

God's Sovereignty and Human Speech

Genesis 11:1–9, Acts 21:30–22:2

Our Acts text is one of just a handful places in the Bible that mention both Greek and Hebrew, the two major languages in which the Holy Scriptures were originally written.¹ Twice in the gospels we are told that the superscription over Christ's cross was written in "*Greek*, Latin and *Hebrew*."² Revelation speaks of "the bottomless pit, whose name in the *Hebrew* tongue is Abaddon," but in the *Greek* tongue it is "Apollyon" (9:11).

In our Acts text the Roman military commander asks Paul, "Can you speak *Greek*?" Then we learn that Paul "spoke [to the crowd] in the *Hebrew* language." Again, several verses later, Luke observes that "when [the crowd] heard that Paul spoke to them in the *Hebrew* language, they kept all the more silent." Paul, like many people in biblical Palestine, was multilingual; he speaks to the Roman commander in Greek (not Latin), then turns and speaks to the crowd in Hebrew.³ So this is good opportunity to touch on the biblical teaching on God's sovereignty and human speech.

Our Old Testament text teaches that "the whole earth had one language and one speech." Keil and Delitzsch observe that "the unity of language of the whole human race follows from the unity of its descent from a single human pair."⁴ The word for "language" in Genesis 11:1 is actually "lip."⁵ Hebrew has relatively few abstract terms: "lip" is concrete; "language" is abstract.⁶ Another biblical term for language is *tongue*: "A nation whose *tongue* thou shalt not understand" (Deut. 28:49). In the book of Revelation, the apostle John testifies, "I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and *tongue*, and people."⁷ So in the first book of the Bible the whole earth had one language and one speech, but by the last book of the Bible the need still exists for the preaching of the gospel in all the languages of earth. If we hear the gospel in our mother tongue, that is a great blessing for which God will hold us responsible; not every human has that advantage—at least not yet. Very simply, the gospel (good news) is that though

¹ There is a third biblical language, Aramaic, the language of ancient Babylon picked up by the Jews during the Babylonian captivity (a cousin language to Hebrew). About ten Old Testament chapters—mostly in Ezra and Daniel—are written in Aramaic.

² Luke 23:38; cf. John 19:20

³ There are differing opinions about what language is meant in this verse. "By 'Hebrew' here is meant the Aramaic dialect of Palestine" (*Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/21-40.htm> accessed 1-14-23). But others "hold that some form of Hebrew was commonly spoken" (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, 'Εβραϊς [Logos Bible Software])

⁴ Keil & Delitzsch, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/11-1.htm> accessed 1-14-23

⁵ שפה

⁶ "Existing as an idea but not having a physical or concrete existence" (*New Oxford American Dictionary* [Mac OS])

⁷ Rev. 14:6

mankind sinned in Adam, God has sent his only begotten Son, the second Adam, to take our sins upon him and go to the cross to die in the place of his people. The one who believes on him will never perish but have everlasting life. If you understood what I just said, and put your trust in Christ alone, in true faith, you will be saved.

But not every person on earth has the opportunity to hear that message in his own language. Experts say that there are over 7,000 spoken languages in the world today. Only about half have writings systems. The language with the most speakers is Mandarin Chinese. If we include second-language speakers, English is the most popular. Sixty-seven countries designate English as their official language.⁸ One such country is India. India alone has 447 languages!⁹ So it needs official languages to get its business done; its official languages are Hindi and English.

God made man a social creature. He gave us each a mouth and two ears. He intended for us to communicate with our fellow man for our mutual benefit. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve communed with God and had joyful fellowship with one another. But sin ruined all that. Now, many members of the human race are isolated and alone, feeling like nobody cares about them, and they have no hope. All of us have a deep human longing for meaningful connection. This is one reason why we need the church, where we experience “the fellowship of the Spirit.”¹⁰ As we meet together with our fellow worshipers, our focus ought to be on Christ, not just on the things of the earth, which are passing away. How comforting to know that God cares about us, and that those who trust in Christ will one day stand in the presence of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world and sing his praises with his people! The cares and disappointments of this world will one day be a distant memory, swallowed up in eternal joy. If you are lonely now, take comfort in the fact that for those who belong to Christ, “We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”¹¹ Jesus understands and knows our human condition—hallelujah!

