance to give incompatible accounts for the origin of nations and the different languages. Yet the author of Genesis seems to view them as complementary. The lexical analysis of the words and vocabulary used, as well as the literary connections shared in both sections, point to the two narratives shedding light on each other and being bound in mutual relationship.

The Table of Nations, unique in world literature, paints a positive picture (or at least a neutral picture) of the relationship between nations; a picture of all nations being genealogically linked as brothers and sisters, all descended from Noah. The shorter Tower of Babel story balances this positive conclusion (Wenham 1987):

Mankind is seen organizing and arrogating to himself essentially divine prerogatives: he builds a tower to reach God's dwelling in heaven; he tries to make himself a name and he schemes on his own account. (p. 242)

God commanded humankind to fill the Earth (Gn 1:28, 9:1, 7), yet here the record shows that humankind rebelled against this command, by only migrating east and rather congregating together in one city, Babel. So, at Babel, God divides language into all the resulting tongues of the world, in the last judgment of primeval times.

The story of the Tower of Babel accounts for what led to the 'remarkable diversity and dispersion' (Mathews 1996:427) of the ever-growing population, as evidenced in the Table of Nations. The 'blessing' of procreation and rule of Genesis 1:28 and 9:1, 7 was being fulfilled by the sons of one man, Noah, yet again only after divine intervention as '[t]he Lord scattered them' (Gn 11:9). 'The story of the tower also looks ahead by anticipating the role that Abram (Gn 12:1-3) will play in restoring the blessing to the dispersed nations' (Mathews 1996:428).

The Table of Nations deals with three sections: the descendants of Japheth, Ham and Shem. Seventy descendants of Noah prefigure on a world scale the 70 sons of Israel who went down to Egypt (Gn 46:27). The 14 'nations' that came from Japheth (10:2-4) and the 30 from Ham (10:6-20) and the 26 from Shem (10:21-31) add up to 70 'people'. Dealing with the less relevant or non-elect lineage first, the writer of Genesis elaborates progressively through Japheth and more into the sons of accursed Ham, focusing with greater interest on Nimrod (Gn 10:8-12), the founder of the cities of Mesopotamia. Nimrod's name (meaning 'we shall rebel') reflects the motives of the builders of Babel. Even the especially accursed Canaanites are included in greater detail (Gn 10:15-19) to account for the judgment that will later befall them through Joshua.

Lastly, and in highest priority, the Table deals with the elect line of Shem, which leads to Abraham. Yet even as Genesis 10 ends with a reminder of the nation's spreading out after the 'flood', there is the association with the 'Babel' of Genesis 11. The story of the Tower of Babel is sandwiched between the two genealogies of Shem. The first genealogy completes the Table of Nations (Gn 10:21-31). It links Shem to (wicked) Joktan and then Babel. The second genealogy extends the lineal descent from Shem, through Peleg, and then to Abram (Gn 11:10-26). There then follows the narrative about Abram.

Mathews (1996:429) warns: 'Genesis 10-11 shows that a disproportionate consideration on "races", as in our modern world, forfeits our inherent unity and may lead to a primitive tribalism that fosters war'. Repeatedly in the Bible the emphasis is on language, which God divided at Babel, and not on race. While many contemporary correctives to racism are to be lauded, the danger yet exists that the remediation itself can lead to a proud nationalism or tribalism that divides. Especially in conflict situations, the temptations are to default to accusations of racism or tribalism, rather than seeking to communicate more effectively, in pneumatological dependence. It remains the inherent unity of all humans that makes reconciliation, relationships and intercultural communication possible. Without this inherent unity, ethnic 'cleansing', tribalism – and even 'retribalisation' – can raise its ugly head. This has recently been witnessed in the violence that occurred in the Congo (DRC), Bosnia, Liberia, Chechnya, Burundi and Rwanda. Arthur Schlesinger (1992:1) thoughtfully concluded: 'Ethnic and racial conflict, it seems evident, will now replace the conflict of ideologies as the explosive issue of our times'.

