

Wales: Flipping the world upside-down

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Our time in Wales has included a tremendous amount of language study.

Many people have asked why learning Welsh is so important, when everyone who speaks it is also fluent in English, and we're only here for less than a year. At first glance, spending hours every week in classes and stumbling through surface-level conversations doesn't contribute very much towards our goal of establishing the kingdom of God and making disciples in Wales. But I think it does.



Ryan Bowen God's economy is rather upside-down, as most of us have been taught. We're used to hearing phrases like "the first shall be last," "the rich shall be made poor" and "blessed are the poor in spirit." Humility and voluntary submission are foundational for Christian living, and that's exactly what we've found in language learning.

The Welsh language is central to the Welsh identity. It's a language that's been oppressed, disrespected, and stomped on for hundreds of years. At different points, it's been forbidden in schools, regarded as barbaric and been automatic grounds for discrimination. So it's a touchy, but absolutely critical facet of Welsh life.

Imagine two scenarios:

In the first, I'd like to be friends with someone who's first language is Welsh. He didn't learn any English until he went to elementary school, and every significant relationship in his life, whether family, friend or other, is through the medium of Welsh. In this scenario, I don't speak a word of Welsh, and I haven't tried. All of our conversations are in English, where I have the clear upper hand. I'm more comfortable in it, and in every instance, he's deferring to me so we can communicate in a language that doesn't deeply resonate with him.

In the second, I'm far from fluent, but every time I see this friend, we catch up in Welsh. I ask about his day, his family, and other similar things. As the conversation drifts deeper, we inevitably switch to English, but the first bit of our interaction was in (somewhat sloppy) Welsh.

The second scenario is kind of humiliating for me. I make a lot of mistakes, and I often pause to remember words or phrases. I emerge with my brain throbbing, but it's honoring to my friend. I'm sitting in Welsh class for hours each week. I'm making a fool of myself. And I'm walking into unfamiliar territory to speak to him in his native tongue, even when I don't strictly have to.

In Wales, everyone speaks English. The language of trade is English. The language of many schools is English. Economically, I don't benefit tons from learning Welsh, but in terms of the kingdom, it makes all the difference. It's the highest compliment I can pay. It's a low bow to the underdog. It's flipping the world upside-down into kingdom economics.

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