In our Genesis text we read that “they had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar”—deficient, crumbling building materials of poor quality, totally insufficient for building a skyscraper. No wonder there are no archeological remains! This illustrates the folly of human plans; they will not stand the test of time. One day, the earth and everything in it will be destroyed. “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”¹² Nowadays, when an

⁸ <https://www.infoplease.com/world/social-statistics/how-many-languages-are-there> accessed 1-14-23

⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India> accessed 1-14-23

¹⁰ Phil. 2:1

¹¹ Heb. 4:15

¹² 2 Cor. 5:1

architect wants to build a skyscraper, he chooses steel and reinforced concrete as building materials. In fact, until the 1880s the tallest load-bearing brick building ever constructed was 16 stories.¹³ Steel skeleton construction has allowed for today's super-tall skyscrapers.¹⁴ The tallest building in the world, completed in 2009, is located in Dubai, with a height of 2,722 feet—over a half-mile high! Even skyscrapers built of steel and reinforced concrete will one day fall, but our dwelling place with God is eternal, and can never be taken from us!

The builders of the Tower of Babel wanted to build a tower and a civilization that would be permanent. They wanted to make a name for themselves (v. 4). They wanted to build the city of man, a place that excluded God, that had no room for God's truth. But God had other plans. He confused their language, that they could not understand one another's speech. The building project was never finished, and the people were scattered. God is trying to teach us something: that he is sovereign and truly in charge, and that his kingdom is eternal. When God confused the language of man at Babel, he introduced the various language-families of the world from which the 7,000 languages currently spoken have evolved. How do languages evolve? Through differentiation and adaptation. English, as an example, is part of the Indo-European family of languages. This family includes such diverse languages as Farsi, the language of Iran; Greek; Romanian; French; Spanish; Gaelic; Dutch; German; Frisian; English; Danish; Swedish; Norwegian; Russian; Ukrainian; Bulgarian; Czech; Polish; Serbian; Latvian; and Lithuanian.¹⁵

Clearly, language changes over time, but the need for the gospel is perpetual. Therefore, God must call committed men who will preach his word faithfully to all the people-groups on earth. All the church's resources cannot go into building the church in our own land. We are charged, "Go ye *into all the world*, and preach the gospel *to every creature*" (Mark 16:15). The missionary vision must be kept before the church in every generation. There is only one Savior, and that is Jesus. He is the Savior of the world, the only Mediator between God and men. Neither is there salvation in any other. Every single man, woman and child in the world needs to hear of him. But the peoples of the world speak over 7,000 languages. The task is enormous. It cannot be fulfilled in human power. Oh, how we need the power of the Holy Spirit! We need to pray that God would equip his church to send forth preachers of his word to the nations, to bring them to the light. Our Westminster Confession of Faith, reflecting Scripture, asserts that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments "are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monadnock_Building accessed 1-14-2023

¹⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skyscraper> accessed 1-14-2023

¹⁵ Calvert Watkins, *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 148–149.

worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.”¹⁶

As an example of how language changes, consider the following. The King James Version uses the word “beeves,” the plural of *beef*. In a list of the booty taken in battle the KJV of Numbers 31:33 records “threescore and twelve thousand *beeves*.” The NKJV updates this to “seventy-two thousand cattle.” The terms “threescore” and “beeves” are proper English words and understandable to those who take the time to look them up in a dictionary, but they are not commonly used today.