While this research will not delve into the heresy of the Hammite curse used to justify racism, it is helpful to notice that the same Table of Nations has been at the core of centuries of division based on cultural diversity. Mohler (2015):

Racism is of course one of those toxic approaches to the issue of diversity. Racism ... suggests that human beings have permanent differences that must be evaluated along a spectrum of superiority and inferiority. Racism is one of the primal human sins and one of the most difficult to eradicate. (p. 1)

The horrors of the interpretative tradition that arose from Genesis 10 and the so-called Curse of Ham, which said that the descendants of Ham were cursed with black skin, does violence to the text and slanders the character of God (we need only remind ourselves that the text (Gn 9:25-27) – indicates that it is not even Ham who is cursed but Canaan). This heresy originated in the medieval world and became 'culturally significant when it was disastrously used to justify the Atlantic slave trade ... that promoted the worst forms of racism imaginable' (Mohler 2015:1). The necessary remedy for heresies, like the misuse of the Curse of Ham, is the authority of scripture. 'Our common ancestry in Adam (and Noah) points to our common need for a Savior and, for believers in Christ, a common new humanity' (Mohler 2015:1).

It is interesting that other academic disciplines have reinforced the interconnectedness of all humanity. For instance, Aalders (1981) notes that:

the sciences of anthropology and ethnology have generally acknowledged the unity of the whole of humanity. The essential physical similarity and the unrestricted capability of cross-generation of all races, point incontestably to this unity of the human race. (p. 214)

Then from the genetic sciences come the latest discoveries that say '[t]he overwhelming verdict of the genome is to declare the basic unity of humankind' (Wade 2014). Another example of the interconnectedness of all humanity is the eminent physical anthropologist M.F. Ashley Montagu (1974:74), who is a scholar who accepts neither the biblical account of creation nor the historicity of Adam yet confirms the truth of the unity of humanity. He states:

Concerning the origin of the living varieties of man we say little more than that there are many reasons for believing that a single stock gave rise to all of them. All varieties of man belong to the same species and have the same remote ancestry. This is a conclusion to which all the relevant evidence of comparative anatomy, palaeontology, serology and genetics points. (p. 74)

As for human blood, apart from the four blood groups and the Rh factor (which are present in all ethnic groups), 'the blood of all human beings is in every respect the same' (Montagu 1974:307). Extensive research 'in population genetic studies' (Manoharan 2013:3029), of the ABO blood types, though variously 'distributed' (Golassa et al. 2017:330), show that 'all humans are 99.9 per cent identical' (Highfield 2002:1). Yet despite all the biblical and scholarly evidence for the essential unity of all humanity, that unity flies apart when we come to Genesis 11 and Babel.

## Babel and division

Babylonians believed that Babel/Babylon meant 'gate of god', but the words sound rather like 'confusion' and are similar to the words for 'folly' and 'flood' (Wenham 1987:245). The nearest source is probably *babel* [gate of God] from the Akkadian language. Thus, it was the gate by means of which humans sought to assault God. Babel was meant to be the high point of culture but has rather become the symbol of human defiance and failure.

When we consider the 'tower', the word used in the Hebrew text (טֹּוֹר) is generic and can be used for any sort of tower, like defence towers or watchtowers. Yet this was an early Mesopotamian city. The most prominent building in the early temple complex was the ziggurat. 'Most interpreters, therefore, have identified the Tower of Babel as a ziggurat' (Walton 2001:373).

Archaeology informs us that those ziggurats resembled pyramids in appearance, but they are nothing like them in function. Ziggurats were solid mounds with no inside. The structure was framed in dried mud brick, and then the core was packed with earth filling. Finally, the façade was

completed with kiln-fired brick. Initially it was said: 'nearly thirty ziggurats in the area of Mesopotamia have been discovered by archaeologists' (Walton 1995:2). The Tower at Babel was this high point of the ziggurat culture.

