

Amazed and Perplexed #1: The Multilingual Spirit's Reconfiguration of God's People¹

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Abstract

This article is the first in a four-part "Amazed and Perplexed" series, originally published in Korean. The series' ambitious goal is to survey God's worldwide work in contemporary times, with a special emphasis on Korean missions. This article looks at the Spirit's work in manifesting God's omnilingual dealings with people and in reconfiguring familiar ecclesiastical labels.

Key Words: church, multifaceted, omnilingual, Spirit

Introduction

"Suddenly ... a mighty rushing wind ... divided tongues as of fire ... [Galileans] began to speak in other tongues...." No wonder the multinational multitude gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost "were bewildered, ... amazed and astonished" (Acts 2:2-7). As Luke summed up the crowd's reaction to what was happening among the benighted Galileans, "And all were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'" (Acts 2:12).

The Spirit and First-Generation Christians

The outpouring at Pentecost of the Holy Spirit on Jesus's followers was a pivotal event in the history of God's dealings with his world. While by no means the beginning of the Spirit's presence and work in the world - indeed, the Spirit has been actively engaging the world since creating it - the Spirit's outpouring on those ordinary Galileans signaled the fulfillment of God's commitment to make the world right again, or in Christian terminology to redeem or save the world from its rebellious path toward utter destruction. The Spirit's sudden, surprising coming indicated that "in the last days" the incarnate, crucified, risen, and exalted Jesus had been enthroned as King of all peoples, Peter explained (Acts 2:17, 30-36). As the use of multiple languages at Pentecost evidenced, God "now ... commands all people everywhere to repent," Paul proclaimed to the Athenians (Acts 17:30).

Luke explains in his account that at that historic Pentecost there were both residents and visiting pilgrims in Jerusalem. There were all sorts of people from all directions near and far, as the list in Acts 2:9-11 shows. Even with their international composition, however, the varied tapestry of Jewish people present were "bewildered," "astonished," "amazed," and "perplexed" when they heard "in our own [multiple] tongues the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). For one thing, they reasoned, Galileans could not speak those various languages. For another, the God of Israel's mighty works were proclaimed only in the God-revealed Scriptural languages of Hebrew and Aramaic, plus in Greek due to the Septuagint. To the Jews in Jerusalem that day, what they were experiencing was impossible. Of course, then, they were "amazed and perplexed."

God's agenda in this historic, pivotal Pentecost was to fulfill his worldwide, international plan and purpose, despite his people's limited understanding and expectations of how he would work. The divine mystery was that Jesus was not just the Jewish Messiah but is the world's

Savior for “all people everywhere,” as the Spirit’s outpouring testified. Like those Jewish Pentecost observers, God’s people inevitably try to confine the divine presence and work; however, God is in fact unmanageable, universal, surprising, and fully sovereign in how he deals with his world.

The Spirit and the Contemporary World

God’s work in contemporary times has shared those same unmanageable, amazing, perplexing, and totally sovereign traits as when Jesus was newly enthroned as the entire world’s King and Savior. Particularly when we project back to the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, we can see how the Spirit’s presence and work has been amazingly and surprisingly beyond the confines of the limited expectations of God’s people. From today’s limited viewpoints as well, what the exalted Christ has done over recent generations by his Spirit - and what he is doing today - should, if we develop the eyes to see, leave us amazed and perplexed.

This and three ensuing articles set out on an audaciously ambitious attempt to give an account of the Spirit’s work in today’s world. Put differently, this four-part series will try to describe “What God has been doing throughout the world” in contemporary times. While these essays are obviously not inspired as was Luke’s Gospel and Acts accounts, the expectation is that the amazement and perplexity we will sense will not be too dissimilar from the reaction at the Spirit’s outpouring at Pentecost. We today are no less prone to confine God’s presence and work than God’s people of the past have been, and the same Spirit of Christ is at work today as the one first poured out by the exalted Jesus. We must not be so presumptuous as to assume that the essays’ accounts will be fully adequate. We can be assured, though, that what God has been doing has been nothing short of astonishing.

