

Lord of Heaven and Earth Genesis 11:1-9

If Christmas is a celebration of the religion of Christianity, what religion does New Years celebrate? Football! New Year's Day is filled with parades and endless bowl games. Which religion is more popular—Christianity or football? The answer to that question is painfully obvious. If you watched the Sugar Bowl you witnessed a fascinating intersection between



Christianity and football. The Sugar Bowl on Friday night was the last collegiate game of Tim Tebow. If you don't know, Tebow was the starting quarterback for all four years at Florida. He led them to two national championships and he won the Heisman Trophy as a sophomore. He is the son of a missionary family and an outspoken Christian with a superb testimony. He always wears Bible verses on his face when he plays and he always gives glory to God every chance he gets.

Tebow had a record breaking game Friday night and several people were calling him the greatest player in the history of college football. In fact, that is how he was introduced when he received his trophy as MVP of the Sugar Bowl. He began by saying, "First of all, I want to give thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." Here is the part I found interesting. When he said Jesus Christ, a loud cheer went up from the crowd of 70,000 fans. Do you think they were actually cheering for Jesus? I think some of them were because I know I would have, but I am guessing that those cheers were more for the religion of football than for Jesus Christ. This is nothing against Tebow, because it appears his faith is very genuine, but I think that most people were cheering for the Jesus of Tim Tebow. After all, from their perspective, the Tebow Jesus helps win football games. The Tebow Jesus even brought home two national championships. The Tebow Jesus is a type of god made in our own image. And for most people, that's the best kind of god. A god that we can control. A god that is here to serve us more than we are to serve him.

You could say that the people who built the tower of Babel were attempting to worship the Tebow Jesus. There was almost certainly a type of religion at Babel, but one where man was in charge of his own destiny.

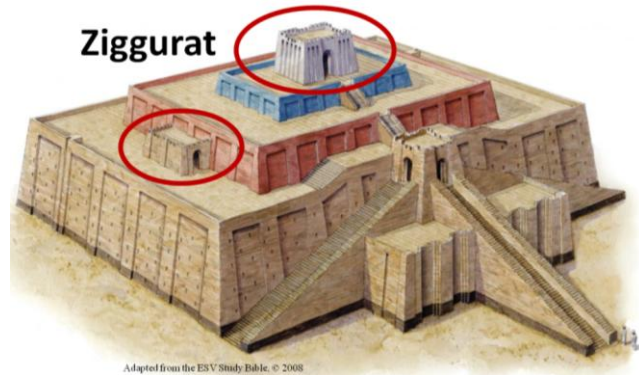
Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.

³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name (shem) for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."

⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. ⁶ The LORD 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. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other."

⁸ So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹ That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The facts of the story are quite straightforward. Their goal was to build a city and a tower that



would reach to the heavens. We always refer to this story as the “Tower of Babel,” but we forget that they were also building a city. We could just as easily call it the “City of Babel.” Historians and scholars agree that they almost certainly constructed what is called a ziggurat. This picture is a drawing of

a ziggurat discovered in the city of Ur, where Abraham lived and which was very near Babylon. It was probably built within a few hundred years of the time of the events in chapter eleven. Archaeologists agree that the ziggurat was a



precursor to the design for building pyramids in Egypt. There was probably an evolution of structures which started with the ziggurat, then to the step pyramid and finally to the pyramids of Egypt. It is likely that Mizraim, (If you remember, Mizraim is the Hebrew word for Egypt. Today, there is a Misr Bank in Egypt which is a form of the word Mizraim.) one of Ham’s sons, took this knowledge with him to Egypt. Most ziggurats like this one had a temple

as part of them. You can see that this one has two temples (circled in red).

They had two primary goals for this building project—to make a name for themselves and to not be scattered over the face of the whole earth. Presumably, they wanted the city to unify them and they wanted the tower to build their reputation. Ultimately they were seeking independence from God. There is no mention of God in their plan. We have no direct statement from them saying, “We don’t need you, God. We can do this by ourselves!” There is no verbal rejection of God but their actions illuminated the attitudes of their hearts—“**We** will build this city and **we** will build our reputation.” And if they were to build such a great city and tall tower, they would have needed one another. Building the ark was a long-term family affair, but to build a city and a great tower would have required a great number of people and total cooperation. The higher the tower and bigger the city the further from God they would become. The more they worked together the less they would need God.

