

CTC BULLETIN

VOL. XXII, No. 2. August 2006

Rebuilding the Household of God in Asia

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Scripture: Genesis 11:1-9, Acts 2:1-15

Build Ourselves A City

With the rise of the curtain on the 21st century, the fading of the socialist system in East Europe and the collapse of Soviet Union have inaugurated the new century as the era of globalization. Globalization in its nature is a process of transnational integration of economic systems to capitalism. Supported by the rapid development of information technology and reinforced by the military power of the capitalist countries, it has become a totalistic process and dominant mechanism affecting all humanity and the whole of creation on earth.

Globalization is now widely seen to be the rule of financial capitals. It forcefully dominates and impacts the whole of human life and society. Its function rivals that of a religion. Therefore, it is also called “money-theism” or “religion of the market.”

Under the rules of this “new religion”, market, instead of being a space for the exchange of goods and services has become the soteriological principle for all nations and people. This new religion functions as a total and totalizing system with its own dogmas, rituals, and liturgies. Further, it employs thousands of missionaries and sends them out to all

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corners of the globe in order to integrate them fully into the saving sphere of market.²

The phenomenon of globalization is not new. Economic imperialism has existed and has been experienced for many years. But the notion of globalization that confronts us today is seductive. It has promised individuals and nations all kinds of goodness and wealth that will bring heaven to us on earth. Even though the promise is a false one, it that has attracted many nations to join its club. This is without saying that they are at the same time under the pressures of economic, political and military threat from superpower capitalist countries. The impacts that globalization brought to our world today are enormous. Jonathan Sacks offers a comprehensive observation:

Our habits of consumption are denuding the world of its natural resources, leaving future generations with ever less on which to survive. Our despoliation of the environment threatens more species with extinction than at any time since *homo sapiens* first set foot on earth. Global warming endangers the biosphere. Genetic intervention in the food chain poses unquantifiable risks to health. Eugenic cloning and other medical technologies may lead humanity to promethean alterations of the human genome privileging the few at the cost of the many and calling into question the very idea of human uniqueness and irreplaceability on which our ideas of love, the human person and the non-negotiable dignity of a human life depend. Beyond these and no less urgent is the growing fragmentation of politics, the rise of new forms of tribalism and religious extremism, the persistence of ethnic wars and the capacity of highly decentralized groups, sometimes no more than a few individuals, to put security of life at risk. We have a global economy. We do not yet have a global culture, global governance or a coherent vision of global concern.³

A process of global integration seems to be taking shape. Whether people agree or disagree they are forced to participate in this epoch-making project. We are building ourselves a city, a city that will integrate whole of humanity into one global system, a city that will sanctify the market and promise to provide redemption to the poor, a city that can rival God to grant

² *Theologies and Cultures*, ed. by M.P. Joseph (Tainan: Chang Jung Christian University & Tainan Theological College and Seminary, 2004), 3.

salvation to the world. No matter whether these promises are true or false, this is not the first human attempt for independence from their creator to become the sole governors of the world.

A Tower that Reaches to the Heavens

Does not this attempt to build ourselves a city ring a bell? Is not the attempt of globalization to rival God and grant salvation to people a re-enactment of the familiar story of Babel?

The story of the tower of Babel in Genesis is a religious myth that reveals the facts of human reality. Lord Acton, a British historian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, said: "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely"⁴. The story of Babel is basically one of power corruption that tells about human beings' struggle against God, their creator, to gain a power that is undeserved. This power struggle fought to expand the domain of humanity. They said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." (Gen. 11.4) Out of the destructive experiences of flood that Noah and his people received, the motive to build a tower is apparently an action to counter the power of God that commands the flood to destroy people. This explains the plan to "build ourselves a city" to protect our lives "with a tower that reaches to the heavens" so that the flood will not be a threat anymore. It is reasonable for people to seek ways to protect themselves from destructions and attacks. To build cities, towers or economic or political systems that can save people from destruction and poverty are common human endeavors in every generation. Whenever humans accumulate enough strengths and power, we fight that which we oppose, even God.

Globalization is not the first organism in history that tried to build up its own kingdom in the name of human well-being and security. The Enlightenment movement of the 18th century established its kingdom of rationalism that was later called modernism. With the rapid development of scientific knowledge new insights about the world emerged and new

³ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (London & New York: Continuum, 2003), 193.

