

Controlling God

by Ray C. Stedman

In Genesis we have the only realistic explanation I know of for the straining forces that twist, heave, and pull at the plastic mass of society as we know it in our day. If we hope to understand life and handle it properly, we must understand what is going on in human society by understanding these issues that are presented here. We shall, in the passage that we look at on the tower of Babel, find the answer to one of the great mysteries of life, the mystery of a race that hungers after unity and is forever seeking to be one, but is also ending up splitting itself into fragments and dividing into splinters, schisms, and cliques.

Why should this be so? Well, we shall attempt an answer as we look at this passage together.

We begin in the days **when the race was yet one undivided entity.**

Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated in the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 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. 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 scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." {Gen 11:1-4 RSV}

When this account says, "the earth had one language and few words," it literally is saying it had one language and one set of words. It is not "few words," as we have here, but "one set of words," i.e., "one speech" as the Authorized Version puts it. It is this that is the noteworthy feature of the humanity of that day: They were still one undivided people.

The atmosphere of Chapter 10 is one of movement, migration. People are thrusting out from a center, like spokes of a wheel, radiating out into the corners of the earth. This chapter opens on the same note. As men moved about they came into the plain of Shinar, an alluvial plain lying between two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The name, Shinar, indicates to us that these people were Hamites, descendants of Ham, because in Chapter 10 we were told it was the Hamites who settled in the land of Shinar of Babylonia (Mesopotamia, as we know it today). It was a branch of the Hamitic family that migrated into the Tigris-Euphrates river valleys and found a level plain there upon which they settled.

Immediately, the inventiveness of the Hamitic people becomes evident. Remember that these were the technicians of humanity – technologically gifted people. Their native inventiveness becomes evident in the way they adapted to the environment in which they lived. This is always characteristic of Hamitic people wherever they have gone. They

did not find rocks and stones to build with, such as they had in the land where they had previously lived, so they made bricks out of dirt and clay. Later they discovered the process of burning them – first in the sun, and then in a furnace – until they became hard and impermeable brick such as we know it today.

All this is given to us in one sentence in the Bible, but we know from history that it occupied a period of time. Man did not discover all this at one time but learned how to make bricks and later how to burn them. They also lacked lime for cement so could not make mortar, as we know it, but some inventive Yankee among them discovered a tar pit which was filled with natural asphalt (these are common throughout the Middle East). They discovered that the tar was sticky and they used this natural bitumen, this asphalt, for mortar. They had then a substitute for stones and cement. They made bricks and used asphalt for mortar and thus demonstrated how adaptable they were to the situation they found.

Now their success in doing these things fired their ambition. This almost always happens. When they discovered that they could use other than natural materials for building, but could invent their own, they were fired with desire to put these to work. They began to talk excitedly about building a city and a tower. The two things they mentioned are very significant, very revealing. The appearance of the first city was back in the story of Cain and Abel, when Cain went out and built a city. It illustrated the hunger of humanity to huddle together for companionship, even though they were not really ready to do it (as they still, obviously, are not ready to live together successfully in cities). God's final intention is to build a city for man. Abraham looked for "a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God," {Heb 11:10 RSV}. But man was not yet ready for that. Now here they are, again ready to build a city to satisfy the desires of body and soul. There is nothing that does this better than for human beings to live together in cities. Cities are centers of commercial and business life where all the needs of the body can best be met. Also, cities are centers of pleasure and culture, where all the hungers of the soul can be satisfied: hunger for beauty, art, and music and all the ingredients of culture. The tower, on the other hand, is designed to satisfy the spirit of man. Here we see, reflected in these two things, a fun-

damental understanding of the nature of man as body, soul, and spirit. All are to be satisfied in these two elementary needs, the city and the tower.

