

ReStart Week 2: Reaching People in their Language Acts 2:1-12

David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (March 14, 2021)

Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service today. I've been glad to see some rain this week and hope it will continue and reduce our rain deficit and level of drought.

Today we're moving to week two of our series ReStart. As we move through 2021, we're praying and seeing God's guidance as to how we can restart and revamp what we're doing this year. We're going through the book of Acts to learn about how the disciples took their history as Jewish believers, incorporated all that they had seen and learned from Jesus of the message of the kingdom of God and then worked to pioneer a new form of faith and ministry that would go beyond their nation to the rest of the world. We have so much to learn from this process as we seek to adapt to the changes in our society and culture right now as we continue in the same mission.

Last week I read the first eleven verse of Acts chapter 1, and I argued that:

- **We are living in a unique time period in which we have an unparalleled opportunity to reach the world for Jesus.**
- 1) **Let's restart the right way.**
 - 2) **Restarting can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.**

Today we are continuing the story in Acts chapter 2. I'll read from verse 1 to verse 12.

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

What happened at Pentecost is similar to what happened in Bethlehem: it is the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, the coming to earth like the physical birth of Jesus Christ. In one aspect, it is unique

and groundbreaking, but in another aspect, it continues to be replicated every time someone comes to faith and experiences the baptism and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

To give the history and background, the word Pentecost means fiftieth, you can see the root for five like in the word pentagon, and it is a Jewish festival celebrated 50 days after Passover. It was the Feast of Weeks given in Leviticus, coming 7 weeks after Passover, or the Harvest Festival of the first fruits, giving the first fruits of the wheat harvest back to God. Now God is giving the first fruits of our Christian life to us, a down payment that is a part of all the blessings and promises that God has intended for us. It was one of the three major festivals that all Jews were to participate in.

It is appropriate that the event that was going to propel the gospel to the ends of the earth took place at a time when people from the ends of the earth were in Jerusalem. Many pilgrims from all over the Mediterranean world had come to Jerusalem for the festival. This was the moment when God choose to give the Holy Spirit in a clear and distinct way. The Holy Spirit appeared in both an **auditory** and **visual** way: sound like a rushing wind, and appearing as tongues of fire. Think of a tornado, instead of a light breeze: this is a demonstration of power and intensity. Wind and fire.

These are actually not new ways of describing the Spirit, but drawing on common biblical symbols for the activity of the Spirit. The Greek and Hebrew words for "Spirit" can also mean "wind" and "breath." In the vision given to the prophet Ezekiel, he was taken to a valley of dry bones and witnessed wind and breath come and give life to dried-up bones. After that the Lord said, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live" (Ezek. 37:1-14). Peter also quotes the prophecy given to Joel to explain what has happened.

Like the coming of the gospel message itself, the coming of the Spirit means life to some and judgment to others. Fire is a symbol of the powerful presence of God that we find in the history of Israel as both the fire at the burning bush that did not burn up for Moses and the pillar of fire at night that guided the people of Israel after they left Egypt. And remember that fire is dangerous! I saw a silly cartoon that depicted how we might respond if Pentecost happened in our church today, like it did then. I'll put that on the screen so you can take a look, and obviously we try to avoid being lit on fire inside the church building, but this is the image that God uses to depict the presence of the Spirit. Now fortunately this, was like the burning bush, a fire that did not consume or burn up, but we must always

remember that our life with God is not safe, because God is not safe. Our life with God is not



comfortable, it is not easy, and it will push us in ways we don't like and require to give up things that we do like.

As we move forward in this Restart series, and we move forward as a church we will need to give up some things we are very used to, and embrace things that will seem uncomfortable or challenging or daunting, but all of this is part of the life of faith that God is calling us to.

Another implication of what happened at Pentecost is that the Spirit rests directly on each one of us, so we don't need a spiritual leader like Moses or Elijah to speak to God on our behalf, but we can each experience God's presence and communicate with God directly.

As I've reflected on the lesson for us from this passage, here is my summary for today:

1. To restart successfully, we must reach people in their language.

In his commentary on Acts, Ajith Fernando writes that "Pentecost also signals the breaking of barriers that have separated the human race since Babel, with the formation of a new humanity in Christ. In other words, Pentecost reverses what happened at Babel." When the languages were divided at Babel in Genesis 11, it killed cooperation and the ability of people to understand and work together. It brought on all kinds of division and conflict that have continued through human history. But our mission now requires doing the reverse and reaching people in their own words and their own language.

There are certain differences between the gift of tongues as explained here and the description in places like 1 Corinthians 12-14. The gift of tongues in Corinthians needs an interpreter to make sense of it, so it is not miraculously speaking different human languages like the disciples experienced.

Reaching people in their own language for the gospel requires something called contextualization. One of the most helpful courses that I ever had in school was a course I took in Nairobi called Contextualization. How do you share God's message in a way that is meaningful to the people around you? How do you communicate that message in a way that is understanding of the culture you are communicating in?