Most importantly the ziggurat did not play a part in any of the rituals that are known to us from Mesopotamia. Walton (2001):

It was sacred space, strictly off-limits to profane use. Though the structure at the top was designed to accommodate the god, it was not a temple, which was typically next to a ziggurat and the place people went to worship. (p. 374)

The ziggurat was simply a structure built to support a stairway as a visual representation of what was believed to be used by the gods to travel from one realm to another. The ziggurat was for the convenience of the gods.

There is some uncertain historical evidence that points to the *Birs Nimrud* (over 46 m high) being the remains of Babel. Jewish tradition recorded by Flavius Josephus ascribed the original construction to Nimrod (Aalders 1981:251). There are considerable ruins evident there, including an enormous tower, which Arabs regard as being destroyed by fire from heaven (Keil & Delitzsch 1989:176). Thus, the desire in building the tower was not necessarily to storm the gates of heaven but to be 'a central point of reference that could be seen by all'; it was not to serve as simply a literal pointer back to the centre of civilisation but to figuratively keep civilisation from being scattered (Aalders 1981:248).

Mohler (2015:1) asks the question regarding what happened to the 70 nations of Genesis 10. How many people groups are there now? According to the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists in the USA:

there are now at least 11 489 people groups in the world. So out of the 70 we read about in Gen 10, there have now developed 11 489. Of those, 6832 are, at least by the best Christian reckoning, less than two percent Christian. And of those 11 489 people groups, 3264 have no Christian witness. (Mohler [1994:np] uses the historical-grammatical method of hermeneutics to posit a physical and literal lineage.)

The disobedience of the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve to the command in Genesis 1:28 to 'fill the earth' led to the judgment in Genesis 11, and that led to the dispersion after the Tower of Babel. Remember though that the dispersion was not itself the judgment; it was God's centrifugal plan all along. Mohler (2015:1) proposes that 'the judgment was that instead of being dispersed in communion, they were dispersed in confusion – a story that continues even into today'.

## Pride and sin

Walton (2001:376) makes a strong case for the judgment on Babel to not be attributed to pride or disobedience. Urbanisation is also discounted as the problem. He argues that the context of scripture speaks against that viewpoint,



for there is nothing wrong with cities themselves. God later even chooses a city for his own name to dwell in: Jerusalem. Walton returns to the ziggurat as the issue. Ziggurats assume a particular concept of God – a function that is at the root of the Babylonian religious system Walton (2001):

It is fair to say that the ziggurat was the most powerful representation of the Babylonian religious system ... The famous Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen summarizes it this way: 'Particularly powerful and concrete in the new anthropomorphic view was the symbol of the temple, the god's house. Towering over the flat roofs of the surrounding town, it gave the townsmen visible assurance that the god was present among them'. (p. 376)

Hence the issue of God dividing language is thus attributed to idolatry, the age-old temptation that would be fought by the people of God throughout the OT.

Davis (2003:96) argues that God intervened by confusing the languages, thus not allowing their building programme to be completed, which further accelerated his own decentralisation programme for mankind. He acknowledges that God was judging their pride and their self-made unity:

... but the judgment at Babel is not to be seen solely as punishment. In God's act of scattering humanity, he was also fulfilling his original intention for mankind. The act was preventative as much as punitive. It was designed to prove to earth's peoples that they could not frustrate his plan for human diversity and pluralism. (p. 96)

Chan (2005) raises the observation linked to the Tower of Babel and the ensuing division:

Some interpreters have suggested that the sin God judged was not pride but disobedience to his command in Gen 1:28 to 'fill the earth' ('let us not be scattered over the face of the whole earth,' v. 4). If this is the case, then God's confounding of human language and geographical scattering need not be viewed as an evil that God inflicted as retributive punishment. Rather, it may be viewed as God's benevolent act of correction, to keep humankind from remaining in the one location at Babel. This proposed reading might find confirmation in the fact that there is no mention of God's wrath anywhere in Genesis 11. (p. 6)

Chan (2005) then draws the conclusion that:

[t]his alternative reading of Gen 11 has one important implication: God is *behind* ethnic and cultural diversity, not opposed to it, since he is the one who set such diversity in motion. (p. 7)

Chan's attempts to emphasise the diversity among humanity may have swung the pendulum too far off balance from the repeated biblical call to unity, yet his emphasis remains a helpful corrective.

