

# drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29, 2006

## Becoming Theologically Bilingual

A funny thing happened at the Faith & Order ecumenical dialogue two weeks ago. In the midst of a discussion about Justification and Justice, the group realized that the Reformed and Lutheran traditions were underrepresented. In order to supplement these voices, the group asked if those who had studied these perspectives might be able to pinch hit. The funny thing was that the most qualified members were from Holiness and Pentecostal traditions.

How ironic: the dominant protestant traditions were being represented by these marginalized, oddball theologians.

Even more ironic: these Holiness and Pentecostal theologians could quote Luther and Calvin by chapter and verse. At some points they were even more conversant with Luther and Calvin than members of the churches that claim these figures as their own.

In the wake of this ecumenical moment, I asked my fellow Holiness and Pentecostal theologians why it is that we know these traditions so well. Is it that we have an inferiority complex and so rely on figures outside our history for theological study? "No," one of them quickly retorted, "Remember: it's always the minorities who are bilingual." Another one swiftly added, "We have to go to their schools, so we have to learn their language."

At this point it dawned on me: a well-trained theologian from a marginal tradition can offer a special service to ecumenical dialogue. We do not need to simply represent our much-needed voice, but we can also speak intelligently and listen comprehensively to those who are different from us. We know how to dialogue because the dialogue is already going on in our own heads. We may be a key link in teaching the church how to become theologically multilingual.

### Any thoughts?

Have you encountered any parallel phenomena?

Are there additional explanations?

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Are there any dangers in developing our bilingualism?

Labels: [Practice of Theology](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 1:46 PM

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## 6 Comments:

At [2:12 PM, March 29, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Wow... Great thought. Must ruminate on that one for a time.

I suppose being spawned within the Holiness movement and trained at a dominantly Reformed school (GCTS) I too can try to be "Bi"

: -)

My initial thought: was his gift for theologically multi-lingual prose part of what makes Paul's letters so rich?

At [4:15 PM, March 29, 2006](#), [ap](#) said...

I wonder what this could have to say about the seminary discussion from a few weeks ago on Schenck's blog. Perhaps remaining small, under the radar and (possibly) "not-a-real-denomination" allows The Wesleyan Church's theologians to convert the theological empires of Calvinism, Lutheranism, Baptist-ism, Methodism, etc., or at least to infiltrate their ranks with meaningful dialogue. The quote, "The minorities are bilingual" may suggest to us the posture we ought to take even when we stop being the minority, or have the opportunity to step out from obscurity.

At [8:47 PM, March 29, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

Why didn't I think of that! Profound and so true. One more advantage to being a migrant minority student!

So who were these other minorities who said those things?

At [10:26 PM, March 29, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

I have missed your blog for a week or two...sad. Catching up.

I am not confident of the theological applications, but here are some of my experiences with dangers of bilingualism:

1. Losing the ability to speak either language well without an accent
2. Instead of becoming truly bilingual, becoming a fluent speaker in the secondary language and marginal speaker in your primary

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language which makes reentry hard.

3. Some bilingual friends of mine have ended up feeling perpetually "homeless"

4. Others have annoyed all of their friends to death with countless showing off of bilingual knowledge (I could give examples if you wanted)

Those somewhat random brainstormers aside. it does seem consistent with God's way of doing things to use weakness as strength, and to bring the margins to the center.

Dave

At [3:42 PM, March 30, 2006](#), [Amanda](#) said...

I'm digging this idea, John.

Learning a new language often forces you to learn the grammar of your native tongue (something we otherwise take for granted).

I'm copying a passage Keith Drury wrote about his experience at Princeton:

"I went to PTS as a five point Calvinist and came out a full court Wesleyan—that's where I met and devoured Wesley's works."

Mandy

At [9:54 AM, April 04, 2006](#), [Kevin K. Wright](#) said...

Great post! I enjoyed this tremendously. Another part of being bilingual is that you sometimes encounter a language from which your native tongue has borrowed more than a few words. As a result, you gain a better understanding of where your words came from. This experiment in etymology is often helpful, especially when you belong to a denomination that is considered "young" by many accounts.

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