A number of years ago, digging in the plains of Shinar, archaeologists discovered the remains of certain great towers that these early Babylonians had built. Some archaeologists have felt that they may even have found the foundation of this original tower of Babel. That is very hard to determine. But they did find that the Babylonians built great towers called *ziggurats*, which were built in a circular fashion with an ascending staircase that terminates in a shrine at the top, around which are written the signs of the zodiac. Obviously, the tower was a religious building, intending to expose man to the mystery of the heavens and the greatness of God. That, perhaps, is what is meant here by the statement that they intended to build a tower with its top in the heavens. They were impressed by its greatness architecturally, that is, it was a colossal thing for the men of that day to build and they may have thus thought of it as reaching into heaven. But they also unquestionably were thinking of it as a means of communication with God, of maintaining contact with him. God is not to be left out, you see, in the city of man. He is there, represented by this tower.

However, the heart of the matter is made clear in these words, "let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." Already a haunting fear had set in. They were conscious already of a disruptive influence in their midst, of a centrifugal force that was pushing them apart so they could not live too closely together and which would ultimately, they feared, scatter them abroad and leave them unknown, unhonored, and unsung, living in isolated communities where they would be exposed to great danger. The fear of this caused them to build a tower and a city. The ultimate motive is expressed in these words, "let us make a name for ourselves."

From that day on, this has been the motto of humanity, "let us make a name for ourselves." I am always amused to see how many public edifices make a plaque somewhere on which the names of all the public officials who were in power when it was built are inscribed: the mayor, the head of public works, etc. "Let us make a name for ourselves," is a fundamental urge of a fallen race. It reveals one of the basic philosophies of humanism: "Glory to man in the highest, for man is the master

of things.” That is the central thought of humanism, glory to mankind.

The fact that this was a religious tower – and yet built to make a name for man – reveals the master motive behind religion. It is a means by which man attempts to share the glory of God. We must understand this, otherwise we will never understand the power of religion as it has pervaded the earth and permeated our culture ever since. It is a way by which man seeks to share what is rightfully God’s alone. This tower was a grandiose structure, and undoubtedly it was intended to be a means by which man would glorify God. Unquestionably there was a plaque somewhere attached to it that carried the pious words, “Erected in the year xxxx, to the greater glory of God.” But it was not really for the glory of God; it was a way of controlling God, a way of channeling God by using him for man’s glory. That is what man’s religion has always sought to do. It is a way of making God available to us.

Man does not really want to eliminate God. It is only sporadically, and then only for a relatively brief time, that men cry out for the elimination of God. Atheism is too barren, too pessimistic, and too morally bankrupt to live with very long. The Communists are finding this out. No, we need “dear old God,” but let’s keep him under control. Do not let him get out of his place. “Don’t call us, God; we’ll call you.” This is the fundamental philosophy of society. It is the tower of Babel all over again.

Now, in the next section we get **the reaction of God** to all this. It is a section of exquisite irony.

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. 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 now will be impossible for them.” {Gen 11:5-6 RSV}

I know that in certain circles the idea of a God who comes down to visit earth is regarded as an expression of a primitive concept of God – that God lives up in heaven somewhere but is cut off from direct communication from earth and is dependent upon certain messenger boys who travel

back and forth to keep him informed. Somehow a message reaches God about man’s tower and he decides to come down and investigate. But this language is not a primitive concept of God. It is impossible to read it that way if you read it in the light of what has already been said about God in the book of Genesis. Already God has been presented as the maker of heaven and earth, the One concerned about the minutest details of creation, the Omnipotent, Omniscient God who knows everything, sees everything and is all-powerful.

No, this is not a primitive concept of God at all; it is an ironic expression. It is a humorous expression, if you please, designed to indicate to us, in a very clever way, the ridiculousness of this whole situation. Here is this tower that men erect, thinking that it will take God’s breath away, it will threaten him. Men think, “Here we are, we wild Promethean creatures; we’ve dared to invade the heavens! You had better watch out, God!” But up in the real heavens this tower is so little that God can’t see it. It is so tiny that even the strongest telescope in heaven does not reveal it. So God says, “I’ll come down and investigate.” It is language designed to set in contrast the ridiculousness of the suppositions of men, and the greatness of the Being of God. He “came down” to investigate this tiny tower that men had erected.

