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The Spirit of Reconciliation

JAMES W. McCARTY III

Every Pentecost Christians around the world hear sermons preached on Genesis 11 and Acts 2. The theological link between the stories seems straightforward and relevant to the celebration of Pentecost, the day that marks the beginning of the multicultural and global Christian church. The story is typically told like this: there was a time when humanity was divided by a curse from God (administered because of their pride) after which they could not understand one another—but now, in Christ, people from all nations can become a part of the universal Church and be reconciled. In the blessing of the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 we see the undoing of the curse of Genesis 11. At Pentecost, Babel is reversed.

However, by telling the story in this way, cultural diversity gets misinterpreted as a curse, and I worry that in the process one of the most important theological lessons of Pentecost often gets overlooked: the importance of listening to others in their particularity for reconciliation between estranged people. Pentecost provides us with an example of how to pursue reconciliation in a fallen world, but we can only see that lesson clearly if we interpret Babel correctly as the human rejection of God’s created diversity rather than as God’s creation of diversity as a curse. This essay provides such an interpretation. In doing so, I will show that the spirit of reconciliation, which is a work of the Spirit, is a spirit of listening.

Babel

The story of Babel begins in Genesis 11.1 and ends in verse 9 of the same chapter.¹ It functions as the concluding story of the primeval history found in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, and is the last story that places humanity as a whole as its central subject before Genesis focuses its attention on one family: Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants. The story of Babel, then, is the transition from the history of all of humanity to the history of one family and the nation that would come from it. As the conclusion to the primeval history, it is also the culmination of the creation of the world as we live in it. Read this way, Genesis 1–11 is an extended account of the creation of the world and the origins of human civilization. The story of Babel is as much a “creation story” as Genesis 1 inasmuch as they are both part of the same primeval history.

The story of Babel is composed of an introduction, a body with two scenes, and a conclusion. The introduction begins the story with the same phrase that concludes the story. That Hebrew phrase is translated as “the whole earth” in the introduction and “all the earth” in the conclusion.² In addition, the introduction and conclusion include references to language. In between these bookend statements referring to the whole earth and the languages spoken in it lie two scenes that mimic one another. The first scene begins with *humanity’s movement* into the land of Shinar and includes a *conversation in which humans decide* to build a city to avoid being “scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” Scene 2 begins with *God’s movement* towards the

1. Theodore Hiebert, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World’s Cultures,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 126, no. 1 (2007): 29–58. My exegetical interpretation is significantly influenced by Hiebert’s exposition, though it takes his argument in directions that he does not go.

2. All biblical quotes are taken from the NRSV.

city. Following this movement *God has a conversation* (with God's self?) in which God notices that humans speak a homogenous language and therefore decides to confuse humanity's language so that the city would not be built. After this conversation, God takes action to complete what God said God would do by "confusing the language of all the earth." In response to the introduction of diverse languages, humans scattered and—in the process—filled the earth, finally fulfilling God's command in Genesis 1.28. Following God's action is the conclusion to the narrative. Contained within the conclusion is an explanation of the birth of humanity's multitudinous languages and people groups. The story in its entirety reads:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." YHWH came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And YHWH said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." So YHWH scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there YHWH confused the language of all the earth; and from there YHWH scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Gen 11.1–9)

The story is often interpreted as a critique of human pride because interpreters focus on the act of building the tower "with its top in the heavens" and the desire for the people to "make a name for themselves." However, this interpretation has recently been challenged in biblical scholarship. The main critic of this interpretation has been Theodore Hiebert, who has argued that the story is "exclusively about the origins of cultural difference and not about pride and punishment at all."³ The main thrust of this argument is that interpreters should focus on the bookends of the story (which are references to language); the ends the people seek (not to be scattered across the earth) rather than the means by which they seek it (building the city); and by the action of God in the story (scattering the peoples and therefore thwarting humanity's intentions by creating a multilingual and multicultural world).

