

Whose Kingdom Are We Building, Anyway?

Today's Old Testament Scripture is Genesis 11:1-9. Nimrod led in the building of the city of Babylon, which became representative of all rebellion against the Lord God. (Ancient Babylon, located in Mesopotamia is modern day Iraq.) Following the building of this tower and God's dispersion as he confuses the language, civilization scatters to form the various subgroups in societies of mankind. Our text for today looks in on the ancient world in rebellion against God, building a wrong kind of kingdom.

Follow as I read Genesis 11:1-9:

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

Even after the judgment of the Flood, the sinful nature of humankind continued to assert itself as a primeval civilization. The building of the tower of Babel was a social project undertaking apart from God, in independence from him. Just as the historic account of the Fall of Adam and Eve has become our story individually, so the story of the Tower of Babel has become the story of successive generations. Throughout history humankind has continued to live independently of God.

As God's people, we live in two kingdoms—the world's and God's. Our hope is that someday, the kingdom of this world, under the leadership of humans, will become the kingdom of God and of Christ, who will reign forever (Rev. 11:15). Our purpose as God's people is to be good citizens of earthly kingdoms, but to give our loyalty to the eternal Kingdom of God. All other kingdom building that opposes or competes with God's kingdom will finally fall under his judgment. The Bible's story is the record of God's building his kingdom, which Jesus explained is not of this world, and that is in the hearts of his people (Luke 17:21). So, are we, on this Pentecost Sunday, involved in building God's kingdom?

The people of ancient Babylon were building a tower, called a ziggurat, which was a common, pyramidal structure in this place and time in Mesopotamia. It's the nature of individuals and societies to build. Take a child to the seaside and give him a plastic shovel and bucket. Watch what he does as he plays in the sand. More likely than not he'll build maybe a castle with a water moat around it. But on a more personal level, we're all involved in some kind of building project. We all have, if not specific goals, some kind of aspirations for ourselves.

We think we know best even how to run our own lives. Each one of us is involved in building our lives—some more methodically and responsibly than others. So, in this ancient community, fallen humankind became involved in a social project outside of God's purpose. All of us, from youth throughout life, are engaged in a struggle for our very souls—who will be the lord, the master, the boss and ruler of our lives. Evidently the people of Nimrod's Babylon didn't think God knew best, as they built with no thought of him. And, though we live this side of the Old and New Testament stories, we often give no more thought to what God thinks of the ways we are building our lives and even our church ministries. Are we building what God can bless?

The builders of Babel didn't really think they could reach heaven, but thought they could in fact make some sort of spiritual contact (J Boice). It's amazing how almost everyone, even in a secular culture, is seeking some kind of salvation. And because fallen sinners seek to avoid accountability to a moral authority, such as the God of the Bible, they contrive their own way of salvation, such as did these people of ancient Babel. These days many describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." They like to think their own path will lead to the same destination (heaven) but don't want to be accountable (religious!). But all of us can easily deceive ourselves into thinking we're living acceptably, when in fact we're separating ourselves from God's authority.

Sinful people in this Babylonian society obviously formed relationships that allowed no room for God, and pride became dominant. The repetitive "Come, let us" seems to indicate an attitude that undertook tasks with no thought for God (3 & 4). The irony was that though they sought to make a unified effort, the result was eventual fragmentation and alienation. Still today this society of "the lonely crowd" yearns for relationships, for connected-ness. Yet many seem to have no clue how to build and maintain normal, healthy, and lasting relationships, in marriage, the family, and the work place and in the community.

We have to face the question today, "Why are we building?" Why are we building our lives, our careers, and our relationships and even our church? Are they for God or are they for self apart from God? God created us for relationships, with him and with one another, and the only way they can be healthy and permanent is when they are built on our relationship with him.

Jesus Christ gave us the key to relationships, saying they must be subservient to our relationship with God. This is why he reminded us of the Greatest Commandment to love God wholly and love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12: 28-34). The builders of Babel had lost their center, refusing to let God be God, who alone is the adequate center of life, both for individuals and community. When we become disconnected from God, we look for a “synthetic center,” which always proves inadequate. Without God as our center, we become alienated from him and each other.

Our lives are meant to be lived in God, and with love for him. Sin separates us. For that reason, Christ died for us, and through faith and repentance we are reconciled to God (Romans 5:1-2). Now the cross of Christ becomes our new center, and pattern for living. Jesus said that our love and devotion for him and our proper relationship with others, even members of our families, was found in following him and in carrying our cross. The cross always was terminal! Anyone who carried a cross was on his way to execution. We are called to die to self as we love and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24-26).

At first, the issue seems to be very clear, but if we are as honest as the first disciples, we have to recognize that there are times when even in our religious life, we want God to give us a special place in his kingdom. We may not be as bold as James and John and their mother, to ask Jesus to give us the right and left places next to his throne (Matthew 20:20-28). But, just like Nimrod and his followers who built Babel, we respond to the invitation to “come and build, and let’s make a name for ourselves.”

