

# History of the Ecumenical Movement

(1 of 9)

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**Justo:** The following is a reading from the RSV. It has been edited to eliminate gender-specific language where the Greek text does not include it. In those places where such language is in the Greek, we have kept it.

**Catherine:** Acts 2:1-24

*When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

*Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were amazed and wondered, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians, we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" But others mocking said, "They are filled with new wine."*

*But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let and give ear to my words. drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:*

*'And in the past days it shall be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young shall see visions,  
and your old shall dream dreams;  
yea, and on my menservants and my maidservants in those days*

*I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.  
And I will show wonders in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth beneath,  
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke;  
the sun shall be turned into darkness  
and the moon into blood,  
before the day of the Lord comes,  
the great and manifest day.  
And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

*"Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of the lawless. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.*

**Justo:** This is an account with which we are all familiar. We are so familiar with it that we have pictures that may not be altogether warranted by the text itself. Indeed, there are several points at which the text is unclear or at which it does not say what we often picture.

The first such point is the matter of who was present at Pentecost and upon whom the Spirit was poured. There are a number of classical paintings in which we see the twelve apostles sitting in a circle, each with a tongue of fire over his head. Other paintings include Mary among the company. What the text says, however, is that "they were all together in one place," and that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues." It is not clear who these "all" are. In 1:13-14, they include many more than the twelve:

*Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James together with the women and with Mary the mother of Jesus and with his brothers.*

If it is to these people that the "all" refers in the account of Pentecost, and it would seem that it is, then those who were present, those upon whom the tongues of fire came to rest, those who were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in various tongues included not only the apostles but also a larger company, both of men and of women. Naturally, this would also seem to apply much better to Peter's quote from Joel, "and on my menservants and on my maidservants."

**Catherine:** Secondly, the text is rather unclear as to exactly where each episode takes place. At the beginning they are all sitting in a house. It is this house that is filled with a mighty wind. Soon, however, there is a multitude listening to them. Such a scene must have taken place outdoors, although the text doesn't tell us how or when they moved from the house where they were meeting to the open street.

**Justo:** Thirdly, it is interesting to point out that, while the text does not use gender-specific language for those gathered in the house, it does use such language for those who come together to listen and comment. It refers to "devout men from every nation under heaven" (v. 5). Peter then addresses them as "men of Israel" (v. 22) and as "men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem" (v. 14). The image this conveys is that for some unknown reason, while the believers gathered for prayer were a mixed group, those out in the street who come when they hear the sound are all men.

**Catherine:** Fourthly, the matter of the languages spoken by these listeners is not altogether clear. They hear the speakers, each in their own languages. Yet, they can also communicate among themselves, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" (v. 12). In other words, while the miracle that is described amazes them, they have a basis for communication quite apart from that miracle.

**Justo:** Finally, in the same context, one wonders about those "others" who mocked and said that they were drunk. What image is the author trying to convey? When the mockers say that "they" are drunk, we usually think that this refers to those who are speaking. The text, however, does not make that clear. The mockers may be referring to the listeners who are acting as if they were witnessing a great miracle. In any case, why did the mockers not perceive the miracle? Why were they not amazed by it? Did they not hear the believers speaking in their own tongue? Or were they simply local folk who did hear their own language but had no reason to find that surprising? There is a tantalizing possibility here—a possibility that is worth pondering, not now but on some other occasion: Could it be that the mockers did not perceive the miracle because they were local folk because they expected to be addressed in their own tongue? Could it be that they were "insiders," and that what we have here is one more instance of the "insider" being unable to see the wondrous work of God, bringing the outsider in?

**Catherine:** We have so often heard of the parallel between this account of Pentecost in Acts and the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11. There human language was confused and made divisive;

here such divisiveness is overcome in the unity the Spirit provides. Clearly the intention is present in Acts to show that in various ways the gift of the Spirit, made possible by the Cross and the Resurrection, has begun the undoing of the power of sin over human life. Babel was the result of sin; Pentecost is the advent of grace and renewal.

There is much more here in this second chapter of Acts, however, than unity in the face of previous divisiveness. Look at the diversity that is assumed and maintained at Pentecost: They all hear in their own language, the variety has not been ended. In the passage from Joel, the diversity of age and gender is affirmed but it is no longer a barrier for the gifts of the Spirit.

A new age has indeed dawned but that does not mean that uniformity has been imposed. Unity has been given and experienced even though diversity has remained.

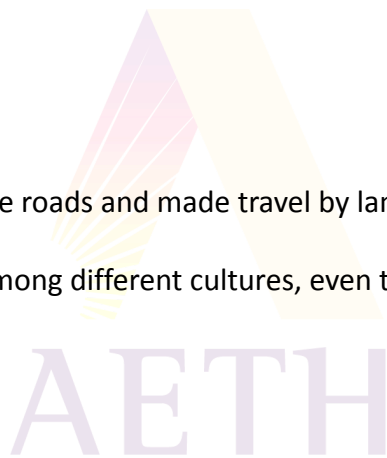
Nor can we say that until Pentecost no work toward unity in the human family had been undertaken. There is a great deal of existing unity shown in this passage even before Pentecost occurs.

Judaism provided a unity. Through the effects of the Exile and less traumatic migrations, Diaspora Judaism had spread throughout the Empire and beyond. Therefore Jerusalem—especially on feast days—had quite a cosmopolitan mix of Jews from the

Mediterranean basin. According to the text, not only had Jews come to Jerusalem, but also proselytes had come with them.

