

“FROM BABEL TO PENTECOST”  
(Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-2, 5-11)  
© 2010 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 5-23-10]

-I: THE PROBLEM-

1. [BOTH Services] Read Early:: Genesis 11:1-9 Read Prior to Message: Acts 2:1-2, 5-11 and Pray.
2. [Approach four different church members and ask them the following phrases...]  
“*Bonjour ami. Comment allez-vous?*”  
“*Hallo venninner. Hvordan står det til?*”  
“*Hola, amigo. ¿Como estas?*”  
“*Guten-tag Freund. Wie geht es ihnen?*”  
Or how about this?... “*Hello Friend. How are you?*”

A–You see, when I speak that phrase in English, we all understand it.

B–But when I speak it, say, in French, or Norwegian, or Spanish, or German, you’re only going to understand it if you speak that particular language, as well.

3. But of course, the problem of mis-communication and misunderstanding in today’s world goes deeper than the mere differences between vocal languages.

A–[Story of 2 Men and Washing Machine]

A man once saw his neighbor next door struggling with a heavy, bulky washing machine in front of his house, and he went over to help. The owner got on one side of the appliance, and the neighbor got on the other, and they both struggled and struggled to get it to move, but to no avail. They both finally stopped, exhausted and frustrated.

The neighbor spoke up: “*At this rate, we’ll NEVER be able to get this machine in the house!*” ...To which the owner glared at his neighbor in surprise and said, “*IN the house?! I’m trying to move this thing OUT of the house!*”

B–Now, isn't that typical of human communication? It’s often distorted and filtered by our own assumptions and presuppositions (which sometimes turn out to be wrong!).

1–And yet, this distortion permeates today's society, where pride, prejudice, mistrust, and simple misunderstanding all work against effective communication.

2–The late Dr. Ed Cole (Christian author & speaker) once wrote that “*[Relationships] die when the [persons or the entities involved] either refuse to communicate, or when too much distortion prevents understanding.*”

C–That’s why I honestly believe that the most powerful weapon that evil has in its arsenal against humanity is *not* anger, hate or violence, but *mis-communication* – it seems to be the root of most all *other* problems we face, whether in our families, marriages, communities, churches, and even among nations.

4. But of course, today isn't the first time in history that there's been a crisis of communication.

A—In fact, the first scriptures you heard read earlier from Genesis 11 tells the story of humanity wanting to build a great tower to the heavens (called the “Tower of Babel”), sort of as proof that we didn't need God anymore.

B—But the story goes on to say that in our self-centeredness and pride during construction, prejudice, mistrust, and paranoia resulted in a form of mis-communication that scattered people throughout the world with different languages, leaving them unable to effectively communicate with each other.

## –II: THE SOLUTION–

5. And yet, today's second scripture from Acts 2 tells us that something wonderful happened at Pentecost to potentially change all that... That something was the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

A—Think about the two stories, and notice that everything described in Acts 2 is a mirror *opposite* of what we find in Genesis 11:

<u>Babel</u>	<u>Pentecost</u>
Prideful humanity tries to <i>be</i> God;	Humanity gathers, realizing they're <i>not</i> God;
Humans build tower <i>up</i> to <i>reach</i> God;	God sends Holy Spirit <i>down</i> to <i>reach</i> humanity
God causes <i>confusion</i> of communication;	God sends Holy Spirit to bring about <i>understanding</i>
God scatters the nations and they begin to mistrust each other;	God brings (Vss. 5-6) “ <i>persons from every nation</i> ” <i>together</i> in reconciliation and love.

B—In other words, through the gift of His Holy Spirit at Pentecost (the day we're celebrating today), God gave to every single person the *potential* for true communication that had been previously destroyed and distorted by our own self-centeredness and pride.

C—Now, notice I said God's Holy Spirit gives us communication “*potential*” – E.G., it's *not* automatic just because we're Christians, or just because we believe in God.

1—And that's because, even though you and I live in a time *after* Pentecost, many people today (including many of us as Christians) are still living in Babel.

2—We still allow pride, prejudice, mistrust, paranoia, and selfishness to distort and cause problems in our communication with one another.

D—And so, one thing today's story teaches us is that until we appropriate the communication potential available from God's Holy Spirit through our own *personal* Pentecost, you and I will *always* have problems with communicating with one another.

- 1–Husbands and wives (men and women, boys and girls) will continue to struggle to truly understand one another.
- 2–Parents and children will continue to have difficulties communicating.
- 3–Communities, governments, and entire nations will continue to misunderstand and mistrust each other.

