

## What Will Heal America's Divisions?

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Rich Nathan

May 28, 2023

*Flourishing Relationships*

Genesis 11:1-8, Acts 2

Disagreeing with one another is a constant of the human condition. But the fact is, we haven't always been this far apart. Let me give you an illustration from the world of politics. If you look at the middle decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there wasn't a huge amount of difference between most Democrats and most Republicans in the way that they perceived the performance of the President. For example, when Harry Truman was the president back in the late 1940s, 61% of Democrats approved of his performance, but so did 41% of Republicans. There was only a 20-point difference between Republicans' perception of Democrat Harry Truman and Democrats' perception.

The difference of 20-30 points continued for the next several decades. The difference began to grow under Ronald Reagan. There was a 40-point spread between what Democrats thought of Reagan and what Republicans thought of him. But by the time you get to President Obama and President Trump, there was over an 80 point difference in the way the 2 parties perceive these respective presidents. Only 10% of Republicans approved of President Obama's performance while 90% of Democrats approved of him. And the reverse was true regarding President Trump. Ninety plus percent of Republicans supported Trump. But less than 10% of Democrats did.

Unfortunately, our disagreements aren't confined to the world of politics. Public schools have become a major battleground for culture wars fights over the past 30 years. If you're a principal, an administrator, or a teacher in almost any school, whether public or private, you've surely received angry complaints from parents about assigned readings or books in the school library or something said in a classroom or a school assembly or a mask mandate during COVID. There have been fistfights and death threats at school board meetings and lawsuits and gag orders against school boards and school superintendents.

And we don't just leave our conflicts on the ground! How about all the stories of passengers acting up on planes – screaming, yelling, cursing, hitting other passengers, punching flight attendants. How many of you have heard about the passenger who had to be duct taped to his seat after attacking a flight attendant on a flight to Miami?

**[SLIDE #1] Picture of passenger being duct taped to his seat**

We've all heard about unruly passengers. To mix it up today, have you heard the recent story about the obnoxious flight attendant? This is kind of a man bites dog story. Recently a Southwest flight from Atlanta to Houston was delayed after a flight attendant refused to let the plane take off until rice spilled in an aisle by a passenger was cleaned up. The flight attendant began screaming, "who spilled the rice"? Some of the passengers began giggling which made the flight attendant look at them suspiciously. The flight attendant then announced that the plane would not take off until all the rice was cleaned up. No one moved. Another flight

attendant apparently took a paper towel and cleaned up the bits of rice on the floor. Then the flight attendant began yelling at the passengers that “none of you were raised right! You are very disappointing people!”

If we need any evidence that fighting with each other is part of human nature, all we need to do is look at our own families. How many of you have someone in your immediate family who is alienated from someone else – two siblings that are no longer talking with one another? A child who is estranged from his/her own parent? An aunt or uncle who hasn’t been seen for years because of some fight in the past?

If you have more than one child, you know that your kids will fight about anything – who got to sit in the front seat of the car the last time; who called it first so it doesn’t matter who sat there last time; who was already promised by mom so it doesn’t matter who called it first; who was promised by dad so it doesn’t matter what mom said about whether you’re going to sit in the front seat or not. Long car rides in the summer were especially fun with my children. We’d be taking a long car ride with our 2 kids and then our daughter would suddenly start screaming from the back seat, “Daniel is deliberately looking out of my window!” I would turn around while I was driving and he was. He was deliberately staring out of my daughter’s window, just to annoy her! I’d find myself yelling, “Daniel, look out your own window and don’t look out Sharon’s window!”

The Bible has a great deal to say about our divisions. In the opening pages of the Bible, we read about a man named Cain who killed his brother Abel. The Bible is a record of the long and tragic history of violence and betrayal and wars and divorces and ethnic conflicts that dominate our world. How can we reverse this downward spiral of conflict in our country? How can we heal the divides in our communities and in our own families? That's what I want to talk about today in a message that I've titled, What Will Heal America's Divisions? Let's pray.

