

Babel and Empire: Pentecost and Empire

Preaching on Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2:1-12

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I

From early Patristic days, it has become commonplace to set these passages in contrast with each other. Both stories have to do with language and communication. The story of Babel appears in the middle of a table of nations; in the case of Acts, a table of nations, probably taken from an ancient source, appears in the middle of the story. In one story, humans come together to try to ascend to the heavens; in the other, the Spirit descends upon those who are gathered. Babel was the epitome of sin and pride; Pentecost is the advent of grace and renewal. Usually, the main point of all these comparisons is that, whereas in Babel unity gave way to confusion, in Pentecost that confusion was overcome by unity.

But look again at the text in Acts. In verse 6 we read that the crowd “gathered, and was bewildered.” The word which the NRSV translates as “bewildered” can also be translated as “confused.” Indeed, it is the same word which appears in the LXX translation of Gen. 11:7, where God says, “Come, let us go down and confuse their language.” If Pentecost produces unity, it is not a simple, straightforward unity.

Pentecost is not simply the reversal of Babel. Before Babel, according to the story, there was unity of language. After Pentecost, according to the story, there was a multiplicity of languages. In Babel, God intervenes to cause confusion. In Pentecost, God’s intervention causes confusion among the crowd. In both stories, the flow of the text is from unity to diversity. At the beginning of the Babel episode, they all spoke one language, and could come together in a single project. At the end, they can no longer understand each other, and they have to go their separate ways. At the beginning of the Pentecost narrative, they “were all together in one place,” presumably speaking the same language. At the end, these same people are speaking a variety of languages, and they have caused confusion and even division among those who hear them.

II

We cannot say that until Pentecost, no work toward unity in the human family had been undertaken. There is a great deal of existing unity shown in this passage even before Pentecost occurs.

Judaism provided a unity. Through the effects of the Exile and less traumatic migrations, Diaspora Judaism had spread throughout the empire and beyond. Therefore Jerusalem—especially on feast days—had quite a cosmopolitan mix of Jews from the Mediterranean basin. According to the text, not only had Jews come to Jerusalem, but also proselytes had come with them.

Nor can we discount the effects of empire. Empires had forced the dispersion of the Jews in earlier centuries. Conquest by Alexander the Great had provided a *lingua franca*—Greek, in the eastern portion of the now Roman Empire. As one can see from the text, those who gathered around the nascent church on that first Pentecost did carry on conversations and were understood in some common language, even if it was not their native tongue.

Imperial power had imposed some unity—particularly on those who lived in cities, or who travelled or had business with people outside their immediate, smaller communities.

The Roman Empire provided relatively safe roads and made travel by land and sea safer than it had been. Commerce provided new links among different cultures, even though much of the commerce was of a colonial character, and the roads were created in order to move armies rapidly in case some of the conquered peoples began an uprising. Early Christian writers mention these commonalities as part of the reason for the incarnation occurring at the time it did. There was a *kairos* that was partly created by the Roman Empire.

Language, roads, commerce, travel: there were unities existing before Pentecost. Some attained at great human cost—imperial unities we might call them—but links nonetheless across the Babel that human sin had created. Sin can create division, and sin can also create unity.

God's purposes for human history include the ability of human beings to communicate with each other. Community is a divine goal, a community based on love. Human empires also demand some unity—otherwise it would be very difficult to govern. Yet human empires impose uniformity by means of power. There is little or no respect for those who have been conquered. Therefore God's purposes for unity cannot be added to the unity created by human empire, as though part of the job had been done, and all that was needed was an added touch of grace. They are unities based on radically differing principles.

III

It is a situation we all know. Even as we study the history of mission, it is clear that mission has frequently been connected with colonialism and imperialism. How are we to deal with this situation? Are we to reject the unity that worldwide mission has brought, because of its connection with colonialism? Are we to bless colonialism and imperialism, because of their connection with the unity we now have?

At this point, we must first of all put the issue of unity in its proper perspective. Unity is not simply an ecclesiastical project, something that the church does and seeks while the world goes its own way. Unity is the very purpose of God for all of creation. As the Epistle to the Ephesians puts it, Jesus Christ

“has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will, according to God's purpose which God set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in Christ (as under one head), things in heaven and things on earth.”

We, the church, as those who know that mystery of the cosmic ecumenical goal, are called to live out of it and to witness to it by our own unity. But meanwhile the God whose mystery it is continues to work for its fulfillment, and we must learn how to discern the signs of that work of God wherever they may take place.

In some mysterious way, God's purpose of unity was being worked out in the very fact that there were in Jerusalem “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia,” etc., etc., and in that those people, even apart from the miracle of Pentecost, were able to use some common language to say to each other: “What does this mean?”

This is not to say that we are to bless all the horrible, cruel, unjust events that bring

about this sort of imperial unity. The famous *pax romana* was wrought at the cost of much bloodshed and much injustice, and it is a terribly ecclesiocentric view of history to claim that all the wars and oppression connected with the Roman Empire were brought about by God simply so that Christian missionaries and evangelists could travel from land to land, and so that Paul's epistles could be safely carried from one corner of the empire to another.

If we look again at the story of Pentecost, we see that the Spirit uses, but also undercuts, the unity of Empire. Those who gathered were able to understand each other. No matter whether they did this in Aramaic or in Greek, their very ability to communicate was the result of a long history of conquests, in which their various languages, cultures, and traditions had been pushed aside as conquest led to empire, and empire to communication.

That is a story with which we are all familiar. When the All Africa Council of Churches meets, they must communicate in English and French. When a person from Latin America attempts to communicate with someone from China, they often must do so in English, a language that both have learned as a result of a long history of political, economic, and cultural empire-building.

