



A Tower that Reaches Heaven

In the name of him who today sends us his Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Old Testament reading is the familiar *and fairly strange* account of the ambitious building project at Babel on the plain of Shinar. It is, on the surface, an explanation for the origin of the various languages and races of mankind. It also explains how it happened that people were scattered geographically all over the face of the globe. Though anthropologists and many modern theologians dismiss the story as a myth, we who hold the Word of God to be absolutely true take the story at face value—but we have to admit that it raises a number of perplexing questions.

Why, we might ask, does the Lord seem to be so opposed to people building cities and towers? We do it all the time today, and he doesn't seem to mind. At least, I haven't heard of him overtly interfering with any major construction projects lately. Have you? Besides that, it's hard for us to imagine the Lord saying, "Oh no! What's the world coming to? Look! People are cooperating and working together to achieve a common goal! I can't allow *that* to happen!" You'd think that the Lord would approve of people working together, wouldn't you? Doesn't the Lord want us all to get along? Doesn't he want us to be united? And if so, why then did he intervene to divide and fragment us into subgroups by language, race, and culture? Especially when you consider how much turmoil and conflict have taken place across these divisions in human history, conflict that has resulted in bloodshed and atrocity beyond description, and has caused terrible damage to civilization. Can you imagine where the human race might be right now had God not thrown this wrench into the development of mankind? What wonderful things we might have accomplished by now? What untold potential we might have fulfilled? Can you imagine?

Well, the Lord God could; and that's exactly why he threw the wrench into the works. It was precisely to slow our development and to cap our potential that he interfered—not because he gets some kind of twisted pleasure in seeing us struggle in confusion, but because he loves us. You see, God knows that the true source of all our problems is the wicked spirit in each one of us. The divisive problem with mankind is internal, in the heart, not in externals like language and race. The effect of confusing the languages was to restrain our potential—not for good, because there isn't any there; but rather for evil because that's where our potential is truly unlimited. Witness the fact that it was the last century, the one in which we achieved fantastic advances in science, technology, medicine, and engineering – the century in which we put people on the moon – that we also murdered more people on earth than in all the preceding centuries combined. The more power and capability we have at our disposal, the more we will use it for evil. Had God not intervened at Babel to slow our "progress", it's likely that the human race would not even have survived until now.

But still we labor under the delusion that somehow we are getting better over time. I call it "*Star Trek* theology". It's a belief in the inherent goodness of mankind and our ultimate ability to overcome evil all on our own. It's out there somewhere in the 23rd century, when warping around the cosmos the crew of the *Enterprise* encounters some planet where the backward inhabitants still practice slavery, or they engage in racism, or they fight over material things like land and resources. It's then that one of the crewmembers turns to another and says, "I once read that we used to have problems like that on Earth." The very thought of such primitive barbarism causes their skin to crawl. They've grown to be so much better than that. And yet,

then in the very next adventure, the same crewmembers will be blasting away with phasers and photon torpedoes at some race of hated aliens over something like, oh, I don't know, maybe mere material things like land and resources. I don't suppose the inconsistency of *Star Trek* theology ever occurred to the show's writers.

But then maybe it's okay if the enemy is not human, because after all, it's within *mankind* that true nobility and virtue are to be found—at least according to the fantasy to which we all cling to some degree: the idea that we are getting better over time, and that somehow, when we have achieved enough, we will have come of age. That really was what the tower of Babel was all about. “Let's get to work. Let's make bricks. Let's put them together to achieve a name—*glory* for ourselves—and let it reach all the way up into the heavens! Let God see what we have done! Boy, won't he be impressed when he discovers we've made ourselves his neighbors up there?”

As silly as it sounds to think that it would be possible to build a tower that reached to heaven, it would be a mistake to think that people are not doing the same thing today. No, we're not building our towers out of bricks of clay anymore; we are using other kinds of bricks. What are they? They are the achievements that we're proud of. Each brick in your tower is something that you have done that you imagine moves you just a little bit closer to the top. And each person has his or her own. For some it may be material possessions and wealth: how much you have, how nice a house and car, and how much money's tucked away. For some it may be accomplishments in your field of study or work. For others it may be how good you've been to your neighbors: all those times someone needed a hand and you were right there to help out. For us Christians it may be the many ways we have supported and contributed toward the cause of the church – the work we've done as well as certain personal acts of piety such as prayers, private devotions, and what not. What are your bricks made of? Whatever they are, we take them and stack them up, sometimes in our own little pile (“Hey, look at me!”) and sometimes we stack them together to build a group tower (“Look at what we've done!”), all to climb up and stand on in order to make a name for ourselves thinking that God is going to take notice of what we have done.