There is much to commend the conclusion reached by Walton that 'the tower, as a ziggurat, embodied the concepts of pagan polytheism as it developed in the early stages of urbanization' (Walton 1995:155). Davis (2003) points out that:

[e]thnocentrism and racism are, after all, just another form of idolatry – of exalting someone else (ourselves or our own ethnic group) above the true God. This truth of unified origin should restrain the temptation to boast in ethnic uniqueness. (p. 104)

Again, the cause of division from Babel onwards is attributed directly or obliquely to idolatry.

Yet Stigers (1976:130) holds that 'another origin for the ziggurat temple-tower must be sought'. As an archaeologist and earlier commentator, Stigers views the Tower of Babel as much too early to be thought of as the origin of the ziggurat. As previously seen, Walton's view is dependent on linking the Tower of Babel to ziggurats. The difficulty Walton has is that the text (Gn 11:4) does not attribute the division of languages to idolatry but rather to pride and fear (of dispersal); yet both are symptomatic of idolatry. Walton's concept that idolatry is to blame for division of language may find traction with the subsequent practice of the called people of God falling from monotheism to polytheism on a repeated basis in the OT. (Subsequently, there are also warnings against polytheism in the NT; cf. Col 3:5; Heb 6:4-5; 1 Jn 5:21.)

## Spiritual transformation from a Pentecost/Babel perspective

After looking at Babel in Genesis we now need to review the material in Acts that pertains to the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit at Pentecost enabled various languages to be spoken by the disciples and understood by the hearers in their mother tongue. The pneumatological promise in Acts 1:8 by Christ was fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came upon the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room on the day of Pentecost (50 days after the Passover). The Holy Spirit not only gifts the disciples to speak with 'tongues' but also empowers them to perform 'signs and wonders' in the name of Jesus Christ. Above all, the Holy Spirit unites these praying disciples into one body, the church. It would seem that the tongues, unity and empowerment are all interdependent. 'Tongues that were divided at Babel were given as a witness at Pentecost and will one day be united in blessing at His return' (Barnhouse 1970:72).

Keener (2007) observes from the perspective of Pentecostal theology:

... many scholars note that the locations from which these Jewish people came look much like the list of nations in Gen 10 (except described in first-century language). In Gen 11, God scattered these peoples at the Tower of Babel by confusing their tongues. On Pentecost, by contrast, God again supplies diversity of languages, but not to divide humanity. This time, through the new gift of tongues, God brings together a church united among many cultures, foreshadowing the rest of His plan in Acts. (p. 1)

The question remains: Was 'the new gift of tongues' meant to bring forth a united church from among the many cultures?

We can attest to a united church among, and with, many cultures. In our experience, as participant observers in a church in Johannesburg (South Africa), we see that it is still true today – the Holy Spirit is rebuilding and remodelling homogenous, segregated or 'apartheid churches' into multicultural congregations. These multicultural congregations

are reflective of the new South Africa and of multiculturalism globally. This phenomenon can best be done through a pneumatological work. The promise of Acts 1:8 includes the implication that, once the church has been witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the Earth, the church (arguably the universal church but just as likely the local church, where many cultures live or worship together, like in Jerusalem on the day of any Pentecost in that Herodian temple period) will be made up of people from 'every tribe and tongue' (Rev 7:9).

