

# The Language of a New Humanity

*A sermon on Genesis 11:1-9 & Acts 2:1-21 by Nathan Nettleton, 9 June 2019*

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## Message

The new humanity formed in the death and resurrection of Jesus speaks a language of love and compassion that transcends linguistic and cultural differences and celebrates unity in diversity.

## Sermon

As many of you know, after being mono-lingual for most of my life, I have developed quite a passion for learning to speak languages other than English over the last few years, and so I really enjoy what we do on this night each year with all these different languages being included in our worship. I think we are hearing sixteen different languages tonight – although I guess in the case of Auslan, you'd have to say it was seen rather than heard.

As a languages nut, I'm really enjoying it, but as a pastor and theologian, I also think that it is an extremely important symbol of some central truths of the gospel; truths that were front and centre in tonight's scripture readings.

One of the things I love about learning other languages is the way they enable us to understand how other people see the world, and I don't just mean because we can talk with them in their own language. That's certainly important, but there is more to it too. Languages often reveal how differently we see the world, because we don't just use different words for the same things; sometimes we conceive of the things themselves quite differently, and language can reveal the differences. Let me give you an example.

The English language reveals an understanding of time as running from front to back. The future is in front of us. The past is behind us. But the Chinese language conceives time as rising from bottom to top. The future is below us. The past is above us. Now not only does that show that we think of the world differently, but it shows you how easily misunderstandings can occur, even when we have learned a little of each other's languages.

If I was to say that drinking tequila is beneath me, the English speakers will probably hear me as saying that I would never drink tequila because I think it's bad, but the Chinese speakers may hear me as suggesting that I'm expecting to get stuck into some tequila in the near future. Learning to communicate well in another language requires more than just learning the words.

Speaking different languages is one of the most obvious signs of difference between different peoples. It is right up there with skin colour. And like skin colour, it often becomes the focus of hostility and racial divisiveness. You have probably all heard of instances of racial attacks that involved some mindless thug abusing someone for speaking another language and threatening violence against them if they didn't start speaking English.

The story of the Tower of Babel that we heard in our reading from the book of Genesis is a story that offers a picture of the origins of such hostility. It is an important myth, and by myth I don't mean that it didn't happen, I mean that it is a story that seeks to explain how things are by telling the tale of how they began.

This myth tells us that the division of humanity into rival tribes that speak different languages and are hostile to one another arose from misguided attempts to bring about unity in inappropriate ways. The people sought to ensure their unity, not by generous hospitality to one another, but by uniting in undertaking a huge and arrogant engineering project. And the story tells us that the consequence was in fact exactly the social and cultural fragmentation they were supposedly seeking to avoid. They ended up as scattered groups, speaking different languages, and regarding one another with suspicion and hostility.

Part of what that story is trying to tell us is that when we try to engineer unity, instead of receiving it as a gift and expressing it hospitably, it always either backfires completely, or it becomes the unity of the privileged at the expense of the outcasts. When we try to force our way to unity, we wind up doing so by scapegoating those who are perceived as threats to our unity. The renewed unity of the majority is found in our shared quest to purge our society of the hated and feared minority.

You see this on a small scale with racist gang violence, where the solidarity of the group is forged in their shared complicity in acts of racial violence. But you also see it on the big stage, in our past in the White Australia policy and more recently in the whipped up hysteria over asylum seekers.

And notice how often language issues feature in such things. Policies that seek to enforce some kind of cultural assimilation have usually sought to prevent the speaking of another language. And history is littered with despotic regimes that sought to outlaw the speaking of minority languages in favour of the one official language of the homogenised majority. The Tower of Babel story tells us that such quests are bound to fail. Even when they manage to wipe out a language, as has happened with most of the indigenous Australian languages, they don't bring an sort of unity of hearts and minds. They usually bring increased division in their arrogant quest to engineer a new unity.

But straight after the Tower of Babel, the story turns to Abraham, and to God promising Abraham that through his line, "all the families of the earth will be blessed." So right there in this account of the beginnings, the explanation of our linguistic and cultural confusion and hostility is followed by a promise that God's blessings will transcend all those divisions and reach all the peoples of the earth.

