

Protective Custody of Confusion

William Cwirla

Genesis 11:1–9

Words. Without words there is no communication, no exchange of information and ideas, no communion, no community, no way to organize and mobilize. Without words we would be unable to reach out to another person, to have any form of meaningful relationship. You've probably had this experience, when you are in a foreign land or encounter someone from a foreign land. You don't speak the same language. Aside from a few gestures and grunts, you can't express much to each other much less order a ham sandwich and a Coke. Without common language and words we would be isolated individuals, left to ourselves and our thoughts without any way of expressing them.

There was a time when the whole earth had one language and one set of words. As people migrated from the east, they settled in a plain and began to make ambitious plans. "Let's build a city and a tower that reaches up to the heavens. We have the technology to do it: bricks and bitumen. With the right team and organization, we'll make a name for ourselves."

"The sky's the limit," we like to say when we think we can do anything. And we are rather proud creatures. Of all the creatures that roam the earth, we're the only ones that have the power to rearrange things to suit our liking. The rest of the animals either have to adapt or die. When it gets too cold or warm, animals have to migrate elsewhere to suitable climates or they will die out. It's either adaptation or extinction. Man, on the other hand, adapts his environment. When it's too cold, we make heat. When it's too hot, we air condition. We can do that. We can damn rivers, move earth, drill through mountains, generally rearrange the landscape to suit our needs. We can do that because we are the top dog of creation, the ones made in the image and likeness of God, the ones having dominion over all the earth. And how we love to exercise our dominion!

We are uniquely inventive creatures. Other creatures use tools to accomplish tasks, but we invent things. Bricks and bitumen in this story represent our inventiveness, our ability to alter the landscape to our specifications. We're not limited to the stones and rocks we can find

laying around. We can bake bricks. We're not limited to mud for mortar. We can produce tar and other adhesives.

Think of our inventions and discoveries, everything from the great advances of medical science and technology to the things like high speed computers and the internet. God didn't do that stuff. We did. We invented it. We made it. A big city and a tall tower seem like nothing to us. We build those all the time. I come from a city of skyscrapers, Chicago, whose tall buildings seem to reach up to touch the heavens. In fact, Chicago was dubbed "the windy city" not for its Midwest winds but for the windy arrogance of its politicians who boasted after the Great Fire that Chicago could do anything it set its mind to.

Our cities are impressive, no doubt about it. They are impressive in their architecture, their design, their building. Watch one of those tall buildings go up and you will be impressed with our engineering and our ability to harness and move material.

The Lord wasn't so impressed when He looked down to see the city that man intended to build. Like a Divine Building Inspector, the Lord looked over the plans for man's city, with its impressive sky scraping tower, and said, "This isn't good. This is only the beginning of what they will do, and they're capable of just about anything."

You sometimes hear people say, "If we only could get everyone together and on the same page, we could do almost anything." And that's true. Brought together as one, humanity could literally do almost anything. Here's the problem. Humanity is corrupted by Sin. We are a collection of sinners, each of us turned inward on himself. We may be capable of almost anything if we just get together, but being sinful means that we are also capable of great evil. And the evil compounds. That's why our cities are so full of crime. It's not that living in the city is "bad", while living the country is "good"; it's that there are more sinners per square foot in the city than in the country. And when sinners get together on a project, it's not necessarily going to be a good thing.

God knows this. He comes down to the plain to cause confusion. He scrambles the language and words so that people cannot understand each other. And when you can't understand one another, you scatter. The name of the place where God did this was called Babel, short for Babylon, man's city, the city man builds with his brick and bitumen and arrogance. It's the city where man tries to be god and reach up into heaven by his own works. But as we heard,

the city that God builds comes down from heaven. We don't build this city; we are given to live in it, now by faith in Christ, and soon by resurrection and sight.

At Babel, God puts Man under the protective custody of confusion. He confuses man's language to limit his ambitions and scatter us. And it works. Language separates us. It's a barrier. Look at our own congregation and our community. If we can't communicate, we tend to separate, if for no other reasons than "practical concerns".