Consider Jesus’ words “Suffer little children to come unto me” (Luke 18:16). Educated Christians know that Jesus was not advocating child abuse—making little children suffer—but was imploring his people not to hinder children from coming to him, the Savior of the world, young as well as old. This is evident from the context: “And they brought unto him also infants, that he would touch them: but when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.” His disciples were wrong for trying to prevent parents from bringing their little ones to Christ. What Jesus was saying was “*Let* the little children come to me.” Wise parents do well to turn off all electronic devices and read and explain the Bible to their children on a daily basis, and to bring them to church, where they can hear the gospel preached. Church is not an adults-only experience, it is for children too. In the Bible, covenant children are considered members of the church, an indispensable part of the covenant community.

Or consider the phrase “He who now letteth will let.” It is found in 2 Thessalonians 2:7, “For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only *he who now letteth will let*, until he be taken out of the way.” Paul is talking about the Holy Spirit’s work of restraining sin, which at some point will be taken away, and then things will get immeasurably worse. The New King James version is more understandable to moderns: “He who now *restrains* will do so until He is taken out of the way.”

Language changes because for some unknown reason the aggregate of speakers stops using certain words (such as “beeves” in the example just noted) in favor of other words. Language also changes because of isolation: people groups that are isolated develop unique speech patterns. The other day I listened to a recording of a doctor from New Zealand, an educated person making a point about medicine. The speech was in English. The doctor’s pronunciation—the syllables accented and the sound of vowels—was quite different from what one typically hears on a U.S. newscast. I had to listen intently to discern the meaning. The New Zealand doctor’s

¹⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.8, <https://opc.org/wcf.html>

speech, in turn, is quite different from the style of English one encounters in “ghetto talk,” where young people cut off from the mainstream of common culture develop unique speech patterns in a desire to conform and be “cool.” When God sanctifies us he cleans up our speech. When we become new creatures in Christ he gives us an appetite for spiritual things. We desire to know him, we desire to draw near to him and worship him. We desire to dedicate our lives, our time, our talents and treasure to the task of making disciples and making Christ known to the people God sovereignly brings us into contact with.

When the apostle Paul was arrested and beaten by a hateful mob he nonetheless was faithful to his calling to preach the gospel. Paul was suddenly accosted by a violent crowd, a crowd that was out for blood! The text specifically says that they were “seeking to *kill* him.” As we saw last week, the original Greek literally says that “there was a *running together* of the people.” The word for *running together* refers to the forming of a mob—an explosive and volatile situation. Think of how frightening that was: to face the violence of a mob, people crying out, “Away with him!” Notice the similarity with what happened at Jesus’ trial. John records that the people “cried out, *Away with him, away with him, crucify him.*”¹⁷ Now, in our Acts text we read that “the multitude of the people followed after, crying, *Away with him.*” Paul, the servant of Christ, undergoes the same treatment at the hands of a crowd as did his Savior who went before him. The pressure must have been incredible. Lesser men would have simply given up. But Paul persisted. He didn’t want anything to stop him from preaching Christ to the unruly crowd. Even though they were hostile, he still wanted to preach to them. So he asks the commander—the highest Roman military official in occupied Palestine—“May I speak to you?” He says the words in Greek. The commander replied, “Can you speak Greek?” He was dumbfounded. He thought he was dealing with a common rabble-rouser, an Egyptian who had recently stirred up a rebellion and led 4,000 assassins out into the wilderness. He didn’t know it, but he was speaking—having a meaningful conversion, in spite of the din and hubbub of the angry mob—with a Christian missionary and erudite theologian, the venerable apostle Paul. What an opportunity!

After Paul had made his request and was given permission, the soldiers proceeded to quiet the crowds. Then, the apostle Paul switched languages and tone of voice. Now he would have to speak as a public orator, raising his voice to address the crowd. And he would speak in the Hebrew vernacular that was understandable to the people: “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.” The King James is more accurate: “*Men*, brethren, and fathers.” The word for “men” is not the generic word for men as distinguished from God; it is the

¹⁷ John 19:15

word for *males*—adult men, as distinguished from women. The modern translations do not like this word; it is not politically correct; it does not sell Bibles, a large number of which are bought by women. We will get into the particulars of Paul’s speech on the castle steps next week. But what I want you to see today is that the same God who was sovereign over human speech at the Tower of Babel sovereignly uses a human messenger using human language to bear witness to a Jewish mob, to convince them that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah, and to reveal his plan of taking his gospel to the Gentiles.