It is hard to imagine how they fell so far from their worship of God in a hundred years. Noah and his sons worshipped the Lord on the very day they stepped off of the ark. How did their arrogant, independence develop over such a short period of time? As it is had often been said, it only takes a single generation to lose one's faith. Look at what happened to Christian, missionary sending country of Great Britain. In only fifty years time they have gone from sender of missionaries to receiver of missionaries. Their buildings have transformed from halls of worship to dance halls, store fronts, climbing walls and museums. Of course it's not the church buildings that should concern us but the loss of millions of British men, women and children who used to worship Jesus Christ. The same trend is happening in the U.S. It only takes a single generation for this to happen, so it should not surprise us how they fell from God-centered worship to total independence from God in a hundred years. That's more than enough time.

These first settlers of Babylon probably did not outright reject God. It is quite likely they had their own temple as part of the ziggurat. They didn't reject God, they just replaced him with a god they could control. After all, the Lord had destroyed them all with a flood. Why should they serve a god like that, who could wipe them out in an instant? It was far better to give their allegiance to a god who was safe.

We even do this as Christians. We may start with Biblical Christianity but then we proceed to paganize our faith. Let me explain what I mean. Most religions of the world have included some form of animal sacrifice. Some religions have used child sacrifice. The Mayans practiced ritual sacrifice of humans atop their own ziggurats. Others have thrown human sacrifices into a volcano in order to appease the volcano gods. The unifying factor in all of these religions is the attempt to control God. If I sacrifice a goat, God will be pleased and leave me alone. If I throw this woman into the volcano, God will be pleased and leave me alone. Of course we don't throw one another into the volcano, but we do attempt to appease God in order to control him. We throw other kinds of things into the proverbial volcano. We throw our good works into the volcano and reason this way. "God, I have served you faithfully, now you need to give me what I want." Or the reverse might be true. If something bad happens in our lives we might complain, "God, I gave money to the building project, I serve in church, I try to be nice to others, why did



you let this happen to me?" Do you see? We throw our good works, our tithes and offerings, our service to our families into the volcano and expect God to pay us back accordingly. If God doesn't give us what we want or if he does give us something that we don't want, we wonder why he was not pleased with our offerings we threw into the volcano. We would never verbalize our worship in this way, but often our motives for Christian service more closely resemble paganism than Biblical Christianity. We want a safe God whom we can control.

Even atheists can't avoid a type of worship. How many atheists do you think there are in the world? With China, North Korea and the former Soviet Union all being officially atheistic countries, you might think that there are well over a billion atheists in the world, but in truth, atheism is like a vacuum that

sucks up anything of transcendent value in its path. North Koreans worship their president, Kim Jong-Il. He is revered like a god. Two years ago, the Christian Science Monitor reported the following. “In fact, in a time of famine and poverty, government spending on Kim-family deification – now nearly 40 percent of the visible budget – is the only category in the North's budget to increase.”¹ The same is true for Mao Tse Tung, who led China into communism and was worshipped like a god. Listen to this quote from Mao which justifies worship of men. “There are two kinds of personality cults. One is a healthy personality cult, that is, to worship men like Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. Because they hold the truth in their hands. The other is a false personality cult, i.e. not analyzed and blind worship.”²



Mao included Lenin and Stalin in the list of men who should be worshipped. Lenin’s preserved body is still on display since he died. Stalin was revered as a god. The Russian writer Avidenko penned this hymn in 1938 as a tribute to Stalin

O great Stalin, O leader of the peoples,
Thou who brought man to birth,
Thou who fructifies the earth.³

We would call the words of this hymn idolatry because Stalin was attributed with powers of creation that belong to God alone. In each of the communist nations, the government became their savior and their god. Think about it—if the government controls your daily life and dictates where you can and can’t go, what job you will have, what you believe, what you will eat, how many children you can have, etc, then the government has controlled and provided everything that a god would do. True atheism—a vigorous and active denial of any kind of God—is very hard to maintain in daily life, so there are actually very few true atheists. Even though the governments of well over a billion people are officially atheistic, in reality, there are very few atheists in these countries. They don’t worship the true God or a pagan god, but they do offer their worship to their government leaders.

