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Downstream from Babel: Lessons in Obedience for Contemporary Leaders

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“Obedience is more than just following the letter of the law; it is discerning what God would want—His will for us—and choosing to seek that outcome.”

~~George Barna

Introduction

Unlike traditional Sunday School lessons that portray the dramatic story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 as a feeble attempt by mankind to reach the heights and power of God, Babel is instead a profound cautionary tale about the centrality of God’s will and man’s inappropriate ambition and intentional disobedience. First, the *importance* of the story of Babel must be highlighted. While the story is only nine verses in length, the phrase “in all the earth” is used five times, showing that it represents far more than a specific issue with a localized population.

Both Christians and Jews have understated the expansive meaning of the story of Babel, viewing it either as an attempt by man to usurp God’s power or a mechanism used by God to develop diverse cultures. As biblical scholar Kraeling said, “It also seems possible that the idea of the jealous deity, that is afraid of man’s prowess and intervenes in order to defeat their attempt to overthrow him by destroying the ladder on which they seek to climb into heaven, shimmers through the story.”¹ Harland also noted, “In Christian tradition the story has been seen as one of human pride, of people wanting to take power from God or to reach heaven. Jewish exegesis has focused more on the theme of dispersion,”² and, “Given that the passage seems to refer to a human desire to go beyond the creaturely limits, it is not surprising that there have been scholars who have suggested that the sin of the people involves an attempt to reach heaven. Such interpretations were made long before the rise of source criticism.”³

Towers, more commonly referred to in earlier times as ziggurats, were very common in ancient cities. As Walton asserted, “The word used in the Hebrew text is generic and can be used for any sort of tower. In the Old Testament, the towers most frequently mentioned are defense towers or watchtowers. But the text is not describing an Israelite city, it is describing an early Mesopotamian city...The NIV’s ‘tower that could reach the heavens’ can be misleading. The Hebrew expression ‘with its head in the heavens’ is idiomatic, just like our English ‘skyscraper.’ This is not a siege tower, as the early rabbis suggested.”⁴

This paper shows that the primary focus of the story of Babel was not about a people attempting to reach heaven, but instead was about their selfish desire and furtive attempt to settle together in the place of their choice. Their resistance to God’s will that they be intentionally scattered throughout the earth resulted in five significant errors often committed by modern leaders: distortion of the true character of God; failure to communicate with God; intentionally ignoring the known will of God; ultimately relying upon themselves for success and security; and, confusing methods with outcomes. The story is fundamentally not about upward striving, but instead is about horizontal striving.

Across the Threshold of Paganism

The descendants of Noah allowed Mesopotamian paganism to infiltrate their faith. The story of the Tower of Babel related the advance of paganism and showed how distorted was their reality of God when they finally crossed the threshold of paganism. Borrowing from pagan faiths, the tower or ziggurat was not for man to approach God, but an avenue for gods to approach man: “Ziggurats were structures designed to provide stairways from the heavens (the gate of the gods) to earth so that the gods could come down into the temple and into town and bring blessing. It was a convenience provided for the deity and his messengers.”⁵ Harland also noted, “The ziggurat was therefore a way in which direct contact was made between the divine and human worlds.”⁶ Most ziggurats were designed with a small room, including a bed and provisions, at the top of a tower for a god to rest on his decent down to earth. God’s people had anthropomorphized God, recasting Him with human features: “The offense of the builders of the Tower of Babel now takes a dramatically different turn. It is no longer humanity that is being corrupted; it is their view of deity that is being distorted and twisted beyond recognition. Already morally and socially destitute, they have embarked on a path that will make them theologically destitute. The people of Babel have lost any realistic sense of who God is.”⁷

In verse five of Genesis 11, we learned that, “The Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.”⁸ In Psalms we saw further evidence that it is not an unusual circumstance for God to lower Himself to regard the earthly affairs of man: “Who humbles Himself to behold the things that are in the heavens and in the earth?”⁹ We can likewise be assured that God never required a ziggurat to do so. It is common for modern leaders to venture into paganism. Their idols abound, and include, achievement, money, education, power, sex, possessions, homes, experiences, etc. Anything that wedges God out of His rightful central role in a person’s life is a form of paganism. The life of a pagan is always centered upon himself,

whereas the focus of a Christian leader is upon God. As Walton noted, “The paganism in each of us drives us to be self-absorbed. God’s revelation draws us to himself. We only need to yield.”¹⁰

