



THE UNIVERSITY OF BABEL

Why did you come to college? Most of us arrive with dreams and aspirations more numerous than all the stuff we pack into our tiny dorm rooms. Our modern colleges and universities are incredible places to be. Yes, they may not live up to everything that the brochures, websites, and tour guides promised, but they're still exciting and full of life.

Think back to the first time you arrived on campus. What impressed you? Was it the sheer size of the campus, making you wonder how on earth you would find everything? Was it the huge, ivy-covered buildings that underscored how small and young you were by comparison? Did you notice the polished landscaping, occasionally overruled by the dirt paths carved by students determined to walk in a straight line? Did you overhear the conversations among the collectives of students, both profound and inane?

A modern campus gives off an air of bustling, ambitious sophistication, combined with sophomoric silliness and leisure. I don't know any other place quite like it. For most of us, though, the lasting impression is not the physical, architectural makeup of the campus so much as it is the *people* who populate it. It's invigorating and maybe even a bit intimidating to meet so many smart, complex people, and to discover how much drive and ambition they have. I've found that the most interesting people are not the ones who passively let college happen to them while they walk to class head-down-and-earbuds-in. The interesting ones are dreaming big and actually achieving their goals. Feeding off the energy of the campus, they are learning, innovating, and experimenting.

I remember meeting Mario my freshman year. We lived on the same floor, but my first memory of him was seeing him outside our student union building, selling bootleg T-shirts without a permit—*on our first weekend at school*. While the rest of us freshmen were still learning where the buildings were, he was setting up shop outside of them. Eventually his little business shut down, but not before making a tidy profit. I remember thinking, “This guy is going places.” As I got to know Mario during that year, we talked about everything from classes to girl troubles, movie quotes, and faith. I also heard about his many business ideas. To this day, he’s the most natural entrepreneur I have ever met. So I wasn’t surprised a few years later when I picked up our alumni magazine and saw him featured in it, as a twenty-seven-year-old newly retired millionaire! One of his ideas had paid off, big time. Now he endows a scholarship with his name on it. In retrospect, I should have invested in his ideas back when I knew him in college.

The raw potential of everyone around you can make college a stimulating place. You may be walking around campus with future governors and senators, dot-com millionaires, CEOs, Olympic gold medalists, Nobel Prize winners, movie stars, authors, and more. Perhaps you are eating lunch with the person who will one day cure cancer. You’re in class with people who will do (or maybe are already doing) unbelievable things.

Colleges, like our great cities, are incredible magnets for people with brilliance, drive, and creativity. Whenever intelligent people gather, big ideas and ambitions are sure to rise to the surface. It’s always been this way, since the beginning of time.

If you grew up attending church, then you’ve probably heard of the Tower of Babel: humanity unites to build a tower, God gets angry and confuses their language, and they scatter, right? So the popular version goes. But let’s take a look at that story in a different light, using the paradigm of the modern university. Here’s the account as it appears in Genesis 11:

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

They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. 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 for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the people were building. 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. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” 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. (Vv. 1-9)

One of the first things we notice from the biblical passage is that the people who built Babel were on the move. They were nomads, attempting to create a home for themselves. Biblical commentators note that there’s a good deal of insecurity running through this short story. The Babelites fear being scattered (and thus more vulnerable), so they build themselves a city. They begin working—and hard. In essence, they are hoping to find safety and security in the crowd and in what the crowd builds together. This massive building project brings in all kinds of creative types to collaborate together, from architects and engineers to businessmen and labor union leaders (or their ancient equivalents). We can assume artists are writing poems and songs about it too. Leaders emerge and give direction to the project. In their creativity, they start innovating and experimenting with new brick-making technologies and techniques. All of this work is to fuel their massive ambition, to “build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens.”