What is the takeaway from all this? Today, you have heard the truth of Scripture. You are fortunate. Not everyone has this opportunity. Others don’t hear the truth but open their hearts to error.

With the internet, anyone can present himself as an expert in the Bible. Such “experts” can have plausible-sounding arguments to lead the unsuspecting astray. God did not intend that his word be taught by independent teachers; rather, his word should be taught by men under the authority of his church—men called by God, examined by elders, ordained to office, and under the oversight of presbyteries. If a preacher or teacher of the Word teaches false doctrine and fails to repent, then a faithful church will remove his teaching authority by deposing him from office.

When the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America was formed in 1788, it adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as its secondary standards (the Bible itself being the only infallible rule of faith and practice). Ministers and elders in the OPC take a vow to “sincerely receive and adopt” these confessional documents “as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.”¹⁸

Over the years I have known men and women who have shown an interest in the church, then dropped out to become “internet Christians,” choosing to derive their understanding of Scripture from self-styled “experts” on the web, rather than from God-appointed flesh-and-blood teachers in the visible church, accountable to higher courts.

The OPC requires that ministers and teachers of the Word demonstrate competency in the original languages of Scripture. Why? Because the God of heaven chose to give his word in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. His word is to be translated into every tongue, and preached in the language of the hearers, but it is important that ministers and teachers of the Word be able to interpret the meaning of the Scriptures with understanding of the original languages. Attaining and maintaining competency in the original languages requires dedication and a lifetime of hard work, and many would-be teachers of the Word can’t be bothered

¹⁸ <https://opc.org/confessions.html>

with this onerous burden. Internet teachers have no such requirement. They can set up shop and pose as experts in the Word without having mastered the biblical languages or studied theology with faithful ministers.¹⁹

It is God himself who ordained the languages of the world, as our Old Testament text reveals. Why are there so many languages? Our wise and loving Heavenly Father confounded the speech of mankind at the Tower of Babel. He did this for man's good, to make it more difficult for man to advance his plan for one-world government with centralized, authoritarian control.

A native speaker of a language is born and immersed in the language during youth, where he hears and interacts with family members speaking his language. Native speakers acquire a language naturally, as opposed to trying to learn a language later in life. Native speakers will not necessarily be knowledgeable about every grammatical rule of the language, but they will have good intuition of the rules through their experience with the language.²⁰

Always be wary of anyone, setting himself (or herself) up as an expert in the Bible, who conceals his church affiliation. All people have a bias, one way or another. There is no one who is a truly unbiased, disinterested third party who dispenses nothing but pure, factual information, in the interest of only helping people. Remember, even "fact checkers" have biases! The Lord of glory is perfect, but his church is peopled by men and women at various stages of sanctification. Even the apostle Paul did not claim to have achieved perfection. He wrote, "Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). For the preacher, his bias must always be the glory of Christ, the eternal Son who became flesh. Consider the examples of the preachers in the book of Acts. We read of Philip, that he "went down to the city of Samaria, and *preached Christ* unto them," and of Paul: "And straightway he *preached Christ* in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God" (Acts 8:5, 9:20). It is always best to obtain your information from men and women who are members of churches that practice church discipline. If they mislead you or defraud you, you have recourse. But as a general rule, insist on full disclosure! There is no mortal human being who is only a pure, unbiased dispenser of truth. That is why the Bible instructs us to be discerning. The apostle John's instruction is right on the money: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1).

Dear hearer, Christ is truth incarnate. He will never lead you astray. Become his worshiper. If you commit your life to him, you will never regret it. Amen.

¹⁹ 2 Tim. 2:2

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_language accessed 1-14-2023