Strict atheism is difficult to maintain, so most people, like average Britons or Americans, simply ignore God or else they replace him with someone or something much safer. The Babylonians didn’t like the God who was able to destroy them in a flood, so they built their own temples for a “safe” God.

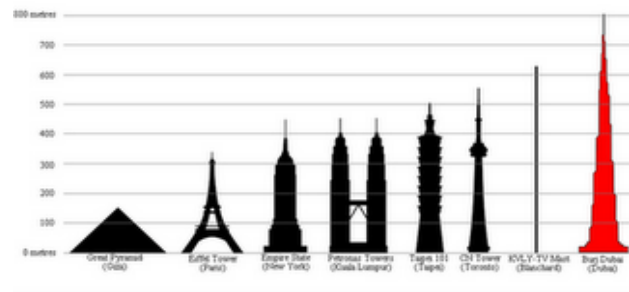
It’s interesting that we humans still measure our pride and success by tall buildings. In the last fifteen years or so there has been a rush to build the next tallest building in the world. The U.S. held the record for decades with the Empire State Building and the twin towers of the World



Trade Center. Why do you think the terrorists attacked these huge towers? Because they represented the power and reputation of all that is American. Like the first Babylonians, we made a name for ourselves by our tall buildings and working together. The battle for the world’s tallest building continues to this day and the record is broken every few years or so. Right now the world’s tallest building is located in Dubai and was built at a cost of four billion dollars. Ironically, the official opening date for the building is tomorrow. Have you seen this size of this thing? It is more than twice the height of the Empire State Building. I am not suggesting that God hates all tall buildings, but I do know that he despises the pride and independence that they represent. I like this comparison of building heights because it also includes the great Pyramid in Egypt (below).

Pride and independence were the hallmarks of the city of Babel. Long before the tower could have reached any significant height, the Lord put a quick end to the building project. And his reason for doing this is very enlightening. *The LORD 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.* God created his people with nearly unlimited potential. Do you remember my “cell phone in the Garden of Eden” analogy? All of the technology and raw materials that go into a cell phone were in the garden in potential form. It was all there waiting to be explored, understood and developed. The Lord’s statement

in verse six was a statement of nearly unlimited potential—*nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.* God put within us an amazing amount of creative potential and given enough time, nothing will be impossible for us. Obviously there are limits on our potential. God did not mean that we would become as powerful or great as he, but he knew we would at least take a whack at it. Look at the great pyramids of Egypt. As we said before, they were probably built using the same technology as the tower of Babel. The initial idea was improved upon and working together—that is, with slave labor—they built pyramids of stone that still cause people to be amazed four thousand years later. How did they get nearly three million stones, some weighing 30,000 pounds, to sit in perfect alignment 400 feet high in the form of a pyramid?



When you look at the great pyramids, or Stonehenge, or the Taj Majal, or the tower in Dubai, or any amazing scientific or engineering accomplishment, you should always think of Genesis 11:6—*nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.* God has given us a nearly limitless

potential to create and build. As we saw earlier in Genesis, we have not only been given dominion over all of creation, we have been given the ability and innate potential to have dominion over all of creation. But is this a good thing? The same God-given, creative potential and unified goals of humans can be used either to bring glory to the Creator and Sustainer of all or to prop up our endless pride and independence from our Creator. In Genesis eleven, God knew full well which direction this group of humans was headed. The Lord stopped the building out of a sense of judgment and compassion—judgment in the sense that they were going their own way and compassion in the sense that he stopped them from moving toward more independence.

The ironic thing is that the builders in Babel actually did make a name for themselves—their “name” was pride and rebellion. Each of us is making a “name” for ourselves, each of us is developing a reputation, whether good or bad. We say things like, “He has built quite a reputation in this city,” or “Just look at her. She’s got quite a reputation.” Everyone has a “name” in this sense, the only difference is whether it is God-glorifying or self-glorifying. Are you satisfied with your reputation? I don’t mean the reputation that you present to the world, with a plastered smile and veneer of goodness. I mean the reputation that is the real you, when all exteriors are stripped away, the one that few people ever see. Are you content with that reputation? But that’s just it. Most of us build our reputation and a “name” for ourselves so we won’t have to show others the real us. Our so-called reputation is often the mask that hides our true selves precisely because we don’t like what is underneath.

