

# ***Babel-ing No Longer***

**Genesis 11:1-9  
Acts 2:1-21**

PREPARED BY  
KEN GEHRELS  
PASTOR  
CALVIN CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH OF OTTAWA  
ONTARIO, CANADA

It's a brief, but all too clear story, told in the same pithy, condensed form as the account of creation. Humanity gathers. Their sense of self-worth knows no bounds. Sky's the limit, it seems. Build a tower, and extend human influence right to the gates of heaven. Behave as gods. Lord it over the world. Erect a monument to secure that reputation.

It's an account about lust for power. About domination. About control.

And in very quick order Genesis 11 displays the futility of that lust and grab for control. They don't get anywhere near heaven. The text says that God had to come **DOWN** in order to see this little pimple extending out from the surface of the earth. A quick word from heaven, and everything stops.

Babel - coming over time to represent the futility of the grab for power, the disconnect between tribal and ethnic groups, the scattering of humanity.

Babel - people who sought security and identity in building monuments to their own greatness and power bring on themselves the very thing they feared.

That curse, the curse of the scattering, the curse of misunderstanding and broken communication, the curse sent down on a people lusting for power, for control, for domination.

It's a curse that has been felt through the millenia.

And, unfortunately, this curse hasn't stopped the quest for building monuments. It hasn't stopped people from striving to dominate, from seeking to consolidate control for themselves.

Conquest, slavery, apartheid, racism - all are outcomes of that sinful lust. The curse of misunderstanding. The curse of division. The curse of oppression by one group of people over another. The curse of people scattered.

Oh, that Babel could be reversed.

Oh, that people could live together, one day, without misunderstanding, without division, without oppression, without the desire for power rearing its ugly head, without the compulsion to build a monument to oneself rising to the surface, without that misguided notion that somehow we are gods.

Oh, that Babel could be undone one day!

A dream of that day drove the ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, Baptist pastor and leader in the American civil rights movement. In a time when blatant segregation was alive and well in the USA King shared that dream at a rally in Washington in 1963.

Here's a 3 minute clip of what he said -

["I have a dream..."]

A dream.

A dream of a day in the future.

A dream shared in the midst of heartache and oppression.

A dream of freedom, of understanding, of peace and unity among all people.

Lest we Canadians get too smug about the segregationist American south of the 50's, just keep an eye on the news, with AFN planning protests through this summer, their tempers at the boiling point. Seems like we're beginning to reap the fruits of centuries of domination, conquest and repression of people stuck in 3<sup>rd</sup> world conditions on reservations with restrictive legislation, right here in Canada.

What do you dream, believer?

Do you share a dream of one day when people from all across the globe will be able to live in understanding - regardless of their ethnic origin, or the colour of their skin?

What about something simpler than that?

What about anglophone and francophone being able to dwell together in this nation without suspicion or grudge? Tell me, did any of us find ourselves inwardly resenting scripture being read or songs being sung in another language because this is **our** space and it should be in **our** language - meaning English, of course?

Tell me, believer, does Babel have the last word?

Thank God for Pentecost!

Today is the feast of Pentecost, and with the Church in every country and culture, we celebrate the descent of God's one Holy Spirit into the hearts of every single believer.

Pentecost - like virtually every part of the life of the Church and the Christian faith, this festival has deep Old Testament roots.

Ancient Hebrews celebrated Pentecost 50 days after Passover (Leviticus 23). At Passover the very first ceremonial cut of a sheaf of barley was offered to the Lord as a sacrifice. It was given at the same time as the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, the lamb slain to take away the sin of God's people.

50 days later the entire community celebrated the Harvest Festival - Pentecost.

Pentecost - 50 days ago we celebrated that Jesus was sacrificed on the cross - the great Passover Lamb, says 1 Corinthians 5:7.

Now it is Pentecost. Acts 2 records the beginning of Christ's harvest. In John 12:24 Jesus said

*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

Jesus died and his body, like a seed, was buried in the ground. Three days later, rising up into eternal life, real life, with a real human body. And with that resurrection, he brings eternal life for all believers. Death cannot touch them - it cannot destroy them forever. Fruit will come in the harvest.

In Acts 2 we see the first reaping of that great harvest of lives - bringing their lives into God's storehouse. 3000 people brought from death to life.

Exactly the opposite of Exodus 32, where God's people, freed from oppression and slavery in Egypt do exactly what the Egyptians had been doing to them – insist on doing what **they** wanted, with **their** power and **their** timetable. They engage in a spiritual and physical orgy before a golden calf while Moses is on Mt. Sinai. In the aftermath of that event, 3000 of those self-assertive, stubborn people die.