At Babel, we read that the Lord did indeed come down to see what people were up to. And I think it's very telling the way the story is told: that God who is everywhere in creation is described as having to stoop down to see it—as if he must strain to see the tower that's supposed to reach to heaven. It gives us an idea about just how puny and ridiculous to him is this monument that appears so massive and impressive to its builders. So it is with all the towers that we build of the bricks of human achievement.

And I want to stress that the problem is not with the towers of achievement themselves, but rather with the spirit within us that leads us to build them in the first place. It is a spirit of sinful pride that imagines itself worthy of God's recognition and reward. It is a prideful spirit that is inherently turned inward on itself. It's focus is “me” and “me alone”. It's extremely selfish and boastful. It's always comparing its accomplishments to the things done by others, finding reason to praise its own work, and finding fault with the work of others. It is, as a consequence, in its deepest core all alone and separated from everyone else. Though at some external level we may cooperate to achieve common goals, in our innermost beings we don't really get along with others or understand them because in these tower building projects it is ultimately every man for himself.

At Babel, God used a confusion of tongues to match the physical reality with the already existent spiritual reality. He changed our languages to show the truth that we are spiritually

fragmented, divided, and unable to properly communicate, interact, or cooperate with others. That is the condition of fallen man, no matter how hard we try to pretend otherwise; and it is why all of our achievements fall far short of the glory we think they deserve. God's intervention at Babel pulled the plug on the people's arrogant boasting. It stopped the work there. And we can thank the Lord that it had the effect of slowing the ever-deteriorating evil course of history. It was an act of mercy to save us from destroying ourselves.

Because now, from our perspective many thousand years later, we have seen what kinds of evil the human spirit is capable of when it has the power to act as it wishes. The most notable and consistent theme in human history is our lack of humanity. No matter how much we achieve or how high we build, we cannot escape the evil within us. That's why our towers will never reach to heaven. They will always come up short. Sooner or later work grinds to a halt because of conflict and confusion, and like the tower at Babel, they erode away into the dust from which they were raised.

But today we celebrate God's solution to the problem of the sinful spirit in each one of us. We read in the second chapter of Acts: *When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language.*

On the day of Pentecost we see God undoing the division of people and the confusion of their tongues. He does it by giving each one some of his own Holy Spirit. The effect is to unite people spiritually: on the inside, where it really matters; and then as a result, they are given the ability to overcome external differences like language.

There's a message here: the Lord God wants us to see that it is now he who is building a city with a tower that reaches up and touches heaven. At its foundation is the work of Jesus Christ: his death to atone for all the evil we have done, and his resurrection to give us life. That's a foundation of solid rock. And the materials he uses to build on that foundation are not the crumbly clay bricks of human achievements, but as we sang in the last hymn, it is we ourselves who are the living stones of God's temple-tower. And the cement that he uses to bind us firmly together is love. It's the love he has for us in Christ Jesus that fills us and overflows to fill the gaps that are between us.

And so it is that we read that after the Spirit was poured out on the believers, they were all together, learning, sharing, breaking bread, and worshipping as a single unit. They were given the common speech of God's Word and Truth that are the same in no matter what language they are spoken. Coming together and confessing their sins, they all received forgiveness in Christ, and all of them were baptized into his name: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and all were joined together into a single building in which lives the one Spirit of the living God.

In your baptism, you too were filled with the Spirit and joined to that tower that reaches to heaven. And today, Pentecost, the Lord calls you to remember that. He bids each one of us to leave off building our individual towers of pride and achievement, and to focus instead on becoming more and more an integral part of his project. To this end, may he bring us to

repentance, continue to give us his Word and Sacrament, and give us the grace to pray, “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your love.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!