

## *The Spirit Empowers*

Genesis 11: 1-9      Acts 2: 1-21

Nineteenth century British historian Lord Acton said famously: *Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.* It is memorable because it has proven true time after time in human history.

While Lord Acton made the statement much later, the founders of our country in the 18<sup>th</sup> century knew its truth from their understanding of history and the problems of checking power once it is granted. Indeed, they knew the importance of the Magna Carta of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Magna Carta is pivotal since it is the first time that binding agreements limited the power of a monarch, King John of England. Needless to say, implementation didn't go well and the principles of the document evolved over several decades of struggles. Nonetheless, the need to check power was understood. Unchecked, power would eventually be exercised wantonly and oppressively, benefiting those who supported the powerful, and ruining whoever stood in their way.

Our nation's founders came to structure the government with a series of checks and balances between the three governmental powers, the executive, legislative, and judicial. Each branch of government needed to exercise the authority which it was given to maintain checks on power exercised by the other branches. If one branch fails to do its duty in regard to checking the power and reach of the other branches, then the delicately balanced system becomes unbalanced and the corruption of power can become entrenched. The power vested in the people can be co-opted and the corruption can come to pervade the whole system of government.

We have discussed before the nature of power in relation to the foundational story of Genesis in the Garden of Eden. The temptation placed before the human creatures was not only to exceed their stated bounds not to eat the fruit of the tree, but it was also, as related by the serpent, about the ability to "be like God." The expression "knowledge of good and evil" refers to the ability to declare and define what is good and what is not, what is righteous and what is not, etc. It was very much a question of power.

As Genesis continues, the question of power continues to get explored, more precisely the human preoccupation with using power corruptly. It hits a crescendo when God decides to wipe out this corrupted creation with the flood, sparing only Noah and his family. God regrets the flood and the attempt at nearly annihilating humanity, and God makes a covenant with Noah. In that covenant, akin to the Magna Carta, God voluntarily checks God's own power in agreement with the surviving humans. Clearly, this is not what gods ever do, any more than worldly kings unless they have little choice.

Today we have the classic story of the Tower of Babel presented in Genesis 11. This story is the last of what are regarded as "pre-history" narratives that have occupied Genesis since the creation stories. At the end of chapter 11, Abram is introduced, and his story starts in chapter 12 as the first "historical" figure.

This story has no real parallel in other ancient Near Eastern texts, unlike many of the “pre-history” narratives which do have shared origins among other people. This story seems unique for Israel.

In this Tower of Babel story, we find that there was one universal language and one common speech throughout humanity. They’ve migrated to where the great Babylonian Empire would be situated, hence the name of the Tower. The historical aspect and impact of this powerful and ruthless empire on the story-making tradition of ancient Israel ought to be acknowledged.

We then discover that there is a new technology available to them in the making of bricks rather than the use of stone. Let’s understand what brick making is versus the use of stone. **First**, it employs a special technology to create the form of what is desired, of a strength comparable to stone, in a uniform shape and of uniform consistency. **Second**, it can be replicated quite simply and mass production can be achieved at relatively low cost. **Third**, it provides the opportunity to create and produce what you want, when you want it, in the size and shape that you want. This would revolutionize all construction and design. They were no longer reliant on what God provided; they could now create on their own as masters of this new technology.

Having this newfound capability, they decide: ‘Let’s build a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the earth.’ We can hear distinct echoes of the serpent, “to be like God,” in these aspirations to greatness. The wording “make a name for” is what a king would do. It’s implied that there would be a challenger to the One who rules the heavens if the human masses can establish their presence in the heavens. This thought ends by expressing the need to control their own destiny, seeking to avoid being scattered across the earth, their power dispersed, and their ascendancy effectively ended.

In brief, the humans, by exploiting all of these assets, have decided to challenge God, perhaps to displace God. At the least, it’s certain they sought to gain parity with God, and attain a place on the heavenly council. They would become God or gods.

Similar to the walk in the Garden of Eden, God is not a heavenly observer. The text suggests that God “came down” and paid the city a visit, wanting to check out the tower. It soon becomes clear what this endeavor is all about. God is distressed to discover what the human creation has been able to do. This was not what God intended, to create a competitor.

God says: *If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.* There is real foreboding in that comment. Human creation has no real spirituality at this point. Remember, the only human with any awareness of the will of God so far has been Noah. The sinfulness of the human creation had been so universal that God had decided with the Flood to wipe out humanity and start again. God has promised never to do again. So, now what?

Disrupt this singularity of purpose that they've attained. Again, in this early stage, there is the concept of a divine or heavenly council of God with the gods. God continues: *Come, let us go down and confuse their language so that they will not understand each other.* The singular language and speech is made confused. They scatter, and they stop building.

At Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus brings about a new phase in the development of God's human creation. Where sinful humanity had sought to become God, at Pentecost, God empowers the human creation with spirituality. As opposed to the corrupt endeavor of Genesis 11 in building the Tower, at Pentecost there is the creation of unity in spirituality, an empowering that enables the Spirit of God to speak, to enable speech in others, to bridge languages, to break down barriers – a reversal of events with the Tower.

One commentator noted the importance of characters who are listening in the passage in Acts 2. Ah, yes – listening is what was absent from the effort in Genesis 11, and for that matter in the Garden of Eden as well. We can understand listening as spiritual activity, listening for the voice of God that speaks to us, but also listening for the voice of God *speaking through others.*

Language is no barrier to human achievement at Pentecost. Instead, a new language of spirituality enables communication and understanding, taking what had been scattered and divided and bringing unity in spiritual focus with a new set of gifts.

These gifts are meant not for the building of the great Tower that ascends to challenge God, to become God. These gifts are spiritual gifts meant for the building of the Kingdom, to bring peace, equity, and new life. It stands opposite attaining power for power's sake, to gain equality if not outright superiority to God. The Spirit brings the power to unite and commit together in building the Kingdom of God rather than power for power's sake, the power that corrupts.

The diversity which God created finds its intended unity and empowerment at Pentecost, fulfilling the promise not only of Jesus to send the Counselor, but also the greater promise of human creation, bringing together in spirituality what God had intended from the beginning.

At Pentecost, we don't need to be concerned with whether the disciples spoke in tongues, or spoke different languages, or anything else. May we recognize that it was the fulfillment of God's promise to bring unity out of diversity through spiritual empowerment and blessing. It is about listening and hearing the other, bearing a spiritual focus that sees difference, acknowledges it, and works with it, perceiving the nature of this difference in terms of the spiritual gift that comes at Pentecost.

It means our faith doesn't fear different people and diverse populations, doesn't require different people to eliminate their differences and conform to any preferred standards, make themselves acceptable, and meet required norms. God made us

different and made us good. We have shown our incredible ability to screw that up, to take blessing and transform it into sinfulness, pain, and suffering.

At Pentecost, may we see unity amid diversity in the blessing of the Spirit, reversing attempts to bless our sinfulness as we aim to be God. May we celebrate God's spiritual empowerment and go forward as witnesses to the servant Kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus.