

witnessed something we are not sure ever happened before—language death on a very large scale. And what has contributed to the death of languages is colonization, with European languages being imposed on peoples all over the world. So you see, we are still trying today, to build the Tower of Babel. With every floor added to our Tower of Babel, the gap between the rich and the poor widens. With the current administration’s tax cuts, many received a 7% raise last year. For the CEO’s at the biggest companies, their 7% raise amounted to roughly \$800,000. It would take 158 years for the typical worker at most big companies to make what their CEO did in 2018. For every dollar a typical white household holds, a black one has 10 cents. With every floor added to our Tower of Babel, we will build more prison cells than classrooms and spend more on prisoners than on school-age children. The Tower of Babel adds more bricks and concrete to our walls and barriers.

I am fascinated by the fact that among the most popular language learning apps which promise to teach you how to read, write or speak a new language, all from your phone, one is named Babel. So I am wondering, with the language app Babel, whether Pentecost is needed? Human ingenuity has overcome the need for the Holy Spirit!

Old Testament scholars, in particular professor Ted Hiebert of McCormick Theological Seminary, note that the story of the Tower of Babel has been mislabeled. The real focus of the story should be the **City** of Babel because the tower, in fact, is not the central element. In the story, when God ended the construction project, the narrator says, *“they stopped building the **city**.”* So why does the construction of the city disturb God so much? The clue is in the punishment that God metes out to the builders. In these brief verses of the story, we are told twice what God’s punishment is—*“God scattered the builders over the face of the whole earth.”* What is odd about this punishment is that when God created the first man and woman, God blessed them with: *“Be fertile and increase, FILL THE EARTH.”* (1:28). And after the flood, God blessed Noah by reiterating the exact same words: *“Be fertile and increase, and FILL THE EARTH.”* (9:1). If a key part of God’s foundational blessing and charge to humanity is that we spread out and fill the earth, how can God’s scattering humanity be a punishment? According to Hiebert, it isn’t! According to our text, the builders want to stay put, to congregate in one place. In fact, the builders resist God’s blessing; they explicitly declare their intention to build their city, and the tower within the city, crying out in fear: ***“lest we be scattered all over the world”!*** What the builders most fear is what God most wants! The scattering may not ultimately be a punishment at all, but a reaffirmation of the initial divine blessing. Professor Hiebert writes: *“The world’s cultural diversity is represented as God’s design for the world, not the result of God’s punishment of it.”*

So why is the builders’ desire to stay huddled together in one place such a problem? And conversely, why is God so committed to dispersing people in the first place? The very first verse of our story is telling: ***“Now the whole earth had ONE language and the SAME words.”*** Our story starts out describing what seems like a wonderful story of human unity, of people living together and successfully communicating with one another. What is so bad about this? A lot, if not everything, depends on how we understand unity. If everyone speaks the *“same language”* and utilizes the *“same words”*, perhaps this story isn’t really about *unity*, but about **uniformity**, which is much different! When President Trump visited Japan recently, it seemed like President Trump and Japan’s prime minister were on a first-name basis. But that is in fact more complicated than we realize. You see, in Japan, a first name means something different: the Japanese refer to themselves with the surname first, then the given name. And Japan’s foreign minister says it is time for the Western world to respect his country’s tradition and render Japanese names in that order in English. I grew up thinking that the way to be accepted was to be assimilated, to fit into the white mainstream. I worked hard to perfect my English so that over the phone, the person on the other end of the call could not tell that I was Chinese. Until one day, in my 30’s, a parishioner intending a compliment, said to me: *“Cal, I have never seen you as Chinese.”* I had succeeded in my goal of assimilation, only to discover that the reward, the prize for my achievement was a sense of shame, emptiness, and non-personhood. My race and ethnicity, my cultural heritage, and yes, my language had been erased. Years later, when I made my first pilgrimage to China, and walked into my parents’ villages, and heard my native Zhongshan tongue spoken, and was able not only to understand, but also to speak the dialect of my village, I felt like I had come home...and I became a person.

Total uniformity is a sign of totalitarian control, a fear of diversity, an erasure of all difference. *In scattering people and multiplying languages, God is offering the world a path of blessing.* In the story of the first Pentecost, we witness

God affirming a diversity of tongues. The Holy Spirit speaks through all languages. Every language is holy! Pentecost invites us into a new way of engaging with difference—not just with different languages, but with all the ways we are marked as different from one another. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit speaks through the differences, without converting them into sameness. The miracle of Pentecost is that God speaks through *all* the native languages—that God does NOT speak a single language, a universal language, that is then translated through the Babel language app. Through the Spirit, difference is made holy.

Eric Laws reminds us that the miracle of Pentecost was not the *tongue*, but the **ear**. Pentecost today entails our listening more than speaking. I wonder if being silent is a prerequisite for colluding with the Holy Spirit, or at least not obstructing the wind, flame and words given to us by God and about God. Charlene, a Pima Native American, was a regular participant in our off-campus youth program at the church in Riverside, CA. Riverside was home to Sherman Institute, the federal boarding school for Native American young people from the Southwest—Navajos and Hopis, Utes and Pimas. Charlene was terribly overweight and wore a scowl on her face. Not only did she never smile, but she never spoke a word to anyone. Once off the bus, she sought out a corner where she could sit alone, and isolate herself from any human contact. Everything about Charlene communicated the loud and clear message—“*stay away or else*”. After 2 months of observing Charlene’s behavior, I decided to sit down next to her. Each week for the remainder of the school year, I sat down next to Charlene and never said a word. I sat down next to her for just about 10 minutes each week; then got up and joined the rest of the group. As the school year drew near to the end, when the youth looked forward to returning home to their families in Arizona and Utah for the summer, I continued my regular routine of sitting down next to Charlene. On this particular evening, suddenly I heard an unfamiliar voice coming from Charlene’s direction. Once she started talking, Charlene did not stop until it was time to return to Sherman Institute. I learned that the Pima were a thriving people, growing their own crops, proudly self-sufficient. Then one day, the river that ran through the middle of their reservation stopped flowing and dried up completely. The Pima could no longer grow their own food and feed themselves. Their beautiful lush gardens were replaced by the weekly visit of the truck that dumped government surplus food to the people. As a result of the changed diets, the health of the Pima declined precipitously. With the construction of Hoover Dam upstream, the river of life that ran through the Pima reservation dried up, replaced by a government welfare system.

Charlene taught me the power of silence and presence. Communication occurs even in silence. And the most powerful part of the human anatomy in silent presence is the ear. If my tongue had intruded upon the silence, I would never have heard Charlene’s story. When I wished Charlene a happy summer, she returned a smile, the first one I had ever seen. Be silent and listen. Then speak words that are not your own, but God’s, knowing that the Spirit gives you the ability to proclaim God’s deeds of power and to experience them through others, too, even those you least expected.