In our class, we looked at a process called Critical Contextualization as explained by Paul Hiebert. He describes a process that requires first understanding a certain cultural view or practice, which requires describing and grasping it as accurately and completely as we can. Then we compare that with the message and lessons from the Bible that relate to it. Then we evaluate that cultural practice to what we learn from the Bible, and developed a contextualized practice that makes sense in a particular setting and also resonates with the values and mission of God.

This is the basic process that missionaries will do when they move to a new culture. For example, in Kenya Christians evaluate traditional burial practices to see what they represent and do they correspond to Biblical values or represent a competing ideology. Or traditional rites of passage that mark a boy becoming a man when he turned 13. I believe we need to take this process and

also apply it to our own culture, because traditional American culture is not uniquely or uniformly Christian, and ask if something like our own wedding traditions, or our American cultural holidays, correspond to our Biblical mission or not. Something like Thanksgiving I think does align very well with many Biblical values, but something like the Easter bunny or Easter eggs and chocolate do not really align very well, and may be neutral or negative and even become a distraction from the original message of Easter. Then we need to decide how we can use a cultural focus like St. Patrick's Day or Easter or Halloween, and remove what we believe may be contrary to God's desires for us, but keep what we believe can speak into our cultural needs and interests and accomplish what God has called us to do.

Language is a huge aspect of contextualization. As we share the message of Jesus, are we doing it in a way that is intelligible to the people we are sharing it to? If they don't understand the words that we use, then we are not communicating. This may require translation itself, if it is a whole different language, as was the case that day on Pentecost, or it may require careful use of the words we use.

We may share the same language, and even if we're operating in English but the words we use don't communicate to the people we're talking to then we are not reaching them effectively. We have to avoid using Christian words in a way that is not clear to someone who did not grow up in the church or using those words. I know that I am guilty of this at times, and I want to be even more intentional with the language I use as I preach and as I talk to people so that I don't rely on Christian lingo, but use words that anyone would understand.

If we ask someone to be a Good Samaritan, and they don't know that parable, it doesn't make any sense. We have to explain. If we say the Lord's Table and someone doesn't know what means, we are not communicating with them. Or something like the Great Commission is a phrase we use, that I use, that people may not know. I'm sure there are others I use that I don't even notice, so I need to continually interrogate my own use of language to make sure it is clear and it is meaningful, to ask other people if they understand what I'm saying, and to be open to questions.

I loved our cultural Sunday that we did in November of last year, and I look forward to doing that again, and to pursuing as many ways as we can of including different languages in our regular worship and in our services. It is wonderful to have a multilingual congregation, and I pray that God will use that to expand our reach to those who speak these languages.

Last week I mentioned major seasons of societal disruption and change that in the past have occurred about every 500 years, including the fall of Rome, the division between the Western and Eastern Church, and the Reformation of the 16th century. Something that I learned and I hadn't considered before is the role of contextualization in the Reformation of the 1500s. One of the major changes that the churches led by the reformers made was to use the local language in worship instead of Latin which was not used in everyday life or conversation. The Reformation can be understood as contextualizing the gospel to northern Europe. Instead of speaking Latin,

now people can hear the gospel and read the Bible in German. My professor noted that in areas that had Latin-based languages closer to Latin like Spain Catholicism tended to survive, but in other areas with different local languages it did not survive. **We need to speak to people in their language.**

Contextualizing requires first understanding the context we are in. To reach our neighbors, we have to be able to relate and to empathize with them. A basic principle of communication is that we should seek first to understand, and then to be understood. When doing evangelism, we should spend more time listening than we spend talking. If we are not hearing the people we are talking to, then how can we expect that they will hear us?

One of the questions I have been wrestling with since I've moved here is the question of how to contextualize ministry in this area. I've had to make changes from what I'm used to from doing ministry in Kenya. Some changes and adjustments have been fairly obvious, but there's much more I'm still processing and seeking to understand. My invitation for us as a church family is to join me in this journey of observing our own context, and try to look at it as though you are a missionary arriving here for the very first time and looking for opportunities for the gospel.

I believe that God is the answer to the cry of our hearts for purpose, for significance, for love, and for belonging. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that "He, God, has also set eternity in the human heart," which I believe means that we have been created for eternal life, and that is what we crave and desire. We have been placed here in this time to answer these questions of the people around us, and we must do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, and as much as possible in their own language.

1. To restart successfully, we must reach people in their language.

I'll close with some announcements – our **Joyful Bounty** outreach event is in less than 2 weeks, on March 27, so please continue to make your contributions and sign up to serve. We're exciting for another chance to do outreach and connect with families in our area. You can contribute online or by mail, and you can help us by serving at a connection station, at our welcome table, as a 'runner' to bring out the food bags, or with set up. Please do talk to Jan or to me.

Let's close in prayer.