Hiebert argues that, "The story's terminology, explicit claims, and repetitive structure all focus on the tension between singularity and multiplicity with the purpose of explaining the origin and variety of the world's cultures."⁴ The story begins by informing us that "the whole earth had one language" and concludes with the earth containing a multitude of languages. The human actors in the story seek to avoid being "scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" and the story concludes with them "scattered . . . abroad over the face of all the earth." We are told that God notices that humans "are one people" and that they possess "all one language," but that God intervenes to confuse their languages and create the world's cultures. Thus, the story of Babel is the story of God intervening in human affairs to create a multicultural world in direct opposition to the desires of humanity for a monocultural world. God acts to fulfill God's desire for humanity to "fill the earth" by interrupting humanity's desire to remain homogenous by creating the world's multitude of human cultures.

The usual focus of the story in sermons and children's lessons, the tower, receives only passing mention in the text, and its placement in the narrative is not especially important. Scene 1 ends, for instance, with the desire of humanity not to be scattered rather than their desire to build the tower. It is not the focus of the story. In addition, the statement that humans desired to "make a name for ourselves"—read in its biblical context—is not necessarily a statement of pride, no matter how much it rings as such in our modern ears. For example, in the very next story God promises Abraham that God will make his name great (12.2). Having a good name, in the Hebrew Bible, is not a desire that is incompatible with faithfulness. On its own, then, this statement does

3. Hiebert, 31.

4. Ibid.

not necessarily connote a condemnation of pride. Similarly, the desire to build a tower “with its top in the heavens” is not necessarily a statement of hubris. Like our word *skyscraper*, it could simply be a hyperbolic statement to connote great height. Thus, in light of the rhetorical lack of attention to the tower, when compared to oneness and multiplicity, we should eschew the “pride interpretation” as the primary interpretation of the story.⁵ Rather, the story should primarily be read as God’s intervention to complete God’s creation by creating a world of diversity as opposed to the homogeneity that humanity sought.⁶

But why would God be opposed to human unity? It is because humankind sought that unity by pursuing homogeneity. Rather than living in a community of diversity, they pursued a community of sameness. They wanted to build a world in which they spoke one language and lived in one location forever. Instead, God acted to create a diverse world. Rather than desiring a world with one language, be it linguistic or cultural or political, God desired a diverse world. Humans, on the other hand, pursued a world based on sameness. Tragically, modern history has shown us in the mass violence of Nazi Germany and other genocidal campaigns that the pursuit of unity through excluding or suppressing difference is profoundly dangerous.

In the story of Babel, then, God completes the creation by creating a multicultural world.⁷ Humans, however, rejected and often continue to reject a diverse social life. Rather, they separate from one another, and those in power segregate those who are different from them in particularly unjust ways, reenacting a long history of violent and exclusionary conflict that results from the pursuit of separation. Rather than learn to listen to one another as we speak in our native tongues, humans choose to separate and exclude—acts of relational violence that too often manifest in physical violence.⁸ When humans in Babel discovered that they no longer spoke a single language, they ceased to speak to one another—rather than learning to listen to one another—and severed their relationships.

The story of Babel does not teach, then, that cultural diversity is a curse from God. Rather, it teaches that humanity responded to the creation of cultural diversity by refusing to learn to listen to one another in each other’s native tongues. Humanity sought homogeneity; God created diversity. However, sinful creatures that we are, humans chose—and continue to choose—not to listen to those who bear God’s image while speaking God’s name in another tongue. Babel is not a story about God’s curse on humanity, but another story of humanity’s original sins. The violence of Babel is not to be separated from the violence of Cain. Throughout the primeval history we see tales of humans choosing violent estrangement rather than to be each other’s keepers.

Pentecost

Christian preachers and theologians often connect the story of Babel in Genesis 11 with the story of Pentecost in Acts 2—and rightly so. However, when the story of Babel is told as a story of God’s curse on humanity the story of Pentecost can become misconstrued. In Acts 2 Peter preached the first recorded Christian sermon, on the first Pentecost after Jesus’ resurrection, after a sound from heaven “like the rush of a violent wind” filled the place where the apostles had gathered. “Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” Because it was Pentecost, there were Jews from throughout the world gathered in Jerusalem and an international crowd soon gathered around the apostles. And then something amazing happened: “each one [of the crowd] heard them [the apostles] speaking in the native language of each.” At Pentecost, then, language

5. This is not to deny that there might be some condemnation of hubris in the story. Rather, it is to say that even if such a condemnation exists it is not the primary message of the story.

