

Genesis 11: 1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. <sup>2</sup> And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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." <sup>5</sup> The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. <sup>6</sup> And the Lord 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. <sup>7</sup> Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." <sup>8</sup> So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. <sup>9</sup> Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. <sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

<sup>14</sup> But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup> Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup> No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

<sup>17</sup> 'In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

<sup>18</sup> Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

<sup>19</sup> And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below,  
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

<sup>20</sup> The sun shall be turned to darkness  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

<sup>21</sup> Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'

May 15, 2016  
Pentecost Sunday

## The Gospel in an Age of Babel

Genesis 11:1-9

Acts 2:1-21

This 3,000-year-old story we call the Tower of Babel is as new as this morning's headlines. A group of people wants to build the world's first skyscraper, and instead of uniting them, they end up scattered across the face of the earth. When God decides this project isn't going to happen, he says their language will be confused so that they will not *understand* each other. I discovered this week that the word for "understand" literally means to *listen to* one another. The breakdown in communication is not so much in the speaking as in the hearing, the listening, the understanding. Once they stop listening to one another, they are divided; scattered across the face of the earth.

And it has been that way ever since. We continue to be scattered and divided even as we live in the same community; the same state; the same nation. Even when we all speak English, we do not understand each other - we do not *hear* each other, we stop listening to each other, and so division abounds.

Sociologists tell us that we create bubbles of similarity for ourselves, and inside our bubbles we insulate ourselves from opinions, perspectives, beliefs and cultures that are different from what we want to hear. We follow social media and read blogs we agree with, watch only one kind of news channel, listen to talk radio that agrees with our already-formed opinions, and read books that reinforce those same opinions. And, most of all, our friends tend to be people who are mostly like us. If you are liberal, chances are, most of your friends are liberal. If you are middle-class, so are your friends. If you are white...well, you get the idea.

The people of Babel wanted to remain insulated, with one language, one identity, one city. We still have that inclination. We still want to relate to people who speak our language, and no one in America can ignore the fact that our language is becoming more and more polarizing all the time. We speak a language of polarity in which we push to the opposite extreme those who disagree with us.

This polarizing speech is coming from folks on both ends of nearly every spectrum you can name. According to a survey reported in the Washington Post college campuses are now more openly hostile to the speech of those with whom students disagree than ever before. Almost three out of four college freshmen say that colleges should prohibit extreme speech on campus, which is almost twice as many as in 1967. And the definition of "extreme" means speakers with whom they disagree. Among those who have been forced to withdraw from campus speaking engagements in recent years simply because students did not want to hear their literal "speech" are former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice and Narendra Modi, who is now the prime minister of India.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays you almost cannot say the word "wall" without sounding political, but, the fact is that we are all of us about building walls to keep out the people we don't agree with – it is far easier than expending the energy necessary to listen to them and understand what they are trying to say.

We live in the land of Babel, scattered and divided by the refusal to listen to one another; by the increasing need to polarize instead of finding common ground. And this is as true in the church, tragically, as it is everywhere else. It isn't that we need to agree with each other on everything; the problem is that we push out of our little bubble anyone with whom we disagree, and we refuse to listen to them.

Pentecost is the antidote to Babel. It is the event that begins to draw people back together, in spite of the multitude of languages that they speak. When the disciples were in the upper room and that great Spirit-wind began to blow, they began to preach the gospel, which is the one great unifying language of our world. People who spoke nearly every known language understood what was being said, and 3,000 people joined together as followers of Jesus that one day. The Gospel of Jesus Christ unites people for two reasons: first, because it is the Gospel of love; second, because it is fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

John 3:16 – *God so loved the world that he gave his only son...*

1 John 3 – six times the phrase is repeated: *love one another*

Luke 6, Jesus says, *Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you*

Romans 5 – *God proves his love for us in that while we were...[God's] enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/liberal-but-not-tolerant-on-the-nations-college-campuses/2016/02/11/0f79e8e8-d101-11e5-88cd-753e80cd29ad\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/liberal-but-not-tolerant-on-the-nations-college-campuses/2016/02/11/0f79e8e8-d101-11e5-88cd-753e80cd29ad_story.html)

