

Bad Unity

Genesis 11:1-9

Wonderful Cultures

One of the great blessings of university life is the opportunity to rub shoulders with many cultures. There are so many wonderful and fascinating cultures in this world! Every year my family loves to spend an afternoon at the Greek Food Festival a few blocks from our house. On another weekend in the opposite direction is the Celtic Classic. Bethlehem has dozens of other cultural influences, and Lehigh University attracts students from all over the world. When the RUF Lehigh worship team was fully developed, we had five cultures represented. And of course Brown and RISD likewise has students from all over the world. What a rich tapestry of sounds, sights, smells, and tastes! What a vision of God's extravagant creativity! Our lives are so much richer for all these cultures.

This was God's intent all along, and when we peek at the end of the story, we see that God will succeed in bringing a vast array of cultures into His Kingdom. The book of Revelation says that "every tribe and language and people and nation" will crowd around the heavenly throne to worship Jesus. This is a picture of the fulfillment of God's first command to man: to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth. Praise God it is happening now, and it will continue to happen until all is fulfilled and Jesus returns. Praise God!

But not everyone is happy about this. Today we have some people who do not appreciate other cultures. I am not talking about uneducated country people. Country people are a mixed bunch, and there certainly are xenophobes among them. But country people are the most generous and welcoming people there are. The most culturally stubborn people I know are educated city-dwellers. But such people today, wherever they are, are only carrying on a tradition that began soon after creation. Several generations after Adam, man decided that he would settle down in one place, keep family and friends close by, and enjoy the camaraderie of familiar faces. Does this sound good? Is this what you desire for your future? There is a lot of good in that picture, but there is also a very dark side to it.

Building for Themselves

I love Genesis! I have read it dozens of times because it is so captivating. But it is also tricky. Moses wrote about universal themes in very compact prose. Every word and phrase is packed with meaning, and a casual reader will miss significant points.

In tonight's passage the people pursued three goals: a city, a tower, and a name. Now these are wonderful goals. Cities are fantastic! I love Philadelphia and New York and Boston – Taipei and Marseille and Casablanca – the stunning architecture, the lush parks, the arts and sports, the neighborhoods and restaurants, the energy and excitement. Towers are useful and impressive. And who doesn't want to do something so impressive that people remember his contribution to society? This was a cohesive culture. In today's world, where the U.S. is bitterly divided between Trump supporters and Trump haters, and Brazil has just had a hate-filled election, and there are insurmountable barriers between Muslim immigrants and natives in Europe – this appears to be a model society. Our passage is rather terse, but every indication is that there was profound unity among these people. It must have been a wonderful place to live.

But someone was not pleased with this picture. God did not approve of their actions, so He interfered with their plans. In the end God managed to ruin the city and tower, and the name of these people has become synonymous with nonsense. The city was halted in mid-construction and the tower was never completed. So what shall we conclude from this? That God does not like cities, towers, and names? Some people have proposed that this passage demonstrates God's displeasure at cities. They are serious about this. Funny, I have never heard these people propose that God opposes towers, and they all give names to their children. No, there is a word in this passage which orients us to the real problem here, the word "ourselves."

God loves cities. The psalms are full of praise for Jerusalem, and God sent Jonah to Nineveh to preach so that He might spare that city. Our future is in a great city. The problem with this city is that it was not being constructed for God – it was being constructed for the glory of man. This is reinforced by noting that these people wished also to make a name for themselves. God loves names. He gives special names to the people He loves. But these people would not wait for God to make their name great, nor did they seem to care if they made God’s name great. The city and the name both show that instead of glorifying God, they were into self-glorification.

And what about the tower? It is less obvious to modern people what they intended here. This was not a skyscraper filled with insurance offices or condominiums. The key phrase is “with its top in the heavens.” This does not mean it was super tall. It means the purpose of this tower was to place man where God belongs. You see examples of this in the ruins of ziggurats in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica. These later towers were constructed so that man could enter heaven and thus control life on earth. The tower was a bald-faced move for man to push God aside and rule from heaven.