Does this sound familiar? The college experience might easily be interchanged for the Babel story. Every fall, a new group of nomads arrives on campus. We feel incredible amounts of excitement, but also fear, insecurity, and displacement. Invariably, the freshmen contingency groups together during the first weeks of class, and we stick like glue to people we barely know. Aren’t we all looking for some measure of security, out of fear of being scattered? And so we unite around a common mission—education. We begin to build. Over time, the best and the brightest rise to positions of leadership and, in the name of achievement, we invest incredible amounts of time, energy, and resources to create a better existence for ourselves and for society.

Listening to the Psycho-Babel

There is generally a dark side to unharnessed, concentrated ambition. Pride takes over. At Babel, it seemed to happen pretty quickly. The understandable desire to build something that would offer some protection quickly took on grandiose, even absurd dimensions: “Let us build ourselves a city, with a tow-

er that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves.” In other words, *Let’s build a tower that touches the sky and make ourselves famous! Something so impressive that people won’t stop talking about us!* The people were unified, but their cause was not inherently good. And what is more important than unity alone is what the people were unified around. As one commentator noted, at Babel “depraved humanity are united in their spiritual endeavor to find, through technology, existential meaning apart from God.”¹

What’s the big deal? you might be wondering. Aren’t skyscrapers the modern equivalent of the Tower of Babel? It sounds like they just wanted to dream big and reach for the stars, and isn’t that a basic and good human instinct? But there’s more at play in the story.

In their ancient language,² “Babel” meant “the gate” or “residence of the gods.” The people were setting themselves up as near-equals with God. The spirit of the age was, “Let’s make ourselves as great as God, without needing God.” Not only was this anti-God spirit expressed by their building a tower up to heaven but also by their desire to stop and cluster together. God had explicitly charged the human race with spreading out. “Be fruitful and multiply,” he said, and in doing so, cause the whole earth to flourish. But the Babelites weren’t spreading out. They weren’t fulfilling their purpose of blessing the world. When God scatters them, his actions are not of a petulant child kicking over an anthill. He is causing people to get back in line with his good and wise plan, whether or not they feel like it.

The Babelites stopped to build because they were obsessed with achieving their own greatness. A similar spirit is alive and well in the world today, and even more concentrated on our college campuses. This culture of self-achievement feeds us lines about our greatness, and we’ve swallowed them whole. If you are part of the “millennial generation,” roughly those born between 1981 and 2004, you have been affirmed, programmed, and coddled for greatness like no other generation in human history. Many people assume college exists simply to make you successful, rich, powerful, and famous, and that such thinking is not in conflict with the Christian faith. Yet I think this kind of “psycho-Babel” has some nasty consequences. On our campuses, we observe that the spirit of Babel results in confusion, bigger and busier self-importance, experimentation, and insecurity. So, let’s look at each of these consequences in turn. If we’re going to be faithful people, and if we’re going to faithfully engage others in this context, we should know what we’re getting into.

Confusion

What is a *university* anyway? What does it mean? In medieval Europe, groups or guilds of teachers and students gathered to promote learning, and these gatherings came to be known as *universitas*. They sought to unify people of many disciplines in the shared pursuit of knowledge. What, might we ask, are our universities unified in today? Ask students and professors in fields like biology, literature, and business some basic questions about truth, meaning, and happiness, and you will get radically different answers. There isn't much *uni* in *university* anymore. Meaning, there is no *one* consensus or goal. That project has in many ways collapsed.

It's largely unknown, but many of the original universities in North America were founded as places to train pastors for ministry. The idea was a strong one, that pastors (and others) should have an understanding of ancient languages, philosophy, math and science, literature, and other disciplines alongside their theology. Over time, university leadership did away with the pastoral training component and, eventually, decided to pursue knowledge without God as the source and goal of their knowledge. In the words of Paul, "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised" (Romans 1:25).