The New Testament story of the miracle of languages on the Day of Pentecost is clearly written as a kind of sequel to the Tower of Babel story. In the outpouring of God's Spirit, the curse of the Tower is broken and the promise to Abraham is coming to fruition.

This Day of Pentecost is the fiftieth and final day of the Paschal season, and so it is important to understand it as the culminating act of the Easter story. It cannot be properly understood apart from the stories of the death and resurrection of one who surrendered himself to the violence of another attempt to engineer unity by scapegoating an alleged threat to society and its security. But Jesus had said, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to me," and so indeed the cross, this ultimate symbol of his self-giving love, becomes the focal point of a new kind of unity.

This new unity does not come by uniting against new victims, but by uniting in the gracious hospitality of the risen victim who refuses the language of hostility, retribution and

vengeance, and speaks instead a language of compassion, forgiveness, unconditional acceptance, and self-giving love. And so the out-poured Spirit of the risen victim on the Day of Pentecost reaches across every boundary of language and culture and brings to fruition the blessing of all peoples, as promised to Abraham.

It is important to note, as we seek to understand and live this story, that the “gift of tongues” spoken of in this story is not the same thing as the other “gift of tongues” spoken of in some of the Apostle Paul’s writings and so cherished by our Pentecostal brothers and sisters. That other gift of tongues is a language for private prayer; a language which enables you to express things to God which might be too deep and incoherent to be expressed in ordinary language, but there is no expectation or likelihood that anybody other than God would be able to make any sense of the sounds that come out of your mouth.

The Day of Pentecost miracle, by contrast, is all about being understood by other people. It is not clear whether the miracle took place in the mouths of the apostles or in the ears of their hearers, but it really doesn’t matter. The message is clear. The unity of the new humanity that is drawn together in the risen crucified one does not require or seek any sort of engineered linguistic unity. The gospel honours the diversity of people and finds expression in every language and culture.

If we had better comprehended this lesson from the start, perhaps we would have managed to avoid many of the tragic mistakes we have made in our missionary endeavours when we sought to preach Christ and instead slid into imposing European manners and customs and languages: the old Tower of Babel mistake of engineered conformity all over again. When the Spirit of Pentecost is poured out, everybody hears the gospel in their own language, and a new humanity is united in Christ without having to abandon their multiple languages.

In one sense, there is a new common language that is born in the risen Jesus, but it is not a language of common vocabulary and grammar. Instead it is a language of common actions and affections, and perhaps that is part of why it transcends linguistic differences. It is a new language of compassion and understanding, of mercy and forgiveness, of humility and gracious hospitality. It is a new language of peace and suffering love that does not give up, even in the face of suspicion, rejection and hostility. It is the language of the cross and the empty tomb, of the risen victim who has no use for a vocabulary of retaliation or revenge, but only of forgiveness, and welcome, and honour.

So you can see why I think that the many languages we are speaking tonight are an important theological symbol of a central truth of the gospel. Even though many of our attempts to speak our second languages are a bit stumbling and broken, they still symbolise the gospel’s desire to reach out across these differences. After all, the Pentecost story certainly didn’t say that the Apostles spoke perfectly fluently in these other languages. The fact that some of the hearers thought they were all drunk may suggest they were not doing much better than us! The attempt to express and honour these languages is important in itself.

While I recognise the importance of ethnic congregations worshipping in their own language, I think it is unfortunate that so many congregations are content to be cultural and linguistic enclaves and make little effort to find ways of worshipping that bridge those gaps and build new cross-cultural friendships of mutual understanding and respect. I love that we normally have languages other than English in our worship, and I would be delighted if one day we

had as many languages as we've had tonight all spoken as people's first languages, rather than mostly as second languages as it's been tonight.

But of course second languages are important too, both for understanding and for communicating. I hope that eventually I won't just be hearing Rita pray in Chinese, but that when she does, I will understand the words she is using and the different aspects and experiences of the gospel that are revealed in those different words and the different ways of viewing the world that are revealed in those words.

It is certainly my hope and prayer that the Pentecost experience of being more and more united in the love of Christ Jesus across the differences of race and culture and language that might once have kept us apart will be beneath us in the Chinese sense, which is before us in the English sense, and certainly never beneath us in the English sense! And to that I say – adding some biblical Aramaic and Hebrew to our mix – Maranatha. Come, Holy Spirit. Amen.