Replacing God

What we have now several generations after creation is a recapitulation of chapter three on a society-wide scale. Adam knew who God was, he knew who he was, and he knew what God expected of him. Adam’s problem was not a knowledge problem – it was a heart problem. Adam and Eve were the first modern scientists. They would not take anyone’s word without checking it out – not even God’s word! They would test everything and make their own judgment about the truth or falsehood of it. This is how to conduct science, but it is no way to treat God. To test God’s word is to imply that God might be wrong. In essence Adam said, “Thanks, God, for your opinion, but I’ll check things out for myself.” Now if this sounds to you like a knowledge problem – like Adam needed more information – that just shows how much like Adam you are. Adam’s act was despicable because it showed that he did not trust God. God had said unequivocally, “Do not eat from that tree.” The question before Adam is, “Is God trustworthy?” Does God know the truth? And if He does, is He telling the truth? Adam was not sure. Adam did not trust God. Adam judged that God might be untrustworthy. So he took judgment onto himself. Satan’s promise was that eating from the tree would make Adam like God. In fact, in eating from the tree Adam substituted his own judgment for God’s. Adam attempted to replace God with himself.

God loves cities and towers and names. The problem was not the city, tower, or name. Here is the root problem: the first and fundamental command to man was to multiply and subdue the earth. This means to spread out all over the globe and make the good creation into the finished product we see in the book of Revelation. But man refused to follow God’s command. Instead of subduing the earth, he decided to stay put and enjoy the companionship of family and friends. Now the companionship of family and friends is wonderful! It is one of God’s best blessings. But it is never to get in the way of obedience to God. Like Adam, these people said, “Thanks, God for your opinion. But we think there is a better way.” Knowing God’s command to populate the earth, they refused and decided instead all to settle in one place.

They replaced God’s judgment with their own. So the next logical step was to replace God himself. Heaven is God’s home, so it was necessary to build a tower to reach heaven and install a man there instead of God. Now this can look like a quaint ancient religion, but can you see how wicked this was? These people intended to invade God’s home, drag Him out, and take over the place. Now you might say, “That is a stupid idea. God – if there is a God – doesn’t live in outer space. And a tower into outer space would be physically impossible and practically useless.” Well spoken, modern person. Yes, God does not live in outer space. But if you are so smart, where *does* God live? This is an interesting question, and scripture has some things to say about it. But that is not what this passage is about. What we need to address is that these people, in their own way, sought to replace God with a more agreeable deity. And don’t we do the same thing?

This story is told in a dispassionate tone which can make us puzzled at its significance. But the more we think about it, the more it becomes clear that these were not good folk who were mildly misguided – people who understandably enjoyed their family and friends and were only seeking to guard that pleasure. No, these people were guilty of the greatest wickedness there is – greater even than genocide. And that great wickedness is judging God to be unreliable and hurtful. They decided that God’s command was not in their best interest. They knew better than God what would make them happy and prosperous. And they were even prepared to invade God’s house, drag Him out into the street, and install a man whom they could trust to look out for their interests.

Modern Babel Projects

At this point we should pause and do some self-reflection. Are there any ways in which we act like these people in Genesis 11? Are we determined to do what benefits us, even if it is inconsistent with God’s commands? Do we value the opinions of men more than the word of God? Is this whole university education calculated to bring glory to us?

Let’s examine the failures of these people in order. First, do we substitute our judgment for God’s? God says it is unhealthy and sinful to engage in sex before marriage. Do you agree? God says it is sinful even to lust for a hot man or woman. Do you agree? God says it is wrong to accumulate great wealth at the expense of your physical, spiritual and relational health. Would you turn down an opportunity to acquire a huge savings if it would cost you your health and family? God says we should honor one day in seven. What do you do on Sunday? Or do think you know better than God? Is your impulse to do what God says, or do you study the matter and make your own decision about what is best? You who claim to have faith in God, is your faith a sham?

Second, do we huddle up with those just like us, or do we obey God’s command to spread out into the world? You know, the people I find easiest to like are those who appreciate classical music, are well-read, and love languages. I was thinking yesterday how enjoyable it is to talk to Eddie because I can use rare words and he knows what I am saying and doesn’t think I am bizarre. I don’t follow sports much and am not drawn to people who do. And the part of the world that is most comfortable to me is western Maryland where I grew up. It is tempting to wish for a nice place in the country with my classical music collection and close friends and enjoy their companionship. It is not that I hate certain cuisines or leisure activities – I am too cultured for that – it is just that it is much more pleasurable not to have to deal with strange foods and customs. How about you? Do you huddle with those just like you? Or do you make the effort to embrace people who look, act, and talk strange – who are not your natural companions?

Third, do we replace God with some substitute? Modern people are not so ignorant to substitute carved idols for God. We have more sophisticated substitutes. In the gospels people flocked to Jesus for healing. Do you? Or do you trust the medical profession to heal you? And what do you do if the medical profession fails to produce healing on schedule? Do you accept this as God’s gracious, if mysterious, will? Or do you launch into anger or despair? But top-notch medical care is ferociously expensive. You need a well-paying job to be in the position to afford the best doctors and hospitals. Is your job, or the hope of a job, your real God? Well you can’t get those types of jobs without a degree from a prestigious university. Are you trusting your Brown or RISD education to provide satisfaction, fulfillment, and a high salary? If so, you are not trusting God. Your education is your real god. For parents, children are often their real god – the expected source of fulfillment. It is easy and subtle to replace God with some substitute, and often we are unaware we are doing it. I bet that if we could return to the ancient world and ask the inhabitants of this city if they planned to replace God with a more reliable substitute, they would indignantly deny any such idea. But that is what they were doing. Are you?

Finally, are you driven to glorify yourself, or to glorify God? This is a difficult question, because it is a matter of the heart. Two people may be doing the same things, but with dramatically different motives and radically different results. And you, university student, are you studying hard, earning good grades, and landing important internships so that people will praise God, or so that *you* will look great? And get a great job offer? Those of you who have been Christians for a while will give the correct answer: you do all this so that people will praise God. And to you I ask, are they? Is it working? Do your classmates say, “Look how Tony studies! His God is so amazing.” Or “Becky received all “A’s” again. Jesus is so wonderful!” Or “Rachel got a great internship at Microsoft. Jesus came through again.” Brown/RISD RUF is a sizable organization that does a lot of good things and is filled with a lot of impressive students. Do students, professors, and administrators all over campus praise God because of you? If not, might it be because you are just as self-serving as everyone else – just not as blatantly so?

God’s Redemptive Response

What should be done about these people? What would you do if you were God? When my children were little, I came upon one of them playing the computer game “Sim City.” He was destroying the city that he had built and all the people in it. I asked why he was ruining all the work he had put into it, and he replied it was because the sims were not doing what he wanted them to. Is what you would do if you were God – destroy anyone who did not obey you?

At first glance it might appear that God was harsh or petty to break up this impressive project, but when you consider the alternatives, it becomes clear that God’s response was wise and loving. Sin always seems right and pleasurable at first; that is why it is so tempting. But in the end sin is destructive. If these people continued to sin, they would become more and more self-centered, which would manifest itself in hatred, abuse, and all the truly horrible sins we hear about. The loving thing to do – the *only* loving response – was to stop them before they could hurt themselves and others more. And how could they be stopped? God’s wise and elegant strategy was to confuse their speech so that they could no longer collaborate.

