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## I. BABEL AND ITS LESSONS.

“ALL the languages of the earth,” says an eminent authority, “have affinities enough to indicate a common origin; but they have differences enough to show that some great dislocation has occurred in their history.” The Scriptures tell us when and how this dislocation occurred. It was a judgment of God inflicted upon men because of their rebellion against his will.

The descendants of Noah had greatly multiplied since the flood, and the earth was again filling with people. They had spread themselves out over the East until the centre of population seems to have been the plain of Shinar—that fertile region which lies between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers. There, under the leadership probably of Nimrod, the Cushite, they devised and undertook the ambitious scheme of building a great city, with a tower whose top, in their hyperbolic speech, should reach unto heaven. Josephus says that their purpose was to secure themselves against destruction from another flood. If such was the animus of the movement it is easy to see why it should have been displeasing to God and deserving of his judgment. He had given his promise that the earth should never again be destroyed by a flood; he had set his bow in the cloud as a pledge of faithfulness to that covenant.

Now if, instead of resting on that divine promise as a sufficient and infallible guarantee of safety, they set themselves to provide a refuge of their own, they plainly betrayed the most

flagrant unbelief and rebellion. But it must be confessed that there is nothing in the record to indicate that this was their purpose. They are represented as saying, "Let us make us a name lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. xi. 4). This was their avowed purpose. They proposed to establish a grand centre of empire, a seat and source of power, from which the whole race should be governed and held together. The dangers and inconveniences incident to the peopling of a new world they would avert from themselves by means of this great city with its massive tower. The whole animus of the movement, and the various ends at which it aimed, we may not be able, with the light that has been given us, fully to understand. But some things are plain. First, the undertaking was purely selfish in its aim—"Let us make *us* a name." It was conceived not for God's glory, but for their own; not to make his name great in the earth, but theirs. They were seeking to establish their own interests; to provide for themselves a safe, sure and desirable portion in the earth upon which they had been placed. Thus they contravened the true end of their creation, which was "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." They were bent on glorifying themselves and enjoying the earth. Again, it is plain that in the whole movement *God was ignored*. He was not in all their thoughts. There was no consulting him to ascertain his mind; no seeking for his guidance and help; no recognition of their dependence on him or of his claims upon them. They took counsel only of flesh and blood; they leaned unto their own understandings; they trusted in their own arms. Their project was thus not only self-exalting, but God-excluding. Some one has said that here was the "birth of heathenism." Whether this be true or not, it is certain that the whole movement was essentially heathenish in its spirit and purpose. In the third place, the undertaking was in opposition to God's revealed plan and purpose for the race. It was his design that they should scatter abroad upon the face of the earth to subdue and till it, and form those nations for which, as Moses tells us (Deut. xxxii. 8), "God divided out the earth;" that they should be held together not by outward, but by inward bonds; not by geographical boundaries, or the hand

of force, but by their common allegiance to him. "Unity in diversity" was his law for mankind as for all nature. But here was an effort to hold men together in another way—by a common earthly portion, by carnal and selfish ties; an effort to build a society, "not by faith in an unseen God and his covenant, but upon faith in brick walls"; a society whose underlying principle should be a common desire, not to serve and glorify God, but to promote and protect their own interests. Hence, God, in righteous judgment, blasted their project. He confounded their language. Misunderstanding arose, and alienation and antagonism, so that "they left off to build the city." They began to build, and were not able to finish.

Thus, at that early stage in human history, an example was set for the instruction and warning of all future generations. Here was an exhibition, on the one hand, of principles that are native to the human heart; and, on the other hand, of principles that are uniform in the government of God. This experiment on the plain of Shinar mankind have been repeating from that day to this, in many different ways, and on many different scales. The spirit exemplified by those Babel-builders is the spirit which has inspired every civilization of the past. When Nebuchadnezzar, for example, centuries afterward, building, as there is some reason to believe, upon the very foundation of this unfinished work, reared the splendid city of Babylon, and the powerful empire of which it was the centre, he had the same inspiration and aim as these early builders. In the Book of Daniel he is represented as walking in his palace and soliloquizing thus, "Is not this great Babylon that I have built for the house of the kingdom *by the might of my power, and for the honor of my majesty?*" (Dan. iv. 30.) What proud self-exaltation! What blasphemous defiance of God! No wonder that the hand of divine judgment was laid upon him, so that he was driven away from among men, and found his dwelling with the beasts of the field. I need not stay to show that the selfsame spirit animated that civilization which was built up on the banks of the Nile—of which the pyramids stand to-day as the mournful witnesses—and also those of Greece and Rome. The aim and motive of them all were identical. Through vast

confederations of men, through a world-wide domination of the race, they sought to establish their own earthly interests, and to promote human glory, in entire forgetfulness of God, and in opposition to his revealed will. Hence, all came to naught. The only signs we see of their greatness to-day are their ruins. In all these experiments of the past there is a significant lesson for us of the nineteenth century. "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; . . . and there is no new thing under the sun." (Ecl. i. 9.) If our civilization has any better issue it will be because it is marked by a different aim and spirit. If we build more surely it will be because we build after another plan and of other material. But, alas! the signs are only too convincing that the masses of mankind, even in Christendom, are intent upon repeating the follies of the past.

