

**Pentecost:
Unity in Diversity**
(1 of 3)

Dr. Justo L. González

Dr. Catherine G. González

New Jersey

Pentecost: Unity in Diversity

(1 of 3)

Justo. The following is a reading from the RSV. It has been edited to eliminate gender-specific language where the Greek text does not include it. In those places where such language is in the Greek, we have kept it.

Catherine. Acts 2:1-24

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. (2) And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. (3) And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. (4) And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

(5) Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. (6) And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. (7) And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? (8) And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own and Medes and Elamites and native language? (9) Parthians residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, (11) Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." (12) And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" (13) But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."

(14) But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. (15) For these are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; (16) but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

*(17) 'And in the last days it shall be,
God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon*

*all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters
shall prophesy,
and your young shall see visions,
and your old shall dream dreams;
(18) yea, and on my menservants and my
maidservants in those days
I will pour out my Spirit; and they
shall prophesy.
(19) And I will show wonders in the heaven above
and signs on the earth beneath,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;
(20) the sun shall be turned into darkness
and the moon into blood,
before the day of the Lord comes,
the great and manifest day.
(21) And it shall be that whoever calls
on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

Justo. This is an account with which we are all familiar. We are so familiar with it that we have pictures that may not be altogether warranted by the text itself. Indeed, there are several points at which the text is unclear, or at which it does not say what we often picture.

The first such point is that the matter of the languages spoken by these listeners is not as clear as we imagine. They hear the speakers, each in their own languages. Yet, they can also communicate among themselves, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" (v. 12). In other words, while the miracle that is described amazes them, they have a basis for communication quite apart from that miracle.

In the same context, one wonders about those "others" who mocked and said that they were drunk. What image is the author trying to convey? When the mockers say that "they" are drunk, we usually think that this refers to those who are speaking. The text, however, does not make that clear. The mockers may be referring to the listeners, who are acting as if they were witnessing a great miracle. In any case, why did the mockers not perceive the miracle? Why were they not amazed by it? Did they not hear the believers speaking in their own tongue? Or were they simply local folk who did hear their own language, but had no reason to find that surprising? There is a tantalizing possibility here—a possibility that is worth pondering, not now, but on some other occasion: Could it be that the mockers did not perceive the miracle because they were local folk, because they expected to be addressed in their own tongue? Could it be that they were "insiders," and that what we have here is one more instance of the "insider" being unable to see the wondrous work of God, bringing the outsider in?

Catherine. We have so often heard of the parallel between this account of Pentecost in Acts and the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11. In the latter human language was confused and made divisive; in the former such divisiveness is overcome in the unity the Spirit provides. Clearly the intention is present in Acts to show that in various ways, the gift of the Spirit, made possible by the Cross and the Resurrection, has begun the undoing of the power of sin over human life. Babel was the result of sin; Pentecost is the advent of grace and renewal.

There is much more here in this second chapter of Acts, however, than unity in the face of previous divisiveness. Look at the diversity that is assumed and maintained at Pentecost.

They all hear in their own language; the variety has not been ended. In the passage from Joel, the diversity of age and gender is affirmed, but it is no longer a barrier for the gifts of the Spirit.

A new age has indeed dawned, but that does not mean that uniformity has been imposed. Unity has been given and experienced even though diversity has remained.

Nor can we say that until Pentecost no work toward unity in the human family had been undertaken. There is a great deal of existing unity shown in this passage even before Pentecost occurs.

Judaism provided a unity. Through the effects of the Exile and less traumatic migrations, Diaspora Judaism had spread throughout the Empire and beyond. Therefore Jerusalem—especially on feast days—had quite a cosmopolitan mix of Jews from the Mediterranean basin. According to the text, not only had Jews come to Jerusalem, but proselytes had also come with them.

Nor can we discount the effects of empire. Conquest had provided a lingua franca—Greek, in the eastern portion of the now Roman Empire. As we have seen, those who gathered around

the nascent church on that first Pentecost did carry on conversations and were understood in some common language, even if it were not their native tongues. Imperial power had imposed some unity—particularly on those who traveled or had business with people outside their immediate community.

Rome had provided relatively safe roads and made travel by land and sea safer than it had been. Commerce provided new links among different cultures, even though much of the commerce was of a colonial character.

Language, roads, commerce, travel, there were unities existing before Pentecost. Some attained at great human cost—imperial unities we might call them—but links nonetheless across the Babel that human sin had created.

There are divisions and unities in the world before Pentecost. There is diversity as well as unity in the new creation Pentecost exhibits. Diversity may be good; divisiveness is not. Unity is good; uniformity, however, is questionable. The account of Pentecost shows all of these characteristics. How can we distinguish what is unity but not uniformity? How can differences be diversity but not divisive? Is it easy to tell? When I work for unity, am I unwittingly stifling diversity? When I work for diversity, am I causing division? It may not be easy to separate good and evil. Do we check motivation or results? Does the good that we would do lead to evil results in the midst of a world not yet totally transformed? Does the evil that some intend lead to good

results they never anticipated? Empire and Pentecost are strange companions in Acts—even here at the beginning of the book.