In discerning how God has been at work, the ongoing implications for Korean missions are never easy to determine. Participating in God’s mission is not exactly the same as being a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, where one is mechanically placed into a pre-cut spot in the puzzle’s bigger picture. On the one hand the puzzle analogy is helpful to a certain degree, for example in explaining how many Korean churches and mission agencies in the 1990s adopted specific unreached people groups that researchers listed as needing gospel witness. On the other hand, however, as he works throughout the world God’s Spirit blows in surprising and often counterintuitive ways. As Jesus instructed Nicodemus, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (John 3:8). These essays will focus primarily on God and his work, without neglecting the helpful task of locating the jigsaw-puzzle-piece of Korean missions within the latest trends of the overall Christian missions picture. The hope is to facilitate constructive discernment for effective participation with other parts of the Body of Christ in God’s worldwide mission.

After a preliminary framework-setting section, this initial article will focus on three general areas of God’s presence and work in the contemporary world. All should leave us with a measure of amazement and perplexity, heartfelt thanks and praise to our gracious triune God, and fresh appreciation for how Koreans have been parts of God’s mission in recent times.

Setting the Framework

In seeking to discern how God has been at work in recent times, we need to employ a comprehensive, multifaceted approach. That is, God is not concerned only with religious and

ecclesiastical matters. Moreover, God has always worked in ways that are interrelated with wider realities, be they economic, political, or any number of other aspects. This study thus sets its sights on God's work in the world as a whole, not just on religious statistics and events.

In short, God works in history. All of contemporary history therefore needs to be in view in identifying what God has been doing in contemporary times.

The result of a multifaceted analysis of the contemporary world can perhaps be best summed up as a macro transition from a mainly European imperial order to a more multi-polar and multi-directional flow of influences, be they economic ones, political power, or migrating peoples. While the world has never been fully dominated by one region only, as of one hundred years ago Western nations held the balance of political, military, and economic power. However, especially since the mid-twentieth century the world has been transitioning out of that Eurocentric anomaly into a more diverse and multidirectional interchange of cultural influences and people movements. God has worked within and through these ever-changing interchanges.

Additionally, the comprehensive scope of God's mission helps to set this study's framework in its clearest form. God's mission can be summarized in three categories. First, God desires people to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, to trust him, and to become his followers. Some Christians see this aspect as the entirety of missions, but biblically God's mission is concerned about unreached people and also much more. Second, God's mission has a corporate focus of growing the Church. Such growth is both quantitative and qualitative; God's mission thus always includes maturing his people as they participate with him in mission service. Third, God's mission also focuses on wider matters of justice and *shalom*, including social, economic, and political arenas. God declares in Revelation 21:5, "Behold, I am making all things new." God's mission is not just populating heaven with as many souls as possible. Rather, God is re-creating a new heavens and new earth that will include redeemed human beings, and his work throughout the world has in view that ultimate purpose.

The Blessing of Abraham

God is the almighty, sovereign Ruler of the universe. God has also come close to the human race he created and loves, taking special delight in those who are humble and weak. God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden, he lived among his Old Covenant people Israel, and Emmanuel - "God with us" - was realized in the incarnate God-Man, Jesus of Nazareth.

As Jesus promised, however, God has come even closer to us by living in our hearts by his Spirit. Jesus's followers are God's temple, individually and collectively. As Paul has summarized the historical development of Old Covenant Israel fulfilled in the Church, "The household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple of the Lord" (Ephesians 2:19-21). Paul also describes God's indwelling, "promised Spirit" as "the blessing of Abraham" who "comes to the Gentiles ... through faith" in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:14).

One heavenly dynamic involved with God's Spirit living among his people is that now, with different peoples being "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise [of the Spirit] in Christ Jesus through the gospel," God proclaims "to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" his "manifold [multifaceted] wisdom" by living among his multinational

church (Ephesians 3:6, 10). That is, God is as it were taunting and announcing to angels, demons, and other spiritual beings in unseen heavenly realms about the wonderful complexity of his grace and mercy to all peoples of the earth. A corollary reality is that God's people, insofar as they are aware of their international makeup, can be more aware of the greatness and universality of God the Creator and Ruler of all peoples, not just of an allegedly favored particular nation.

This heavenly, spiritual victory celebration of God's gracious dwelling among all types of people has never ceased since the Spirit's out-pouring at Pentecost. God's taunting of spiritual forces increased throughout early Christian generations with the incorporation of more and various peoples into the Spirit's temple. However, within the perplexing mystery of God's dealings with his world and his people, the heavenly declaration of God's multifaceted wisdom dissipated as Jesus's followers increasingly became confined to European peoples as of half a millennium ago. Similarly, European Christians unwittingly but assuredly came to understand the God of heaven and earth as Europe's deity, rather than as the true God of all kinds of people.