Note, however, that in the text the Spirit undercuts the unity of empire. Empire leads to all these people being able to understand each other in a language that is not their own, whatever it might have been. But by the power of the Spirit, these people are able to hear, as they say, "each of us, in our own native language." I do not know if there was a Hebrew-only movement in Palestine, as there had been in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. I do not know if there was an Aramaic-only movement. I do know that among the cultured elites there was a Greek-only movement. And I certainly do know that, whatever attempts there might have been at imposing uniformity, the Spirit did undercut it, for all these various people, from different parts of the world, were made to hear, not in the language of empire, but "each in their own native language." In this, they did not reflect a monolithic culture of empire, but a diversity of native cultures.

If we then look back at the story of Babel, we see that the parallelism between these two stories are more complex than we thought at first. In Babel, God intervenes to confuse the unity of a rebellious humanity. In Pentecost, God's intervention confuses the unities that empire has built. What is new about Pentecost is not that they all speak the same tongue. They do not. What is new about Pentecost is that God blesses every language on earth as a means for divine revelation, and makes communication possible even while preserving the integrity of languages and cultures.

But that is not the whole story. The Holy Spirit also causes confusion among some who do not believe. As the text says: "others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'" How can this be? In the face of such a miracle, with all sorts of different people hearing each in their own native language, how can anyone be so dense not to see that this is a miracle?

The author does not tell us. But there is only one explanation I can imagine: Those who sneer do so because they do not see the miracle. They do not see the miracle, because to them there is nothing extraordinary happening. There is nothing extraordinary happening, because to them being able to understand what is being said is not unusual. All hear what is being said in their own native tongues. So do these mockers. But they don't see the miracle, precisely because they are natives. They are used to hearing everything in their own native tongue. They see all these people excited, and

all they can say is, “What’s the big deal?” In other words, they did not understand what was going on, precisely because they expected to understand.

The miracle that is taking place is that God is taking all these people, whose native tongues and native cultures make them outsiders, and bringing them inside, making them insiders. They, the Medes, the Elamites, and the Phrygians, can understand that something extraordinary is taking place. But those who are already insiders, those who expect to hear their own language, those who are already at home, those who expect to understand, can do nothing but sneer.

What could one of those natives, who did not perceive the miracle, what could they have done? They could have turned to their Cappadocian or their Egyptian neighbor, and asked them, “What is going on?” Perhaps then, through the witness of those who were not supposed to understand, such a person could have understood, and would not have sneered.

The implications for the discussion about Christianity and culture should be obvious. And we better beware, those of us who belong to cultures where we expect to understand, lest we fail to see what God is doing in our world. Perhaps, like those who could not see the miracle, we may need to turn to others, to others who are still astounded that the message is proclaimed in their own native tongue, and ask them to give us a glimpse of what is really going on.

IV

The direction of God’s action is seen in the Pentecost event. A new age had indeed dawned, but that does not mean that uniformity has been imposed. Unity was given and experienced even though diversity has remained.

There is much more here in this second chapter of Acts, however, than unity in the face of previous divisiveness. Look at the diversity that is assumed and maintained at Pentecost: They all hear in their own language: as has already been said, the variety has not been ended. In the passage from Joel that begins Peter’s sermon just after the description of Pentecost, we read:

“Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young shall see visions, and your old shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit.”

The diversity of age, gender, and social situation are mentioned, but these diversities are no longer a barrier for the gifts of the Spirit.

There are divisions and unities in the world before Pentecost. There is diversity as well as unity in the new creation Pentecost exhibits. Diversity may be good; divisiveness is not. Unity is good; uniformity, however, is questionable. The account of Pentecost shows all of these characteristics.

But as we face our own day—particularly in intercultural situations—how can we distinguish what is unity but not uniformity? How can differences be diversity but not divisive? Is it easy to tell? When I work for unity am I unwittingly stifling diversity? When I work for diversity am I causing division? It may not be easy to separate good and evil. Do we check motivation or results? If love and respect are not the basis of unity, can God’s purposes be served by it? Does the good that we would do lead to evil results in the midst of a world not yet totally transformed? Does the evil that some intend lead to good results they never anticipated? Empire and Pentecost are strange companions in Acts—even here at the beginning of the book.

The same ambiguity is to be found back in that strange story of Babel. The reason the people give for wishing to build a city and a tower was so that they would “make a name for [themselves]...otherwise we shall be scattered abroad on the face of the whole earth.” Their desire was to be united in order not to be scattered, and their means was to build their projects. Yet the judgment of God upon their work was precisely to scatter them abroad over the face of the earth. In what they had sought to accomplish they had failed. What they tried to avoid had happened.

How strange it is, that in the passage immediately following the story of Babel, we find the beginning of the Abraham narrative. To Abraham is given the promise that his name will be made great, and his descendants a mighty nation. In some ways, the real undoing of Babel is the covenant with Abraham. What the city and tower builders at Babel sought to accomplish for their own sake God granted to Abraham for the sake of the world.

The covenant would hold, though empires would rise and seek to impose their own unity by means of scattering the people of the promise. Yet Israel saw even in that scattering the continued work of God in judgment and return.

Here at Pentecost we come to a new point in the gathering process, built on that ancient covenant with Abraham, built also on the diversity created by their dispersion under various empires, and in the midst of the forced unities created by yet other empires. At Pentecost, the Spirit gathers those whom the Spirit will also disperse in preparation for a greater gathering.

Babel and empire. Pentecost and empire. God’s purposes and judgments in the midst of human empires. Somehow they meet in these passages, even as they meet in our encounters with one another. They cannot be easily untangled. But in faith, we must seek to discern their roles.