

## **Getting Our Priorities Straight: I Think, Therefore, I Am**

Genesis 11:1-9

April 10, 2011

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language so that they will not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because the Lord confused the language of all the earth, and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

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First, let me tell you about the sermon I *could* preach. Maybe you have heard it before.

The Tower of Babel is about human beings storming the heavens in an attempt to encroach upon the mind of God. The story serves as a kind of warning; a slap on the hand to human beings and our intellect – reminding us to “let God be God” and to know our place in the order of the universe.

The ethical implications of such a sermon would be obvious. By God’s actions toward those who built the tower at Babel, it is safe to assume that we are being faithful when we limit the boundaries on what we seek to understand. Part of being a Good Christian would mean not seeking to know; not seeking to explore beyond the limits set forth in scripture and tradition.

For example:

- What the Bible says about creation is sufficient and warrants no further intellectual engagement.
- The wonder of the human body – how it is constructed, even down to the building blocks of our DNA – are mysteries better left alone.
- What other people – in other denominations, nations, and even faith traditions – have come to understand about God is irrelevant and has no bearing on our understanding of truth.

It is possible to preach this kind of sermon based on the familiar story of the Tower of Babel, but, in fact, I cannot.

I can’t preach that sermon because to do so is to assume that God’s problem – and the reason for God’s judgment toward the people – has to do with the tower that they were building...and, you see, the tower isn’t the problem.

God’s problem is that the people had one language. God’s problem is that the people had created a closed system. They had consolidated their knowledge, their power, and their identity in order to make a name for themselves.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing in this story to suggest that the people’s motivation for building a tower was to commandeer the mind of God. If anything, the people seem disinterested in the mind of God. The people’s sin was their desire to control their knowledge; to bottle it up; to hoard it in one place.

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<sup>1</sup> From a footnote of the Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin’s paper on this text (The Well, Davidson, 2010).

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Let me say – no, we cannot fully comprehend the mind of God. There will always be aspects of God – mysterious and unknowable – that are beyond us.

But let me also be clear that in no way does our theology lead us to believe that the grey matter in between our ears is designed to simply take up space. God is not against knowledge. God is not against curiosity. God is not against intellectual or scientific pursuit. God is not against the exploration of this wonderful creation. In fact – God creates us in order to explore it. It is what makes us human.

A few weeks ago, a friend and colleague introduced me to an idea, originally from the field of pre-biotic chemistry, called the “adjacent possible.”<sup>2</sup> A guy by the name of Steven Johnson wrote a book called *Where Good Ideas Come From* that incorporates this principle to explain how innovation happens.

Bear with me while a theologian attempts to talk about science. The best illustration of the adjacent possible from the scientific perspective is the carbon atom. One of the reasons why a carbon atom is the perfect element for creation is because it has four electron clouds that something else can connect to, meaning that it can lead to lots of interesting compounds – which, in turn, create the building blocks for things like grasshoppers, trees, seaweed, and human beings.

To explain the concept for non-scientists, Johnson uses the metaphor of a room with four doors, each representing an adjacent possibility. When you open one door, you discover a room with three more doors; three more adjacent possibilities. The more adjacent possibilities that are present, the argument goes, the more innovative the environment will be.

For example, Johnson tells a story about the need for neonatal incubators in the desperately poor country of Malaysia where infant mortality rates are high. With the light and warmth of incubators, many lives can be saved. The problem was that the technology of incubators designed in the west is

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<sup>2</sup> With thanks to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, pastor at First Presbyterian, Dallas, who taught me this principle at the NEXT Conference in Indianapolis in February of this year. To learn more about the idea, google Steven Johnson’s name and click on the TED link.

not easily accessible in Malaysia, meaning the incubators would work for about a year and then break – never to be replaced. A technology that is widely available in Malaysia, however, is automobiles. So a group of scientists working with the indigenous population re-designed the incubators to run off of car parts that could be easily replaced by anyone who lived in the village.

Another example: recently, the Nike Corporation publically released more than 400 of the patents it owns for environmentally friendly materials and technologies under a web-based portal called GreenXchange. The result is that other companies can leverage Nike's breakthroughs and work collaboratively to create more eco-friendly products.<sup>3</sup>

One more example; one that will require your participation. Raise your hand if you or your children have ever been taught anything about God by Lynn Chance in a Sunday school class. Keep your hands up. Now, for the rest of you, raise your hand if you or your children have ever been taught anything about God by any of those with their hands already raised in a Sunday school class. Keep your hands up. Now, one more time. Raise your hand if you or your children have ever been taught anything about God by someone with their hand up.

The adjacent possible.<sup>4</sup>

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So, preacher, what does any of this have to do with the Tower of Babel?

Well, it is hard to embrace the adjacent possible if you stay in your tower with the intent of consolidating knowledge for the purpose of making a name for yourself. It is hard to embrace the adjacent possible if you view knowledge as something to control and possess instead of something that leads to discovery.

That was not how God created us to be. So, the story goes, when God came down from the heavens to pay a visit to the land of Shinar and saw what was transpiring, God opened things up and scattered the people by confusing their speech; forcing them to take leave of the misplaced notion

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<sup>3</sup> From an article by Steven Johnson in the Wall Street Journal, October of 2010.

<sup>4</sup> I owe this pedagogical method to Joe Clifford who illustrated this principle with the congregation at the NEXT Conference in February.

that they could construct a monument to their own ideas; as if they would have no use for the rest of creation; as if they would have no use for their Creator.

I want share with you that sitting with this story during the week, I was struck again by one of the most powerful things about the scriptures. We believe that the scriptures, and especially the verses of this first book in the Bible, are written to do much more than give us a history lesson. In fact, what makes these words scripture is that they actually describe how things are. They speak, not only of our past, but to our present.<sup>5</sup>

*Come, let us build ourselves a city,  
and a tower with its top in the heavens,  
and let us make a name for ourselves;  
otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the  
whole earth.*

*And let us all read the same books.  
And watch the same news channels.  
And vote for the same people.  
And gather in like-minded groups.  
And believe in the exact same ways.*

And to this impulse – practiced by people like you and me from the dawn of human history – to this impulse to consolidate and protect our own ideas, the God behind every door, the God who is the Source of our being, the God who laid down his life for the sake of our own asks,

“Where is the possibility in that?”

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<sup>5</sup> Bratcher, Dennis, “Commentary on Genesis 11:1-9: Pentecost Sunday.” Christian Resource Institute (<http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/Cpentecostot.html>) As found in the Rev. Jarrett McLaughlin’s paper from The Well (2010) on this text.