Let me give you just one example. Harvard was founded in 1636 as a school to train Christian ministers. In 1692 it adopted the motto "*Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae*," which in Latin means "Truth for Christ and the Church." Take a closer look at the original seal, and you'll notice the top two books on the shield are facing up, but the book on the bottom is facing down. In this way, the seal was to be a symbolic reminder of the limits of human reason and the need for God's revealed truth. At some point, however, Harvard changed its motto, shortening it simply to *Veritas*, without all the religious stuff. All three books in the modern Harvard seal now face upward, as if there is no limit to human reason. This is but one example of how universities decided to remove God as the *telos* (or goal, purpose) of their learning. A similar secularizing process played out, again and again, across the country. People built their towers of "truth," assuming it was possible to know nearly as much as God, without needing God. Is it any coincidence that we sometimes refer to academia as the "ivory tower"?

There have been some interesting and tragic effects of removing God from the academic mission. For starters, when there is no unifying goal or *telos* at a university, any number of "created things" compete to be worshiped and pur-

sued, whether it is knowledge, power, riches, or pleasure. The options for alternative gods are as many and varied as creation itself. There's no one way, no *uni* anymore. We are not on one search; we are on many searches, disagreeing on how best to go about it. It's no wonder people feel lost and confused. At the very least, it accounts for why students are undecided and change their majors so often.

While the original residents of Babel named their city as "the gateway of the gods," the Hebrews who wrote the Bible got the last laugh, because Babel sounds like the Hebrew word for confusion (not to mention our English "babble"). Just like the builders of Babel eventually departed in confusion, so will many of today's students. Despite undoubtedly successful attempts to increase our knowledge in general, the university lacks a framework or overarching purpose for that knowledge. The result is thousands of voices attempting to shout over one another and, ultimately, too many confused generations of students.

Bigger and Busier Self-Importance

Nobody likes the guy who takes himself a little too seriously. You whisper under your breath, "Hey, *relax!* You're not that big of a deal!" But have you ever said that about a building? The University of Pittsburgh's campus is dominated by a building called the Cathedral of Learning. Standing at 535 feet tall, it's the tallest educational building in the Western Hemisphere. As the term *cathedral* implies, it operates like a church. However, instead of being dedicated to the worship of God, it is dedicated to the worship of knowledge. It's rumored that the Cathedral of Learning intentionally lacks a steeple, since the steeple on a church is traditionally intended to point up to the heavens and acknowledge God. Your campus probably doesn't contain a skyscraper, but I bet it has at least one building designed to take your breath away; perhaps a building meant to impress visitors on those campus tours. I have no problem with stately structures, but it's worth asking, "Where does my school take itself a little too seriously?"

Excellence is important, and the artisanship and labor that goes into making beautiful buildings is a good thing. However, the condition of our hearts as we work, study, and play inside of these buildings determines whether or not they become our churches, our places of worship. Are we unknowingly becoming the priests of self-importance? Self-importance can take a lot of forms, one of the most common being busyness. We run from class to meeting to working out to a quick meal and then on to more before crashing into our beds, only to get far too little sleep. Why? Because busyness is one of the ways we prove to ourselves and others how important we are. I've observed far too many students

who are incredibly high achieving and skilled, but they lack integrity, substance, and a core. They're busy, but they feel hollow.

Years ago, the evangelist Billy Graham visited Harvard University and was talking with then-president Derek Bok. Graham asked, "What's the biggest problem facing college students?" Bok answered succinctly, "Emptiness." I don't think much has changed. We may be busy, but we lack substance. We've programmed ourselves to be efficient automatons of achievement, but to what end? Much of our achievement has lacked meaning. I've seen too many students running exhaustedly on the treadmill of success, only to crash and realize that their busyness was an attempt to avoid deeper, harder issues.

Bigger and busier is not always better. Our society—and university culture with it—is like those giant, genetically modified strawberries that we pick up from the grocery store. They're huge, they're red, but they're hollow and nearly tasteless. If you have a *real* strawberry, a natural one from your garden or a farmer's market, you immediately taste the difference. The modified strawberries have the general form and function of a fruit, but we find that they are distorted, less tasty, and ultimately less appealing than how God intended. That's human nature. That's Babel. That could be college, unless . . .

