



**LIVING GOD  
RENEW AND  
TRANSFORM US**

**World Communion of Reformed Churches**

Called to communion, committed to justice

**General Council Bible Study**

**Acts 2:1-21, 37-39**

**Mitri Raheb**

The story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts (2:1-13) is one of the most powerful stories in the New Testament. For us in the Middle East and Jerusalem this is a foundational text for our identity in Palestine. The church was born in Jerusalem, in the then-occupied Palestine. It was not born in Rome, Constantinople nor Geneva, and certainly not in Hannover. It was not born in any of the regional capitals of the region, like Alexandria or Babylon, but in occupied Jerusalem. Let's hope that in a liberated Jerusalem, Jerusalem will be the seat for all ecumenical bodies. Let's pray that the next move of the WCRC will be to no other city but to East Jerusalem in Palestine.

This text is also foundational for our identity as Palestinian Arab Christian. I challenge groups always to guess when the gospel was first proclaimed in Arabic. Their guess usually is the 19th century or Late Middle Ages. They are shocked when I refer them to Acts 2, verse 11. According to this verse, Arabic was one of the languages heard at Pentecost 2000 years ago. Today Arabic has become almost a synonym for Muslim. But not all Arabs are Muslims nor are all Muslims Arabs. In fact the largest Muslim countries in the world today are non-Arab countries, Indonesia being the largest. On the other hand, not all Arabs are Muslims. In fact, Arab Christianity is older than Islam. The Quran itself testifies to that, and there is serious research suggesting that the Quran was intended originally as a contextualized Arab Christian liturgy before it developed to be a Holy Book for a new religion. Without doubt, it was Christians who were so much involved in developing the Arabic language, that became the language of the Quran, in the first five centuries *anno Domini*. This development was parallel to similar development of the Coptic, Armenian and other Middle Eastern languages. Today there are around 15 million Christians in the Middle East for whom Arabic is their mother tongue.

But the story of Pentecost in the Book of Acts (2:1-13) is in its essence a counter narrative to the narrative of the empire. The narrative of the empire is found in Genesis (11:1-9) in the story of the Tower of Babel, where a mighty empire with a strong economy reaches to heaven and with one language holds the empire together. Behind a single language is an imperial quest that leads all too often to a totalitarian system.

This is exactly what Alexander the Great and the Greeks tried to do with imposing Koine Greek and Hellenistic culture on their conquered peoples. Alexander and company had the ambitious plan to pour all tribes and groups into one gigantic melting pot. The outcome of this forceful unification was utter confusion. The empire fell apart and dissolved. The Romans tried the same experiment by imposing their *Pax Romana* on the conquered countries and were no more successful. *Pax Romana* was a propaganda tagline of the empire trying to silence the many resistance movements across the empire.

The Byzantine emperor, Constantine, thought that by forcing one creed at Chalcedon he could unite his empire behind one emperor and one faith. A single Greek formulated creed was supposed to be the theological glue that holds the empire together. The Byzantine Empire became hostile to the local and national expressions of Christianity in Egypt, greater Syria, Armenia, etc. The Oriental identities and expressions of faith—Coptic, Aramaic, Assyrian, Armenian—were thus declared heretical and were alienated. The ecumenical movement today, centuries later, is still suffering from this forceful imperial unification.

The Arabs tried to push their language on to the Berbers of North Africa and on central Asian countries, but that led to the opposite effect—of less identification with their empire by those tribes. The Soviets in turn tried the same and their empire too cracked and disintegrated.

This issue is central for a Middle East which is pluralistic in nature. No single empire has been able to force the region into uniformity. There was never a single Catholic Church that monopolized the Christian faith in the Middle East but rather national churches: Copts, Syriac, Maronites, Greeks, etc., each worshipping in their own native language and possessing, as they do today, a distinct cultural identity. The same is true for Islam. It, too, has different expressions according to different regions: Shiite, Sunni, Alawite, Druze, etc. All efforts to forcefully unify them have come to naught.

