

## **“CREATING CHAOS OR COMMUNITY”**

**Genesis 11:1-9**

**Acts 2:1-12**

Lou Holtz, former football coach at the University of Notre Dame for ten year, told a story about one day he and a couple of his coaches are chatting in his office. Coach Holtz asks his staff if it is important for them to be well known. The line coach speaks first and confesses that he would like to be easily recognized. He shares his fantasy of walking into the oval office and having the president greet him by name with a hardy handshake and invite him to sit down, because the president wants the line coach’s advice on a few problems facing the country. Another coach chimes in and agrees he too would like to be well enough known that he would be easily recognized. He shares his fantasy of attending a game at Dodger Stadium and having Tommy Lasorda, the Dodger’s manager at the time, recognize him sitting in the stands. Lasorda would call his name, indicating it is good to see him and invites him to sit next to him in the dugout so he can help the manager call the game. The coaches then turn to Lou Holtz and asks if it is important for him to be well known. The head coach at the noted Catholic university replies by sharing his fantasy. He dreams of the Pope inviting him to the Vatican for a personal audience and then having the Pope invite him to take a ride around St. Peter’s Square in his Popemobile. He dreams of riding through the multitude of religious pilgrims and overhearing one woman say to her friend, *“Who is that riding with Coach Holtz?”*

Thinking too highly of oneself—wanting to be recognized by and before others—is a temptation which seemingly is a part of our human nature. In the opening chapters of Genesis, we find accounts of the sins of ancient persons. For instance, the first man and woman were forced to leave the Garden of Eden because they disobediently ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which would have given them the same knowledge as God; Cain killed Abel as an act of jealousy; the sinful acts of persons which so disappointed God that he was ready to destroy humanity with a great flood. In each case persons were putting

themselves on the same level or above God. The original imagery of humankind we find in the scriptures is pretty deplorable.

We see this same characteristic in the story we are considering from Genesis which is the final story in what is known as the primeval history portion of the Bible; in other words, recounting the earliest ages of human history. In my understanding, these ancient accounts are not so much about specific persons with names like Adam, Eve, Cain and Noah, but they give us a description of the nature of human beings which persists to the present day and is found in you and me. The story we are looking at from the eleventh chapter of Genesis records how these ancient people settled several thousand years before Christ in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. This is modern-day Iraq. Babylon was the largest of several cities located along these two rivers. The people decided to build a great city, complete with a great tower which would reach into the sky to God. Commentators suggest the proposed tower was likely a “*ziggurat*,” which was the name given to a kind of tower in that region which was in the shape of a stair-step pyramid with each story smaller than the one below it.

While we at first might consider building a structure to God—such as any place of worship, including a great cathedral—a commendable task, the scripture account suggests God is not pleased with their efforts. The reason for God’s displeasure has to do with their motive for building the tower. A careful reading of the scripture suggests the people’s motive for building the tower is not to glorify God, but to “*make a name for themselves*.” While they are building a tower to heaven, there is no evidence they are doing so to serve God, but rather to serve their own selfish advancement. Yes, their motive encompassed the sin of pride.

In his helpful book entitled Mere Christianity, the British author C. S. Lewis, suggests there is one vice of which no one in the world is free, which everyone loathes when present in others and which hardly any person ever recognizes in themselves. Persons will acknowledge that they are guilty of having a bad temper, or drinking too much, or sexual immorality, or being greedy, but no one ever confesses the sin of pride. Augustine considered it basic to other sins.

The church fathers listed pride as one of the so-called “*seven deadly sins*.” C. S. Lewis suggests other sins are “*mere fleabites*” in comparison to pride.