Experimentation

I mentioned earlier that I love the college atmosphere: the energy, the excitement, the willingness to try new things, and the fresh ideas. But it has its ugly sides. Colleges are like our greatest cities. They are uniquely able to put the best and worst of society on display, often simultaneously and side by side. In a big city, disparity might look like homeless people sitting out in front of a world-class theater or art gallery. Or a renowned university with billion dollar endowments next to underfunded public high schools whose graduates barely have fifth grade reading levels. On campus, we find students who give time and energy to participating in peace rallies or fighting for social justice by day, yet see nothing wrong with sexually exploiting a fellow human being by night.

We're told that the value of the college experience is in trying new things. Experiment. Branch out. Seek new experiences, some will say. College is like one big laboratory, so have fun! Yet not every experiment is worth trying. As Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (and other famous plotlines) have emphasized, certain experiments can have unforeseen, and undesirable, consequences. The people of Babel were experimenters and innovators, building their tower in the form of bricks and tar instead of stone. Innovation can be worthwhile, but as

any savvy Hebrew reader would recognize, bricks later came to symbolize the oppression and slavery that the Hebrews faced in Egypt under Pharaoh. As so often happens, our experiments turn on us. They are not as benign as we think. We believe we have control of them, only to find that they control us; and we often find out too late. Yes, the atmosphere of college is like a laboratory, but sometimes *we* are the ones being experimented on. “Let’s see if this works” is a lot less appealing when you’re the subject. The frequency of alcohol-related sexual assault on campuses is proof that all experimentation is not harmless. What happens in the name of experimentation can be exploitative.

God responds to Babel’s great experiment in self-importance. On one level, what they’re doing is pathetic. Build a tower that reaches to heaven? Yeah right. God has to come down, verse 5 says, just to see it. That’s how small it is compared to the heavenlies. On the other hand, God is also aware of humanity’s tremendous capacity to inflict harm on ourselves. “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. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other’” (Genesis 11:6-7).

Consider the last hundred years of world history: two world wars (and countless others), genocides, terrorism, government-sponsored famine, economic oppression, and more slavery in the world today than at any point in human history. There are nearly seven thousand languages spoken in the world today, but imagine what we would do to each other if we didn’t have the language barriers? “Nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them.” Aren’t you glad Hitler, Stalin, and Mao had some resistance to their experiments?

Perhaps you are seeing now why God steps in at Babel and confuses their language. He wasn’t being petty, vindictive, or insecure when he scattered humankind; he intervened because he loved us. It was a mercy. He was saving us from ourselves. There are plenty of people walking around our campuses, perhaps you included, who are reaping the consequences of experiments gone wrong. But God’s mercy is greater than our mistakes, and he’s not done with us yet.

Collective Insecurity

Vampires, werewolves, and zombies. Not only is this the stuff of our nightmares, but it’s the stuff of our entertainment as well. Mythological monsters have made a comeback in recent years, a trend that has been lucrative for authors, producers, and actors. According to culture watchers, these gruesome

characters have become symbols of our collective insecurity. They serve as allegorical avatars for our fears.

Our best building projects, all the things that we've placed our hopes in to make us great and to save us, are showing their weak points. It feels like the towers of money, government, education, and climate are coming down, to name just a few. The only constant now is change, and that fact leaves us feeling a bit insecure. Because of our access to around-the-clock global news sources, we hear about human disaster and hardship like never before. It seems like the sky is always falling for someone. We just hope it never happens to us.

September 11, 2001, was a reminder that all towers come down, eventually. Except one. "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10, NRSV).

Babelites thought themselves the center of the world, and we have a tendency to do the same. In our own minds, we often think we are doing something great, but Jesus' definition of greatness is very different:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. (Mark 10:42-44)

The human assumption, expressed at Babel, is that greatness is achieved through growing bigger and building higher. Jesus turns this thinking upside down. He ultimately showed us what greatness is by making himself low. We can't build our way up to heaven, but in Christ, heaven has come down to us. When Jesus came as a baby, he arrived in humility. But when he comes again, he will come in glory. Revelation 21 tells us that the entire Holy City of God will descend one day, in all its beauty and glory. God comes down to us!

