

Acts 2:6 in the Navajo Bible

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Áko kót'éego hodiists'áa'go t'óó ahojyóí álah dzizlíi'go t'áálá'í jinítínigo t'áá hó dahazaadígíí yee yádaahti'go dazdiizts'áa'go bik'ee t'óó hoł dahóólaad. (Acts 2:6)¹

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. (Acts 2:6)²

Introduction

In Acts 2:6 we have a description of the gift of tongues on the day of Pentecost. The Navajo translation agrees with the English in conveying the idea that what these people were speaking were real languages.

Wrong Interpretations

There are two wrong interpretations here that we need to avoid. The first is that the disciples on the day of Pentecost were speaking unintelligibly, i.e., in words that no one would normally use in speaking to another person. We know this was not happening because on that day there were people from all over the Roman world and beyond who understood what the disciples were saying. They didn't just hear in their own languages (*t'áá hó dahazaadígíí*), they heard the disciples speaking in those languages (*yee yádaahti'go*).

This brings us to the other potential problem mentioned above. This is the idea that the gift of "tongues" was actually a gift of "ears." We need to read carefully. The gift was not poured on the crowd as a means of helping them understand what was said. It was poured out on the disciples as a means of helping them to speak in other languages. It is true that some thought they were drunk because of the sounds they were making, but then not all of the crowd came from the same place.

Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?"⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own 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 Rome¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs- we hear them declaring the

¹ Navajo Bible quotations are from *Diyin God Bizaad. The Holy Bible in Navajo*. Revised edition. New York: American Bible Society, 2000.

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wonders of God in our own tongues!"¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:7)

People from Cappadocia who were there that day understood those disciples who were praising God in the language of Cappadocia. Those who did not understand that language did not understand what those particular disciples were saying, but might have understood other disciples who were speaking in the language of Parthia, or Media, or Elam. Jews from Media or Elam might have thought that the disciples who were speaking the language of Cappadocia were drunk, but they didn't think the disciples speaking the languages of Media or Elam were drunk. Instead they wondered how people from Galilee could know Median or Elamite and speak it so well.

Peter knew some were saying that the disciples who were speaking languages they (those in the crowd) didn't know were merely drunk. But he denied this in vs. 15. We need Peter here today. Many good hearted people want to make the gift of tongues into a gift of meaningless sounds – very much like what one might hear from someone who is drunk. What Peter specifically denied we have brought into our churches. But there is no reason for this. In Acts 2 the disciples were speaking real languages. As some in the crowd said, they were speaking "in our own tongues" (*t'áá nihí danihizaad bee*) (vs. 11).

Discussion

Acts 2

Any legitimate outpouring of the gift of tongues today will involve speaking in actual human languages and it will have the same purpose now that it had on the day of Pentecost, i.e., it will be used to reach others for Christ. More than this, it will have the same effect.

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. (Acts 2:41)

On the day of Pentecost those who received the gift of tongues were not Christians experiencing a special kind of fellowship with each other. They were Jews who received Christ as a result of the message they heard

Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers. (1 Corinthians 14:22)

I always wondered what 1 Corinthians 14:22 meant, but the intent is clear. When the gift is genuine, it is given for the purpose of reaching out to those who are not already Christians. It makes Christians out of those who have never been Christians. Notice a point that might seem subtle, but is actually very important. The gift of tongues in Acts 2 was not given to bless those who received it. It is given to bless those who would be ministered to by those who received it. Today also it is given to bless others, not ourselves. We have turned this around and made it a means of authenticating who the real members of our group are. But the original purpose was the opposite of this.

Acts 10

In Acts 10, when Cornelius and his household believed Peter's preaching and accepted Jesus, they received the gift of tongues. In this case it was not the disciples who spoke in tongues, but those who received Christ through their preaching. This is closer to what we have today, but it is not the same thing.

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said,⁴⁷ "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have."⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. (Acts 10:44-48)

There's a point to notice here that would be easy to miss. Who was being convinced by what? Cornelius and his household were convinced by Peter's preaching. So they received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Is this the end of it? No. Peter also needed to be convinced of something. He needed to know that Gentiles were not rejected by God and that they also needed the gospel. We know Peter drew this conclusion because he tells us so.

He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. (Acts 10:28)

What is Peter saying here? "God has shown me that . . ." What did God show him? That it's alright to eat pork. Right? "God has shown me that I should not call any *man* impure or unclean" (vs. 28). The point he draws is not that we put anything and everything on our tables, but that we should all kinds of people into our churches. I'm glad Peter caught this point, because I am a Gentile – just as much a Gentile as any Navajo reading these lines. I don't want to be excluded from Christ because somebody thinks the first part of the chapter applies to food. It doesn't. It applies to me. And undoubtedly to you. God accepts people no matter who they are. This is the lesson to be learned from the vision of the sheet (see Acts 10:9-16).

Peter was not the only one who needed to surround this point. Those who came with him "were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (vs. 45). Jews everywhere were amazed at this. "The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God" (Acts 11:1). But this was not the end of it. When Peter returned to Jerusalem he had to answer for his actions. He had entered the home of a Gentile. So he explained that the Holy Spirit had come upon Cornelius. What was he supposed to do? If God had accepted this man, how could Peter reject him?

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life." (Acts 11:18)

Notice the role of the gift of tongues in all of this. Here also, as on the day of Pentecost, it was serving to convince those who needed convincing. On Pentecost it convinced Jews from all over the world that Jesus was the Christ. After Peter's experience with Cornelius it convinced the church that it was God's will for them to accept Gentiles into membership.

1 Corinthians 11

The ancient use of the gift of tongues that is most similar to its modern use is what happened in Corinth. But does Corinth provide a good model for modern Christians? What does Paul say?

In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. (1 Corinthians 11:17)

The Corinthian church was using this gift from the Holy Spirit to assert one member over another (Look at what I can do!) and the result was disorder and confusion. When this is the result, we can be sure something is wrong.

Conclusion

I'm convinced that there is a genuine gift of tongues in the church today, but I'm also convinced that it is roundly misused. When Nicky Cruz accepted Christ and started coming out of the gangs of New York into a different life, he had not received much of an education. The time he spent in school had nothing to do with learning things, except how to stay alive. As his name started being known, people wanted to hear his testimony. But he had come from Puerto Rico and spoke mostly Spanish. So when he spoke before large audiences he always used a translator. One evening he was to speak but there was no translator. He got up and tried to speak in English, but could not. He tried again, but the words would not come. He prayed for God to help him and then the words came. He bore his testimony and many were led to Christ. This is the genuine gift.

The truth is always humbling. This is especially true in regard to the truth about Jesus. He leads us to glory, but does this by first leading us to the cross. Every day we must take up our cross and follow Jesus (see Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). This is something we can only do if we're taking the same path Jesus took. Let us follow Him humbly and use His gifts to build up others. When we do this and the result is that others who don't know Jesus are led to Him and accept Him into their lives, we can be sure that the gift is genuine. We can only know a tree by its fruit (see Matthew 7:16, 20).