The Middle East continues to be one of the most diverse regions in the world with multiple ethnicities, religious affiliations and plural identities. For any empire this was and is a challenge—a challenge because the region resisted all attempts of forceful inclusion. Their local, cultural and “national” identities are so deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of people. A forceful unification that comes at the cost of their identity doesn’t create a sense of belonging but the opposite. Empires fail because they often believe that military power and imperial propaganda is enough to control people. They deny conquered people the right to preserve their language, to develop their own identity, to protect their dignity and to give them the needed space to exercise their self-determination.

On the other hand, empires were forever keen to exploit the diversity of the conquered people by playing one group against the other and ensure that the region remained preoccupied with internecine fighting so that the empire’s job of control was easier. This is part and parcel of colonial history in the Middle East. Prior to World War I the West assisted the Arabs against the Turks; today the West is pitting Sunni Muslims against Shiite Muslims. Identity politics in the Middle East today are a successful tool to expedite the arms race in the region and to close gigantic military deals. The tower of Babylon is the best and clearest symbol of empire.

The story of Pentecost is both a critique of empire as well as an alternative vision. Jerusalem becomes the counter narrative to empire. Here, on otherwise contested and occupied land, not far from the battleground, various nations and cultures meet. They come from all corners of the *oikumene*: “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs.” This represents the entire *oikumene* at the time of Luke, from Persia in the east to Tunisia in the

west, from Rome in the north to Egypt in the south including Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. Luke mentions Cretans and Arabs last to indicate that islanders and nomads of the desert are included. No one is left out. No group is excluded.

These diverse groups use their own native languages and do not adhere to the language of the empire. Their identities are respected and embraced. With all these diverse languages one would expect confusion, misunderstandings and even wars. Communication is not only difficult but almost impossible. Yet, the Spirit provides a kind of a software (almost an app “voice translator”) for translation and communication so that they understand each other.

Based on this Lukan vision, the role of the native language became key to Christian mission. While in traditional Judaism the Bible was to be read in Hebrew, and in Islam the Quran can be recited only in Arabic and no translation is allowed, in Christianity each people have “to hear the gospel in their own native language.” God wants to speak to us in the languages in which we dream. This understanding of Acts 2 became key to Protestant theology—Protestant theologians from Wycliffe in England to Lefevre in France to Luther in Germany. In a context where Latin was the language of the ruling and oppressing empire (described often as Babylon) the Bible translation became a tool of resistance and liberation. While celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we do not do the Reformation justice if we understood what happened in Wittenberg, Geneva, Zurich, Edinburgh or northern Italy as a mere religious revival. This was a resistance movement to empire, and the translation of the Bible was one tool of resistance. God had to speak the language of the people and not the language of empire.

This is why the Bible was translated so far into more than 2500 different languages. In fact without Bible translation some languages would not exist in written form. This is not only true for tribal languages only but for most languages as well. The translation of the Bible and the development of written languages went hand in hand, not only in Coptic and Armenian as indicated before, but in most European languages as well. There is an interrelation between the King James Bible translation and the development of the standard English language, between Luther translation of the Bible into German and the development of the modern German language, etc.

In the Pentecost story the rich diversity of the region is embraced and celebrated. It is regarded as a strength rather than a deficiency. The multiple identities of the region are viewed not as contradictions, but as a treasure to save. It is the uniformity of the empire that is the glue to keep things together but rather the unity within diversity. In Jerusalem the people from the different communities from the vast *oikumene* “stood” on equal footing. This equality and the respect of diverse identities is the foundation of the new vision of the new *oikumene*. It is good to see that there are six different supported and equal languages at this WCRC assembly.

The moment Pentecost was taken out of its original context it became a nice story without any particular significance. It became a tale about speaking in tongues, and thus lost its contextual relevance. The church born in Jerusalem was meant to counter the empire; not by creating another but by providing a new vision of a different possible world.

Living God transform us!