⁴ See *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, 3rd Edition, eds. E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James

patterns of life developed. The world was captured by a one-sided force of rational thinking. For better or worse, these movements symbolize human confidence and human efforts to overcome outside environments, and an attempt to direct their own destinies. A Chinese idiom "*Jen Ding Seng Thian*" (□□ □□) means human being eventually will overcome the power of the heaven/gods. Directed towards creation and nature it has been advocated to characterize this era of enlightenment.

'A tower that reaches to the heavens' does not only indicate the height of the tower, but it also expresses the desire of humans to subdue the divine power of God and to alter the creation order set by God upon the world. The people who built the tower of Babel were clear about the plan of God to spread them over the earth. According to their creation story: "...God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen. 1.27-28). The effort of the people to build a city and a tower to reach the heavens symbolized the human desire to establish their achievements and resist the plan to scatter them throughout creation. Their purpose in doing all these was, as they themselves declared: "so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

Therefore, it is not the problem of human beings trying to seek ways to protect themselves from havoc, but the problem of malfeasance that they committed when they were trying to protect themselves. This malfeasance, in religious language, is "sin against God". Paul Tillich used the term "hubris" to express it. The tower of Babel was not built simply to avoid havoc and flood, but it was a symbol of human dominion. Human beings taking charge. They make a name for themselves and resist the divine order of creation. The core of the sin of hubris is self-elevation, which by nature is idolatry. According to Tillich:

The word Hubris cannot be adequately translated, although the reality to which it points is described not only in Greek tragedy but also in the Old Testament. It is most distinctly expressed in the serpent's promise to Eve that eating from the tree of knowledge will make man equal to God. Hubris is the self-elevation of man into the

Trefil (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002).

sphere of the divine. Man is capable of such self-elevation because of his greatness.⁵

Tillich contends that all people have the hidden desire to be like God, and we act accordingly in our self-evaluation and self-affirmation. No one is willing to acknowledge, in concrete terms, their own finitude, weakness, errors, ignorance, insecurity, loneliness and anxiety. And one who is ready to acknowledge them makes another instrument of hubris out of that readiness. A demonic structure drives human beings to confuse natural self-affirmation with destructive self-elevation.⁶ The temptations to build the tower of Babel and to integrate a new world order by the globalization process are rooted in the same human habit of hubris, which occurs when the greatness of a human being is tasted and affirmed collectively and confidently, yet in a destructive way.

One Language and Common Speech

There are conditions to invite human beings to practice our rivalry to God. In the case of the Tower of Babel, the unison of human language was the circumstance. "Now the whole world had one language and a common speech" is the prologue of the story. One language and common speech provide a condition for human beings to develop concurrence and consensus, and out of which totalitarianism is possibly nurtured. Today's globalization is based upon an equally powerful communication condition, information technology.

The monopoly of communication, no matter if it is by control of speech, writing or communication media, creates power for domination. Globalization as a phenomenon of capitalism takes the shape of transnational integration, and is supported by modern information technology. The one language and common speech produced and monopolized by the internet and cyber-culture sustains and strengthens the modern Babel of globalization. Powerful monopolistic culture is a menace even to God the creator. In the story, the Lord came down and said: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Gen. 11:6). The result was divine interference to confuse human languages and scatter the people to fill the earth.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*

To be great, grand, unique and monopolistic are always attractive to human desires. They are other ways of showing the human thirst for power. When the tool of language is unified, the desire and attempt to build a tower to reach the heavens will be stirred and motivated. Nothing but the interference of the hand of God can prevent this.

Delivering Action of God

Most English language translations of the Hebrew Bible characterize the response of God to the human attempt to build a city for themselves and a tower to reach the heavens as to “confuse their language”. The term “confuse” was used to describe the hindrance of communication. Although various translations use “confuse”, “confound” or “mix up”, they all point to the object of “language”, giving an impression that ‘language’ was the punishment. The “New Living Translation” translates the verse as “confused the people by giving them many languages” (v. 9). This more adequately grasps the theological meaning of the passage. Taking into consideration its context, the central concern of the passage is that it is people, not language that becomes confused. The ultimate purpose of God’s interference in this incident of the Tower of Babel was to fulfill the divine creation plan to scatter the people to fill the earth. Therefore, to confuse languages was not the intention of God. Instead, many languages are given to human beings as a continual creative action of God to fulfill the original plan of creation.

