

Commentary: Babel and Pentecost: God's love for a diverse world

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This is Part 1 of a three-part series on a Christian response to diversity.

What happened at Babel was bad, right?

Or was it?

What if Babel was not so much a punishment as it was a prompt?

God commanded humans to “fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28; 9:7). Yet, at Babel, people tried something else. Instead of spreading out and filling the earth, they huddled up to build a tower.

In response, God “confused their languages” (Genesis 11:7). While that seems like a bad thing, it turned out God “scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:9), which was God’s original plan anyway (Genesis 1:28; 9:7).

After Babel, God called Abraham and his descendants, so “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). Spoiler alert: this comes true!

This is how the story ends, with “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

Sure, at Babel the people had disobeyed, but God has a way of working all things together for the good (Romans 8:28), even things we might see as negative.

Babel's many languages may seem negative, but strictly speaking, the result is not entirely bad. In fact, when given the chance to reverse Babel at Pentecost, God kept the many tongues (see Acts 2). Instead of "fixing" Babel, God baptized it. God used the diversity of languages to reach a diverse world.

This is why it is so problematic when Christians accept the way "diversity" has become politicized. My colleague [Joe Rangel recently wrote on this](#), and I'd like to support him by adding a few things I've had to reconsider recently, because many from my own tradition—majority culture Baptist churches—have been asking about this topic recently.

Segregation vs. congregation

Jesus gave his followers the command to evangelize "all nations" (Matthew 28:19), going as Abraham's spiritual descendants to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And as we carry out this Great Commission, we also obey the Great Commandments (Matthew 22:37-39), which means we love our neighbor, even if our neighbor is a Samaritan (Luke 10:25-29).

The result will be churches with no demographic barriers, so "there is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Of course, Paul's statement does not mean Greeks stop speaking Greek, or Jews stop being Jewish. Males and females in Christ still are male and female. The point is the demographics that remain are subordinated now to our ultimate identity as followers of Jesus.

So, any church that discriminates—segregates—has betrayed its essence—the antithesis of segregation: "congregation." The church is—and every church should aspire to be—a diverse place, inclusive of every nation, tribe and tongue.

Of course, in reality, many churches are what church planters call homogeneous units, where everyone looks the same and belongs to the same culture. Like attracts like. Birds of a feather flock together.

This is “natural,” however, only because our *fallen* nature tends toward Babel, toward the Babel humans wanted, where we all speak the same language. It is to defy God’s call to be a light to *all* nations. Even in Acts, the church backslides in this way.

An example from Acts

In Acts 6, an embarrassing scene occurred. The Greek-speaking widows in the Jerusalem church were being neglected. The apostles immediately summoned a church business meeting, which appointed seven who would “serve.”

The Greek word for serve (*diakoneō*) is the word from which we derive the title “deacon.” In other words, the matter was so serious, the early church formed the first deacon board. What was it about this scene that demanded such drastic action?

The early church in Acts believed it was living in the Messianic Kingdom. That is, the re-established kingdom promised to Abraham’s descendants, ruled by a Son of David.

Many prophets had described this renewed kingdom with its “new,” or renewed, covenant. For example, Joel foretold what God would do: “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days I will pour out my Spirit” (Joel 2:28-29).

At the first Pentecost, Peter quotes this passage in Acts 2:17-18 to show the

prophecy was being fulfilled. The Acts church sees itself as living in the Messianic Kingdom. Or, at least, it should live that way.

Diversity needs Pentecost

Other prophets gave further descriptions of the renewed covenant community, such as Zechariah and Malachi, who insisted God's people would care for the "alien and the widow" (Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5).

The prophet Jeremiah took this further when speaking about the renewed covenant: "if" (and *only if*) you care for the alien and the widow, then God will keep this new covenant with you (Jeremiah 7:6-7).

Fast-forward to Acts 6, and you immediately see the problem. The Jerusalem church had neglected alien widows. To be "alien" in the Bible is to speak another language and/or come from another land.

When this is brought to light, the church springs into action, appointing seven who were "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). These newly appointed deacons also had another quality: they were Greeks. That is, they were Greek-speaking Jews who were to some extent Hellenized.

Have you noticed the names of these deacons? Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolaus. These are not Jewish names. Philip is a name shared with Alexander the Great's father, so a name of one of the most famous Greeks in history, and one connected to Hellenization.

In other words, if you intend to minister to Greek-speakers, you appoint Greeks. Their ability to speak the language and know the culture is one of their assets. And if the church is going to reach a multicultural and multilingual world, we need Pentecost.

What this means for diversity

What does all this mean for “diversity” in terms of our current political climate? The answer: It’s complicated.

There are lots of anxieties and debates around “diversity for diversity’s sake,” DEI, Critical Race Theory and a host of other political hot potatoes. Before we can begin to address all of that, we need to acknowledge in the church there is no question God turns Babel into Pentecost, and God loves Pentecost.

To set government politics aside for the moment and to focus this conversation strictly on the church, there is no argument about inclusivity when it comes to the church. The church is for all people.

“Diversity” seems like a good word for this, a word that describes God’s vision for the kingdom. But I will concede, it is a word arising more from our current culture than from Scripture. But that doesn’t make it unbiblical.

Lots of words used by Christians are from our current culture, as opposed to the Bible, such as the word “budget.” While a lot of pastors might like to get rid of that word, it is here to stay.

If we tried to put it in strictly biblical terms, we would speak of hospitality and *koinonia*. In truth, we need bigger phrases to describe it, such as “all nations,” “the alien, the orphan and the widow,” “no respecter of persons,” and “every people, tribe and tongue.”

Even then, we still would need more comprehensive explanations, ones that can account for Adam’s commission, Abraham’s calling and Christ’s kingdom. But if we are looking for just one word, then I guess we could call this “Pentecost.”

This three-part series will continue next week with [Part 2](#).

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