

A Spirit of Understanding
Acts 2:1–21; 22–24, 32–33, 36–41; 42 – 47
Sunday, May 24, 2026 (Pentecost)

Let us pray: Lord, may your Spirit move among *us* as it did on Pentecost, helping us to understand not just your Word, but also *each other*, in Christ. Amen.

So often, we think that the amazing thing about Pentecost is that Jesus' disciples were able to speak in the native languages of all these different people, and they could *understand* them; that the Holy Spirit came upon them and gave them the ability to speak languages that they did not know. And that *is* pretty amazing. But I want to show you something, and I asked John McClintick to come help me out with this. *(Patrick has a conversation in French with John, using an A.I. language translator.)*

Through the use of Artificial Intelligence, I can have a conversation with someone in a language that I do not know. I just talk to my phone, my phone talks to them, they talk to my phone, and my phone tells me what they said. It is an incredible technological development that has enormous potential. Any of you who have ever traveled abroad and needed to communicate with someone, but you *couldn't*, how much easier would this have made your life? *Why* did I spend five years of my life learning Spanish in school?! We can essentially communicate in almost every language on the face of the earth, instantly.

We don't *need* the Holy Spirit to help us do that anymore. But here's the problem. I can speak the same language as someone and still not understand them. How many of you have looked at someone who is very similar to you and thought, "How can they hold *that* political belief? How can they think *that*? How can they support *that*?" My brother and I were raised in the same home, by the same parents, in the same schools, in the same church, with very similar experiences, and yet when it comes to politics, religion, worldview, lifestyle, priorities, we could not be more different. There are times when he will say or do something, and I just absolutely do not understand how he can think that way.

One of the biggest challenges that we face in our society today is that we do not understand each other. We don't understand people who *think* or *act* or *believe* differently than we do. They must just be stupid, right? They're not *educated*. They don't have all the facts. They just don't *get it*. If they *did*, then they would think and act and believe like *I do*. Or they're just *crazy*. Or even worse, they're *evil*. These are the main ways that we try to make sense out of people who are different than us. If someone thinks or acts or believes differently than I do, it must be because something is *wrong* with them.

So I wondered, can Artificial Intelligence help us do *that*? Can it help us understand people who think and act and believe differently than we do?

I love the Bible, and I take scripture very seriously. I try to understand not just *what* the Bible says, but *why* the Bible says it. I do *not* think that scripture is always meant to be taken *literally*. But plenty of people *do*. And there have been times when I am listening to someone who takes scripture literally that I find myself thinking, "I just don't *get* how you can think that. There is *metaphor* and *historical context* and *translation issues* and all sorts of other things that suggest this should not always be taken *literally*." And they would probably look at *me* and say, "How can you *not* take God's Word literally? You must not be *faithful* enough."

So I asked ChatGPT, "Can you help me understand why someone has a literal view of scripture?" It gave me a very long (actually very *good*) answer. It said things like:

- "They believe that God speaks clearly. A literal reading can feel like the most faithful way to honor what God has said, rather than reshaping it according to modern preferences. For them, taking scripture 'literally' is an act of submission and trust."

- “They want to protect scripture’s authority. Throughout church history, Christians have worried that once difficult passages become ‘symbolic’ too quickly, people may end up explaining away anything they dislike. A literal approach can feel like a safeguard against reducing Christianity to vague spirituality, making faith entirely subjective, or allowing culture to override scripture.”
- “They are reacting against skepticism. In the modern era, many Christians have watched scholars, institutions, or churches question miracles, the resurrection, the divinity of Jesus, or biblical morality. A literal view often develops partly as a defense against the fear that Christianity could devolve into mere symbolism.”
- “It provides stability and certainty. A literal approach can give people a strong sense of grounding in a confusing world. Clear boundaries and firm convictions can feel spiritually and emotionally stabilizing. This is not always about rigidity. Sometimes it comes from a deep desire for moral clarity, confidence, faithfulness, and continuity with tradition.”

That’s a *good* answer. It helps me understand why a person can hold a literal view of scripture without just dismissing them. But you know what it *doesn’t* do? It doesn’t help me understand why *this person* holds a literal view of scripture. It doesn’t tell me about the family they were raised in or the experiences that shaped them. And it doesn’t tell someone how *I* grew up in an area where a lot of people held a literal view of scripture, and I saw the ways that it was used to hurt and oppress people, so I came to a *different* understanding.

I asked ChatGPT why someone holds conservative political views. It said things like:

- “They believe that traditions contain accumulated wisdom. Many conservatives think societies are fragile and complex. Customs, institutions, and moral norms may exist for reasons that are not immediately obvious. Conservatives may be cautious about rapid cultural or political change because they worry unintended consequences can be worse than the original problem.”

