

Genesis 10-11:9

Faulty Tower

The TV series *Fawlty Towers* is about a crazy hotel owner named Basil Fawlty. Central to this comedy is the inability of Basil Fawlty to communicate clearly with the Spanish waiter, Manuel who can hardly speak a word of English. The result is chaos.

1. Unity and Diversity

We all take it for granted that good communication is a good thing. The incident described in Genesis 11:1-9 shows us that the people who settled in the plain of Shinar were united by good communication: *"Now the whole world had one language and a common speech."* These people were great at communicating with each other. The writer of this passage lets us overhear these people talking to each other. In verse 3 we overhear them as they use their common language: *"Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly."* They are communicating well with each other and agree with each other about what work needs to be done. Then in verse 4 we overhear them as they speak to each other again: *"Come, let us build ourselves 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 whole earth."* Once again they are communicating well with each other. They are all agreed about what they are trying to achieve and why they are trying to do it.

They are building a tower to make a name for themselves. A name for themselves with whom? Who are they trying to impress? These people are building a tower which will have its top in the heavens, that is, a tower which will actually reach into the heavens and make contact with God. The very expression "making a name for oneself" is used in the ancient world in connection with temple construction. Similarly, the expression "with its top in the heavens" is particularly used with respect to temple building. These people are building a temple-tower, or if you like a communications tower.

Communications towers can be very dangerous. Some studies indicate that residents who live near cellular communications towers are more liable to contract cancer. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has taken action to reduce the number of birds killed in collisions with communications towers. It is conservatively estimated that in the United States alone over 4 million birds are killed each year after colliding with television, radio and cellular phone towers. Communications towers need lights to warn off aircraft, but these same lights seem to attract migratory birds. The communications tower being built in Genesis 11 is even more dangerous, not to birds but to high-flying humans who reach too high. These people are great at communicating with each other they are lousy at communicating with God. The whole tower project is fundamentally defective. They are building Faulty Tower.

The key word used in verse 4 can mean any kind of "tower", but in the latter Old Testament it describes a military stronghold. Were they building a huge tower to defend the city? This doesn't fit. We are told "the whole world" is united and they all have the same language. If they are settled together in this huge city from whom on earth do they need to defend themselves?

Our passage assumes that the tower is a religious building, probably built like a Babylonian ziggurat. The ziggurat symbolised a mountain which was

approached by a ramp or stairway. The ziggurat of Nippur was actually called "the house of the mountain". A priest ascended a ziggurat like a person ascends a mountain. The ziggurats as man-made mountains were meeting places between heaven and earth.

You see what they are doing, don't you? They have decided themselves how they will communicate with God. They expect God to communicate with them on their terms. Napoleon Bonaparte was quite correct: "All religions have been made by men." Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and any other religion you can think of represent humanly constructed attempts to touch base with ultimate reality. Each religion has developed its own conditions for this to take place. They are all faulty towers made out of crumbly bricks. Are you relating to God on his terms or your terms? Have you built your own little communication tower and you say to God, "Well, I go to church. I try to live a good life. You should be pleased with what I've done." God himself has set up the conditions by which communication with him is possible. It is completely on his terms. Jesus said, *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*

We must watch this as a church. We may be reasonably united, pretty good at communicating with each other. But as a church community are we communicating well with God?

2. Power Games

"Man is a political animal," said Aristotle. The people of Genesis 11 unite to create an immensely powerful political state. Hegel said, "The State rests on Religion." These people are trying to build a great city state whose security depends on the tower of religion. The people who settled on the plain of Shinar were united by one language and a common speech. Because of this unity these people had enormous power. Imagine I decide to break the window with my hand. If I use just my little finger I will only succeed in breaking my finger. If I try with two or three fingers I will just break my fingers. But if I unite my fingers and bind them together in a fist then I can easily break the window.

You might say, "That's a stupid example. You'll cut yourself, you will injure yourself if you try to smash the window with your fist." Well, our passage teaches us that the unity of these builders was a foolish unity which only resulted in them injuring themselves.

This passage is deliberately written to make shots about the pretensions of one of the great empires of the ancient world, the Babylonian Empire because "Babel" is shorthand for "Babylon". In Genesis 10 we are introduced to a very nasty character, Nimrod. He is described as "a mighty hunter before the Lord." The Lord himself had taken notice of this man's immense savagery. For this monster, Nimrod, made a specialty of hunting down people and killing them. His kingdom was founded on human blood. And, we are told, the beginning of his kingdom was - well, look at 10:10: what comes first? Yes, Babylon. The text speaks of "the beginning" of Nimrod's kingdom. This phrase deliberately echoes the first words of the Bible: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."*

Genesis 1 describes the beginning of God's great kingdom, a kingdom of order and blessing and life. Babylon and empires like it are Nimrod's kingdom: a kingdom built on savagery and death.

The famous writer George Eliot described a certain arrogant person: *"He was like a*

cock who thought the sun had risen to hear him crow." This is the way the tower builders treat God as though he was there to respond to their religious initiatives and impressive achievements. On the contrary, God sees this kingdom for what it is - utterly pathetic.