The result was impressive. The text says that “the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth.” When they could no longer understand each other, they wanted nothing to do with each other. The heart-warming unity which enabled the glorious building project turned to hatred and division. And who caused this? Inflammatory politicians? Propagandists? Multinational corporations? No, God caused this hateful division of human society. So did God create hate? No. God simply revealed the hate that was in man’s heart all along. What God’s action showed was that the impressive unity of this community was an evil unity. This community was united in rejection of God and determination to oppose Him. It looked good on the surface, but this unity was nasty inside. The united rejection of God was so bad, division was better. It is better to be enemies of each other than enemies of God.

But then an amazing thing happened. The confusion of language produced the sorrow of division, but it also produced all the wonderful cultures we love. As a result of God’s action, people spread across the whole world and developed a lush profusion of cuisines, dress, housing, customs, etc. None of this would have happened if everyone had stayed in the same city. As always with God, His punishments are blessings in disguise – and when God judges sin, man flourishes – even though it is painful at the time.

Bad Unity

The lesson for us is that not all unity is good. Some unity is unhealthy. I hope no one will dispute that the unity of the German nation around Adolf Hitler was an evil thing. So is the consensus in Planned Parenthood that it is OK to kill unborn babies and the actions of white supremacist groups. Certain Muslims united around the ideal of a universal caliphate, and the atrocities ISIS committed led us to conclude that this also is an evil unity. Less certain is the value of a politically united Europe, as Britain recently voted to leave

the European union. The British people think that political division is healthier than political union, although France and Germany disagree. Unity is not always good. It depends on the motive and purpose. Sometimes division is better. If you find yourself in a community that is determined to oppose God, you should oppose the community or leave.

Thinking more locally, there are some peaceful, white communities in the United States which would benefit from an infusion of immigrants. They do not want people of a different language and culture in their midst, but their attitude is sinful. My Korean friends have told me that there are some Korean churches that are vibrant and spiritual, but are unwelcoming to non-Koreans. If this is true, it is sinful. Exclusiveness is not limited to white communities, but is found in every community. In corporations and universities cliques can emerge which are harmful and destructive. This same motive – to protect and preserve our group identity – which we see in this passage is what creates these groups. It is admirable to cherish the riches of your own group, but not at the expense of others. God will have a multi-cultural Kingdom, and if that is not what you want, perhaps you do not belong there.

A positive result of God's judgment on the sin of this community was the proliferation of all the beautiful cultures we see in the world. But along with the beauty comes the stress of division. Is it worth the cost? On balance, would we be better off mono-cultural if it meant we could live in harmony with each other?

Restoration of Unity

Jesus is the answer to the problem of cultural unity and diversity. Sin will always propel us from division to xenophobia. When cultural divisions become unbearable, sinful man will solve that problem by obliterating diversity. But cultural divisions constantly reappear, partly because the diversity is so appealing. On his own, man can never find a way to affirm diverse cultures without fracturing society. But Jesus can. On the day that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit into the church He began the process of undoing the divisiveness of Babel without undoing the beauty of diverse cultures. When the apostles stood up to preach the gospel of Jesus, people from all over the Roman Empire heard the good news in his own language, and they were all baptized in the same name of the triune God. In Jesus it is possible to be united in one society with diverse cultures, and in Jesus we all inhabit one spiritual city, we all participate in the heavenly worship, and we all bear the glorious name of God. In Jesus we find the strength to repent of our ugly sins of exclusion and the grace to reach out to strangers. In Jesus, and only in Jesus, is the divine love which binds together people of every language and culture.

When we look to the end of the story we see a glorious city teeming with hundreds of races and languages, a great urban park of unbelievable beauty, an eternal city in which is no sorrow. This is the destiny of all who follow Jesus. If you love cultures as I do, but hate the divisions they produce, you can find hope in Jesus. Jesus is in the process of erasing hatred and replacing it with love. It is a long process, but we see the end. But if you wish this to be your future, you must place your trust in Jesus. Happily, Jesus welcomes everyone. Even if you see in yourself some of the sins we discussed here, Jesus calls you and welcomes you into His Kingdom.

Prayer

C. David Green
Brown University
November 2, 2018