

Unity, Diversity, and the Holy Spirit

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-13

Brent A. Strawn
Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

“There the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there... scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.” (Gen 11:9)

“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.” (Acts 2:4)

The Diversity God Desires

The big question in the Old Testament lesson taken from Genesis 11 is: What’s so wrong with the tower of Babel that was, at best, probably no more than thirty stories tall? If God isn’t disturbed when we hit our cruising altitude of 35,000 feet, why is God so put off by this tower? Well, if you know something about biblical interpretation, it will come as no surprise to hear that there’s more than one opinion on this matter. Some readers think the problem with the tower was one of *pride*. The people wanted to build a tower with *its head in the heavens*, after all (v. 4a). That sounds arrogant, doesn’t it? Some interpreters have gone so far as to suggest that these folks actually wanted to storm heaven and wage war against God. But that seems like stretching things. The story doesn’t say as much, and even if that were the case, the story doesn’t seem to take that possibility very seriously. Quite the contrary, in fact, as verse 5 says that the LORD had to “come down”—evidently a *long way down*—to even see that great big mighty tower way, way down there. I guess it didn’t quite reach the heavens after all!

Other readers have noticed the detail of the humans *wanting to make a name* for themselves. That, too, seems to smack of pride, of *hybris*. Just next door, in Genesis 12, it is *God* who promises to make Abram’s name great; Abram doesn’t make such a name for himself, all by himself. In this light, the tower builders, again, look to be guilty of being excessively proud. But, only a bit later in the Old Testament, David earns a name for himself without coming under judgment (2 Sam 8:13). That means that making a name or having a great name isn’t necessarily a bad thing all by itself.

So, if there is pride in the tower, it isn’t too pronounced and shouldn’t be overdone, especially in the face of another issue that is equally if not more prominent: *fear*. “Come, let us build... and let us make a name... *otherwise we shall be scattered abroad* upon the face of the whole earth,” they said (Gen 11:4). There is anxiety in that statement, insecurity even. There’s strength in numbers, after all. It’d be better to hunker down and stick together. The world is a big scary place when you stop and think about it. Why not just ride it out here where we all speak the same language and the same words and where we are united—united in fear...and perhaps also pride, but really just a pride born of fear? Sticking together is much, much safer.

“But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower...,” Genesis says, and God was not pleased. Not because their energy was wasted. In fact, after surveying

the scene, God believes there will be no stopping these folks, and the LORD seems slightly concerned about that. This towering city, this fear-produced isolationism, is just the beginning of what they will accomplish. And so God puts an immediate stop to it—in the space of only a verse—confusing their language so they can no longer understand one another. Then their greatest fear comes to pass: the text emphasizes, not once but twice, that “the LORD scattered them abroad...over the face of all the earth” (vv. 8, 9).

That’s the story, but, still, what’s the problem? Is the Lord who has to “come down” to even see this grandly puny tower really and truly threatened by it or the humans who built it? Surely not! Then what? Is the Lord just mean-spirited, punishing people by realizing their worst nightmares? Before we jump to that conclusion, we need to recall what has come before this in the opening chapters of Genesis. Right from the start, you’ll remember, the Lord created humans to fill the earth (1:28; cf. 9:1) and to serve and preserve it (1:26; 2:5, 15). That is the creational purpose—the creational *command*—and it is threatened, directly disobeyed, by these people who prefer to hunker down and stick together rather than fill the earth and serve as the image of God, God’s representatives, in the world. But God resists their resistance to the commands of creation; their language is mixed up, and they end up scattered and dispersed throughout the earth.

Seen in this way, one might say that this story indicates that there is *a diversity that God wills* and *a unity that God does not will*.¹ Isolationist, balkanized unity that resists God’s creational purposes is divinely rejected. Seen in this light, these people are not guilty of hybris as much as *sloth*, not overstepping as much as *under-reaching*. Both types of sins are deadly. But make no mistake, God’s judgment here is lined with grace: in scattering the people, their fears are realized, yes, but they are also enabled and empowered to obey God’s creational command.

That there exists a diversity that God wills is an important word to hear, even and especially here, in Church. Not just here at this particular church, of course, but also beyond it. Here in the melting pot of the USA and in the global village, diversity is a reality and it is a *valued* reality. It is not equally valued everywhere, of course, not in all parts of the world or in all parts of the Church for that matter, but it is a valued entity nevertheless because cultural-linguistic diversity throughout creation is, according to Genesis, something that God wills. Not all humans are to be in one place, speaking one language, working on one project—not if that means they are resisting the will of God concerning the world. God’s will involves filling the earth and serving it for God. So, yes, there *is* a diversity God wills and *that* is the kind of diversity God wills.

But two things should be said about diversity. First, if we are honest, we have to admit that the diversity with which we are familiar isn’t always the kind that is rooted in the creational purposes of God. But it should be! I don’t know if you know this, but some people don’t like diversity. It sounds leftist or radical to them and, in some iterations, that may well be true so that such judgments are not simply alarmist. They are accurate. But those of us who listen to Genesis 11 and take it up as God’s address must assert in the face of those who fear diversity that there is, in fact, *a God-willed kind of diversity*. God’s kind of diversity cannot be simplistically dismissed by calling it “leftist” or “politically-correct” or some other term designed to scare people. God’s kind of diversity is actually part of the Gospel. If—and let this be underscored—if it

is the diversity God wills. And that's the rub.