- “They are skeptical of concentrated government power. A core conservative belief is that governments, even with good intentions, can become inefficient, coercive, or corrupt.”
- “They emphasize personal responsibility. This does not mean that they lack compassion. Rather, many believe long-term flourishing comes from strong habits, discipline, and local relationships more than large systems.”
- “They value social order and stability, because they believe disorder harms vulnerable people most. This can shape support for law enforcement, border security, military strength, traditional institutions, and gradual rather than revolutionary change.”
- “Religious convictions influence their worldview.”
- “They believe free markets generally produce prosperity.”
- “They may see progressive movements as overreaching.”
- “Personal experiences like growing up in a rural area, serving in the military, owning a business, experiencing crime, religious upbringing, immigration history, experiencing economic hardship, or distrust of institutions.”

Those are really good answers that take people’s beliefs seriously. But they don’t fully help me understand why one of *you* might be politically conservative.

I did the same thing for liberal politics, and it told me how a person might believe that society should actively protect vulnerable people; they see systemic problems, not just individual ones; they value equality and inclusion; they are more comfortable with social change; they believe that government can be a force for good; they are skeptical of concentrated private power; they have experienced discrimination, worked with vulnerable populations, grown up economically insecure, or been exposed to diverse communities. But that doesn’t fully help me understand why one of *you* might be politically liberal.

I asked it why people are for or against gun control, and it gave great answers, but it can't tell me how *you* have experienced gun-related crime or violence that shaped your view either way. I asked it why people are for or against abortion, but it couldn't tell me if *your* view (either way) was shaped by the fact that you *had one*.

One of the things this technology does is help you understand someone without actually *listening* to them. It's like with the language translator I used. I didn't actually have to *listen* to John or *try* to understand him. A.I. did the listening *for me*. I just listened to my phone. So while we don't need the Holy Spirit to help us speak different languages anymore, I think we *do* need the Spirit to help us *understand* one another; people who think and act and believe differently than we do. If you really want to *understand* someone, if you really want to *know* them, you have to *listen* to them.

Some of you took part in my doctoral project a few years ago. I brought together a group of 23 people, some of whom identified politically as liberal and some as conservative, to have a conversation about a potentially divisive topic of their choosing (they chose gun control). But the way we did it was that first the conservative group sat in a circle, and they went around with each person taking about five minutes to say what they believe about gun control and why they believe that way. Then we switched and did the same with the liberal group.

No one else in the room was allowed to respond. No one could talk while anyone else was talking, and no one could say anything *after* they talked. When it was your turn to talk, you could not say, "I want to go back real quick and talk about something that Bill said." They couldn't sigh. They couldn't laugh. They couldn't roll their eyes or throw their arms up in the air. They could not respond audibly or visually. All they could do was sit there, be still and quiet, and listen.

It was *hard*. It took some getting used to. But after both groups had their turn, we came back into one big group, and I said, “What did you learn,” and right away someone said, “We have a lot more in common than I thought!” All because we actually took the time to *listen* to one another.

It may be really hard for you to do that; to sit down and have a conversation and really *listen* to someone who thinks or acts or believes differently than you do. It may drive you crazy and make your blood boil. And this is exactly where we need the Spirit’s help. Paul talks in his letter to the Galatians about the *fruit* of the Spirit; that when God’s Spirit is present and at work in you, *these* are the things that it will produce. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If you really want to *know* and *understand* someone who thinks or acts or believes differently than you do, you need to approach them with a spirit of *love*; a desire for *their* wellbeing.

You need to approach them with a spirit of *joy*. “I *get* to know you and understand you in a way that I don’t right now!”

You need to approach them with a spirit of *peace*. A peace and stillness and calmness within *yourself*, but also the desire to be at peace with this other person.

You need to approach them with a spirit of *patience*; a willingness to take your time and hear them out.

You need to approach them with a spirit of *kindness*; being friendly and considerate; compassionate and empathetic.

You need to approach them with a spirit of *generosity*, willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

You need to approach them with a spirit of *faithfulness*. And *faith* is not just *believing* in God, it is living in ways that *trust* God *and* that trust this other person. It's saying, "God, I *trust* that you are at work in this conversation and in this person."

You need to approach them with a spirit of *gentleness*, not being harsh or argumentative.

You need to approach them with a spirit of *self-control*, the ability to manage your thoughts and emotions and resist temptations or impulses.

These are all things that don't come naturally to us when we're dealing with someone who is different from us. And that is *exactly* why we need God's Holy Spirit. On our own, left to our own devices, we might not be able to do *any* of this. We might not even *want* to do any of this. But if we rely on the presence and the help of God's Holy Spirit, then we might actually be able to understand one another and live life together and love one another a little bit better.

And *that* was the *point* of Pentecost. It wasn't just about speaking different languages. It was about building community and understanding one another across differences. Pentecost starts off with all these people from all these different places, with all these different beliefs and backgrounds, speaking all these different languages. But how does it *end*? "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

That kind of Pentecost is still possible today. With the Holy Spirit's help, we can *understand* one another and *live life together* and *love one another* in the midst of our differences. We just have to open ourselves up, to God and to each other. We have to *humble* ourselves, putting our own egos and our own sense of rightness to the side. Because *righteousness* is not about *being right*. It is about *living* in right relationship with God and with each other. *That* is the kind of *spirit*, the kind of *Pentecost*, the kind of *church* that the world needs today. Amen.