In Acts 2, 3000 people humble themselves before God and are brought to eternal life. Brought to life and brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit pours into human hearts a blessing from God that joins together people who otherwise might have nothing in common.

In Pentecost the curse of Babel is shattered.

The great harvest of lives has begun.

All humanity is joined in the one family of God. A growing family.

Growing still today. Growing all around the world. The hymns we sing in different languages today here at Calvin Church representing just a small fragment of the many languages that are singing the praises of God around the world today.

So - yes - thank God for Pentecost!!

Thank God that the cacophony of confusion that resulted from the curse at the tower has been miraculously transformed into a symphony of beauty and understanding - where many languages are still spoken, but through the healing miracle of heaven now all can find understanding!

They find that understanding through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of Jesus.

The Spirit who is taking a fractured world and beginning to knit together one people for God,

one people into one body, the body of Christ,

one people that will join together before heaven's throne, says Rev 7:9

one people from every nation and tribe and language.

one people.

Babel drove people away from each other in fear and suspicion.

Pentecost unites people in Jesus.

At Babel people raised up their own ambitions and reputation - exalting themselves. And they were brought low and scattered.

At Pentecost lowly people were raised up and joined together by God who reached down and poured himself into them.

Babel is the tragedy of disintegration.

Pentecost is the miracle of reintegration.

At Babel the human lust for power and domination was shattered and scattered.

At Pentecost people who humbly surrendered to the Son of God were gathered and united. Not by removing human diversity. Not by imposing one language or culture upon all others. Not by raising up one ethnic group as superior to the others. Or welding all believers into one group and place. Remember, the Spirit sent those same believers all across the globe soon after Pentecost.

Rather, this miracle creates a unity of the heart.

A unity based in Jesus.

A unity based in humility.

A unity founded on Jesus' servant sacrifice for us.

A unity in which we can follow him as servants to each other.

A unity not of domination, but of foot washing.

Thank God for that unity!

The fact that we can be gathered here in the city of Ottawa as an assembly of people from a variety of different nations is testimony to that miracle of healing and unity.

And yet - Babel still lurks.

Whenever humans over reach their proper domain, when they extend their hand in an attempt to grasp power, or to control others, or to dominate a community, God's Pentecost blessing of Holy Spirit unity is lifted, and the curse of Babel settles once more. What we seek, then, to build is shattered. And we are scattered.

That's true on a church level. God cannot and will not bless any move by leadership or followers to consolidate power, or demand absolute uniformity to their way. A church community that strives for this will be splintered and scattered.

It's true on a national level. No nation can claim it as their Christian right to dominate or control another. God will bring them down.

So, while Pentecost remains on one hand a time for great celebration and thanksgiving, while it remains a day for hope and working towards the healing of broken bonds between peoples and cultures and nations,

while that is all true

Pentecost also is a day for repentance and mourning.

Repenting of, and mourning, ways that the curse of Babel shows up again.

It shows up in the fact that even in this city there are hundreds of different apparently Christian denominations, groups and splinter groups - each gathering purportedly to worship ONE Jesus Christ on the basis of ONE Bible.

Whenever a church split happens, both sides will claim they are doing it for purity of doctrine and life. Looking back, though, it seems to me that the vast majority of them were more over grasping for control and power than anything else. And that is the stuff of Babel.

It shows itself in the legacy of residential boarding schools where native languages and families were shattered, at least partially in the name of God. Actions of domination, of manipulation, of control.

Think about it this week - can you think of other ways in which perhaps we might be party to such Babel-like dynamics?

If so, then NOW is the time to repent of them and drop them in the ditch.

Someone once said that this whole antithesis between Babel and Pentecost boils down to the use of an apostrophe. Let me ask you - Which exclamation accurately represents our self-understanding?

- (a) We are God's!
- (b) We are gods!

When spoken, the two lines sound identical. But they are utterly different.

A) says that we submit our life to the Son of God, to his purposes for us, to His commands for our lives. All we have is his. All we are is his. All we do is for Him. All of us equal as His children, His servants to each other, His caretakers of Creation.

B) says that **we** are what matters most. What we like. What we crave. If we have the power, we can do whatever we want. Nobody should be able to stop us. We are accountable to no one.

If people who see you live and who know a little bit about you had to choose whether you gravitated towards A/ or B/, what would they say?