

June 8+9, 2025 at Grace, Manitowoc, WI

Many Languages, Same Spirit

How many of you can understand another language? Whether you can read it, interpret it when it's spoken, or even speak a few sentences yourself. Some of you grew up in bilingual households, some studied other languages in school, and others picked it up through work experiences. But not all of us are blessed with the gift of tongues. To some extent, we all face the frustration that comes from the diversity of languages. Did you know that there are around 7,000 languages worldwide? Not even the most gifted linguist could learn all of those in a lifetime. How are we ever supposed to communicate with one another?

Even within our own primary language, English, there are so many barriers to understanding. There are regional vocabularies, generational phrases, idioms and expressions. Are you reading legal jargon or an abbreviated text message filled with emojis? Language is necessary, language is powerful, and language is confusing.

Today, we look back to a life changing event, something that shifted world history. We remember how God confused the languages of humanity for all time, and we rejoice because of that. We are glad knowing that God's will prevails, not human plans. As the LORD's plan prospers, we know that his name fills the whole earth. Although there are many languages, the same Spirit speaks the light of the LORD.

First, let's take a close look at this lesson from Genesis. Chapter 11 wraps up a period of time where God deals with humanity on a grand scale. From creation to the Tower of Babel, the events of the Bible affected the whole world. Our God has always been a God who deals with all nations.

At this point in time, all the people who existed were descendants from Noah after the flood. Only a few generations removed, they naturally all had one language and vocabulary. As the population grew from Noah's sons, some migrated to a plain in Shinar, which we identify with the region called Mesopotamia. This was a fertile valley between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. It would've been an ideal location to settle and start a civilization.

Now, God had commanded Noah, just as he told Adam and Eve, to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. As they went out to the corners of the world, they would carry God's name with them. But this group at Shinar had a different plan. They decided to settle into a permanent home. "Come, let's build a city with walls for security. Let's use extra-sturdy, fire-baked bricks. We'll establish agriculture and commerce and an engineering system so that we can build a tower with its top in the heavens." This man-made plan defied God's will in two ways: they didn't want to be scattered over the face of the earth, and they wanted to make a name for *themselves*, instead of proclaiming the name of the LORD.

But the LORD, the good and gracious God of justice and mercy, came down to see their little project. This picture of God coming down shows how insignificant their structure was. God didn't need to descend from heaven to know what was going on. But he "came down" as if the tower couldn't be seen from the sky. Also, verse 5 says God came to see what they "were building;" the Hebrew for that verb shows that their arrogant activity was done. They may have had plans to keep going, but when the LORD came down, the building stopped.

God said to himself, "Look, if this is how much they could accomplish as one people speaking a common language, nothing will be impossible for them. They will carry out whatever they plan." And then, God echoed the people's arrogant words: "Come, let us act. Let us confuse their language so they can't understand each other." From there, the LORD's will was done. The people stopped their building because they couldn't understand each other. They were so confused, irritated, upset, disturbed that they scattered from there, each gathering with people they could understand and starting over in new places. So, the LORD accomplished his desire to fill the earth.

But what about the other part of what God wanted? The other aspect of the people's rebellion? They wanted to make a name for themselves, while God wanted *his* name to be proclaimed. If the people couldn't understand each other, if they couldn't communicate, how could they tell others about the LORD? Well, for one, each family still knew about the great and powerful God who just scattered them. They could share the stories passed down about the wonders of the LORD who created the world, who reshaped the earth through a great flood, the LORD who promised salvation. The Spirit works as the Word is proclaimed.

But there could still be confusion. Maybe you're familiar with the telephone game, where a secret message is whispered from one person to the next, and by the time it reaches the end of the line, the message is nothing like how it started. As these generations passed on the promises of God, there was still sin. There's still confusion. To this day, even as language barriers have dwindled with technology, we still run into division and frustration.

Last week, we talked about God's desire for unity, that all believers would be one. If God wants all people to hear his message, to be united with Christ, why would he confuse our languages? Wouldn't it have been better if we could all speak one language? When we talked about oneness last week, we weren't just highlighting being one with each other. At the Tower of Babel, as they were all one, they were united in self-centered, human-driven desires. "Let us plant fields and build walls and make a name for *ourselves*."

Today, as technology allows us to be connected with people around the world, what are we uniting to do? What purpose drives us? Even with many languages, there will always be one thing that unites all people: our self-centered sin. What horrors has humanity produced as we're united around grand ideas? What monuments to mortal man stand as marks on our history? What a name we've made for ourselves!

We need more than unity within humankind. We need that bond with God. We need the Spirit to come into our lives and shine light into our darkness. Listen to our pleading prayers in all our hymns today. Come, Holy Spirit, fount of life, fire of love; fill our hearts, impart your light, invigorate the weakness of our mortal state. Bestow your abiding peace. Come, Holy Ghost, God and Lord. Pour your grace into our hearts and minds. By the brightness of your light, gather and unite people from every land and every tongue through faith in Christ. Emblazon *your* name on our hearts. Erase the mark of sin and heal us.

Thanks be to God for this life-giving work of the Spirit! He leads us to see what is truly good and right - not personal glory, but the glory that comes from God's plan of salvation. How does the Spirit teach us, guide us, lead us, give us life? Through words. Through *the* Word. The Holy Spirit's tools are the means of grace, the gospel in God's Word and sacraments. God communicates to our hearts through written and spoken words from his Holy Bible. God connects his power to simple water, to

bread and wine, through the words of his promises. The Spirit speaks through words to reach our hearts and give us faith in Jesus.

The amazing thing is, God is able to accomplish this work through words even after he confused all our languages! We experience frustration, anger, division because we can't understand each other. In a miraculous way, the LORD reaches across these barriers to communicate his gospel to all nations. We see that as we remember the first Pentecost among Christians. The Spirit filled those disciples. He showed his presence through a powerful wind and tongues of fire over their heads.

But most of all, the Spirit worked through words. These men who spoke one, maybe two languages, suddenly spoke in tongues they never knew. At Babel, the overwhelming commotion of scrambled speech led to division. They scattered. But at Jerusalem on Pentecost, God-fearing people from every nation under heaven heard their own language being spoken, and this overwhelming communication commotion caused a crowd to come together. They came and heard the wonders of God.

Pentecost didn't remove the variety of languages. There are still thousands of tongues in the world. But it powerfully demonstrated how the Spirit can overcome this barrier, working through words to reach all nations. We rejoice as the Spirit works so that Bible translations are produced in more and more languages. We rejoice as the Spirit blesses people to serve as interpreters partnering with missionaries in foreign fields. We rejoice that we can train up local ministers who can bring the Word to their own communities in their own tongue. We marvel at how the Spirit works through words to continue accomplishing his will.

What a name the LORD has made for himself! Humanity has tried to build towers to its own glory, monuments that proclaim the greatness of people, relics that reveal our hearts of rebellion. But God's plan prevails. We wouldn't guess that mixing up the languages of the world could still lead to God's will being done. But in the midst of the chaos, the Spirit brings clarity and light and life. There are still many languages, but the same Spirit calls us all to believe in our Savior Jesus. And one day, a crowd of nations will gather to proclaim his name with one tongue. We look forward to that great multitude from every nation, tribe, people, AND LANGUAGE, crying out: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" Come, Holy Spirit, fill our hearts as we proclaim your holy name. Amen.