When you hear talk of "one world" this and "one world" that, leave God out of that picture. He doesn't think this is a terribly good idea. That's why he leaves countries in place. That's why He even puts up with divisions in the church. "One world" anything won't amount to anything good if we all "get together." All we sinners will do is make a great name for ourselves instead of hallow the Name of God.

At Pentecost, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, the confusion of Babel gets undone. Sort of. The confusion of languages remains, but now, by the Holy Spirit, the good news of Jesus is preached and heard in all the languages and dialects of the world. God leaves the custody of confusion in place because we are still sinners, but He brings the nations, tribes, peoples, and languages of the world together in one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one salvation, one death and resurrection. It's not just that the apostles spoke in all these languages, but everyone heard them preach in his own native language and dialect in his own ears, and nothing says "for you" quite like hearing the Gospel of Jesus in your own native tongue.

Pentecost is the beginning of the end, the beginning of Christ's mission to disciple the world by baptizing and teaching. Peter says it in his Pentecost sermon. These are the last days when God pours out the Spirit upon all flesh. This was prophesied by Joel. Pentecost was a harvest festival of the winter wheat. Fifty days after the Feast of Unleavened Bread came the harvest of the first fruits. Fifty days after the Resurrection of Jesus comes the harvest of the first fruits of His conquering Sin, Death, Hell, and the Law on our behalf in the 3000 who were baptized that day.

John the Baptizer had said, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to His disciples to lead and guide them into all truth. And here at Pentecost, on a Sunday, fifty days after the fateful Sunday when

Jesus appeared risen from the dead, ten days after His ascension to the right hand of the Father, Jesus breathes the fiery breath of His Spirit into His Church.

In order to speak words, you need to have breath. You may not think about it, but before you speak a sentence, you pause to inhale. No breath, no words. Pentecost is about the breath. It's the breath of the Spirit that raised dry, dusty bones to life in the vision of Ezekiel that we heard back in the Easter Vigil. It's the breath that breathed life into Adam's clay and made him a living being. It's the breath that Jesus breathed on His apostles in the upper room when He sent them to proclaim His forgiveness and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the breath and fire of the Church.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Jesus said, "I am going away, and I will come to you." In His going away, He comes to us in the most profound of ways. In going away to the Father, He comes to us by the Spirit. In going away, He can no longer be seen, but now He can be heard. He comes to us by the Spirit-mediated Word who drums the good news of forgiveness, life, and salvation into your ears in your own language. It's for you. The Spirit is not some independent free agent, not the closing pitcher brought in for the late innings to close out the game. He is not the replacement for Jesus, but the agent who brings the words of Jesus to our ears that we may hear Him and trust Him and cling to Him by faith.

Unless the Spirit gathers us, we will be scattered. The protective custody of confusion remains over humanity to guard us against our own hubris. We may build cities and scrape the sky with our towers, we may marvel at the wonders of our own bricks and bitumen and how clever we are at exercising the gift of dominion over the created world, but this present age and man's city have an expiration date. This old order of things is passing away. But the wind of Pentecost tells us that the new has already come in Jesus. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."

We may not think of ourselves as "Pentecostals". That term is usually claimed by those who speak in tongues and believe that the Holy Spirit works directly, without means, to create ecstatic speech and eccentric behavior. But that's about as far from Pentecost as it gets. In the book of Acts, Pentecost ends in the water of Baptism and in the daily and weekly gathering around the apostolic word, the holy communion that is, the Breaking of the Bread, and the prayers. Pentecost begins in Baptism and ends in the liturgy, in the gathering of baptized believers around the Lord's Table.

We will all be one again, one day soon. We will all have one language and the same words again, just as we now have one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all. It will not be by our doing and ingenuity, but when the Spirit of Christ raises us from the dead and we are gathered, as we already are gathered in Christ, to be one holy communion in the city of our God.

For this we long, for this we hope, for this we pray.

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

William Cwirla · Genesis 11:1-9 / Pentecost C / 19 May 2013 / Holy Trinity – Hacienda Heights, CA · Text: Genesis 11:1-9
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), “Protective Custody of Confusion”, posted 2013-05-19
(<https://htlcms.org/2013/05/2485/>).