Noting the motivation for the Babylonians in building the tower, God decides to confuse their efforts by causing them to speak different languages. This means the workers cannot work together because they cannot understand one another. The foreman cannot give directions to the laborers. One cannot shout out a warning of danger. Soon their building project has to be abandoned and they wander off in different directions. This structure referred to in the eleventh chapter of Genesis is known as the “*Tower of Babel*.” The word “*babel*” is Hebrew for “*gate of God*,” although it sounds like the Hebrew word which means “*confusion*,” and that is the way we generally use this term today. For instance, we speak of a person “*babbling*” who is rambling on while making little or no sense. Or maybe we use the term to refer to a baby who is making incoherent sounds. What is important to note about this Genesis story is the effect of pride—or an arrogant attitude of giving oneself too much importance. Chaos is the result. A total breakdown of community follows.

The eleventh chapter of Genesis describes pride as being a characteristic at the core of our human nature—that is, putting ourselves on an equal basis with God and considering ourselves superior to others. So, what is the corrective to this sin? What is an alternative to the chaos resulting from our prideful actions? Some commentators point to the answer being found in the Pentecost story recorded in the second chapter of Acts. This scripture recounts that Jesus’ followers are assembled in a room in Jerusalem fifty days following the first Easter. They are there to observe the Jewish festival of Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks. It is one of the lesser important Jewish festivals and is celebrated at the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. One can get a sense of the chaotic nature of the scene in that persons from many different nations have assembled, some coming from as far away as Crete and Arabia. The Acts account lists fourteen different countries represented. Persons in the crowd speak many different languages.

Then something very unexpected occurs. The spirit of God comes upon the people. This phenomenon is described as sounding like a strong wind blowing and appears like tongues of fire which touch each person. The scripture indicates being filled with the Holy Spirit finds expression in persons speaking in tongues. In the twenty-first century we use this term, “*speaking in tongues*” or “*glossolalia*,” in referring to a person speaking in a strange or unintelligible language. The apostle Paul names such an experience as a gift of the spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:10) Interestingly, a careful reading of the Acts account indicates this gift of the spirit had a different effect on the first Pentecost participants. Instead of confusing communication by speaking in an unfamiliar language, on that occasion those who normally could not understand one another because they spoke in different languages were able to comprehend despite the language barriers. This gift of understanding did not diminish the diversity found in that great crowd. They were still Medes, Persian and Elamites. They were not reduced to a vague generality without past and place. But a sense of communication, despite their differences, was found. Thus we see the Pentecost account of the Holy Spirit coming upon the people being the reverse of the Babel story. In the Genesis account we see how a prideful attitude—thinking one is better than others and even capable of attaining equality with the divine—leads to division between persons. On the other hand, the Acts Pentecost story notes how the power of God’s Holy Spirit results in community being attained.

Clayton Schmit, Lutheran pastor and seminary provost, (Pulpit Resource, June 4, 2006) recounts that in making pastoral rounds he would often visit an elderly woman in a nursing home who was originally from Russia. She spoke virtually no English and he spoke absolutely no Russian. When he first visited her he tried to indicate who he was by showing her his Bible and his kit used to give communion to the homebound. Rev. Schmit could not converse with her in any usual sense but she seemed to graciously put up with his babbling in English. The pastor could see by the warmth of her smile and the way she stroked his hand that she was grateful for his visits. Not much was exchanged between them in the way of shared information, although he would have loved to have learned more about her life in Russia and her Orthodox faith. Yet there

were moments of clear communication, especially when they entered into the communion liturgy. Suddenly all confusion and miscommunication fell away as they entered into the language of the church. In reciting the Lord's Prayer together, their English and Russian blended in perfect unison. When they shared the body and blood of Christ, no words were needed. Yes, there was a fifty year difference in their ages. For most of their lives they would have been considered political enemies. But neither age, nor language, nor ideology divided them at those moments when the Holy Spirit drew them together in communion with one another and with Christ.

The litmus test of God's presence is a sense of community which embraces our differences. Yes, there are differences among us. We are liberal and conservative, affluent and poor, Republican and Democrat, young and old, employer and employee, straight and gay, Caucasian and minority races. **The chaos which results from our prideful attitude as seen in the Genesis Babel story can be changed to a sense of community when the Holy Spirit enters our lives as it did in the Acts Pentecost story.**

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