## An exegesis of Acts 2

While Acts is narrative writing, not didactic or normative, it remains historical record. Elwell 1995; Ac 1):

The Book of Acts, then, is not a mere chronicle of events, but a portrayal of the kinds of people and kinds of things that were taking place in the early church. This approach makes Acts a much better "handbook" for the church today. (p.3; v.1)

With this understanding of Acts, Leaney presents a helpful synthesis of biblical evidence, culminating in the fact that Acts 2 is essentially interrelated to the Babel text in Genesis 10–11. Leaney (1968) summarised the various ways in which Acts 2 has been interpreted as:

the reversal of Babel, the proclamation of the New Law, the fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel, of the threat of John the Baptist, and of the promise of Jesus, and an earnest of the spread of the gospel throughout the world. (p. 419)

It is the first interpretation that we are choosing to explore, namely 'the reversal of Babel'. Ac 2:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (vv. 1–4)

As the disciples gathered for what was 'originally the festival of first-fruits of the wheat-harvest' (Bruce 1951:81), the Holy Spirit came on them as the wind [πνοῆς] (Ac 2:2 – the wind also being an emblem of the Holy Spirit; cf. Ez 37:9; Jn 3:8) and with 'tongues' [γλῶσσαι] as of fire [πυρός]. The analogy of the tongues of fire (Ac 2:3) most probably points forward to the 'tongues' [γλώσσαις] of languages in Acts 2:4. Others, however, like Bruce (1951:81), suggest that the 'tongues of fire' are probably indicative of a mystical experience. The Holy Spirit had been associated with fire by John the Baptist (Mt 3:11; Lk 3:16). The tongues of fire were distributed [διαμεριζόμεναι] upon each disciple, just as the Holy Spirit had descended upon Christ Jesus in the form of a dove (Jn 1:32). There are also OT parallels Ex 19:16; Jdg 5:4–5; cf. Ps 18:7–15; 29:3–9). Parsons (2008):

In describing the event as accompanied by these natural phenomena, Luke is echoing the theophany scenes of the OT, in which God's presence is accompanied by similar signs (p. 37)

Of all the writers of the NT, it is only Luke who records the descent of the Holy Spirit for the first time, but 'the essential

historicity of the incident is firmly assured' (Marshall 1980:67). The way the narrative is placed in Acts corresponds with the birth narrative of Christ in the Gospel of Luke. The significance is that the newborn church is now equipped for the task of witness and mission, assumedly after the on-the-job training with Christ for more than 3 years. Remarkably, the church immediately proceeds to witness to the death and resurrection of Christ, in the temple, then progressively from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the Earth, as foretold and commanded by Christ (Ac 1:8).

While the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the first occurrence of this experience, it was prophesied by Christ at his ascension 10 days earlier, in Acts 1:8, and foretold by prophecies in Isaiah 32:15 and Joel 2:28–32. This indicates that the last days have arrived. Marshall (1980:68) contends that the Acts event shows 'no basis in the text' for a contrast with the story of Babel. He does acknowledge that some scholars have detected a link. It is this link that we are searching for, which may go beyond the word *glossa* [γλῶσσα] used in 'tongues of fire' and 'tongues' spoken.

Historically, the Lectionary Readings for Pentecost Sunday pair Genesis 11:1–9 with Acts 2:1–21, yet Parsons (2008):

there is little from the ancient historical and religious context to suggest that Luke or his audience would have made such a connection, despite the theological attractiveness of seeing Pentecost as the reversal of Babel. (p. 36)

Parsons discounts the surface similarities or the theological links. It can be said that these two texts have profound theological connections. Luke, as the likely author of both the Gospel of Luke and Acts, has taken care throughout both books to establish a continuous link between God's actions in the past with Israel and his actions in the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the church. For this reason, it is probable that Luke deliberately constructed the Pentecost account in Acts 2 as a counter-balance to the Babel story in Genesis 11, as seen in the exegesis above. Luke seems to have carefully shaped the Pentecost narrative to make a theological affirmation against the background of, and together with, the Babel story.

The major point of contact is the diversity of language. In the Genesis 11 a common language was a symbol of unity around a false centre of idolatry, pride and self-sufficiency. The diversity of language was a symbol for the confusion that results when human beings attempt to go their own way without God.