Failure to Communicate With God

There is no record in the story of Babel about men seeking God’s will for their lives, whether corporately (where to settle, what to build), or individually. Although the descendants of Noah had strong corporate memories of God’s communication to Noah and his people, they never chose to seek His face or limn His desires. Their intentional omission runs counter to the view of Christian scholar George Barna: “Obedience is more than just following the letter of the law; it is discerning what God would want—His will for us—and choosing to seek that outcome.”¹¹

A critical action for modern leaders is to continually pray and stay connected to the God who is. In addition to supplication, it is important that they regularly spend considerable time worshipping and thanking God for what He has done for them and their charges. In the book of Isaiah we learned that, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.”¹² For that reason, ongoing, regular communication is essential between leaders and the Lord of the universe.

Ignoring God’s Will

When the killing floods finally receded, God gave Noah and his descendants a clear and unambiguous charge: “So God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...And as for you, be fruitful and multiply; Bring forth abundantly in the earth and multiply in it.’”¹³ All of the people spoke the same dialect and were very comfortable working with each other. Nonetheless, God specifically told the people to scatter themselves across the earth and to multiply their descendants to fill it. Genesis 11:2 documented their response to God: “And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there.”¹⁴ They were already restless, unsatisfied, and searching, though God’s plan was for them to separate, not to settle as a group. To them, Shinar was the “perfect” location, large enough for them to “be fruitful and multiply,” and a lush valley watered by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to provide adequate food. Noah’s descendants completed only half of God’s instructions by growing in numbers, but ignored God’s instruction to intentionally scatter across the globe: “God desired the multiplication and spread of people over the earth, but the people wanted to stay in their safe mode of homogeneity.”¹⁵ As Harland noted, “Fear of scattering is resistance to the purpose of God. The people do not want to go abroad, but rather, remain in one place. God’s will is that the world should be peopled everywhere by man, his vice-gerent working in His image to rule creation. The unity which is desired is resistance to God. The people of Babel have a fortress mentality that seeks to survive by its own resources, not the will and purpose of God. The issue at stake is whether the world will be organized by the will of God or the purposes of man.”¹⁶

Leaders often view organizational unity as a primary goal. As Parker noted, “Unity in thought, word, and action may be a worthy goal. But what is the focus of that unity? What is the name, the character, the reputation that is sought after? The people did not consult God about building the city. They did not seek God first.”¹⁷ Unity is spurious if it is used for the wrong purposes. As George Barna said, “A vital element in loving God is to have sufficient faith in Him to completely trust him. God Himself is eager for us to grow that trust and provides the means by testing the strength of our trust in Him through the challenges and trials of daily life. Our handling of each obstacle, setback, and victory in life can either be seen as a series of chance events or as a means of deepening our faith and trust in God.”¹⁸ Noah’s descendants understood God’s role in their lives and trusted God to save them from the flood. They didn’t trust Him, however, to guide and protect them once the floodwaters were gone. Corporate leaders must focus their trust on God and His will, and not their own. Leaders must similarly understand that a societal need does not necessarily equal God’s call for their organization, and that they must commit to do all of God’s will, or none whatsoever.

The Fallacy of Self-Reliance

Because of the Fall, man constantly spirals inward toward himself. The fundamental error of the people of Babel may be found in Genesis 11:4: “And they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.’”¹⁹ In essence, they said, “Our destiny is in our hands. There is no limit to what we can accomplish. Let’s show off our capabilities and rev up our public relations machine because our fame and reputation will save us. If we aren’t well known we will be powerless.” As Harland said, “To aspire or have ambition is not wrong, but it must be in accord with God’s will...where the people at Babel go wrong is in their desire for human autonomy...The striving after a name in Gen xi therefore is inappropriate ambition.”²⁰ Walton et. al similarly noted, “While there need not be anything evil or sinful about wanting to make a name for oneself, we must also acknowledge that this desire may become obsessive or lead one to pursue wicked schemes.”²¹