3. Settling and Scattering

Why did they build the tower? Consider verse 4 again: *"so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."* If God is impressed by their achievement then he will relax his demand that they spread over all the earth. If he is impressed by what they have done he will let them have their way to settle in this spot.

What's changed? Isn't that the way the vast majority of people treat religion today? We expect God to rubber-stamp our ideas and our plans because of the impressive things we have done to please him. *"I've lived a good life. I've never killed anyone or stolen anything. So what right has God to make me live a completely different kind of a life?"*

Verse 5 says, *"But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building."* You get the joke? Does God have trouble with his eyesight? Well, from God's perspective this city and tower, which these people think is so great, is so tiny and miniscule that God has to come down to see it properly. God is not impressed at all. When we take a closer look at this seemingly impressive empire we see it is made out of shoddy building materials. These people make bricks out of baked clay instead of using solid stones. They use tar to bind these bricks together instead of proper cement. Their entire empire, their city and their tower, might look good from a human perspective. But in reality it is a house of cards. It is terribly fragile. Think of the sudden collapse of the USSR.

Next we are told: *"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."* God is not impressed by the city and tower. But God does see how thoroughly dangerous it is to allow this kind of unity to persist. People are very good at uniting to create systems which prevent people from genuinely knowing God. While great empires or humanly constructed systems last - like the USSR and say Catholicism (for most people) - they succeed in preventing people from knowing the true God. Think of Islamic states like Pakistan. Islam is a towering system which forces people who speak many different languages to be a united people. And, not surprisingly, Islam is a God-denying religion which shuts off from millions the possibility of knowing God. There is much to be commended in our multicultural society, when we see the marvellous things a united people can accomplish. But we live in a society which is dominated by religious and ethical pluralism, in which increasingly the majority insist that we must all be tolerant; everyone is entitled to their own views about religion and life, no one should impose their values and beliefs on others. In short, we live in a society which, the more united it becomes, the more successfully it shuts the true God out or treats him as just a triviality.

The builders thought that if they could impress God with their religious labour and effort by their building of this huge tower then maybe God would waive his requirement that they fill the earth and be dispersed over its surface. God wanted them to be scattered over the earth. God wanted nations to be formed from Noah's sons, as Genesis 10 indicates. From the perspective of Genesis 10 linguistic, ethnic, national and geographical identity are natural results of people spreading over the face of the globe and are in fact intended by God from the start. God

never wanted linguistic unity to be preserved. God wanted a unity in diversity, the kind of diversity described in Genesis 10. But those people who settled in Shinar clung on to their linguistic unity, they refused to spread and allow the diversity in unity intended by God. So God had to intervene and force linguistic diversity and the scattering of people over the globe.

4. Communication Breakdown

You know the saying: United we stand, divided we fall. That could describe the tower builders. Looking at things in this light have a fresh look at verse 7-8: *"Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city."* God always wanted them to be scattered. As verse 4 indicates, the people did not want to be scattered. But there is no blessing in a sinful people being bound together in linguistic unity. It is because of what God did at Babel that there are now an estimated 6703 living languages in the world.

You will also notice in verse 5 how the unity of God conflicts with the unity of people. God says, *"Come, let us go down"* in contrast to *"Come, let us make bricks"* and in contrast to *"Come let us build a tower."* Here again as in 1:26 we have a clear implication that the unity of people described in Genesis 11 is diametrically opposed to the unity of God, what we now understand - given New Testament revelation - as the Trinity.

God said, *"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness"* and so he created "man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." The kind of unity which glorifies God and images him is unity in diversity, initially represented by the unity of the man and the woman. The kind of unity grasped at by people in Genesis 11 is a caricature of this divine unity. It is a unity which represents a profound distortion of the image. Even in Christian communities, when Christians try to impose a fixed model of what a Christian should look like then they are in danger of violating the unity sought by God. It is most significant that when we come to Revelation 7:9 John deliberately takes up the same four categories used in Genesis 10 to describe all people who will gather around the throne of the Lord Jesus. In Genesis 10 we see the peoples of the world identified according to geographical territory or nations, ethnic families or tribes, nations (that is, what John calls "peoples") and languages. In Revelation 7:9 John says, *"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."* Unity in diversity is the glorious ideal celebrated by John.

Our unity as a Christian church community is not based on our commitment to common projects, not on what we can collectively do for God, but on what he has done for us. It is "in front of the Lamb" that we stand united, that is, in front of the one who was slain for us. The only man-made construction that carries any weight with God is not some impressive religious tower-building or a magnificent glass cathedral. It is two pieces of crude wood nailed together. Let us pray that the scattered people of God will fill the earth as those who are conquerors in Christ Jesus, communicating the greatness of God in the heart-languages of all who so desperately need to down their tools and turn their backs on the piles of crumbly bricks with which they are trying to build their way to personal liberation.