6. So, in the time we've got left, I'd to offer two suggestions to help us communicate better that I believe we find in today's story of Pentecost.

–III: TWO SUGGESTIONS–

7. First of all, Pentecost teaches us a right way of SPEAKING.

A–Remember that at Babel the people gathered to glorify *themselves*, but at Pentecost they gathered to glorify *God*.<sup>1</sup>

B–So let me ask... When you speak, does *WHAT* you say and *HOW* you say it glorify God?

1–Ephesians 4:29, (MSG) “*Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift*”

(NRSV) “*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear.*”<sup>2</sup>

2–Does your speech (and actions, for that matter) reflect “*what helps / grace to those who hear?*” Do they “edify/build others up” and display respect and love, even for and with people with whom you disagree?

C–That's the kind of speech that we're supposed to have.

1–And that means we've got to get rid of things like jokes about a person's skin color or their politics, or theology, or sexual orientation – you see, we don't have to agree with a person's beliefs or lifestyle in order to treat them like human beings!

2–This means that we have to get rid of gossip and rumors – because even if they *are true*, or even if we *are “right”* about something, often best way to glorify God is to keep that knowledge to ourselves, and *not* use it to tear others down.

D–We can communicate better, you see, first by *speaking* in ways that glorify God.

8. But the second way this story teaches us to communicate better is by remembering the importance of LISTENING.

A–Remember that at Babel, humanity was so busy talking to itself about how to build the tower that there wasn't time to listen to God.

B–But at Pentecost, the people were gathered there for the sole purpose of listening to and hearing from God through the speech of Peter and the other Apostles.

1–You see, unlike what some Christians say, I believe that the miracle of Pentecost was *not* really a miracle of **speaking** (e.g., speaking in tongues – though that’s a legitimate, though misunderstood, gift of the Spirit).

2–No. The *real* miracle of Pentecost was one of people being able to **listen and understand** each other and God in a new and fresh way.

C–As a general rule, you see, “*speaking divides, but listening unites.*”

1–Someone once said, “*It’s better to listen and let people think you’re a fool than to speak and leave no doubt about it.*”

2–James Russell Lowell: “*Blessed are they who have nothing to say and who cannot be persuaded to say it.*”

3–Maybe that’s why God gave us *two* ears and only *one* tongue: so we can listen *twice as much* as we talk.

D–So... How well do you truly listen to others? to your spouse? your children? your parents? your friends? your workmates? your fellow church members? to God?

1–You see, even when we disagree others, we dishonor God (not to mention the other person) when we criticize without taking time to listen to their point of view.

2–Whether we agree or not, we can at least *listen*.<sup>3</sup>

#### –IV: CONCLUSION–

9. You see, I believe that much of the fear, mistrust, prejudice, and paranoia we live with in today’s world is the result of us not really being able to effectively communicate.

A–And in large part, it’s because we’ve never experienced a *personal* Pentecost in our own lives – at least in terms of our communication ability, many of us still live in Babel.

B–But yet, today’s story reminds us that if we can allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives...

(1) to Enable us to **speak** in ways that glorify God, and...

(2) to teach us to be **better listeners**,...

C–...then we will all be better-equipped to help solve today’s communication crisis by helping people move “*From Babel to Pentecost.*”

10. [PRAY... *Invitation for people to experience their own personal Pentecost by inviting the Holy Spirit to reign free in their lives...*]

**ENDNOTES:**

1. The Jewish festival called “Pentecost” was an annual time to celebrate God's goodness through their crops and farms each year.
2. Perhaps you know the story of a man carrying a pitch fork one day being attacked and bitten by a dog as he was walking down the road. In self-defense, the man struck the dog w/the prong of the pitch-fork and killed him. The owner of the dog came running up and asked, "Why didn't you strike the dog with the other end?" The man wasted no time in his answer: "Why didn't your dog come at me with the other end?"
3. A potential THIRD POINT could be that Pentecost teaches us the essential-ness of GRACE in our speech. After all, our words can be deadly, and we should always make sure that our words reflect the grace of God BEFORE we say things that we may regret later. Some people think we have to speak our mind in order to get our point across. But we can always get our point across without having to use sharp words or sharp language -- we can learn to be tactful and grace-filled in our speech. An ancient proverb says, “A wise person REFLECTS before they speak; a fool, however, speaks, then reflects on what they have said.”