In Acts, we see the focus still on both the diversity of language and the centre of unity but with a dissimilar emphasis. Apart from what some commentators would like to argue, the languages in Acts 2 are representative of the various national or ethnic languages of those who were in Jerusalem for the festival of *Shavuot* (Ac 2:6–11). With the descent of the Holy Spirit, he enabled the diversity of people there to hear what was said in their own native language. It is possible that because they were Jews or God-fearers, they already had the

common language of Aramaic (or Hebrew), or perhaps even Greek or Latin. However, that is beside the point of the narrative. 'The emphasis in the Acts account is clearly the unity brought by the Holy Spirit on the level of language that would otherwise raise barriers' (Bratcher 2013).

The instantaneous filling of the Holy Spirit resulted in inspired utterance. While the 'phenomenon of glossolalia has appeared in many forms' (Bruce 1951:82), it would seem from the context here in Acts 2:4 that the disciples' words made perfect sense to those who understood the various languages or dialects spoken. To the other people present, who did not speak that particular language uttered in each case, the glossolalia was unintelligible. The disciples (probably with Galilean accents) praised God and told of his mighty works in such a way that each listener heard with surprise his or her own mother tongue.

Then, when Peter addressed the questioning crowd from Acts 2:14ff, the crowd heard him in the common tongue of Greek or Aramaic. For here there was no surprise around language from the crowd, nor mention of his Galilean accent. Stott (1990:63) points out that the symbolism of the Holy Spirit coming on the church at Pentecost includes 'the speech in other languages [pointing to] the universality of the Christian church'. Surely the Triune God would want all humans, made in his image, to once again be one in Christ.

Some have argued that the glossolalia attributed to the Corinthians was not the same as this in Acts. Paul negatively comments on the Corinthian situation by saying (1 Cor 14):

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? (vv.23)

Bruce (1951) observes that:

the effect of the Pentecostal glossolalia was better understood on the part of the hearers; this does not appear to have been so at Corinth, nor is it so in many circles where the gift of tongues is cultivated nowadays. (p. 82)

While there continues to be much debate on this point, a helpful test of scripture needs to be applied: 'All this must be done for the strengthening of the church' (1 Cor 14:26). Surely, the strengthening of the church by the Holy Spirit is to be sought in our multicultural world. This strengthening may be through the historically divisive, orderly use of glossolalia, if given by the Holy Spirit in the local church. The references to order (1 Cor 14:33, 40), however, need to be strongly emphasised. Likewise, administrative order is a much-needed gift of the Holy Spirit, especially to facilitate order in conflict resolution. More importantly for now, it seems to us, is the imperative use of the fruit of the Spirit, like patience, in intercultural dialogue. While the gift of tongues in the 20th and early 21st centuries has seen much division in Christendom, the fruit of the Spirit should surely be desired to bridge all the linguistic divides.

Another debate has raged around whether tongues are known or unknown languages, like tongues of angels. Hui (2010:46) contends with Gundry (1966:299), whose seminal article proposed that it is not impossible that Paul was referring to human languages (rather than 'tongues of angels') in 1 Corinthians. Gundry confines us to two options: 'ecstatic utterance' or 'the miraculously given ability to speak a human language foreign to the speaker'. Gundry shows that the 'tongues' speech of both Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12-14 can refer only to known languages spoken here on Earth. Poythress (1977:130) proposes 'at least five different parameters of classification'. After careful analysis, he finds that the tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians and understood by the church in Corinth were the same as those referred to in Acts. Hui (2010:46), on the other hand, allows for both known and unknown languages in what he calls 'true, yet not human, languages'.

In seeking to reconcile the Pentecostal view of tongues and the Cessationist (that all tongues ceased after Acts) view, Parsons (2008) says:

Whatever the nature of glossolalia in the book of Acts, did Luke understand the Pentecost event to be a 'once for all' phenomenon? The answer here is simply 'No.' ... our current context calls for a middle way that affirms the reality of Pentecostal experience while correcting aspects of extreme expressions of Pentecostal theology. (pp. 50-51)

While tongues are not necessarily evidence of baptism in the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit is imperative, for 'whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love' (1 Jn 4:8). While the merits of the Pentecostal and Cessationist views are beyond the ambit of this article, the clear statements of passages like Galatians 5:16-26 remind us that without the fruit of the Spirit we cannot 'inherit the kingdom of God' (Gl 5:21).