God does not break down the tower being built, which would be a response to human arrogance and pride that attempts to reach God. In fact, the text only speaks of a very high tower reaching to the skies that would be a memorial. The important divine response is the scattering of the people, for which God comes down.⁷

This creative action of giving human beings many different languages is further confirmed in the Pentecost story. The Pentecost event as recorded in the New Testament is theologically considered a response to the tower of Babel event. The scattered people were assembled again to confront the actions of God. Many languages still hindered human communication.

⁷ Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis: Chalice press, 2004), 152.

The presence of the Holy Spirit on that day did not eliminate the plurality of human languages and cultures. Instead, in order to overcome the hindrance of communication, the Holy Spirit has reaffirmed the value of pluralism and diversity by empowering and enabling people to speak in many languages. Based on this argument, Nestor O. Miguez, an Argentinean biblical scholar, points out that the interference of God in the Babel story is not about punishment, but is a delivery action:

So, God descends and decides to put an end to that project (v. 7). Now, in the biblical tradition, when God descends from heaven it is a liberative act. We never read that God comes down in order to punish. God does not need to move from heaven to punish. But God comes down to join the people to overcome oppression. So, for example, we read in Exodus 3.8, that God comes down to deliver Israel from the Egyptians and take them again to their assigned land.⁸

S. R. Driver, a British Semitist, did an exegesis of the story of the tower of Babel to show how the distribution of human beings into the nations and the diversity of languages are elements of God's providential plan for the development and progress of humanity. C. S. Song has come to the same conclusion: "very few exegetes have understood dispersion in the world not as God's punishment for human pride but as fulfillment of God's command."⁹

Declaring the Wonders of God in Our Own Tongues!

To be sure, the power of the Holy Spirit which was able to empower the disciples to speak in the tongues of different peoples could also enable the people to understand one language if the disciples were all to speak in one tongue, their own language. The work of the Holy Spirit to affirm diversity at Pentecost has its theological significance of revealing the intent of divine policy on language and cultures. The descending tongues of fire that enabled the disciples to speak in other tongues is a continuation of God's creation following the giving of many languages at the event of the Tower of Babel. Yet, if the giving of many languages was

⁸ Nestor O. Miguez, "A Comparative Bible Study of Genesis 10–11.9: an approach from the Argentine," in *Scripture, Community, and Mission: Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles*, ed. Philip L. Wickeri (Hong Kong and London: CCA and CWM, 2003), 154–155.

⁹ C. S. Song, *The Compassionate God* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982), 22f.

to fulfill the creation plan of scattering people to fill the earth, the tongues of fire were given to re-unite people not by unifying language but by respecting different cultures and tongues. Thus, Acts 2 does not abrogate plurality as a divisive human condition, but rather affirms it as an enriching of one another in a receptive plurality.¹⁰ Diversity, though it brings challenges and risks to human society, is the most precious gift in our world. “In some ways this is a relatively recent discovery. We are more aware than any previous generation of how much our existence depends on the presence of other species, which produce the food we eat and the oxygen we breathe, absorb the carbon dioxide we exhale, sustain the fertility of the soil and provide the raw materials we need.”¹¹ Singularity with the superior concept of “uniqueness” is no longer a tolerable attitude in our world today.

From the perspective of creation order, acknowledgement of the value of diversity by confirming the many languages in the Pentecost event, affirms the plurality of creation. From the side of the listeners, hearing the message in their own native languages signifies solidarity and identification. Even the ordinary people have the right to receive the message of God in their own tongues. Is not this the way God has done the divine mission to the world? The salvific action of God through the incarnation of Jesus Christ demonstrated to the world that God’s mission (*missio Dei*) is done through loving identification with the people for whom the mission is aimed. In the incarnation, God became human, God with us (Immanuel). Christian mission taking the form of incarnation is a radical action of God to identify the divine self with human histories and cultures in order to transform them. Christian mission cannot be done in monopolized contexts or in totalitarianism. It has to be done amidst peoples of plural cultures and histories.

