

You Don't Need to Know the Language



Lancaster, PA
April 28, 1993

© Justo L. Gonzalez; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>
info@aeth.org

You Don't Need to Know the Language

Introduction. Pleasure to be here. I was asked to speak about Hispanic or Latino issues in seminary. Gave the title: "You don't need to know the language to read the Bible in Spanish." What prompted me to suggest this title was an experience I had some years ago in one of the leading seminaries in this country. (Mention the miracle, but not the saint.) You see, it is possible to learn Spanish, and even to learn it in order to read some of the radical things that are being written in Spanish and still miss the whole point. And vice versa.

This is because, when we speak of "reading in Spanish," we do not mean literally reading in that language, which many of you studied in high school or in college, Spanish 101, yo amo, tú amas, él ama, etc. What we mean is reading from a perspective and with certain hermeneutical eyeglasses that are derived from the Hispanic experience. Out of that experience, and reflection upon it, we have come to the conclusion that it is necessary to read the Bible in a way that is different than the ways in which we were told.

For me personally, there have been two "aha!" experiences that have shaped my own hermeneutics.

The first began many years ago. . . Peter's denial . . . Nobody had been with Jesus! Years later. . . concerned about my accent . . . (are they all ladies? No, we are not all old!). Then she told me

that the text they had chosen for that particular Lenten series was the betrayal and passion of Jesus as it appears in the Gospel of Matthew. And, reading the account of Peter's denial in that gospel, I came across startling words: "The bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.'" You see, the reason why they knew that Peter was one the disciples was not that his face shone. It was that he had an accent. He talked funny! What is going on is that all these immigrants from Galilee have come to the center of power. And the center does not like it! (Later, Virgil and Orlando added much to this.)

That "aha!" experience opened my eyes to issues of culture and language which ever since I have found throughout Scripture, and also throughout the history of the Church. (For the hermeneutics which I am applying here to the Bible must also be applied across the entire theological curriculum.)

The second "aha!" experience came years later. It was the late sixties. Vatican II. Tell story. I Cor. 12. Then I came to verses 23 and 24, and I could hardly refrain from laughing: "and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with great respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this." This is what is unique about this entire passage. And then it goes on to say: "But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member." This now relates to the whole argument, a few chapters back, about those who came to the Supper and

gorged themselves, while others went hungry, and about discerning the body of Christ. Do you see the connection?

This second "aha!" experience opened my eyes to another dimension of what I now call "reading the Bible in Spanish." This is the social and political dimension, the question of power and powerlessness. You see, from the perspective of those in power the traditional reading of I Cor. 12 is rather innocuous. But this other reading is quite threatening, and thus we gloss over the verses that may well be the very center of the passage

It is this perspective, a perspective so to speak from the margin, a perspective that is suspicious of what we have been told that the Bible says, a perspective that seeks to read the Bible anew out of its own pain and oppression, that we call "reading the Bible in Spanish." In that phrase, the language is mostly a symbol. It is a symbol for reading out of our own experience, and often against traditional readings. And that is why I say that "you don't have to know the language to read in Spanish."

This point is important for us who are Hispanic or Latinos. It is important, because within our own community the Spanish language is both a source of identity and a means of oppression. As a source of identity, we value it. There are some things we can only say in our own language and have a very different time conveying to those who do not speak and feel the language. But at the same time, we must remember that language and culture, which at some point may

become a source of identity and a means towards liberation, are also the result and the expression of countless oppressions. The reason I speak Spanish is. . . Romans: amos, amas, ama; Visigoths: queso; Moors: alacrán; Castilians: yo; Arawaks: yuca, bohío.

So, in a way my language is a symbol for the many vicissitudes and oppressions through which I have come to be what I am. As such, it is a source of strength and of resistance against those forces which would force me into an alien mold, or which would discount me and my culture, or which would exclude me and mine from the centers where the decisions are made which most affect our lives. At the same time, however, I must take into account two other facts:

- 1) No culture can live without changing; and
- 2) Spanish is nothing but very poorly spoken Latin.

There are important reasons for affirming this within the Hispanic community. . .

Pejorative use of the term "Spanglish." But a new people is being born. And perhaps a new language.

So, "reading the Bible in Spanish" is not an attempt to place the Spanish language on top, or to make it normative. It is rather an attempt to allow some hermeneutical space for that which is not normative, that which is not on top, or as Paul would say, for that which is not wise by human standards, that which is not powerful, that which is not of noble birth.

Such readings have often been criticized as being too political, or not spiritual. Yet, I submit that there is no reading as spiritual as such reading—spiritual in the best sense, as being guided by the Holy Spirit.

Look at that great account of the outpouring and the action of the Holy Spirit in the early church, the story of Pentecost as it appears in Acts 2. There are many facets to that account; but the one I would like to underscore is the matter of languages and the role they play in the story.