Justo. Unity is not simply an ecclesiastical project, something that the church does and seeks while the world goes its own way. Unity is the very purpose of God for all of creation. As the Epistle to the Ephesians puts it, Jesus Christ

has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will, according to God's purpose which God set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ (as under one head), things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:10).

We, the church, as those who know that mystery of the cosmic goal, are called to live out of it and to witness to it by our own unity. But meanwhile the God whose mystery it is continues to work for its fulfillment, and we must learn how to discern the signs of that work of God wherever they may take place.

AETH

In some mysterious way, God's purpose of unity was being worked out in the very fact that there were in Jerusalem "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia," etc., etc., and in that those people, even apart from the miracle of Pentecost, were able to say to each other: "What does this mean?"

This is not to say that we are to bless all the horrible, cruel, unjust events that bring about this sort of imperial unity. The famous *pax romana* was wrought at the cost of much bloodshed and

injustice, and it is a terribly ecclesiocentric view of history to claim that all the wars and oppressions connected with the Roman Empire were brought about by God simply so that Christian missionaries and evangelists could travel from land to land, and so that Paul's epistles could be safely carried from one corner of the empire to another. One can look at the imperial unity that to some degree facilitated early Christian expansion and see it for what it is: a unity that reflects, but also distorts, that unity that God intends for humankind. One of the elements that give power to our twisted unities, to our oppressive unities, to our unities of privilege, is their aping and mimicking of that unity, that Shalom that God intends.

There are many sorts of unity in today's world. We wish we could simply take out a ledger and write negative unities on one column and positive unities on the other. But the matter is not that simple. Modern technology has made it possible for us to communicate with people at the other end of the world in a matter of seconds. Beautiful. We have become a global village. Even more beautiful. In that global village, those who are furthest away from the centers of power have lost control over their lives. Not so beautiful. In that global village, goods and resources tend to flow in a single direction, towards those who already have more than they need. Even less beautiful. In that global village, partly as a result of its being a global village, millions are starving. Horrible. In this global village, there are at least two men who have the power singlehandedly to destroy the entire planet and all that is in it. Incredibly demonic. And yet, somehow, we must still be ready to find in the globalization of this village the signs of God's

mysterious purpose, hidden for all eternity, but revealed in Jesus Christ: to unite all things under him as under one head, in a final reign of shalom.

Catherine. The Roman Empire—as a culmination of other imperial forces before it—had created imperial unity in the Mediterranean world. Its means and intentions were hardly unambiguous or even commendable. We read today about the glories of Rome, and we forget all the pain, misery, and exploitation that such glory cost. The Mediterranean world had been united under one government, yes, but at the cost of much suffering and bloodshed. Rebellions and uprisings were common occurrences. Indeed, the very city of Jerusalem, where Pentecost took place, would be destroyed a few years later in reprisal for one such uprising.

Justo. It is into this world that the church is born. It is in the midst of this empire that the event of Pentecost occurs. Those who look at Pentecost from the outside may think that what is taking place here is no more than one more instance of those many unities that the world knows.

"They are drunk." "They are full of new wine," they say. There is nothing particularly new here.

But those who participate in the event from the inside know that what is taking place is indeed something new. As Peter puts it, "This is what was foretold by the prophet Joel: In the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." In other words, in the last days there will be a unity like no other unity the world has ever known. The unity of the Spirit, in which the young see visions and the old have dreams, in which the sons and the daughters prophesize. And, surprising and

strange though it may seem, what Peter is saying is that these are the last days; that by the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Spirit, these people who live by the Spirit are already living in the last days. It is not only that we look forward to a new future. It is also, wonder of wonders, that God's future comes to meet us here, now, by the power of the Spirit.

Tonight, by sharing at the Lord's table, we shall celebrate and participate in that unity that the Spirit gives. Like the unity of the Roman Empire, and like all the various unities of our technological age, it is a costly unity. The difference, however, is that its price has already been paid. As Peter says, Jesus Christ "was crucified and killed by the hands of lawless people." We gather here in memory that he was crucified and killed. For that reason, we gather confessing our sin, our disloyalty, our lack of unity, the injustice that still remains even in our midst, our dislike of each other, our dislike of diversity, our attempts to create uniformity instead of unity.

But we gather also in celebration that, as Peter also says, was "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus who was crucified." We gather, not only to remember His past crucifixion but also to remember his coming reign of unity, peace, and justice; his coming reign of shalom. We gather, not only to seek unity but also, and above all, to celebrate that unity that we have in the risen Lord. We gather, not only to remember our sinful condition, our deep-seated prejudices and hatreds that required his death, but also to claim and to celebrate the new reality into which we are being called by virtue of his resurrection. By the power of the Spirit, we gather to

foretaste the joy and the unity of the last days. We gather to become that which we are called to be, a people whose sons and daughters prophesize, whose young see visions, whose old dream dreams; people whose witness crosses all cultural barriers. It may be that the world will look at us and say, "they are filled with new wine." But, if we are filled with the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection we here celebrate, we shall be able to look back at that very world and see in it, not only its pain, its injustice, its oppression, but also the shalom to which God is calling it. May our gathering at this table strengthen us for that task.

