

The Babel Syndrome (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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In the liturgical life of the Church, the event of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended on the Apostles and they began to speak in various languages, is linked to the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament. There, too, people began to speak in different languages but with an entirely different outcome. Pentecost brought the unity of the gospel, Babel brought the scattering of peoples through the diversity of languages. There are lessons within the Babel story, however, that are worth noting.



I leave it to others to worry about the historical nature

of the Tower of Babel. Linguistic evidence points to widespread language differentiation for most of human history. But the lesson of Babel should not be lost in historical analysis, for some of it is quite contemporary.

In Genesis, the building of the Tower provokes a crisis for all of humanity.

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.” But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, “Indeed the people *are* one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.” (Gen 11:4-6 NKJ)

God’s action in “confusing the languages” is similar to His action in Genesis 6:

And the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he *is* indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.” (Gen 6:3 NKJ)

God has not destroyed humanity – but He has mercifully placed *limits* on us. Those limits are not punishments, but restraints. He saves us from *ourselves*.

Though Orthodoxy does not view human nature as poisoned or utterly perverted, it nevertheless recognizes certain tendencies and dangers. This is one of the deepest flaws in modernity. The myth of the modern age is rooted in a view of progress. Historically, progress is the transferral of the ultimate hope within the Christian

faith, the coming of the Kingdom of God, to a present tense project of human civilization. Utopian visions are transferred from paradise and transformed into moral caveats. “To make the world a better place” is a moral platitude that finds almost universal moral acceptance.

Strangely, the story of Babel is God’s rebuke for just such an effort.

The Scriptural account of humanity is not one of progress. It is the story of salvation and salvation is not the outcome of any form of progress, technological, political or spiritual. The concern in Genesis is stated rather plainly, and in a timeless fashion:

“Now nothing they propose to do will be withheld from them.”

It is interesting that the Babel account does not specifically treat the question of the tower. There is no sin attached to the tower itself. Equally problematic are tower, city, and a “name for ourselves.” The Biblical writers were sure to have known that many “towers” were built in the Ancient Near East. Cities and names continued to be built. It is the *unity* that is attacked in the Biblical account. The confusion of the tongues creates many cities, many towers, many names. It also creates competing cities, towers and names. We can even say that it creates wars between cities, towers and names. And somehow, in the Biblical vision of humanity, those confusing and often tragic outcomes are to be preferred to “nothing being withheld from them.”

This is the fearful aspect of the love of God. For the God who loves and saves us, also loves us enough to save us from ourselves. I think it is wrong to say that God creates wars, but our wars are allowed lest something worse should come. Who cannot say that the tragedy of the Second World War was better than the looming tragedy of an unchecked Nazi Empire? The darkness that destroyed over 30 million persons still pales against the darkness it overthrew.

Biblically, our “shortened” life-span is also a Divine limitation imposed on us for our own relative good. It would be surprising to most, but the Scriptures tend to think that living longer (than 120 years) only leads to more trouble and intractable evil in our lives. The Scriptures do not think of human beings as inherently evil, but the Scriptures are extremely realistic regarding all human beings. It should be noted that nothing has ever made the Scriptures human skepticism seem incorrect in this regard.

The modern period has been marked by numerous Babel-like hopes. As noted

earlier, we believe in progress. The modern project is all about building a better world and creating a better future. Of course, the better future has been through several versions. For some, the better future was the arrival of the “Classless Society,” i.e. Communism. In the name of a better world, many people were killed. The same could be said for a variety of other “future” projects.

A weakness in all “projects” is their tendency towards utilitarian approaches. Utilitarianism is a moral philosophy in which “good” is measured by “useful” (*utilis* in Latin). Here in East Tennessee, for example, we built large dam projects to produce electricity. It was a great leap forward for rural electrification, but displaced many communities. It was considered to be an “end” that made the “means” acceptable.

Such reasoning has always been part of the human project. New, however, are the scales to which the modern imagination can reach. And with the size of our modern “towers” (projects), so, too the size of our modern failures and dangers.

Christian eschatology includes some reference to this phenomenon. In 2Thessalonians, St. Paul writes:

Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way. (2Th 2:3-7 NKJ)

Here, St. Paul refers to something that “restrains” the “mystery of lawlessness.” There are many and varied suggestions for what (or who) St. Paul has in mind. Regardless, there are many very identifiable restraints already revealed in Scripture. Death is one of them. Regardless of a man’s evil – he only lives for a lifetime. In the long stretch of things, such fragility plays a very important role. The Soviet Union, just prior to its collapse, saw a string of short-term leaders reminiscent of the Roman Empire during its unstable periods. Such instability, inherent in the fragility of our lives, has a way of collapsing systems.

But, back to Christian expectations, there is an apocalyptic concern with the “man of sin,” described variously as the “Antichrist” and in other manners. St. John says

that “there are already many antichrists in the world.” But St. Paul seems to have a particular one in mind. Revelation concerns itself with a particular manifestation of such evil. And there it also hints at a systemic form or power for such evil:

He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. (Rev 13:16-17 NKJ)

The late twentieth century gave rise to widespread Christian speculation about a bureaucratic beast. Everyone from American fundamentalists to newly liberated Russians pondered the meaning of Universal Product Code images on goods and food. Such fears among former Soviet citizens would seem perfectly reasonable. Having just survived a 70-year long conspiracy theory in plain sight, their concern for any centrally-planned system of observation and accounting can only be considered well-founded. I had a young Russian man whose mother sent him to me (the priest) to consult before he obtained a social-security number. As an American, I smiled.

But his fear was not misplaced within the tradition. At some point, the restraints *will* be removed and the reach of man’s Tower will be manifest. Like every other great project, that tower will be described in benign, even *beneficial* terms. It is important to note as well, that not all towers are *that* Tower. Not every benefit is *that* benefit.

On a more personal level, we do well to contemplate the towers of our own lives. Several of my life’s better-laid plans came either to no fruition or to a costly collapse. Various confusions contributed to their failure. The modern habit is to revisit our failures and “wonder what might have been.” This is an idolatry. We do not know what might have been. More often than not, God has likely spared the world from “what might have been,” for which we should be eternally grateful.

It is difficult to accept that God has placed limits in our lives for our protection. Our dreams and visions of “what would be good,” often exclude our salvation. We treat our salvation as a disconnected reward for the good choices of our life (the consumer’s “heaven”). The process of salvation, including the woof and weave of tragedy and rescue that form the purification and illumination of our lives, are beyond our planning (we wouldn’t dare). But God dares. He smashes towers and raises them up bringing the whole world towards His Kingdom.