Even the construction materials the people used demonstrated their pride and selfishness. Instead of mundane sun dried bricks commonly used for the construction of cities, they chose instead to use decorative fired bricks, usually reserved for the construction of temples. As Walton said, “The technique of baking brick was developed toward the end of the fourth millennium, and the resulting product, using bitumen as a mastic, proved waterproof and as sturdy as stone. Since it was an expensive process, it was used only for important public building.”²² As Harland noted, “Like the sin of Genesis iii the wickedness of the people is found in pride. God’s will is abandoned and human desires take precedence over what God wants.”²³

The single most dangerous action a Christian leader can take is to rely solely upon the capabilities of employees to succeed in this world. Evading God’s will and provision has the same negative results for

individuals and for those in the corporate and non-profit worlds, including the Church: “When we come to think we are indispensable to God because of the money we donate, the talents we have, the ministries we engage in, or the worship we offer, our paganism is showing.”²⁴ At minimum, following God’s will has a cost: “There is a price tag for obedience. It often requires that we lay our convenience and comfort on the altar.”²⁵ The citizens of Babel ignored that important truth.

The Results of Babel

At Babel, as in all similar situations, God frustrated the efforts of those who do not seek him or avoid accomplishing His will. As Dart noted, “Yahweh systematically reverses the humans’ deeds and aspirations in the second half of the Babel story.”²⁶ Kraeling asserted that, “It is plainly the intention of Genesis 11. 1 - 9 to tell that Yahweh hindered the builders of the tower, so that they could not complete their work,”²⁷ and Walton similarly noted that, “The confusion of the language makes cooperative living impossible and therefore scattering unavoidable.”²⁸ Everett Rogers considered the importance of communication to the diffusion of ideas: “The essence of the diffusion process is the information exchange through which one individual communicates a new idea to one or several others...The nature of the exchange relationship between a pair of individuals determines the conditions under which a source will or will not transmit the innovation to the receiver and the effect of such a transfer.”²⁹ After God confounded the language of those in Babel, only small groups could understand each other, and they chose to move to other areas of the world. Borgman noted, “The chaos resulting from Babel’s presumptuous choice is precisely the chaos feared in the first place, only greater. Afraid of being scattered and vulnerable? Well then, says God, be scattered indeed, worldwide—and alienated as well by garbled language.”³⁰ For generations afterwards, the people would have a visible reminder of their foolishness: “...A great temple tower that had remained a torso or had fallen into decay would stimulate the imagination profoundly.”³¹ The confusion of languages ultimately had more sinister long-term results: “The loss of common language opened up the world to conflict. For not only did the break-up of language mean the introduction of linguistic differences, but also, the division into different languages meant that we lost our ability to communicate with each other and, in the absence of such communications, antagonisms emerged.”³²

Diverse Languages and the Hearing of God’s Word

After the flood, everyone on earth easily understood each other and could communicate without effort: “Now the whole earth had one language and one speech.”³³ After Babel, the fragmentation of the people into many language groups engendered an important question: How would God communicate with the various language groups? Some suggested that a new universal language would arise: “It is the desire to control the production of antagonism and overcome differences that suggests the necessity of a universal language.”³⁴ The answer came at Pentecost: “Far from favoring the monotonous standardization of cultures and languages being wrought by the juggernaut of globalization, God demonstrated through Pentecost that the confusion of

the intrahuman discourse was not to be mitigated through some global monolingual scheme but through God's revelation of himself in the mother tongue of every tribe and nation...Pentecost is about God's insistence on communicating this Good News in the language most appropriate for intimate discourse, one's mother tongue.³⁵ As Chuck Colson noted, "Yet eternal truth comes to us in temporal beings, living in a diverse and contingent world. The counterpart to Babel is Pentecost, when each listener heard the same glorious news of salvation *in his own tongue*. The universal message of salvation is meant to be received and embodied by an endless variety of individuals through their local cultures."³⁶ As Parker said, "At Pentecost the gift of the Spirit transcended language barriers, but at the same time maintained the differences that languages reflect (Acts 2)...Unity is connection to God and to each other through the Holy Spirit in the language of prayer and proclamation."³⁷ At Pentecost, regardless of their mother tongue, all could hear the Word in their own language. This was by the working of the Holy Spirit and not through any mechanism of man.