Today we're celebrating Pentecost. Pentecost is a holiday that goes back to the Hebrew Bible. It marks 7 full weeks or in the biblical reckoning, 50 days after the Sunday following the Passover sacrifices. So we have the Jewish Passover which celebrates the Israelites deliverance from Egypt. We move to the Sunday following the Passover, count off 7 weeks, and that's Pentecost. But in order to set the background for the celebration of Pentecost, I want to go back to the Old Testament to Genesis chapter 11 and read together one of the 1<sup>st</sup> recorded attempts by people to heal our divisions. This story in Genesis 11 took place in Ancient Mesopotamia, back around 2000 B.C. on the Euphrates River in a place that became known as Babylon. Let's read together Genesis 11: 1-9.

**[SLIDE #2]** Genesis 11:1-9 NIV

**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 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.

We read in verse 3...

**[SLIDE #3]** Genesis 11:3 NIV

They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar.

Why did this attempt to live together in peace go so horribly wrong for this Ancient Middle Eastern City?

**[SLIDE #4]** Why Are We Divided?

## **[SLIDE #5]** Technology Isn't the Problem

There's nothing wrong with technological advances, moving from stones to brick or from bronze to iron. Technological advances have improved our lives immensely whether we're talking about medical advances so that the majority of children and women no longer die in childbirth. Or advances in farming so that we can feed the world's population or advances in communication and transportation – there's nothing inherently wrong with technology. Moving from building with stones to creating man made building materials is a good thing. It improves people's lives. What is a problem is when we begin to believe that a new technology, any new technology, will save us apart from God. I don't know if you've been reading or listening to any podcasts about AI. But some of the Silicon Valley engineers who have worked on AI are saying the wildest things about AI's possibilities. I heard one of the chief engineer's of ChatGPT saying that he believed that AI would cure every disease in the world in the next 50 years and produce untold wealth that would lift everyone out of poverty. He went on and on with this mind-blowingly, optimistic, utopian view of what AI would accomplish. I thought, do you really believe that a technology, any technology will save people apart from God?

Releasing the power of the atom will save the world. Unless of course we blow ourselves to bits first by dropping nuclear bombs on each other. Social media will bring the world together.

Really? All of the algorithms that Twitter and Facebook deploy create the incentive for people to be obnoxious, aggressive, and cruel. The overriding emotion of people who are on social media regularly is outrage! Everyone is always outraged all the time. The loudest voice always

wins. Instead of bringing the world together, social media has handed the world over to trolls.

We don't have reasonable, nuanced, thoughtful conversations with each other. All we do online is constantly dumb down complicated issues so that we further shatter any kind of connection we have with one another. The most extreme voices always win.

Technology is not the problem. The problem is that we sinful human beings will use whatever technology is available to gain the upper hand in our fights with each other.

What else is not the cause of our divisions?

### **[SLIDE #6] Cities Are Not the Problem**

Let's look at verse 4.

### **[SLIDE #7] Genesis 11:4 NIV**

**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."**

We think maybe the issue is too many people living too closely together. Maybe if we all moved out to the suburbs where we could each live on a 5 acre parcel of land, and make sure that we zone out multi-family housing and high rises, and lower income housing, because that's inconsistent with our community's character, maybe then we could live together in peace! But

cities are not the problem. As the late Tim Keller put it, God loves cities, because cities have more image bearers of God per square mile than anywhere else! In the end, we followers of Jesus will all move in from the country and the suburbs to a huge city, to the new Jerusalem, but it will be a city that is crime-free and violence-free and pollution-free. There will be no sickness or homelessness or poverty or hunger or death. Crying and weeping will not be heard in the New Jerusalem. We'll all live in harmony in this city.

