

The Communion of the Holy Spirit

sermon digest

May 31, 2009

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-8

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One of the few Trinitarian statements in the New Testament is Paul's final blessing at the close of 2 Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." He characterized and personified three Christian experiences of God as *grace*, *love*, and *communion*—the work of Jesus, God, and Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God is identified with *koinonia*, communion, community. The Greek spoken by people on the street in the first century was called *koine*, the common language. Koine Greek was the chosen dialect of early Christians in the New Testament. From the beginning, Christians were seeking a common denominator among the peoples of the earth, common language to communicate the gospel. The Spirit of God overcomes barriers of culture and language to bring people together. The communion revolution happened at Pentecost. The walls of hostility between peoples of the world began to crack, the foundations moved, and the will of God to overcome barriers of community became the mission of the church.

Two stories emerged together in early Christianity to identify the basic problem with humanity and the action of God to save the world, the story of Babel and the story of Christian Pentecost. One associated conflict among the nations with the diversity of human culture and language. The other identified God with overcoming the barriers of language and culture to bring a new age of understanding.

Misunderstanding is basic to human conflict. Babel is about the break down of communication, the diversification of human culture, language, and religion. Babel is an ancient etiology, a story to explain a common landmark or fact. The story answers the child's question, "Why is the world confused by a variety of languages?" while it responds to the adult observance of prehistoric monuments in the Persian desert. The Ziggurats were pyramid-shaped structures in the Persian desert probably related to the religion of an earlier civilization. Then as now they stimulated wonder about the ancient world and mythology that explained their existence. Hatred of Babylon and curiosity about the Persian Ziggurats that dotted the landscape of the Jewish exile were a part of the unwritten agenda along with the universal fact of human arrogance.

Recently Old Testament scholar Theodore Hiebert has challenged the common understanding attributing to God the confusion of human language and culture in order to prevent the construction of Empire. ("Is the Tower of Babel Wobbling?" *Christian Century*, August 7, 2007, p. 11-12) He insists that the story is about the "city" more than the "tower" of Babel, that the focus is on the "mixing" of language rather than the more sinister "confusion" of language, and that the story is not about God's punishment on human unity. The story stands in the twilight zone of early history and belongs more to mythology than to factual history. It seems that Hiebert with some support from Walter Brueggemann is concerned to redeem the image of God from the distortions of tradition. The story is about the resistance of a people to be dispersed throughout the world. It follows on the heels of Noah and the flood and assumes a family connection to all survivors. But, rather than punishment for arrogance and divine judgment on human Empire, the mixture of language is a positive move toward cultural diversity and human expansion.

Whether connected to the story of Babel or not, the fear of Empire is a significant dimension of the Jewish understanding of what's wrong with the world. Following the settlement of Canaan and the age of the Judges, the demand for a monarch leads to the anointing of Saul, an act of God to be sure, but also an institution subject to human corruption. So the Jews learned to despise their own attempts at Empire in the experienced tyranny of Persia, Greece, and Rome. The praise for human unity always calls for an element of exception and caution. The forced uniformity of a monarch is less than good.

Karl Barth observed that the sin of Babel was neither in the search for unity nor the ambition to bridge the gap between heaven and earth. The problem was in the objective: "let us make a name for ourselves." It was a denial of the need for God, a rejection of grace. Thus, the fundamental evil in this world is the narrow mentality which allows one people to exclude another. Yet, elitism, racism, nationalism, and bigotry are parasites that have always seemed to attach themselves to the children of God like fleas on a dog. Diversity of language and culture is not in itself the root of evil, but the sinister claim for superiority of one dimension of humanity over another is the root of all evil. Poet Laureate Carl Sandberg was asked by a reporter, "What is the worst word in the English language?" He replied without hesitation, "exclusive." The evil is in the claim of one person or group of the right to shut out all others who are different.

Understanding is the foundation of communion. The only certainty here is that barriers to understanding becomes walls of spiritual segregation. Within the sound and fury of a violent wind, Christian Pentecost is about understanding. The miracle here was not in the wind or the tongues, "as of fire." The miracle was in the hearing. The international community in Jerusalem for the festivity of Jewish Pentecost were able to hear in different languages the message of the Apostles. The diversity of language and culture remained the same. No one established a common language and passed a law that required all residents to speak the same. God was overcoming the barriers to understanding to bring to birth his new people.

On a trip through South America, I gained the acquaintance of a missionary in Lima, Peru, Elbert Smithen. We immediately found common ground. We were Texans and graduates of Baylor. I asked Elbert about where he learned his Spanish and was

surprised to learn that he had grown up in a South Texas community with numerous Latinos. The Spanish language of the Mexican residents was as natural to Elbert as English, and his ability to communicate led to his calling to serve with the people of Peru. I later read of two approaches to doing missions that have both been employed in Christian history. One is to bring people together in one language and culture by imposing the language and culture of the missionary upon the people. The other is to accept the diversity of language and culture placing the burden of communication on the one who initiates the new community, the missionary. Please note that the center of understanding at Pentecost was not enforced linguistic or cultural uniformity. The people were enabled to hear in their own language and culture.

Bill was a Pentecostal Christian, clergy from the Assembly of God, and a fellow graduate student in my seminary. Bill was “charismatic”; he spoke in tongues. He believed that the miracle of tongues is a common language that is miraculously given by God. I took issue with him when he called the miracle of Pentecost a miracle of a common language that everyone could understand. That is what he believed happened whenever people “spoke in tongues.” I do not believe that the Spirit was imposing a common language at Pentecost any more than an enforced common language is imposed at the U.N. in New York. The miracle is a spiritual unity that defies explanation.

After our son’s family returned to the US from study in Japan to enter Keith’s medical residency in Portland, Oregon, we encountered a language barrier with our granddaughter. As a one-year-old Nina was only comfortable with Japanese, and her grandparents seemed to her to be from another planet. Somehow she knew that we were family in spite of our language limitations. We had our first connection when we arrived home from the long flight from Japan and petted the dog together. Later she would bring us story books in English that were called, “Daddy’s books,” for us to read. We were lacking in communication but not in communion. There was a spiritual connection in spite of the language barrier. I wonder if that is not the best description of what was happening at Pentecost.

When the Spirit of God moves among a people, they form community and experience communion. It began with the church. Jewish Christians crossed boundaries between Jew and Gentile to discover the new community of God that transcends all barriers. Paul was not present at Pentecost. He began as an enemy of this new movement, but he came to a new understanding of what God was about in the world and experienced the communion of the Spirit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23)