From early Patristic days, it has become commonplace to read this passage together with the story of Babel, and then to set these two stories in contrast with each other. Both stories have to do with language and communication. The story of Babel appears in the middle of a table of nations; in the case of Acts, a table of nations, probably taken from an ancient source, appears in the middle of the story. In one story, humans come together to try to ascend to the heavens; in the other, the Spirit descends upon those who are gathered. Babel was the epitome of sin and pride; Pentecost is the advent of grace and renewal. Usually, the main point of all these comparisons is that, whereas in Babel unity gave way to confusion, in Pentecost that confusion was overcome by unity.

But look again at the text in Acts. In verse 6 we read that the crowd "gathered and was bewildered." The word which the NRSV translates as "bewildered" can also be translated as "confused." Indeed, it is the same word which appears in the LXX translation of Genesis. 11:7,

where God says, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language." If Pentecost produces unity, it is not a simple, straightforward unity.

Pentecost is not simply the reversal of Babel. Before Babel, according to the story, there was unity of language. After Pentecost, according to the story, there was a multiplicity of languages. In Babel, God intervenes to cause confusion. In Pentecost, God's intervention causes confusion among the crowd. In both stories, the flow of the text is from unity to diversity. At the beginning of the Babel episode, they all spoke one language, and could come together in a single project. At the end, they can no longer understand each other, and they have to go their separate ways. At the beginning of the Pentecost narrative, they "were all together in one place," presumably speaking the same language. At the end, these same people are speaking a variety of languages, and they have caused confusion and even division among those who hear them.

Note, however, that these various people can talk to each other in some common language—presumably Greek, although the text does not say so. Whatever that common language might have been, it is the result of empire and conquest. But in the text the Spirit undercuts the unity of Empire. Empire leads to all these people being able to understand each other in a language that is not their own, whatever it might have been. But by the power of the Spirit, these people are able to hear, as they say, "each of us, in our own native language." I do not know if there was a Hebrew-only movement in Palestine, as there had been in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. I do not know if there was an Aramaic-only movement. I do know that

among the cultured elites there was a Greek-only movement. And I certainly do know that whatever attempts there might have been at imposing uniformity, the Spirit did undercut it, for all these various people, from different parts of the world, were made to hear, not in the language of Empire, nor even in the language of the first disciples, but "each in their own native language."

It is the Spirit who makes it possible to hear, "each in our own native tongue." It is the Spirit who brings unity, not through uniformity, but through communicating multiplicity. Therefore, the sort of reading which I am proposing here, and which many are proposing today, is eminently spiritual, for it is the sort of hearing and the sort of reading which the Spirit makes possible.

We tend to read the book of Acts as the story of the overwhelming expansion of the church, constantly overcoming various horizons. What we do not see is that it is also the story of the constant conversion of the church, for as new peoples are brought in new readings of the gospel become necessary. In Acts 10 and 11, the section that we usually call "the conversion of Cornelius," what we really have is the conversion, first of Peter, and then of the church in Jerusalem. And the story of Paul is the story, not of one, but of many conversions.

For our purposes here today, however, I would like to direct our attention specifically at Acts 6, which affords many examples of the sort of reading I am advocating when I speak of "reading in Spanish."

The text begins by speaking of a "complaining" (NRSV), or a "murmuring" (RSV)—Hebrews and Hellenists. All Jews. Hellenists are viewed askance for religious and political reasons.

Murmuring is against the twelve.

First surprise: they listen. (The problem is not the Hellenists; it is the Holy Spirit.) Appoint seven men. With a specific function: to manage the resources of the church. (Not "deacons").

Second surprise: A radical response. They elect seven with Greek names. Today we would. . . We would also find excuses: giving will go down. . . (Problems which scholars have with this.)

Third surprise: Stephen preaches. (And then Philip.) Saul.

He does this by the power of the Spirit. (Which means that when today some may be surprised by women. . .)

I find this text very affirming of what I call a reading of the Bible in Spanish:

1) Complaining is OK

2) There is a possibility that others might listen. If they do so, this will be done in solidarity.

3) But even then, the Spirit may have additional surprises for us. Women.

4) It is this combination of 1, 2, and 3 that makes mission possible.

But then, I also find this text very sobering, for there is a further surprise I have not mentioned so far. For in Acts 6:9-12 we find that those who made things difficult for Stephen were not the "Hebrews," but the Hellenists.

We have a saying in Spanish, "there is no worse wedge than that which is taken from the same piece of wood." The Hellenists are the first who are threatened by the growing Hellenistic Church. Today, some Hispanics are among those who are most threatened by what I call a reading of the Bible in Spanish, which to me means that not all who speak Spanish will read in Spanish, and that many who do not speak Spanish will be able to join and to support us as we seek to read in Spanish. I hope you will be among the latter.