Then, in all seriousness, we are given the divine analysis of the situation. There are three things that God took note of:

- First, man’s unity: “And the LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language.’”
- Second, he noted their creativity. “This is only the beginning,” he said, “of what they will do.” This creativity is part of the image of God which he conferred upon man; this inventiveness, this ability to think and reason, to deal in concepts and put them together and to come out with very practical applications. The nature of it is suggested here.

Notice that God does not suggest that man does everything at once; he builds gradually. One man discovers an idea, another man improves it, and a third man links it with another idea. So gradually there takes form inventive solutions to the technical problems of life. God

took note of that fact, that man is an inventive creature, and he is a united creature.

- As a result of these two factors at work in society, God comes to a startling conclusion: “Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible to them.”

That sounds rather up-to-date, does it not? That is exactly what man has thought about himself and what he is saying in a thousand ways today. He loudly announces continually, “There’s nothing we can’t solve, nothing we can’t do.”

The startling thing from the Scriptures is that there is truth in that. God himself acknowledges it! He says it is true; if man puts his genius to any given, specific task, then his native creativeness and his persistent spirit will solve the problem eventually. Nothing will be prevented him.

Now look at **God’s action**:

“Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. {Gen 11:7-9 RSV}

That is startling, isn’t it? Here these people had built a tower and a city in order that they not be scattered abroad over the face of the earth. But the net result is, because they built the tower and the city, they were scattered abroad throughout the face of all the earth! They ended up doing the very thing that they feared.

What is behind God’s actions here? Is he jealous of man? Is God threatened after all by this tower of mud and slime that these men have built? Does it mean that he is afraid that men will master all things and that he cannot any longer control them so that the very foundations of the universe will be threatened by this inventive man? No. That is the way man wants to read this. Forever we have been telling ourselves that we can do anything

we want, if we want it badly enough! Therefore, we don’t need God; God is optional in human life. We are ready to dismiss him, or at least to remove him to a quiet corner of the house where he won’t bother anybody except when we need him occasionally to run some special errands.

It is true, as we have already seen, that God admits that man can do things if he puts his mind to them. He can *do* anything, but what about *be*? That is the question. You see, there is a fatal flaw in man’s thinking. What does he actually purpose or propose to do? The final answer is, to glorify himself,

- to be the center of things,
- to be the master of the universe,
- to be God, in other words.

God knows that man is incapable of this; he is a creature. He is a dependent being; he always was, and always will be. The very forces he thinks he can manipulate to accomplish his aims are forces that are part of his own life which he did not make and upon which he continually depends. Therefore, he is constitutionally incapable of being the God he attempts to be.

It is always the old, old story of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Remember the story in mythology of the boy who hired himself out to a sorcerer to be his servant and to carry his water for him? Like all boys, tiring of the work, he looked around to find some easier way of getting the job done. One day when the master was away he prowled around among the sorcerer’s magical paraphernalia. He found certain books with magic words, incantations, in them. He learned a few of these and tried them out on the broom. To his amazement he found that he could command the broom to carry water in buckets. He sat back, opened a magazine, and read while the broom carried in the water, bucket after bucket. But after a bit he detected a little moisture on the floor. To his consternation he realized that the tubs and basins were all full and the broom was still carrying in the water. He decided he had better do something about it. He arose and uttered the magic incantation, but the broom kept on carrying in the water, dumping it on the floor. As it began to rise around his ankles the boy panicked. He didn’t know what to do. He cried out every magic word he knew, but nothing worked, and the broom kept on carrying in the

buckets and dumping them on the floor. Soon the water rose around his neck, and he began to cry out in anguish, realizing that he hadn't learned enough. He was saved at the last moment by the return of the master who, in a few words, cleared up the whole situation.

