

Tower of Babel

Lessons for the mission of the church

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Introduction

The subject for this essay is what lessons for the mission of the church can we learn from the story of the Tower of Babel?

The story of the Tower of Babel is written down in Genesis 11:1-9. First I will take a look at the story, then I will take a look at the context of the story and then I will give my answer or conclusion of the essay.

Whenever I quote bible verses they are from the English Standard Version.

Genesis 11:1-9

1. Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3. 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. 4. 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."

5. And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 6. And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." 8. So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth and they left off building the city. 9. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

The major theme in this story seems to be the origin of the languages or the confusing of speech. Is this the main theme of the story or are there other hidden themes? The text is beautiful because it can be structured in different ways and it contains Hebrew wordplay. Looking at the structure the centre is, "And the Lord came down" (Genesis

11:5). Is that not wonderful? The people were making a tower up into heaven and the Lord has to come down to see what they are making. However it is not only a tower which the people are making, they are also making a city and a name for themselves. “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” (Genesis 11:4). The tower was the centre of the city. It could also have been a religious centre, whereby people were bonded to each other¹. Morris (1977, 270) says

Quite likely this project was originally presented to the people in the guise of true spirituality. The tower in its lofty grandeur would symbolize the might and majesty of the true God of heaven... surely please God and more than compensate for the fact that the entire project was contrary to God's commandment and would glorify human achievement rather than recognize human frailty and divine salvation.

A lesson the church can learn from that is to be careful with presenting true spirituality or the true faith without enduring the critics. The church should ask, is what we present glorifying God or is it glorifying human achievement?

And the church should ask and teach her members to test the church. Test means here to build the church, not to take it down. As Romans 12:2 says “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” According to Romans 12:2, the church has to renew her mind, and that is a process which has to continue each day. The church has to test what is the will of God; to test what they are doing is the same as glorifying God's name. Because the text also speaks about people making their own name.

In the bible a name is something which also presents a character. In Genesis 12:2, God blesses Abraham and makes his name great. In Genesis 11, the people want to make a name by themselves. What can we learn from that, in our world? If you have a business you are building up a name. You want everyone to know your name of the business, because then it will become successful. You want to present a good image. How often is the church not busy with presenting a good image to the world? They want to make the name on their own.

¹ Archaeological evidence shows that the Tower of Babel could have been a ziggurat. I just leave the idea there and I won't discuss it in this essay, because of the limited word count.

Context

The whole Old Testament explains who God is, how God deals with Israel and how Israel deals with this God. Except for Genesis 1-11, it only shows who God is and how He deals with all men. It is a kind of an introduction to the rest of the Old Testament. It shows that God created the earth that humans were made as an image of God, that humans sinned, and it shows the consequences of sin. Gowan (1988, 116) says about the story of the Tower of Babel,

The story forms the culmination of J's sequence dealing with alienation: husband from wife (ch. 3), brother from brother (ch. 4), children from parents (ch. 9), and now, peoples from other peoples.²

Gibson (1981, 209) adds to that, "In reality human beings have brought their divisions on themselves, and they have done so because they have first made a division between themselves and God." So to this point we are back at the start of Genesis, because there is division between men, and between man and God (cf. Genesis 3, Genesis 11). So the lesson we can learn from the context of the story is that there is division between men and between man and God. I think one lesson the church can learn from the story is to search unity in Christ. Just because this story shows that naturally there is division between men and I think we can take this broader, even between Christians or between churches or denominations.

Power of the people

The story of the tower of Babel is also a story of power. The people were united in building a city, and they were united in the force of not getting scattered around the world. So the unity of the people became the power. Today we can see power in unity when the national team is playing football. In the Netherlands all people will watch football and they get dressed in orange coloured clothes³. So unity makes people powerful. We can even see that in history, e.g. with the fall of the wall in Berlin.

The word power does not occur in Genesis 11. However God says in Genesis 11:6, "And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."

In Western Europe town centres there is often an old church building which is there for a few hundred years. Around this church the town has grown bigger and bigger

² Gowan is dealing here also with the Wellhausen source theory. I am not discussing that theory here in my essay. But it is quite interesting how the different stories in Genesis 1- 11 work to this culmination.

³ Orange is the national colour of the Netherlands.

and is still growing. The Roman Catholic Church had a lot of power in Western Europe; they appointed the kings and the dukes. So from that point of view there are similarities with the story of Babel, the church had power, the buildings are impressive, strong and beautiful. So what about the protestant churches, their buildings are also in the centre of town? What about church in general or even looking at the organisational structure of the church? Looking at my own church the synod has some power, and the mandate of that power lays in the fact that they have to unite the local churches. And even within the local churches the church elders have the power because of the unity; they have to unite the people in the church. So one lesson the church can learn from this, is to be aware of the power they got on the mandate of unity. Genesis 11:6 says that God says “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” So in unity nothing will be impossible.

Conclusion

What lessons for the mission of the church can we learn from the story of the Tower of Babel? The first lesson is that the mission of the church is not the work of men but the work of God. The church has to be humble; they can not make the name or the image that of their own. The church has to seek the will of God and to test the will of God. The will of God, is to follow Jesus. Following him means loving God and loving your neighbour. In Mathew 5:14 Jesus says “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Following Jesus and obeying his commands shows something to the world. You cannot hide if you follow Jesus. The people will see it. So the lesson is that the church has to focus on following Jesus.

Another lesson the church can learn from the story of the Tower of Babel is that there is division between men, and between men and God. The church can recognise this and learn that we can only be united if we are all in the same body, in Jesus. All who follow Jesus are our brothers and sisters. So why should the church be busy with saying why they are the true church and what is wrong with the other churches. Are we not all one in one body? Also the story of the tower of Babel shows us that the church has to teach their members to be critical of the church, to test if the church is

glorifying God. This is to build up the church so that it does the will of God and not the will of men.

Another lesson the church can learn from the story is the power to unite people or to keep united. How often are the decisions made by the leaders in the church also based on the fact that they want to preserve unity? The church, the members, and the leaders should be aware of this kind of power and decision making. Of course the church has to seek unity, but there is only one form of unity and that is that we all serve the same God. We are all part of one body. We are all one in the same body, in Jesus Christ.

The main lesson the church can learn from the story of the Tower of Babel is that the church should glorify God and follow Jesus.

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