Even so, the divine determination to live among the totality of the world's peoples, as well as to exhibit his multifaceted wisdom to the heavenly beings, to his beloved people, and to the entire world, began to break through European peoples' misguided confinement of the universal God by enabling European peoples to migrate throughout the earth. Throughout the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, Portuguese, Spanish, English, Dutch, French, Danish, and other Europeans headed for the coasts of Africa, of the Americas, of Asia, and of the Pacific. God worked among non-Christian peoples around the world as he brought the news of Jesus to them through limited, fractured European vessels. God was renewing the heavenly celebration of the Spirit's indwelling among Christ's multinational people.

Especially after European migrations (and related exposures of others to the message of Jesus) had accelerated throughout the nineteenth century, the stage was set for God to grant the blessing of Abraham throughout the world's peoples in an especially celebratory manner. Thus it was in the early twentieth century that fresh outpourings of the Spirit occurred around the world. Oft-reported Pentecost-like revivals occurred in India, Wales, Korea, the U.S., and elsewhere. Less-reported independent movements of God's Spirit leading Jesus's new followers in Africa and elsewhere were also occurring. Jesus's worldwide kingdom was receiving new and varied testimony, and both surrounding peoples and other Christians were amazed and perplexed.

Along with celebrating his manifold wisdom before the heavenly beings and granting the promised blessing of Abraham to more and more peoples, a central component of what King Jesus has been doing in these worldwide revivals has been taking his proper place among the spiritual realities of the world's non-European peoples. For their part, most European Christians had come to terms with the European Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, resulting in their becoming blind and deaf to spiritual forces that they presumably had explained away. For other peoples, however, spirits of all sorts - malevolent, benevolent, ancestors, sub-divinities, angels, and others - have remained very much alive and well. Christ's Spirit taking up residence among the world's peoples necessarily has involved dealing with these spiritual realities, despite European Christians' common ill-informed counsel simply to ignore them.

Along with the well-known revivals mentioned above, various other charismatic and pentecostal movements have begun and increased until today. Demographers report that charismatic-type Christianity exhibits the single largest growth sector of the worldwide Church. Some mission leaders have given special attention to strategic prayer and spiritual conflict in

order to unseat principalities and powers over cities and regions (Lausanne 2000). We should not rush to infer that Christ has somehow left non-charismatic Christian groups and traditions. (Later we will examine more closely some of the overall ecclesiastical implications of the rise of explicit Christian spirituality.) Suffice it to note here that King Jesus's ongoing display of spiritual manifestations should leave us astonished and amazed at his gracious and irresistible determination to dwell among his multifaceted temple comprised of all kinds of people - including Koreans.

God's Onmilinguality

As noted earlier, human beings, God's people included, attempt to confine and tame God. Doing so is connected to our bent toward attempting to control our lives and world, apart from acknowledging God as Creator and Ruler of all things. During modern history (at a minimum over the past half-millennium), the Christian faith had become largely confined to Europe such that the Christian God was assumed, sometimes explicitly and almost always subliminally, to be the Europeans' deity. Christian as many Europeans' impulses and understandings were, a general lack of experience at interacting with non-Europeans until recent generations sought to confine and tame God within Greco-Latin intellectual, religious, and linguistic categories.

However, the Lord of Hosts will never allow himself to be confined to only part of the world and its peoples. As God's Spirit has moved among a fuller scope of the nations over recent generations, he has expanded his special verbal, inscripturated revelation into hundreds and even thousands of additional languages. God has of course always been speaking to all peoples through the witnesses of his created order, including heavenly bodies (sun, moon, and stars), seasonal changes, and people's consciences. Through the Bible's translation into additional languages, God has been demonstrating that he communicates to people not just in Semitic or European languages (and a few select others with older translations, e.g., Chinese), but in all types of human languages. That is, God is by no means a European deity who speaks only Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and cognate languages; rather, he is the omnilingual God who speaks and understands all languages.

Yoruba Africans interacting with *Olorun* ("God") and Maori Christians with *Atua* ("God"), for example, have broken through a debilitating European colonial legacy to affirm that "God" is *their* God. The same is true for peoples throughout Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific, including Koreans. *Hananim* has dealt directly with Koreans through the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he has not left them searching in futility for an unknown or foreign deity. The unsearchable riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ should continue to inspire Korean and all Christians to thank and praise God with fervency and enthusiasm.