Cities are not the problem! What is the problem in Genesis 11? It's not technology, it's not cities, it's not any of the things that we often point to. The problems is not social media and big corporations, the Republicans or the Democrats. The cause of our divisions is much deeper. It's rooted in every individual's attempt to live life independent of God. In verse 4 we read this.

**[SLIDE #8]** Genesis 11:4 NIV

**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."**

These words, "come, let us build" communicate to us humanity's arrogant attempt to echo God's original command found in Genesis 1:26 where we read...

**[SLIDE #9]** Genesis 1:26a NIV



Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...”

These folks want to reach the heavens without God. We can storm heaven, we can build our own paradise here on Earth, a suburban paradise, a communist paradise, a Christian communal paradise. We can get back to Eden on our own without reference to God. Now the author of Genesis throws in a little comedic comment in verse 5 to our attempt to build paradise.

**[SLIDE #10]** Genesis 11:5 NIV

**But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.**

The author is saying this human project, our attempts to build a paradise, our own garden of Eden without God turning to heal our divisions, without reference to God, was so futile, so pointless – so ridiculously ineffectual that God had to stoop down in order to see what human beings were doing. We always think we’re involved in some great project. This is going to do it! This is going to fix our politics, or our schools, or our families, or our churches! God from Heaven can barely see what it is that we human beings are busy doing. So God scatters the people. But He didn’t do so because He was threatened by human beings. He didn’t do so because His pride wouldn’t allow us to achieve anything. No this was one of God’s severe mercies to scatter people so that our violence and our arrogance and our propensity to demand the upper hand could be dissipated for a period of time. So we wouldn’t destroy everything by our toxic, godless attempts to create our little paradises here on Earth.

Think of all the ways we human beings try to create unity apart from God.

**[SLIDE #11]** How Do We Try to Heal Our Divisions?

**[SLIDE #12]** We Require Assimilation

Yes! We welcome you here as long as you become like us. As long as you give up all of your cultural heritage, as long as you dress like we do and talk like we do and act like we do – as long as you like the same music and have all the same opinions that we do – then we welcome you!

We will create a unified society by assimilating you into us. How else do we try to create a unified society apart from God?

**[SLIDE #13]** We Enforce Segregation

We constantly hear that the lesson of history is that different kinds of people can't really live in peace, so we need to separate! Whether it's Jim Crow laws in America or apartheid in South Africa, or building walls or red states and blue states or north and south, there's no way that we could actually mix our peoples. We need to enforce segregation. We think we can create a unified society through assimilation, or through segregation. But sometimes somebody suggests the only real answer to creating a unified paradise is extermination.

**[SLIDE #14]** We Practice Extermination

We will only be safe if you are eliminated so we will have to kill all the Jews – or all the Armenians, or all the Tutsis, or all the Bosnians, or all the Native Americans. We're not going to be safe until you don't exist! Or we'll practice reputational extermination. We'll cancel you, we'll label you, we'll silence you. We'll get you fired, we'll shout you down! We'll ban you from working at our university and we'll troll you online. We will only experience unity and peace when the people who are the source of all the world's evil are destroyed.

So what's the way forward? Only God! If all our human attempts at unity just end up causing more harm and more pain and more division, if we just end up building another Babel, then our only hope is an inbreaking from beyond humanity. We need God! We need God to intervene. We need God to heal. We need God to save us from ourselves. That's what the day of Pentecost is all about. Pentecost is the reversal of Babel!

Let's read Acts 2:1-4.

**[SLIDE #15]** Acts 2:1-4 NIV

**When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each**

**of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.**

We read in this passage in verse that they were all together in one place. Disciples of Jesus were all together. Why did it not turn into another Babel, another place of confusion and conflict, another context for these disciples of Jesus to fight with each other? We read in verse 2 about the wind of God coming. Throughout Scripture, the wind is a symbol of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is the breath of God, the life of God, the breathed out presence of God. When the Spirit comes, He also comes like fire – fire speaks of God’s holiness.

