

When Ambition Become Tyranny

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Genesis

Genesis 10 traces Noah's family after the flood in what is often called the Table of Nations. First the descendants of Japheth, then the descendants of Ham, and finally the descendants of Shem are listed. Among them, Ham's grandson Nimrod stands out as a mighty hunter, a tyrant, and a city builder who founded an empire of naked aggression based in Babylon.

With Nimrod fresh in our memory, we come to the building of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. Like many cities in the ancient Near East, Babel is designed as a walled enclosure around a great temple or ziggurat. The mud-brick stair tower was intended to reach to the realm of the gods. With such a tower, people could ascend to the gods, and the gods could descend to earth. Although God does not condemn this drive to reach the heavens, he questions people's motives behind the project. In their own pride and self-aggrandizing ambition, the people want to "make a name for ourselves" (Genesis 11:4). They also act out of fear – the fear of being scattered throughout the world.

God's objection to the tower is that it will give people the expectation that "nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). Like Adam and Eve before them, the builders of Babel

intend to use their God-given creative powers to act against God's purposes. They plan to do the opposite of what God commanded in the cultural mandate. Instead of filling the earth, they intend to concentrate themselves in one location. Instead of exploring the fullness of the name God gave them, they decide to make a name for themselves.

We might be tempted to conclude from this story that cities are inherently bad, but this is not so. God gave Israel their capital city of Jerusalem, and the ultimate abode of God's people is a holy city coming down from heaven. The concept of city is not evil, but the pride that we may come to attach to cities is what displeases God. We sin when we look to civic triumph and culture, in place of God, as our source of meaning and direction.

While it might appear that God's scattering of the peoples is a punishment, in fact it is a means of redemption. From the beginning, God intended people to disperse across the world. By scattering people again, God put humanity back on its intended path, resulting in the beautiful array of cultures we see today.

The Tower of Babel reminds us to honor diversity in our work today. The specific offense the builders committed was centralizing their culture, language, and institutions. In their ambition to do one great thing, i.e. to make a name for themselves, they stifled the breadth of endeavor that

ought to come with the varieties of gifts, services, activities, and functions with which God endows people.

In many cases Christian leaders and institutions have sought the same kind of concentration of power that tyrants and authoritarians seek, albeit with more benevolent goals. Christian legislators seek control over the populace, with the object of enforcing piety. Christian educators seek to enforce morality through authoritarian control over freedom of thought. Christian business people seek oligopoly to spread a Christian model of doing business.

As laudable as all these goals are, the events of the Tower of Babel suggest they are often dangerously misguided. In a world where even those in Christ still struggle with sin, God's idea of good dominion seems to be to disperse people, power, authority, and capabilities, rather than concentrating power in one person, institution, party, or movement. Of course, some situations demand decisiveness – a pilot would be foolish to take a passenger vote about which runway to land on. But it could be that more often than we realize, when we are in positions of power, God is calling us to disperse, delegate, authorize, and train others, rather than exercising all the power ourselves. Doing so is messy, inefficient, hard to measure, and anxiety-inducing, but it may be exactly what God is calling Christian leaders to do.