However, the messages communicated in the occasions of the story of Babel and the story of Pentecost are also different. The totalitarian approach of communication in the Babel story (when the whole world had one language and a common speech) conveys the message of “building themselves a city and a tower that reaches to the heavens for the sake of making a name for themselves and resisting the plan of God to scatter them over the face of the whole earth”. But the pluralistic approach of communication in the Pentecost event (each speaks in

¹⁰ Preman Niles.

¹¹ Jonathan Sacks, 173.

other tongues) conveys a sharing in the wonders of God. These wonders, in Pauline interpretation, are the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (I Cor. 1.18). Paul declared: "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (I Cor. 2:2-5). When explaining the meaning of the Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, Paul gave his famous theological interpretation:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2.1-11)

In other words, means and ends are correlated; the models of communication have to do with the content of the message. To be a messenger of the incarnate and crucified Christ is to carry a message of self-sacrificial love, humility and identification. A totalitarian way of communication and a dominant mindset contradict and distort their contents. A message telling about God's identifying with people through the brave and loving "word become flesh" can only be witnessed to in the native languages and cultures of the people.

If the mission of God in the story of Babel was of divine interference through giving people

many languages in order to scatter them to fill the earth, and if the interference of God in the Pentecost event was to unite people by confirming their diverse cultures through empowering missionaries with tongues of fire to speak in their hearers' native languages, then what will God do to interfere in the globalization process by which human beings today build another tower of Babel?

In 2003, the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) emerged in southern China. A Chinese professor from Shenzhen, on a visit to Hong Kong, encountered several people in a hotel elevator. Within days the epidemic was brought to Vietnam and Canada. Soon the disease erupted into a global epidemic. The numbers of patients rose to tens of thousands in China, Hong Kong, Canada, France, Taiwan, Vietnam and some countries in Africa. One ironic phenomenon was that the mechanism of globalization aided SARS, which was highly contagious, through physical contact and by breathing the same air as an infected person. This called for power to segregate exposed people from communities, even from intimate family relations.

In this globalization era, people no longer feel a sense of control over their own lives. The great forces that surround us – financial markets, currency movements, technological change, economic climate, international arena, natural environment – are becoming ever more volatile, complex and unpredictable.¹² When nation-states become ever more limited in their ability to shape events, we begin to feel as if the car carrying us forward has no driver at the wheel.¹³ Will all of these be considered another intervention from God through a divine invisible hand to confuse people and prevent the building of the Babel tower of globalization?

Rebuilding the Household of God in Asia

The term "ecumenism" (*Oikoumene*) has its linguistic root in the Greek word "*Oikos*" which means "household". Ecumenism thus has the ultimate goal to build up the household of God. Human beings historically have striven to build for ourselves a totalitarian, exclusive

¹² Jonathan Sacks, 71.

¹³ *Ibid.*

household. This is one lesson from the story of the tower of Babel. God's intention is to bless the world as a plural, inclusive and harmonic household. This is seen in the multiplicity of creatures in the creation story, the many languages given in the Babel event, and the native tongues that were affirmed in the Pentecost happening. Totalitarian and dominant modes of society are against the biblical creation mandate.

The ecumenical movement of Christians and Christian churches which seeks ways to accomplish unity by reconciling differences is challenged by the globalization mechanism that possesses the power to integrate the world and eliminate differences. Christian mission in this circumstance has the essential task of rebuilding the household of God through its proclamation of the good news of Jesus who sacrificed himself on the cross to bring reconciliation of peoples to God and their fellow human beings, by revealing the message of God's unconditional love shown through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Asian ecumenical movement therefore should aim to enhance peace and security from people's perspectives and contexts, in order to promote better life circumstances for the people in Asia, particularly for the generations to come.

The Pentecost event is an effort to rebuild the household of God created and challenged by the story of the tower of Babel. Now at the beginning of the 21st century, a new Babel tower of globalization is being built. Like it or not, we are involved in it. It is a challenge to us as Christians to look for the wonders of God that can regulate the trend of the world order and to return it to its track in the creation plan. We must respect the diversity and plurality in the world. If the *oikos* of God faces distortion, it is our responsibility as a Christian movement to respond and reconstruct it. Can we create a paradigm shift through which we come to recognize that we are enlarged, not diminished, by difference, just as we are enlarged, not diminished by the 6000 languages, each with its unique sensibilities, art forms and literary expressions that exist today?¹⁴

¹⁴ Jonathan Sacks, 201.