Here the question: How can holy God set His presence among sinful human beings without destroying us? This is the whole story of the Bible. Do you want the story of the Bible in a nutshell? It’s a story of how a holy God can live with sinful human beings without destroying us. The Gospel is the way that Holy God can live with sinful human beings. The Gospel is the story of how God in love sent His Son into the world to die for all of our sins, to pay the price for all of our attempts to create our own Edens on Earth, and all the hurt and damage we cause when we try to build our own peaceful paradises without God. The gospel is the story of how Jesus gave his life to pay for all the ways we try apart from God to create unity by assimilation, by segregation, by extermination. He died on a cross so that Holy God could live inside of you and inside of me and in our midst without destroying us.

We could literally spend the next several months exploring the depths of Acts chapter 2, the story of God coming down just like at Babel, but this time not to judge, but to bless! We could talk about Pentecost as a harvest festival, that's what it was, where we see a harvest of thousands of people coming to know Christ. We could talk about Pentecost as a covenant renewal festival. Pentecost was the day in the Hebrew Bible the law was given to Moses and the Old Covenant was established. Acts 2 speaks of a day where God writes His law not on tablets of stone but on people's hearts and establishes a New Covenant by His Spirit. When the old covenant was given, 3,000 people died. But when the new covenant was given here, 3,000 people were saved. We could talk about Pentecost as the beginning of the last days as Peter does in his sermon. But I want to finish today by talking about Pentecost as the reversal of Babel.

Only the Holy Spirit can create true unity between human beings. Only the Holy Spirit can bring a married couple together. Only the Holy Spirit can heal a family. Only the Holy Spirit can create a unified Church. Only the Holy Spirit can heal our divisions as a country and as a world. Let me finish by reading chapter 2, verses 5-12.

**[SLIDE #16]** Acts 2:5-12 NIV

**Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven.**

**When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one**

**heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who**

**are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?**

**Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”**

Unity is the activity of the Holy Spirit! What does the Holy Spirit do when He comes? Yes, He comes to empower us, yes He comes to transform us – to make us resemble Jesus our Lord. But the special gift of the Holy Spirit is unity. Our human attempts at unity only result in Babel, in confusion, in more hurt and more harm – just another way for 1 person or 1 group to dominate another person or group. But when the Spirit comes, when God intervenes, He breaks down our dividing walls and heals our divisions.

Have you ever heard that Christianity is becoming a global religion? People say, “Christianity is becoming a global religion”, as if for the first time in history, Christianity is moving outside of its home of Europe and American and is now spreading to the rest of the world. Let me put it this way. When you think of the typical Christian in the world right now, what picture comes into your mind? People who study this say that the typical Christian in the world right now is not a European man. The typical Christian in the world right now is a Nigerian woman. The majority of followers of Christ in the world are women and the majority of Christians in the world right now come from the developing world – from Africa, from Latin America, and from Asia. But

when people say that Christianity is becoming a global religion, our response ought to be, “that’s not quite accurate – Christianity has always been a global religion.”

From the beginning, the message of the gospel went out into the world. We see this wonderful circle of nations around Jerusalem being gathered into the early Church.

**[SLIDE #17] Picture of Nations at Pentecost Map**

Luke, the writer of Acts, goes East and he talks about Parthia and Media and Elam and Mesopotamia and then after mentioning Judea, he goes north to Cappadocia and Pontus and Phrygia and Pamphylia. Then he goes west to Egypt and Cyrene and Rome and Crete and finally to the south to Arabia.

If anyone knew Christian history, they would never think that Christianity was an American religion, a European religion, a white man’s religion. It was the gospel writer Mark who took the gospel to Egypt. Dozens of churches were planted in Egypt in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. There are reports of the gospel reaching India possibly by the Apostle Thomas before the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. One of the first fully Christianized nations on earth was Ethiopia, an African nation, in the 300s. Sudan was reached for the gospel in the early centuries. In the early 200s, Christians went along the Silk road and planted churches throughout the Persian Empire. Then they pressed forward and reached central Asia by the mid-300s and China by the 500s. And of course, the gospel spread across North Africa, the entire Roman Empire in Asia and in Europe in the first two centuries of the Church.