Korean Christians can also continue to collaborate with other Christians in facilitating God's communication with increasing numbers of peoples through the translation and dissemination of God's Word. Amazingly, God's linguistic interactions with the world's peoples through Bible translations has increased from about 33 languages a half-millennium ago to 71 two centuries ago to more than 1800 by the late twentieth century (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* Editors 1999). Even so, God's Word is still available only in roughly half of the world's 6,500 languages, with about 250 million people having no access to any part of the Bible and about 1.5 billion people still needing the full Bible in their first languages (Wycliffe 2019). Some organizations work on written translations of the Bible, while others focus on oral recordings (Wycliffe 2018). Whether it be through financial support, prayer, or actually working with these ministries, Korean and

other Christian servants everywhere can participate in God's mission to display his omnilingual character to all peoples.

Reconfiguring Traditions

Wherever they migrated over the past half-millennium, European Christians transplanted their various Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches' organizations, beliefs, and practices. As these churches took root and grew in the soils of the Americas, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific, the newer Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches have both maintained their particular characters while also taking on characteristics of their new residences. In many cases, the continuity of particular church names - e.g., "Southern Baptist," "Roman Catholic," "Anglican," "Cumberland Presbyterian," "Greek Orthodox" - has maintained the transplanted churches' identities as having originated in Europe and, quite often, as "mission churches."

However, together with granting fresh outpourings of his Spirit as well as communicating with increasing numbers of peoples in their own languages, God has been reshaping established ecclesiastical traditions within the new contexts where he has been at work. Nutrients in the native soils in which European churches have been transplanted have produced indigenous fruits of leadership, music styles, relational dynamics, and other traits that have inevitably required new types of organization, belief, and practice. For example, the Reformed Church of Indonesia, Anglicans in Rwanda, numerous Presbyterian churches in Korea, and several Roman Catholic missionary orders in the Philippines operate similarly to, yet differently from, their churches of origin in Europe. Newer Pentecostal traditions like the Assemblies of God follow similar patterns, such that AOGs in Iran or in Sri Lanka resemble but differ from the first AOGs that began in Euro-North America only a century ago.

Indeed, entirely new movements have either broken away or sprung up independently from their European counterpart churches. Such new, indigenous movements were already beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but they have even accelerated after the mid-twentieth-century breakup of European empires (and that of Japan). Financial independence has been crucial for these movements to take on their own indigenous shapes, so even churches that might have continuing European denominational labels (e.g., Presbyterian or Methodist churches in Korea) are effectively independent, indigenous movements in their own right. Even when similar confessional statements have been adopted - e.g., Apostles Creed, Westminster Confession of Faith - these confessions' homes in different, non-European languages give new dynamics that the Greco-Roman-based creeds of European Christendom could not express.

Surveying today's vast and varied landscape of worldwide Christian churches and movements leaves one amazed and perplexed. Many groups are so new or deeply embedded contextually that they are practically unidentifiable. Some churches are connected to multiple international networks that have conflicting Western origins, e.g., World Council of Churches and Lausanne Movement. Several newer, indigenous churches have formed their own organizational networks or fellowships, whether national or beyond. The labels "Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant" that were familiar to many just a few generations ago can now be seen for what they always have been, namely contextually particular, limited, and inadequate for the more full panoply of churches that God has been sprouting up worldwide, particularly in non-European soils, by his Spirit.

Conclusion

Two millennia ago, God began to display to angels and demonic forces alike his “manifold wisdom” through the multifaceted tapestry of the Church of Jesus Christ. In contemporary times more than ever before, God’s “manifold, multifaceted wisdom” is on even more full display for the angels, evil spiritual powers, and the world to see in amazement and perplexity. Korean Christians and churches have been part of all three dynamics surveyed here: God’s fresh outpourings of the Holy Spirit, God’s new linguistic interactions with more and more peoples, and God’s reshaping of church traditions. In our times God is increasingly adorning the Church, the Bride of Jesus Christ, with the multicolored jewels of the nations.

Just as the wider political-economic world is no longer Eurocentric, we in the Church are no longer primarily European but worldwide. Through globalization and urbanization we are intermingled by nationality and language. We belong to all sorts of socio-economic classes and ethnic peoples, especially including many of the world’s poor people. Moreover, by God’s Spirit we are continually navigating our way through the wilderness of this still unredeemed world. May God’s Spirit continue to fill, use, and guide us his multilingual people as we live and serve among the world’s peoples in our various organizational forms.

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