

"The True Way to Unity"

Genesis 11:1-9

The Feast of Pentecost + June 6, 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

"Why can't we all just put aside our differences and come together in unity?" Have you ever said that as you read the newspaper or watched the news? Around the world there are thousands of people groups, each with its own language, its own customs, its own way of life. Often we read of new conflicts brewing between people groups or old conflicts boiling over into armed conflict. Here in the United States, where we have been blessed with a tradition as a melting pot, there are nevertheless many signs of conflict and disunity among people of different languages and backgrounds. No wonder that immigration reform is such a hot political issue. What does God's Word have to say about all this? Is it possible for different people groups to dwell together in unity? And what is the way to genuine unity among the different peoples of the world? Our sermon today is divided into two parts: first, some of man's ideas for creating unity--which are unsuccessful, and second, God's plan to bring the peoples of the world together.

— I —

Way back here in the Book of Genesis, in the early history of the world, we hear of people who wanted unity. At the Creation the Lord God had commanded that the earth should be filled with people: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28a). After the disaster of the flood, God told Noah and his sons, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.... teem on the earth and multiply in it" (Genesis 9:1,7). Chapter Ten of Genesis tells how the people spread abroad on the earth after the flood (Genesis 10:32). But in a plain in the land of Shinar there were a group of people who settled and figured out a plan that would keep them from being dispersed over the face of the whole earth (Genesis 11:4). They didn't want to be scattered as the Lord had decreed. They wanted to stay together so that they could make a name for themselves and grow in power and influence over the other peoples of the earth. What was their method of producing unity? What did they devise to keep themselves together?

For one thing, they tried technology. They made some new discoveries, apparently, and tried to put this to work in creating unity: "And they said to

one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen [tar] 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, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth" (vv. 3-4). Apparently they discovered a new way to harden bricks by firing them in a kiln. They saw that they were able to build taller structures than before. They believed that this would lead other people groups to fear them and stand in awe of them and trusted that this new technology and all it could do for them would keep them from being dispersed.

People still trust in technology. They look at the problems of the world and trust that new discoveries are going to be able to solve the problems that we face. To be sure, God has blessed us with great knowledge and know-how of which other generations never dreamed. Who would have thought that doctors would be able to look at the inside of your body and thoroughly check out your internal organs without having to cut you open? Who would have thought that we could begin to understand the tiniest building blocks of matter and of life itself? Who would have thought that we could cheaply and quickly communicate with many millions of people all over the world simply by using the computers in our homes?

But can these advances bring people together? Can they unite the various peoples of the world? Sadly, the answer is no. In and of themselves, new advances cannot bring true unity among people. Take the internet, for example. What could be a better tool than the world wide web for bringing people together? But instead of bringing people together, it is more and more used as a way to exploit people, to steal from them, to stir up hatred against other groups, to spread lies about other nations and their people, to threaten and intimidate them with horrible images.

Neither did this new brick-making discovery result in true unity. The Lord Himself came down to see what was going on. In order to break up this group building the tower--in order to keep these people from being a plague on the other peoples of the earth--the Lord resolved to come down and confuse their language. He intervened in their affairs by confusing their language and dispersing them over the face of the whole earth as He had commanded.

We might look at it another way. These people in the plain of Shinar tried to keep from being dispersed by making a name for themselves with their great

city and the tower that would reach to the heavens (v. 4). This seems to be a way of saying, "We will work our way to get closer to the gods. We will build this tower that will take us to heaven so that we might be with our gods and then we will be famous and people from all over will come and climb our tower and get themselves to be with the gods."

This is very similar to the way all man-made religions work: you have to go to work and serve your god/gods. You have to strive and work and follow the prescribed laws and make the required sacrifices and make a way for yourself to get up to heaven. And the hope is that these man-made religions will unite people. But this did not work for these in the Plain of Shinar. The Lord saw to that. And it will not work for us either. Our sinfulness makes us unfit to climb our way into heaven. No matter how hard we try, we are unable to penetrate heaven's gates to get ourselves in where God is. Indeed, human religion, instead of uniting people, has only driven more wedges between different people groups. Look at the Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Man's methods for unity simply do not work.

— II —

So what is God's way of creating unity, true unity, among the peoples of the earth? It begins, not with man working his way to God, but with God coming down to man. "And the Lord came down to see the city and tower which the children of man had built" (v.5). The triune God says: "Come, let us go down and there confuse their language., so that they may not understand one another's speech" (v.7). We don't know exactly how the Lord did this. It may be an example of God the Son taking human form for a short time. In any case, it shows that the Lord is not aloof from His creation. Rather, He has a keen interest in the human beings He has created and desires to have a hands-on approach to being their God. This is the pattern that God continued when He, in the person of His Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit, became a true human being in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God came down to us when Jesus, the Son of God, lived as one of us, perfectly fulfilling the laws of God for every person of every language and ethnic background. Jesus was among us when He carried the guilt of all our sins all the way to the cross, where He suffered in full for the punishment deserved by the entire human race. That means that Jesus answered for every sin of every person, no matter what they had done, no matter what language they spoke or what their customs or

culture. He is the Savior of all human beings of all time. That is the sure testimony of His resurrection from the dead. God is saying to all the peoples of the world: Look to Jesus, My Son, and be rescued from hell and damnation. Look to Him, trust in Him, and you will be united as never before.

The pattern continues after Jesus' ascension into heaven. God still has a desire for coming down to us. He still has his ways of coming down among us and uniting us. We saw it in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost after Jesus' ascension. The sound of the mighty wind brought together a crowd, and the disciples spoke to peoples of many different languages, each in their native tongue. In each case the apostles declared the wonders of God that He had demonstrated through the coming of Jesus. The Holy Spirit directed these people of many nations to the One Savior of the nations, Jesus Christ. As the Holy Spirit added about three thousand souls that day, these people began to find that being united in Christ brought them unity with each other. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, they were all one in Christ Jesus.

This continues to be the work of the Holy Spirit today: to bring people to Jesus, and by their unity with Him, to unite them one with the other. This is why we rejoice at the work of people like Jon and Carol Shaneyfelt, who are working to support Bible translators all over the world. In the hands of Godly men and women computer technology truly is a blessing in putting the word of God into written form more quickly than ever before. As the word of God changes hearts it alone can create the true unity needed among the peoples of the world. No wonder we read in the Book of Revelation: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Rev. 7:9-10).

Man cannot bring true unity, but the Holy Spirit does so as He brings people to faith in the one Savior, Jesus Christ.