The realm of Christianity is not immune from selfish ambition. Even these pagan followers of Nimrod, these founders of the pagan city of Babylon, had a religious motivation. They built their impressive ziggurat, a huge structure similar to the Egyptian pyramids. It was not as impressive as the 1353-foot Willis (formerly Sears) Tower in Chicago, but nevertheless, for its day, was impressive enough. Like the Willis Tower, this ziggurat was built in successively smaller sections, rising in towering height, like a pyramid. Although the builders didn’t think it would actually reach “heaven,” but would symbolize that they had achieved the favor of heaven. This temple was a monument to self-righteousness and achievement.

I love the subtle humor in this text! What people thought was so impressive, to God was so insignificant he had to descend to get a better picture (5). It’s like seeing a 1335-foot skyscraper from the ground level, and then looking down at it from 20,000 or so feet. It’s not so impressive from up there. God had to “stoop down,” as it were, just to notice that puny achievement! Yet, all the time, God is around the builders of the tower and allowing them the freedom of their futile efforts. Also, God loves us enough to give us a free will that we might love and serve and build with him for his glory. But even when we make the wrong choices, he continues to love us, and intervenes in our behalf. God’s intervention

in this project was for the good of the people, whose grandiose scheme would have led to eventual self-destruction. God is actually impressed by this project and so determines to limit what they might try to do (6). He knows man unrestrained can do the “humanly impossible.” God’s purpose is to restrain mankind’s proclivity to self-destruction. This same divine intervention has happened down through the ages. And it’s happened in my life as well. God loves me so much that he keeps me from self-destruction. He has interfered with and frustrated my plans, which would have hurt others as well as myself.

Our rebellion against God is due to our prideful distrust that God knows what is best for us, and wants us to let him be God in our lives. He alone knows what will make us supremely fulfilled and joyful. He will withhold nothing that we need for life, godliness and joy. The big question is, will we trust him and join in his kingdom building, or will we, like the builders of the Tower of Babel, keep on trying to live and build in our ways?

This abandoned tower was Babel’s folly. Every culture and every life that is lived apart from God’s leading and blessing leaves a monument to folly because when God is not the center of our lives or our society, his judgment comes in the form of fragmentation, alienation and separation. We can see this even in marriages and families. When husband or wife are not living under Christ’s lordship, usually communication breaks down, then trust, and next alienation, and then division that often results in divorce. Look at the “generation gap” when children become teenagers. All of a sudden the parents speak a different language from their teenage children, which brings alienation and separation in the form of rebellion against the parents. Though living under the same roof, relationships of love and trust are fractured. This is the natural judgment God works in lives and relationships where he is not Lord. And the same can happen in churches. Even church leaders can keep up good appearances yet step out from under Christ’s lordship. As a result, there is a breakdown in communication, growing alienation, distrust and suspicion, and then the fragmentation or division within the church body.

Helmut Thielicke lamented, that when he traveled throughout Asia years ago, he could speak few of the languages, and the only word he found he could speak with mutual understanding was “Coca Cola.” We as followers of Christ speak the same language of God’s love for each other and for all. On this Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate God’s miracle of reversing the curse of Babel. He’s given his kingdom people the language of the Spirit, to make us one in purpose—doing his will, his way in kingdom building (Acts 2:1-21). As your pastor, I resolve to seek and follow his leading, in my personal life and relationships as well as in serving as your spiritual under-shepherd. Let’s bring all we do and will do under his authority, by his will, and for his honor in a way that will last for eternity.

During the early years of our marriage, Nancy and I were privileged to start a new church during our seminary and graduate school years. I was in the

seminary and Nancy was a graduate student in the University of Louisville. Our little mission grew to a congregation strong enough to build a small and rather ordinary building. To us, however, it was a great edifice! As we look back, we marvel that God used us to help shape Christ in people who were reached from the lower end of the social scale of that small city in southern Indiana.

We routinely spent the weekends serving that church, and on Sunday nights would drive back to our student apartment in Louisville to resume our studies. One Sunday night as we crossed the bridge across the Ohio River and came upon the skyline of the city, where new skyscrapers were under construction, I said to Nancy, "Compared with all of that, our church building we are building seems awfully small. Our accomplishment seems puny, doesn't it?" With her usual insight Nancy kindly rebuked me and reminded me that we were building a different kind of building for a different kind of kingdom altogether. In the eyes of God, our little building loomed a lot larger than the skyscrapers of the city of man. God had to stoop down to see those buildings in Louisville, just as he must stoop down to see the Willis Building or Mt. Everest. But our church building was a part of something great and eternal, and that reached up into the heart of God and was his temple.

Let's resolve to join God in his project of kingdom building, at Dale Heights and also in our personal lives, for his honor and glory.