The Gospel of Jesus Christ that the disciples preached on Pentecost Sunday is the gospel of love...God loved us so much that even while we were his enemies the greatest sacrifice of all was made to reconcile us to himself; God calls us to love one another, and not just those who are in our little bubbles of similarity, but the entire world, even our enemies who hate us. And when this gospel is proclaimed in our speech and our actions, reconciliation begins.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the gospel of love fueled by the power of the Holy Spirit. The disciples were not required to start proclaiming this message on their own. Jesus told them to wait until they had received the Holy Spirit, and then they could begin to preach this message. That's good news! We don't have to try to find all the right words on our own. Jesus said, "I will not leave you alone. I will ask my Father and he will send the Spirit to be with you, to empower you to do these things – and greater things will you do than I did!"

That Spirit is here. We do not have to try to burst these bubbles of similarity on our own. But here is the third part of the Pentecost event that we must also incorporate into our lives. We must begin to speak the language of love; we must remember that we are not alone in doing so. God's Spirit will give us the power to do what we cannot do on our own. But, third, the Pentecost wind pushed the disciples out into the streets, into the world to proclaim their message of love.

Listen, friends, a church that is not focused on the world out there is not a church that has allowed the Spirit to blow through it. A church that focuses only on its own bubble, on its own people, on its own theology, preserving itself against all the other bubbles of this Babel world – that church will die, and it should, because it isn't the church of Jesus Christ who sent his followers into the world to make disciples of all nations. A church that isn't mission-oriented isn't the church of the Holy Spirit who drove those disciples out into the streets with the message of the saving love of God in Jesus Christ.

There is a Babel world out there that is destroying itself because it refuses to listen to and understand those who do not share the same bubble of beliefs and opinions and preferences.

We have the antidote to the Babel world in which we live. But it requires us to do three things: 1. Speak God's language – the language of love, in both our words and our actions. 2. Be open to and trust the power of the Holy Spirit. And 3. Move out of our comfort zones, our own bubbles and go into the streets, the world, offering a different way, a different word.

One of my spiritual heroes of our day is a man named Tony Campolo. I've mentioned one of his sermons many times: *It's Friday but Sunday's Coming*. Another of my favorites from him is a sermon called *Titles or Testimonies* he preached to a group of college graduates in which he said to them:

*You all are going to die. When they stand at your graveside, will they list all of the titles you earned in your life? Or will they give testimonies of how you introduced them to Jesus; how you helped them to surrender to the Holy Spirit? How you encouraged them to be Jesus in the world today? I wish both titles and testimonies through your life, but, if you have to make a choice, go for the testimonies.*<sup>2</sup>

Strong on evangelicalism, the authority of Scripture, bringing the Gospel to the world, a few years ago he wrote a book called, *We Have Met the Enemy, and They are Partly Right*. He wrote it to his conservative evangelical brothers and sisters, saying that the Social Gospel of the more liberal wing of the Christian church is also a message that needs to be preached and acted out. His conservative friends mostly disowned him because he was trying to burst bubbles and combine the two theologies. But he was right. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the authority of scripture and the need to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior...AND it is about lifting up the oppressed and speaking truth to power. It is about bursting our bubbles of insulation and reconciling by listening, hearing, understanding, as well as preaching the Good News.

The Babel world needs more desperately than ever one unifying language. And we have that language. The question is whether we will leave the bubble of our own little upper rooms to share this new language to this Babel world? I truly believe there is no greater need in the world than this: the unifying language of love in Jesus Christ. Go...speak the language you have been taught. Speak it to a world that desperately needs to learn this new language of love. And remember, you will not be alone. The Spirit of Jesus Christ himself will be with you.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.tonycampolo.org](http://www.tonycampolo.org)