That is a parable of the tower of Babel. Man, in his inventiveness, thinks he can master the earth. But the very solutions he works out become the bigger problems which he can no longer encompass. The whole vast scheme of things eludes him; he is not able to put them all together. Thus, for man's sake – (this is the heart of it) for man's sake – not because God is afraid of man, but for man's sake, to protect him from himself, God says, "Let us go down and confuse their language." Let us stop man, in his mad folly, from destroying himself off the face of the earth, because he is not God enough to handle it."

So God came down and suddenly, as the workers gathered for work one morning, they found they could not communicate with each other any more. What a scene this must have been! The foreman would give orders, but the men would shake their heads; they didn't understand. The foreman would yell, but they wouldn't get it. They would try to explain but he couldn't understand them. You can imagine what fist-shaking, table-pounding, and yelling went on here. It was utter confusion.

The Bible plays upon the name for Babel, and links it with the Hebrew word for confusion, *balal*. It says this was a veritable Babel of confusion. It is interesting that the name *Babel* means "the gate of God." That is what man named the tower. But in the ultimate outcome, Babel became the place of confusion. "The gate of God," in man's eyes, becomes confusion in the eyes of God. Since that day men have been divided by this confusion of tongues.

It is most striking that the confusion of tongues is most evident, even today, in the Hamitic families of earth. Linguists know that most of the languages of earth can be gathered into family groups (e.g., the Indo-European family of languages), and in the Japhetic line and the Semitic line they are quite closely allied; it is not difficult to group those various tongues. But in the Hamitic languages all is utter confusion. Tribes of people, growing up close by one another, have completely different languages. It still persists into this day, and it still divides mankind. We are all aware of the attempts

to overcome this with awkward devices of translation. The United Nations cannot even meet together without mechanical gadgets of translation by means of which they can understand one another.

We think we have solved this confusion by translating one language into another, but any linguist knows that language is much deeper than words; it is a basic, fundamental element, reflecting the thought of life and cultural pattern of a people. Merely to know the words of a man's language by no means guarantees that you can communicate with the man. This confusion of language represents a loss of basic understanding between peoples, the loss of the ability to communicate at the deepest levels of thought. I was struck by a quotation taken from a world traveler recently who said,

On my trip to Asia, the word *Coca Cola* was the one word I understood in every language. It sprang out familiarly from signs written in the most alien characters. What is wrong with a world in which this is the only word that has survived the Babylonian confusion of tongues? We can still talk to one about *Coca Cola*, but not about freedom, not about God, not about what a neighbor is.

Is that not striking? The impressive thing to me is that man is still haunted today by the lack of unity. He feels the need for it. He feels that if we can only get together, then, with our technological abilities, if we can just cooperate, we can do anything. Is that not the dream that hangs over humanity? If we can merge – this is the day of the merger, corporations are merging, nations are merging, companies are merging, churches are merging – if we can just become one great community again, then, with our technological excellence we can master the earth. The dream still endures, but God still scatters. God yet continues the confusion of tongues.

This may be hard for the Wycliffe translator who is seeking to put Scripture into the various languages of the earth, but, nevertheless, it is the kindness of God that confuses the speech of men. It is God's way of preventing the ultimate catastrophe. When man at last gets together again, and, under the illusion of technical ability, thinks he can master all the great and intricate mechanisms of life, we will have achieved the ultimate disaster.

This is why God continues to humble men everywhere, to scatter, to humiliate, to bring low the proud. Why? Because, as Jesus said in the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit [the man who has nothing, the man who has lost everything upon which he can depend, outside and inside himself] for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” {Matt 5:3 RSV}

When you no longer depend on anything in you, then God is ready to give you everything he

possesses: That is the basic message of the Christian faith.

Prayer:

Who has been thy counselor, Lord? Which of men has instructed thee? How we need to quietly listen and remember that the “fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;” that without your mind we will only make a continual mess of things, both individually and as a race. Teach us this, Lord, above all else. We ask in Jesus’ name, Amen.

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