

June 8, 2025

The Day of Pentecost

Texts: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

The Day of Pentecost is the birthday of the New Testament Church, the day when God the Holy Spirit began gathering together in large numbers the peoples of all nations into the one people of God. How does He do this? Through the word – the word of God. It's the word that is heard in all the various languages. It's the word which is proclaimed by St. Peter to all those gathered, such that about three thousand souls were added to the Church that day.

It is the word that the Holy Spirit still uses to call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify the whole Christian Church on earth, as we confess in the Catechism. In the readings for today, we're given a picture of why the word of God is central, essential to this saving work of God.

We see this importance all the more clearly through a negative example: the word of man as seen in the account from Genesis 11. That word of man would seem to be a good thing, at least as far as we hear in the first verse of chapter 11. "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words." Doesn't that sound nice? Every single man and woman being joined together in the same language, the same words, nothing getting lost in translation or misunderstood.

And it's more than that. It seems that, in telling us that they had not just the same language but the same words, the Bible is declaring that they are all united in one purpose. No one is speaking words contrary to someone else; they're all of one mind and therefore the same words. Wouldn't such unity be a great thing to have? Don't we wish we could experience that on earth today?

Well, it could've been good, had they been united around God and His will for them. But we see, tragically, that they are united in rebellion against God. The great flood, which may very well have been in living memory of those gathered on the plain of Shinar, had not eliminated sin from mankind. After the waters had subsided, God made this observation about mankind: "the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."

And now we see those evil intentions bearing evil words, and evil deeds. God had told the descendants of Noah to "be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply on it." They were to spread out and cover the earth, trusting that God would care for them wherever they went.

But what do they do instead? They purposefully stay together in one place. Describing the reason for building their great tower, the people say they need to build it "lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." It's in deliberate defiance of God's word that the tower goes up.

And defiance of God's word is always defiance of God Himself. The tower is also being built to have "its top in the heavens," so that the people might "make a name for [themselves]." Previously, how would one have expected to get to heaven? The same way we would expect to get to heaven, for the word of God doesn't change: repent of sin and believe in the coming Messiah, promised to Adam and Eve.

But they don't want to repent. They don't want to believe. They want to earn heaven for themselves, brick by brick, up to the realm of God. They'll show God that they don't need Him.

That's what it means that they want to "make a name for themselves." This isn't just vanity and a desire to be famous. No, the idea of a name is bound up in who a person or people are. To make a name for themselves is to reject whatever name God would give them. They'll be who they want to be, they'll identify however they want to identify, they'll determine good and evil – as their father Adam and mother Eve had been tempted to think long before.

It will be man's word – not God's – that will have the final say. It will be man's word that will lead them to their great future, achieving their grand purpose.

It will be man's word, the word of pride, that will lead to their destruction. They don't realize it – because pride and arrogance never do – but the tower they think is climbing up to the heavens actually leads down into the pits of hell. Rebelling against God's word always drives a person away from God and His blessings, despite what our own reason or feelings might tell us.

As we're told in Genesis, the LORD has to come down to see the city and the tower. This is language of separation, distance. The people might think they're getting closer as they add on, but they're no closer to bridging that infinite gap between earth and heaven.

That God has to come down and take a look also shows that they've not been communicating with God. None of man's words have been toward God, asking if this tower is a good idea, nor have they listened to God's word in which He's already spoken on the matter.

Observing this effort of man, God makes this remark: "This is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." In His perfect knowledge of the sinful human heart, God knows that this will only be the start of their rebellion. It isn't that man would've ushered in some utopia if God would've let them continue. No, as man progressed beyond bricks and mortar, he would try even other ways to eliminate his need for God and find glory and salvation on his own.

Consider what we've done, even with our languages confused. By the mere power of our words alone, we've sought to redefine and recreate what marriage is, what a man and a woman are, what the purpose of life is. We've used our knowledge, which God has often given to us for good, to mutilate children, conceal truth, and create doomsday scenarios. And when we're confronted by our sins and their horrible consequences, we often double down and push on ahead, rather than repent and heed God's words.

Because God loves man, then and now, He comes and throws down man's pride, that man might not bring such destruction on himself – or not as easily, at any rate. To stop the building of this gigantic brick-and-mortar idol, God throws man's word into confusion. He is the God of order, not confusion, but if He must use confusion to break the unity of man in sin and destruction, then He will do so.