In the book of Galatians, God's people were told that, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus."³⁸ The unity that only comes through Jesus will be universally shown as those from "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" are finally gathered before God's throne.³⁹

Reconstructing Babel

Mankind did not learn the appropriate lesson at Babel, and continues in selfish pursuit of its own goals. The times and methods change, but we continually attempt to reconstruct Babel: "In the Enlightenment modern thinkers supplanted belief in God with belief in Reason (often capitalized), through which they hoped to discover universal truths, cure disease and poverty, and create a rational social order. Reason would confer godlike omniscience—in essence, building a tower to heaven."⁴⁰ Borgman also said, "For each of these, there is a striving for position in the world, rather than for usefulness. However subtly, each seeks to promote his or her own name, though at the expense of others' well-being. Families nearly self-destruct with subtle or shocking rivalries and one-upmanship."⁴¹ Walton noted, "Sometimes we rely on things like government or technology to solve our problems or to bring us success and comfort. Most of all, we rely on ourselves: our hard work, or ingenuity, our network. Relying on God asks us to take risks by not hedging our bets."⁴²

Theologian Nancy Pearcy summarized, "If we find ourselves thinking we can do the Lord's work in the world's way, as though worldly weapons were adequate, then we have drastically underestimated the nature of the battle...We can go so far as to say that if Christians win their battles by worldly methods, then they have really lost. Visible results can be deceptive. In the seen world, we may appear to make a great advance—win professional recognition, attract people to our cause, raise money for our program, distribute tons of literature, win passage of an important bill. But if it was done by humanistic reliance on technical methods, without the leading of the Holy Spirit, then we have accomplished little of value in the unseen world."⁴³

Pastor Jay Dennis said, “Obedience is always a choice. You don’t have to feel like it to do it. There is no excuse for not doing the right thing. The option of obedience is always on the table. If we wait until we feel like it to obey God, obedience would probably never come.”⁴⁴

What key steps should leaders take as we seek to fathom and obey God’s will?

- Continually praise and thank God for who He is;
- Earnestly pray to learn God’s will, realizing that His answer may be “yes,” “no,” or “not now;”
- Read God’s Word to get a clear understanding of the parameters of His will;
- Seek counsel from Christian brothers and sisters to help clarify God’s will;
- Consider earthly circumstances and how they relate to God’s will for us;
- Ask forgiveness of God when you intentionally or unintentionally step outside of His will.

Conclusion

The story of the Tower of Babel was far more than a tale of the construction of an ancient architectural wonder. Instead, it outlined the ongoing battle between the will of God and man’s inappropriate ambition and intentional disobedience. As Harland noted, “The people of Genesis xi built a tower in proud defiance against God. Their sin was hubris and they were punished by scattering and confusion of languages. God’s intervention is both a punishment and a means of preventing further ambition.”⁴⁵ Language played a crucial role in the story: “The story begins and ends with the issue of the different languages that divide us from one another by making communication difficult...God intervened to thwart their immense project by confusing their speech, making life more difficult for them; but that also protected them from the worst that they could do to one another.”⁴⁶

Babel is more importantly a story about the God who knows no boundaries: “At Pentecost the gift of the Spirit transcended language barriers, but at the same time maintained the differences that languages reflect (Acts 2). As that event revealed, building walled cities and towers to heaven do not create unity. Unity is connection to God and to each other through the Holy Spirit in the language of prayer and proclamation. In trying to create unity, the people of Babel lost it...God shatters us into a diversity of voices that requires us to communicate through the language of the Holy Spirit to be made whole. The language of the Holy Spirit requires us to see past the differences. Prayer breaks through all walls, barriers, and prejudices so we can be the children of God living in the city of God.”⁴⁷ Only then may we, regardless our mother tongue, “...With one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁸

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Gary Oster joined the faculty of the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship (GLE) in the Summer of 2007 after more than two years as associate dean for Academics in the Regent University School of Undergraduate Studies and a decade in senior administrative roles at William Tyndale College. He has served as a classroom and online instructor since 1994 and currently serves as associate professor and director of the Doctor of Strategic Leadership program.

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