Ford (1971) likewise seeks to find this 'middle way'; he investigates tongues and remarks that:

there is a general tendency among more recent exegetes to accept to some degree the validity of this spiritual experience, to interpret 'tongues' as genuine languages uttered in a non-ecstatic state rather than 'gibberish' in ecstatic or frenzied state. (p. 3)

He ends his findings with the following (Ford 1971):

In Acts and 1 Corinthians 'tongues' are a prophetic sign with the dynamism to re-create faith, either (1) to bring the Jew to the realization of the fulfilment of Sinai, or (2) as a sign that the *apistos* is entitled to the plenitude of Jewish-Christianity; (3) as a sign to apostles etc. that the latter may be received into full membership of the Church; (4) as a general dynamic sign to build up the faith of the individual or the community; (5) as a sign of international unity, a sign that Babel wrought by God has been reversed by God. (p. 27)

It is this fifth point that concerns this article; as we do not need to delve too deeply into the other contested waters, it will be taken that there is a singular usage in the NT for the word 'tongues' as used in Acts and Corinthians.



This sign of international unity is the issue at hand here (Rev 7:9) Stott (1990):

At Babel, human languages were confused and the nations were scattered; in Jerusalem, the language barrier was supernaturally overcome as a sign that the nations would be gathered together in Christ ... prefiguring the great day when the redeemed company will be drawn 'from every nation, tribe, people and language'(p. 69)

This unity between nations and cultures in a multicultural local church's context takes much empowering by the Holy Spirit and the ripening of the fruit of the Spirit on an ongoing basis. Acts 2:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. (v. 5)

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. (v. 6)

Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? (v. 7)

Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? (v. 8)

Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, (v. 9)

Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (v. 10)

(both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' (v. 11)

Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, 'What does this mean?' (v. 12)

When Acts 2:5 refers to 'every nation', it means that Luke would probably have depended on the Rabbinic tradition that reckoned that all the languages of the world numbered 70, according to the Table of Nations found in Genesis 10. As a little aside, it is interesting that in the Midrash *Tanhuma* 26c it was believed that at the giving of the law the voice of God was heard in every nation under heaven. Also, in Talmud *Bavli Peshahim* 68b the tradition said that 'the Feast of Weeks [Pentecost] ... is the day on which the Torah was given'. This may go a little way to explaining the centripetal nature of Judaism, in contrast to the centrifugal nature that God expects of the gospel and the church. Marshall points out that this linking of Pentecost with the giving of the law on Sinai comes from second-century Judaism. This means that 'we cannot be certain that this tradition was current in the first century' (Marshall 1980:68). Yet the centripetal tendency of Judaism throughout the biblical and post-biblical ages cannot be denied, regardless of the source of this Judaic linking of Pentecost to Sinai.

In Acts 2:9 the 'Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia' were countries full of Jews who did not return from the Exile. There lived the descendants of the ten tribes (incorrectly called the 'lost tribes') who had been settled by Artaxerxes III around 350 BCE. They mostly spoke Aramaic. 'Judea' is thought to have included all the territory from Egypt to the Euphrates, including Syria, and was also full of Jews. 'Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia'

were all districts of Asia Minor and full of Jews, as we see in the second half of the book of Acts. Egypt had a population estimated by Philo to be about a million Jews around 38 CE, soon after the events at this Pentecost (Bruce 1951:85). 'Parts of Libya near Cyrene' would have included Jews from the region from which Simon of Cyrene in the Passion story originated (Mt 27:32). Rome represented the centre of the Empire. It also had a Jewish population numbering in the thousands at the time. It is quite probable that the church in Rome began with returning converts after this day of Pentecost, as we have no historical record of their origin (Moo 1996:4). Finally, the list ends (Ac 2:11) with the Cretans and Arabs, who all together hear the Shema ('Hear, O Israel', etc.) in the various languages and dialects, by Galileans of all people. Bruce (1951:86) observes that 'the reversal of the curse of Babel is surely in the writer's mind'.