One of the most marked tendencies of the times in which we live is a tendency to association. Combination is, perhaps, the most characteristic feature of the age.

On all sides and in every department of life men are saying to each other, "Go to, let us build together; let us make common cause; let us associate ourselves." And why? For what ends, and upon what principles, are such confederations projected? Too generally their principles and aims are purely selfish. All are looking upon their own things, seeking, through the influence of numbers, to protect and advance their own interests, to the neglect, or at the expense, of the interests of others, and in utter forgetfulness of God, as if he had no claims worthy of being considered and had made no revelation of his mind worthy of respect. The great combinations which are making themselves felt in our modern civilization are, with few exceptions, selfish and godless. They "neither fear God nor regard man." Well, the lesson which is thundered in our ears by this Old Testament incident, and by all the experience of the past, is that all such associations contain within themselves the elements of their own destruction. They will inevitably end in confusion and failure. "Too low they build who build beneath the stars." God's sentence has gone forth, and stands to-day unalterable and sure; mankind cannot, and shall not, be combined and held together in helpful, suc-

cessful co-operation upon such a basis, for such ends, or by such bonds. The basis is too narrow, the ends are too low, the bonds are too sordid. To all such the word of the Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, is addressed: "Associate yourselves, O ye people, and ye shall be broken in pieces; . . . gird yourselves, and ye shall be broken in pieces. Take counsel together, and it shall come to naught." (Isaiah viii. 9, 10.) "That which is built on selfishness," says Frederick W. Robertson, "cannot stand. The system of personal interest must be shivered into atoms. Therefore we who have observed the ways of God in the past are waiting in quiet but awful expectation until he shall confound this system as he has confounded those which have gone before; and it may be effected by convulsions more terrible and more bloody than the world has yet seen. While men are talking of peace and of the great progress of civilization, there is heard in the distance the noise of armies gathering rank on rank; East and West, North and South, are rolling towards us the crushing thunders of universal war."

Let us now turn from this scene to the counterpart of it as portrayed in the second chapter of the "Acts of the Apostles." There we have God's plan for unifying the race—the principles upon which he would have men confederated together; the method by which he would have human interests protected and advanced. It was on the day of Pentecost, and there were assembled at Jerusalem devout men from every nation under heaven. The disciples of Christ were gathered together with one accord, in one place, waiting for the fulfilment of his parting promise. "And suddenly there came from heaven a sound as of the rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." When the multitude came together they were "confounded, because that *every man heard them speaking in his own language.*" The miracle of Babel was reversed. The confusion of tongues was healed.

In almost every particular the one scene stands in contrast with

the other. The disciples were gathered around the person of the risen and glorified Saviour, and were inspired by a supreme desire to exalt his name and make it glorious in the earth. They spake, not the wonderful works of *man*, but "the wonderful works of *God*." Instead of the spirit of Babel, which sought the exaltation of self, they were possessed by a spirit which sought to glorify Jesus and exalt his name. Instead of self-interest, the bond by which the Babel-builders were held together, their ruling passion, and the unifying principle which made them of one accord, was love—love to God, and love to their fellow-men, for Christ's sake. Personal interests were entirely subordinated, yet no one suffered, "for neither was there among them any that lacked." They had all things common; "neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own." Not from any outward compulsion of commandment or law, but under the influence of the Spirit of love, "they sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all as every man had need." The golden rule became operative in their lives. They looked not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Thus we see in practical operation God's plan for uniting men together for his own glory and their highest good.

"So the whole round world is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

Babel was man's work, Pentecost was God's. The one displayed the energy of the flesh, the other the energy of the Spirit. The disciples at Jerusalem, equally with the men of Shinar, were builders—only after a different plan, and in another spirit. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and in his power, they were laying the foundations of a temple whose top shall indeed reach unto heaven, and against which the gates of hell shall never prevail—a temple which is built not of brick, an imitation of God's creative work, but of stones, living stones, each one of which is linked in vital and indissoluble union with every other and with the Chief Corner-stone. Slowly but surely that temple is growing to completion. The Apostle John gives us a prophetic glimpse of its glorious consummation when he says, "I beheld, and lo, a great multitude which no man could number, of *all nations and*

*kindreds and people and tongues*, stood before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God, which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb." (Rev. vii. 9, 10.)

The spirit of Babel and the spirit of Pentecost are still in the world. They are contrary the one to the other. There is an irreconcilable conflict between them. Each is striving after ascendancy over us and expression through us. The Babel spirit controls the world; the Pentecostal spirit should control the church. But, alas! she may be invaded by the opposite spirit. There is her supreme peril, and she is often and solemnly warned against it. Let a church in any measure be possessed by the spirit of Babel, becoming earthly in her aims, selfish in her motives, and unscriptural in her methods, and to that extent she loses her character as the Bride of Christ, and takes on the character of Babylon, for whom a cup of fury is reserved. She may still be active and zealous and full of works, but she builds of wood and hay and stubble, and her work will not abide. Her safety, her glory, and the permanence of her work depend upon her steadfast adherence to the aims and methods of Pentecost, and her absolute subjection to the Spirit who dominated that scene.

J. F. CANNON.

*St. Louis.*