By His mere will, He stops man's efforts, turning a symbol of supposed human achievement into a symbol of shame and failure. Man's efforts to reach heaven fall embarrassingly short, be they a tower of brick that the wind and rain will eventually reduce to rubble or every modern effort that also fails to bring in the golden age of humanity.

Such is the end of all man's efforts to save himself: crumbling in the face of forces we are powerless to stop, divided and confused by our pride and hubris, ending in shame and then destruction.

Yet even as God confused man's word, giving him many languages and many words, He was also preserving for man a different word, a word that would save, a word that would bring true unity, a word that would lead, not to shame and destruction, but to glory and life. This is of course the very word of God.

This word is not about glorifying man, making him feel good about himself, exalting man's efforts and achievements. No, this word is honest, making very clear the fallen condition of man, the extent of his corruption, the futility of His efforts. At the same time, this word glorifies God, and does so, not through exaggeration, but simply by stating the truth. God is everlasting. God is holy. God is perfect. God is all-powerful, all-wise, all-good. None of God's efforts ever fall short, nor do His purposes ever fail. God is love.

And in that love, the Lord came down, not just to stop the building of a false god of brick and mortar on the face of the earth, but to walk the face of the earth as the true God in flesh and blood. He would span that infinite distance between heaven and earth, not with a glorious tower, but with a blood-stained cross. In His resurrection, He would undo that one thing that seemingly held all men in common: death. And by His ascension, He would be lifted up into heaven, achieving the purpose for which the tower of Babel was built, but doing so with the purpose of saving and serving others. The holy God came to earth in order to cleanse sinful man and bring him to heaven.

That word – the Gospel – and the word that contains it – the Bible – are the word which God has given in place of man's sinful word of pride. It is that word which God the Holy Spirit miraculously caused to be proclaimed on that first New Testament Day of Pentecost nearly two thousand years ago. From the mouths of Galileans, simple fishermen, former tax collectors, ordinary guys, the mighty works of God are proclaimed.

And these are heard, not just by other Galileans, nor only by Israelites. No, the word of God is heard by "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and 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, Cretans and Arabians."

How are they hearing this word? By the miraculous working of the Spirit. Now, He doesn't simply reverse what He did thousands of years before at Babel, making them all speak one language again, though He certainly could have done so. But instead, God causes His Church to begin proclaiming the Gospel in all the variety of languages spoken by those visitors present in Jerusalem.

Why does God do this? I would argue that He does it to show the true unity found in the word of God. The previous unity was found in man's understanding of man, all having the same language and word, and this unity was turned toward evil.

But at Pentecost, we have a unity surpassing that, a unity that binds in hearts and minds, a unity grounded in the truth of God, a unity that lasts into eternity. The word of God is true, surpassing the

earthly divisions of people, tribe, and tongue. God's Law is true for all. The Commandments do not change based on where you live, or how old you are, or what the society around you thinks about them. Likewise, God's Gospel, His promise of salvation for all who believe, is true regardless of what language a person speaks, or from whom he is descended, or where on this earth he calls home.

The waters of Holy Baptism save, regardless of whether they originally come from the Jordan River or the springs outside of Rawlins, because it is done in the name and by the power of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in whatever language the Triune Name is invoked.

The Father hears the prayers of those who cry out in faith, regardless of what language they pray in. In fact, the word tells us that God the Holy Spirit even intercedes for us "with groanings too deep for words... according to the will of God." Working through the word, the Spirit changes us, what we call sanctification, conforming us to the image of Christ, leading us to put away the sins in our lives where we follow the prideful words of man and to live in accord with what God has set forth in His word.

Once man was unified in His own word, a word of pride. That word leads to destruction. And so God has shattered that word and replaced it with His own – a word leading to forgiveness, life, and salvation. In that word, and in the Church gathered together through that word, people of all times and places are brought into the one people of God.

At the present, the Church is scattered over the face of the whole earth, as God wills it, but the day is coming when we will be gathered together, not around an earthly tower, but into the heavenly Jerusalem, singing God's praises with one heart, one mind, and one voice. May our Lord hasten the day!

In the name of Jesus, amen.