This list of nations comes in both a strange order and includes a selection of countries and regions that scholars have yet to find a fully satisfactory explanation for. Marshall (1980:71) holds that the list was not invented by Luke himself and is meant to show that people from all over the 'known world were present'. Parsons (2008:38) speaks against a link between Acts 2 and Genesis 10 but still goes on in his commentary on Acts to say: 'In 2:5–13, Luke lists witnesses to Pentecost in connection with a list of nationalities reminiscent of the Gen 10 "table of nations"'. It is this reminiscence that seems to haunt the various commentators. Parsons (2008) later says:

The list of nations in Acts 2:9–11 may be taken as an "update" of the table-of-nations tradition found in Gen 10, a point rarely examined by interpreters (though see Scott 1994:483–544). (p. 38)

Stott (1990:65), in an earlier work, looks at the list of nations and says: 'this was the international, multilingual crowd which gathered round the one hundred and twenty believers' from the four points of the compass, even if 'the crowd's reaction was one of bewilderment'.

It may also be noted that the fact that Christ had sent out the 70 (or 72) earlier in Luke 10:1 would also point to Christ's intention in reaching all the nations. Parsons (2008), looking at the intended audience of Luke's writing, goes further:

The authorial audience has already been introduced to the table-of-nations tradition in Luke 10:1 in the so-called mission of the seventy ... From a very early point, then, the audiences (the scribes) connected the mission of the seventy(-two) with the table of nations in Genesis 10 to symbolize that their mission was a universal one. (pp. 39–40)

This comment from Parsons again comes from one of the commentators who question the link between Babel and Pentecost. Surely there is sufficient evidence in the structure and style of Luke's writing of the Gospel of Luke and Acts to warrant an intended linking of Babel to Pentecost. Acts 2:

Some, however, made fun of them and said, 'They have had too much wine'. (v. 13)



As the early disciples were maligned for being drunk on sweet wine, while speaking many languages (Ac 2:13), so Paul points out that *glossolalia* may be mistaken as insanity (1 Cor 14:23). Likewise, the culture shock of communication using many languages internally pressurises multilingual contemporary congregations to revert to the dominant language. Such congregations may also be critiqued as being unreasonable to 'force integration' of various languages and cultures. For instance, one post-apartheid South African writer still states: '[t]here is at least one barrier that won't be overcome until the last day: language. Until that day, it is best to plant separate churches for different language groups' (Prichard 2015:53). Overcoming this barrier has been witnessed in the early church, which was on occasion multicultural and in places probably multilingual (Ac 13:1).

## Conclusion

In Acts 2 we see many cultures gathered for Pentecost and supernaturally united by the Holy Spirit into one church of diverse cultures. Again, today globalisation is placing many cultures in one geographic area. The Trinitarian nature of God enables all humans, made in his image, to again be one in Christ. The centripetal cause of Babel, which led God to centrifugally scatter nations through language, was reversed in Acts 2 by God: so, empowering the early church to go out from Jerusalem, to be centrifugally natured, to all cultures.

We conclude that Acts 2 reverses the breakdown of Genesis 11 and becomes the theological underpinning of multilingual and multicultural churches, not simply the prevailing winds of globalism in our day. The key lies in patiently grown heterogeneous local churches, because of the pneumatological rationale, even using tools learned from intercultural communication. We observe that there is significant evidence that Pentecost continues to reverse the curse of Babel, through structural forms to facilitate conflict resolution resulting from intercultural misunderstanding. The lessons learned in intercultural pastoral care and conflict resolution may thus be of assistance and serve as laboratory test cases to other groups grappling interculturally in our globalised world.

Acts 2 reversing Genesis 11 impacts the disciplines of Ecclesiology (of multilingual and multicultural churches, heterogeneous local churches), Pneumatology and the Pneumatological rationale, as well as intercultural studies, intercultural communication, intercultural pastoral care, conflict resolution and globalism. Heterogeneous local churches call for a change in the discourse (which is both possible and necessary in a globalised world) of the traditional homogenous church growth principle.

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