6. Hiebert, 56–7. According to Hiebert, the story “describes the origins of the world’s cultures through a narrative world in which humans desire uniformity and God desires diversity.”

7. John T. Strong, “Shattering the Image of God: A Response to Theodore Hiebert’s Interpretation of the Story of the Tower of Babel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 4 (2008): 628. Strong argues, “The first person plural cohortative, as spoken by God, appears only twice in the primeval history, once at the conclusion of the Priestly creation story in Genesis 1.26, and the second time in the story of the tower of Babel. . . . The divine use of the plural cohortative, then, creates a bookend that signals to the reader the close of the Primeval History, specifically the end of the chapter in which God attempted to make humankind in his image.”

8. On the violence of exclusion, see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

was no barrier because all listened to the apostles and each listener understood them in his or her own language. The crowd declared, dumbfounded, “in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” The experience was so bewildering, in fact, that the listeners assumed the apostles must be drunk!

Many have noticed that perhaps the most amazing thing about this story is not that the apostles spoke in different tongues but that each person in the crowd heard what the apostles said in his or her own language. The scene at the first Pentecost seems to be the exact opposite of what we see at Babel. Rather than people refusing to listen to one another and separating, Pentecost is a story in which people come together and listen to one another across cultural differences. Whereas at Babel people left to create new cultures based around their languages, at Pentecost people from different cultures gather in one place and are able to listen to one another. The Spirit’s first gift to the first Christians was a multicultural listening experience. The homogeneity of Babel is replaced with the radical diversity of the kingdom of God. This is, indeed, good news.

The miraculous nature of Pentecost and the traditional interpretation of Babel have led many to interpret all of this as the activity of God. Indeed, this is often how this story is preached: God cursed humanity by creating different cultures but reversed the curse at Pentecost and the birth of the church. And the activity of God is clear in both stories. However, God’s activity in those stories is not the only activity. God’s actions in Genesis 11 and Acts 2 are always toward more diversity. At Babel, however, humans acted to resist God’s creation of diversity by refusing to listen to one another. At Pentecost, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they acted differently and followed God in God’s intentional creation of a diverse community that listens to one another. Human action is as important as divine action in both exclusion and reconciliation.

At Pentecost God creates unity *in* diversity, not *despite* it or by *transcending* it. People come together in the multitude of their languages, not by reversing the effects of Babel. God does not “reverse” Babel by giving humanity one language to speak but enables humans to live together in their diversity. And like the people at Babel, the people at Pentecost go out from their centralized location to fill the earth, thus showing that they could have listened to one another at Babel without remaining centrally located. However, this time they fill the earth with the good news of the multicultural kingdom of God, in which people listen to one another in their particularity rather than exclude one another based on their differences.

Conclusion

This model of Spirit-inspired reconciliation is the opposite of “colorblind” approaches to racial reconciliation so often found in churches and American society. Such approaches attempt to reverse God’s creation of diversity at Babel by imposing a new homogeneity. They deny difference and insist on sameness. In other words, they are attempts to rebuild Babel. In the United States, this new homogeneity usually manifests as a form of whiteness or American consumerism. It denies particularity for a false universalism by claiming “not to see race” or that “race doesn’t matter”—and, therefore, denies the lived experiences of people for whom racial, ethnic, and cultural particularities matter. This is the opposite of the Spirit-led reconciliation between nations that occurred at Pentecost. There the gift of the Spirit was the gift of listening to people in their particularity. At Pentecost cultural difference was not seen as a curse but as a sign of God’s inbreaking kingdom.

Churches that seek to be led by the Spirit to pursue reconciliation, then, must be listening communities. They must be willing to abandon the human impulse for sameness and live fully into the diversity of God’s created world. They must be spaces in which people feel free to speak and be heard in their particularity. If churches create spaces like this, the Spirit is sure to show up like a rushing wind. And then we might be able to hear. Otherwise, we will think we are speaking words of reconciliation . . . but we will just be babbling on.

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