Nor can we discount the effects of Empire. Conquest had provided a lingua franca—Greek, in the eastern portion of the now Roman Empire. As we have seen, those who gathered around the nascent church on that first Pentecost, did carry on conversations and were understood in some common language, even if it were not their native tongues. Imperial power had imposed some unity—particularly on those who travelled or had business with people outside their immediate community.

Rome had provided relatively safe roads and made travel by land and sea safer than it had been. Commerce provided new links among different cultures, even though much of the commerce was of a colonial character.



Language, roads, commerce, travel; there were unities existing before Pentecost. Some attained at great human cost—imperial unities we might call them—but links nonetheless across the Babel that human sin had created.

There are divisions and unities in the world before Pentecost. There is diversity as well as unity in the new creation Pentecost exhibits. Diversity may be good; divisiveness is not. Unity is good; uniformity, however, is questionable. The account of Pentecost shows all of these

characteristics. How can we distinguish what is unity but not uniformity? How can differences be diversity but not divisive? Is it easy to tell? When I work for unity am I unwittingly stifling diversity? When I work for diversity am I causing division? It may not be easy to separate good and evil. Do we check motivation or results? Does the good that we would do lead to evil results in the midst of a world not yet totally transformed? Does the evil that some intend lead to good results they never anticipated? Empire and Pentecost are strange companions in Acts—even here at the beginning of the book.

**Justo:** It is a dilemma we all know. Even as we study the history of ecumenism, it is clear that ecumenism has always been closely tied to mission, and that mission has frequently been connected with colonialism and imperialism. How are we to deal with this situation? Are we to reject the unity that worldwide mission has brought because of its connection with colonialism? Are we to bless colonialism and imperialism because of their connection with the unity we now have?

At this point, there are some insights that we may draw from Christian tradition. First of all, we must put the ecumenical issue in its proper perspective. Unity is not simply an ecclesiastical project, something that the church does and seeks while the world goes its own way. Unity is the very purpose of God for all of creation. As the Epistle to the Ephesians puts it, Jesus Christ

*has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will, according to God's purpose which God set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ (as under one head), things in heaven and things on earth.*

We the church, as those who know that mystery of the cosmic ecumenical goal, are called to live out of it and to witness to it by our own unity. But meanwhile the God whose mystery it is continues to work for its fulfillment and we must learn how to discern the signs of that work of God wherever they may take place.

In some mysterious way, God's purpose of unity was being worked out in the very fact that there were in Jerusalem "Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia," etc., etc., and in that those people, even apart from the miracle of Pentecost, were able to say to each other: "What does this mean?"

This is not to say that we are to bless all the horrible, cruel, unjust events that bring about this sort of imperial unity. The famous pax Romana was wrought at the cost of much bloodshed and much injustice and it is a terribly ecclesiocentric view of history to claim that all the wars and oppressions connected with the Roman Empire were brought about by God simply so that Christian missionaries and evangelists could travel from land to land and so that Paul's epistles could be safely carried from one corner of the Empire to another.

Here again we may draw from some of the earliest Christian traditions. We in the West tend to see as normative an understanding of creation and of history according to which God's creation, as described in Genesis, was perfect, complete and finished. From that point on, because of the Fall, all that exists falls far short of that original creation. It is in this context that one hears of

speculations as to the great powers of Adam and Eve—speculations that make Superman and Superwoman pale by comparison. From such perfection there is no direction to go but down and that is what all of history is—until the final consummation, the great return to the original perfection.

There is, however, another way of looking at these issues. As I read the writings of Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons, in the second century, what I find is a vision of growth. Growth was God's original purpose from the time of creation and still is. Irenaeus declares that God created Adam and Eve "as children." They were perfect, yes; but they were not finished. They were perfect just as an infant is perfect. Like the child they were intended to grow—to grow towards that final unity in which Jesus Christ is the head of all. What has happened as a result of sin is not that growth has been halted. It is not even that growth has been retarded. It is rather that growth has been twisted. There is still growth. Unity is still coming about. But it is coming about in a warped way.

From this perspective, one can look at the imperial unity that to some degree facilitated early Christian expansion and see it for what it is: a unity that reflects but also distorts that unity which God intends for humankind.

Returning to Irenaeus, he also declared that falsehood on its own has no power. The power of a lie is in the portion of truth it contains. Today we say that a lie has verisimilitude—in other words, that it has a semblance of truth. It is that semblance that makes a lie believable.

Likewise, one of the elements that give power to our twisted unities, to our oppressive unities, to our unities of privilege, is their aping and mimicking of that unity, that Shalom which God intends.

There are many sorts of unity in today's world. We wish we could simply take out a ledger and write: negative unities in one column; positive unities in the other. But the matter is not that simple. Modern technology has made it possible for us to communicate with people at the other end of the world in a matter of seconds. Beautiful. We have become a global village. Even more beautiful. In that global village, those who are furthest away from the centers of power have lost control over their lives. Not so beautiful. In that global village, goods and resources tend to flow in a single direction, towards those who already have more than they need. Even less beautiful. In that global village, partly as a result of its being a global village, millions are starving. Horrible. In this global village there are at least two men who have the power singlehandedly to destroy the entire planet and all that is in it. Incredibly demonic. And yet somehow we must still be ready to find in the globalization of this village the signs of God's mysterious purpose hidden for all eternity but revealed in Jesus Christ: to unite all things as under one head in a final reign of shalom.