In verse seven, God’s solution to their arrogance both drips with irony and brilliance. *Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.*” The irony is in the first half—come let us go down. What kind of tower were they hoping to build? “A tower that reached to the heavens.” Their tower was supposed to reach into the heavenlies, up to the abode of the gods. Yet the Lord says, let us go down to them. Their amazing tower wasn’t all that amazing, was it? Imagine a three year old building a tower out of plastic blocks and he’s so proud of his accomplishment, he says, “Daddy, look! Look what I did.” So you walk over to the one foot plastic tower, stand over it with your six foot, two inch frame, hands at your hips and say, “Why son, that’s not big at all. It doesn’t even reach up to daddy’s knee.” That would be a cruel thing to say to a three year old, but in a small way, that is what God did in verse seven. The tower not only did not reach up to the heavens, God had to come down to see it. Even if they had accomplished something as tall as the great pyramid or even the Tower of Dubai, God still would have had to come down. Our greatest accomplishments are as plastic toys compared to God’s glory and power.

I am convinced that the author wants us to see this incredible irony when God came down to see the “big” tower, and his solution to the problem was brilliant. (It’s not as if God could do anything less than brilliant!) *Let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.* God could have easily knocked over their tower just as easily as the six-foot-two father could topple his son’s tower of plastic bricks. God could have done that, but that would only have been a temporary solution. If God had sent an earthquake to topple the tower they would have started building all over again. God could have frustrated their plans for thousands of years, and no doubt he does do this in all manner of unseen ways, but his solution was far different—he confused their language so they would be forced to separate. It was their common language and unity which contributed to their pride and rebellion. If they were

separated by different languages and scattered over the face of the earth, they might be forced to depend more upon God and less upon themselves. Do you see the principle at work here? Unity leads to rebellion against God and division leads to dependence on God.

God did more than just confuse their language. Look again at verses 8-9.

So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

We usually think of the Babel story in this way. God took their one language and confused them by miraculously giving them many languages. We don't know how many languages there were, but we do know that those languages have developed into more than seven thousand languages today. They were separated by their language, so of course they slowly began to find other people who spoke the same language. Don't you wish that could have been recorded on film? It would make for an amazing documentary as everyone tried out their new language on one another. You can imagine the excitement they must have felt every time they found a new person who spoke their language. Sprechen ze Deutsch? Habla Espanol? Do you speak English? Mukawoonga? (I made up that last one!) We imagine that they slowly divided themselves into different parts of the city according to each language and then they eventually realized that it would be better if each language group separated and went their own way.

It may have happened something like that, but we must realize God was directing the entire process. Twice in these two verses we read, *the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth*. God did not confuse the language and then stand by and watch them divide themselves and scatter over the earth. The Lord actively scattered each of them. Moses said it twice so he made sure we caught it—*the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth*. The Lord gave each person one of the many new languages. As they were packing up their belongings and planning to move, God was directing all of it—which direction they would choose, how far they would travel, whether they would settle by land or by sea—all of it was the outworking of his divine plan.

The builders of Babel attempted to demonstrate their independence from and control over God but the Lord showed that just the opposite is true—he is sovereign over all things and is not what we would consider to be a “safe” God. Whether it is scattering the nations over the face of the whole earth or else frustrating your plans because he sees you going the wrong direction, he does it out of judgment and compassion. His judgments are a form of compassion meant to keep us humble and dependent upon him. And don't forget that this is ultimately a gospel story, which we will explore more fully next week.

Rich Maurer
January 3, 2009

(The descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth moved eastward to a plain in Shinar, which was another name for Babylon. In Genesis, moving to the east is not just a random choice of direction, but east was always away from the land and God's blessing

Gen 3:24 After he drove the man out, he placed on the *east* side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life

Gen 4:16 So Cain went out from the LORD's presence and lived in the land of Nod, *east* of Eden.

Gen 13:11 So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the *east*.)

¹ <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0103/p01s04-woap.html>

² <http://library.thinkquest.org/26469/cultural-revolution/cult.html>

³ O.A. Avidenko, Pravda, 1938.