Just like at Babel, the dominant worldview on your campus is that greatness is found through puffing ourselves up, ambition should have no limits, and our security lies in how much stuff we own. Jesus reverses our assumptions by showing us instead that greatness is found in humility, that we should seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and that if we want to save our lives, we need to lose them. The way up is down. It's the great reversal.

Only the power of the gospel can truly reverse what happened at Babel. In the babble created by competing worldviews, Christians need to speak and live as the very presence of Christ on our campuses, bringing words of hope to a

confused people. Where people once found unity around selfish ambition, we can demonstrate unity around Jesus Christ. Through Christ, we can live lives of humility, generosity, and sacrifice. The reversal and redemption of Babel is foreshadowed in Zephaniah 3:9, where it says, “Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.”

These prophetic words begin to manifest themselves in Acts 2. Through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, the gospel is proclaimed in the various languages of the world. Many languages are spoken, but all with the same message. Words of hope and good news begin to reach the scattered peoples of the world. True to God’s original intent, the people are scattered throughout the world, so that every tongue can call on the Lord, serve him shoulder to shoulder, and build something of eternal value: the kingdom of God.

What Tower Are You Building?

Why did you come to college? To eventually qualify for a good job? To make lots of money? To have fun? To earn recognition? Or perhaps it just seemed like the next thing to do? These are some of the common stories we are (often unconsciously) living in. What towers are we building? If we’re not intentionally asking ourselves hard questions, it’s likely that we’re building our own towers—towers of success, achievement, money, power, reputation, pleasure, and more. But God has something much better in mind for us than our sand castles. The biblical story should reshape how we view our college years. You are not *gathering* on your specific campus, at this specific time, so that you can become great. You are, however, being *sent* there by God for a good and unique purpose. You may be enrolled at the University of Babel, but you belong to a different kingdom.

You might be reading this, thinking, “I don’t buy into the ambition and pride of my campus. I spend a lot of my time with my ministry, church, or fellowship group, doing God-honoring things.” But here’s my concern. It’s possible to imbibe the spirit of Babel and express it in Christian-looking ways. Our religious ambitions and arrogance are expressed through building the “towers” of our own little groups. Seeking safety and security, we never leave our small circles of friends. It’s easy to look out for our own comfort, instead of willingly being scattered to the corners of the campus, for the flourishing of all. If we don’t approach our campus with a sense of being *sent* to it, in Jesus’ name, then we’re just baptizing Babel.

Being sent to the scattered means being concerned with advancing God's kingdom, not building our own. It means struggling against the pride and ambition that is all around us. Being sent also means we may look very different from those around us even as we look for true security in God. For instance, we will need to rightly direct our ambition, and use the knowledge, technology, and tools that we gain at school for God's purposes, not ours. We should create and innovate with the mission of increasing the knowledge of God, and seeing our campus flourish. We should also seek to be a blessing, bringing the peace of God into hard and dark places.

To follow Christ means a certain amount of downward mobility. Maybe we won't have people trumpeting our successes from the rooftops (or the tower). Maybe we won't be famous or rich or voted most likely to succeed. Even if our names won't be great, *God's name will*. And that's better by far.



CHAPTER 1

SCRIPTURE STUDY: **Genesis 11:1-9**

Discussion Questions

1. Why did you come to college? Have your reasons changed?
2. What are the “Towers of Babel” on your campus? What traits make something Babel-ish?
3. In the chapter we listed four areas that result in “psycho-Babel”: *Confusion*, a *Bigger and Busier* mentality, *Experimentation*, and *Insecurity*. Which of these do you relate to most? Why?
4. Your friends, classmates, classes, and clubs are building Babel; how can you show them something better, and invite them into building the kingdom of God?