The second thing that should be said about diversity is that it isn't easy to deal with. On the contrary, it is often very difficult to deal with. Those folks in Genesis 11 were fine one minute, and the next minute they couldn't understand a single thing other people were saying to them. And then they were scattered, just as they feared. Diversity may be something God wills, but that doesn't mean it is easy to handle. God's will seldom is. So take heart if in your church or in some other corner of your world, you have encountered diversity not simply as something to celebrate but also (or instead!) as a very real problem to negotiate. Join the club. It's a lot harder to get things done when everyone is speaking a different language and they're scattered all over the map. (As a professor, that sounds exactly like a faculty meeting to me!) Remember: the people in the story never finished that tower. It's just a lot harder to get anything done. Maybe we should call that the down side to diversity, even to the diversity God wills.

The Unity God Wills (and the Spirit Gives)

Now if there is a diversity that God wills and a unity God does not will, perhaps the converse is also true: could there be a diversity that God does not will and a unity that God does?² That brings us to the New Testament lesson from Acts chapter 2.

It seems quite clear that what happens on the day of Pentecost is nothing less than an undoing of Genesis 11. Gathered in Jerusalem are people from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5), and suddenly all of them, no matter their nationality, hear those disciples with their thick Galilean accents (cf. Matt 26:73) speaking perfectly the native tongues of folks the world over: Parthians, Medes, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Romans, you name it!

This text about the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost and the close connections between it and Genesis 11 suggest that, yes, alongside the diversity that God desires, there is also a unity God wills. In Acts, it is a unity marked not by pride-tinged, fear-inspired building projects, but by *testimony*: "We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" the listeners said (2:11). "What does it mean?" they asked.

Well it *doesn't* mean that the diversity established in Genesis 11 is suddenly done away with. It isn't that the disciples all started speaking some proto-language that existed prior to the mix-up at Babel. No, the Spirit gave them ability to speak *within* all those diverse languages so as to speak *about* God's wondrous acts (2:4, 11) and as Peter proceeds to do, in order to *preach the Gospel* (2:14-36). So yes, there *is* a unity God wills. And it too, no less than the diversity God wills, is connected to the redemptive purposes of God.

But two things should be said about unity. First, if we are honest, we have to admit that the unity with which we are familiar isn't always the kind that is rooted in God's redemptive purposes. But it should be! Instead, the unities that we know of often seem nothing more than thinly veiled tower of Babel projects. They are *unities*—and I use the plural form here quite intentionally and ironically—they are unities that are actually masks for parochial isolationism, a sticking together at all costs, resisting all else, including at times the very diversity God wills. Those kinds of unities are the kind that marked Babel. They are not the kind of unity God wills, however. The LORD rejects and scatters those types of unities.

The second thing that should be said about unity—real unity, of the sort God desires—is that it is difficult to achieve. *Really* difficult to achieve. And, even when it is achieved, Scripture tells us that it won't always be understood. Some people present at Pentecost sneered; they didn't think the disciples were unified in the Spirit, but drunk, smashed out of their gourds.

Grieving Our Disunity, Working Toward Unity

And who could blame them? A unity willed by God, rooted in God's redemptive purposes, sounds great, but honestly, sometimes—maybe even a lot of the time—it seems like a pipe dream if not an alcohol-induced hallucination. Here and now, right before our eyes, things seem far more diverse, and not always helpfully so—not always of the kind of diversity God wills, and not always easy or manageable. Here and now, right before our eyes, unity is hard to believe in, let alone achieve. I mean really, what unity: democrats and republicans? What unity, progressives and conservatives, let alone “fundamentalists” and “liberals”? What unity: Catholics and Protestants? Calvinists and Wesleyans? What unity here, in the South, with its enduring legacy of racism? What unity on Sunday, the most segregated day of the week? What unity, with so many denominations poised to fracture?

Yes, on most days, unity is hard to believe in, let alone achieve. But listen to this: in Acts 2, the unity that is present is *not* a unity that is *achieved*. It is a unity that is *given*. It is not only desired by God, but it is *provided* by the Spirit. The kind of unity that God wills is *granted* by God. Scripture is full of statements to that effect, replete with exhortations for all of us to realize the unity that God has already established. Here are two famous ones: from Galatians 3, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28; cf. Eph 2:14), and from Ephesians 4, “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received....Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3; cf. 4:13; 1 Peter 3:8; also Ps 133:1; Rom 15:5-6). Listen to Galatians: “All of you *are* one in Christ Jesus.” And also to Ephesians: “*Make every effort* to keep the unity of the Spirit.” We *are* one, you see, but we *must work* at keeping it so.

Maybe at those times when we aren't one, it is because we've fallen short of making every effort to be what we are in Christ. Maybe when we aren't one, instead of giving up on the unity that God desires and provides—maybe instead of refusing to believe in that unity when we don't experience it—maybe we ought, instead, to grieve over it. Grieve that we don't have it, grieve that we aren't yet one. Worry about it, wonder about it, and redouble—make that re-triple—our efforts, making *every* effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. What would that look like if it happened? Can you imagine what might happen? At Pentecost, about three thousand were added to their number in a single day (Acts 2:41). According to Jesus, all people, everyone, everywhere, will know we were his disciples by our love for each other (John 13:35).

“You are all one in Christ Jesus.” That's the fact. In all our amazingly rich, variegated, God-willed diversity, nevertheless also and indelibly one. So, then, even now, make every effort to become what you already are: one. *In Christ. One.* By, with, in, under, and through the power of the Holy Spirit. It won't be easy, but who knows? With God, all things are possible.

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.

Notes

1 For this language, I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation)*, Atlanta: John Knox, 1986).

2 Ibid.