By the way, if the global scope of Christianity excites something in your heart, here's what I want you to do. You were handed a card on your way in today. It's got a little QR code on it. You may not realize this, but Vineyard Columbus has sent out international workers around the world to places like Indonesia and China, to the Middle East and Africa, to South America and Europe. The 3 things you can do if the global reach of the gospel catches something in your heart.

**[SLIDE #18]** How Can We Participate in God's Global Plan?

**[SLIDE #19]** You Can Pray

You can pray. Find out what we're doing and pray for our international workers.

**[SLIDE #20]** You Can Give

You can give. Go beyond praying and actually financially support some of our missionaries around the world. And third, you or your children can go.

**[SLIDE #21]** You Can Go



Especially if you're a teen or young adult, but this opportunity is open to any qualified adult here at Vineyard. You could join us on a trip somewhere in the world where we seek to serve Christ globally. All of the information about how you can pray and give and go is available at...

**[SLIDE #22]** [www.VineyardColumbus.org/international-ministries](http://www.VineyardColumbus.org/international-ministries)

So how does God break down dividing walls between people? How did God reverse Babel on the day of Pentecost? Let me finish with Acts 2: 16-18.

**[SLIDE #23]** Acts 2:16-18 NIV

**No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.**

The gift of the Holy Spirit breaks down racial walls. We read in verse 17 that in the last days God will pour out His Spirit on ALL people. God breaks down ethnic divides. The Spirit is not just given to people whose native language is English. God says I will pour out my spirit on ALL people. On Asians and Africans, on Mexicans and Central and South Americans, on Europeans and Native Americans, refugees and immigrants, and the native-born, ALL people. God created ALL people.

God loves ALL people. Jesus died for ALL people. The Spirit is poured out on ALL people. But it's not just racial divisions that the Spirit heals. He heals divisions between the genders. In verse 17...

**SLIDE #24]** Acts 2:17a NIV

**In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy.**

The Spirit is not just given to men, but to women! The gift of the Spirit is completely non-discriminatory! The gift of the Spirit is not racist. The gift of the Spirit is not sexist, and the gift of the Spirit is not ageist. Look at verse 17.

**SLIDE #25]** Acts 2:17b NIV

**...your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.**

There are t-shirts that are meant to be funny “okay, boomer” that millennials and gen-z wear to mock the older generation. We can always find someone to exclude. All young people are like this. All old people are like that. You're not one of us, you're not like us. The Holy Spirit breaks down age divides – He breaks down all the ways that we write off people of a different generation from us. Look at verse 18.

How does the Spirit accomplish His work of unifying people? How does the Holy Spirit heal our divides – in our marriages, in our families, in our workplaces and churches and communities and our nation? The Holy Spirit breaks in anytime an individual like you or me decides that we don't want to live independently of God. Anytime someone says, "I'm tired of trying to create my little paradises on Earth without God. I'm tired of all the fighting, all the divisions, that I see and all the broken relationships that I've contributed to. Anytime an individual like you or like me chooses to open our lives to the Holy Spirit and asks Him to transform us, we become agents of healing and agents of peace in our little corner of Babel. We get to partner with God to help heal our world.

Gospel Call.

## What Will Heal America's Divisions?

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Rich Nathan

May 28, 2023

*Flourishing Relationships*

Genesis 11:1-8, Acts 2

- I. Why Are We Divided?
  - a. Technology Is Not the Problem
  - b. Cities Are Not the Problem
- II. How Can We Heal Our Divisions?
  - a. We Require Assimilation
  - b. We Enforce Segregation
  - c. We Practice Extermination
- III. How Can You Participate in God's Global Plan?
  - a. You Can Pray
  - b. You Can Give
  - c. You Can Go