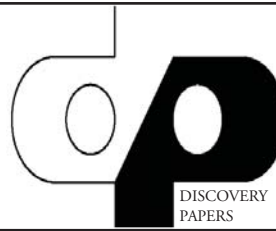


# DIVERSITY: HOW MANY BECOME ONE

*SERIES: THE SKIPPING STONE OF THE SPIRIT*



Catalog No. 100905  
Genesis 11:1-9  
1st Message  
Paul Taylor  
September 5, 2010

Last week Scott ended a sermon series on the gospel of Mark and left us with a dramatic challenge to follow Jesus. Throughout his series we learned of the way of the Lord and we left singing “I have decided to follow Jesus.” So now that we’ve decided to follow Jesus, what does that mean in our particular culture? How do we address the issues of our day as followers of Jesus? We face a lot of issues that the Bible doesn’t directly address. To make it worse, if you ask five Christians what they think, you’ll get six opinions. Our challenge, then, once we’ve decided to follow Jesus is to figure out what that looks like in the world that we live in.

That’s the motivation behind what we’ll be looking at for the next six weeks here at PBC. We’re going to address six different issues that are particularly current for us today: diversity, poverty, politics, the generation gap, technology, and sexuality. And we are going to try and lay some groundwork for thinking about these issues as followers of Christ. We’re not going to answer all the questions by any means. In fact, I’ll probably end up raising more questions than I answer. But my prayer is that we can lay a foundation for how to think about these issues.

This series is called *The Skipping Stone of the Spirit* because we’ll be trying to follow the Spirit across time. Each message will have three parts. We’ll start with the primary way that the Spirit has revealed Himself: Scripture. Each week will be based on one or sometimes two passages of Scripture. That will be our first step in following the Spirit. But we have to realize that we aren’t the only ones in the history of following Christ who have faced these issues. We have a long tradition of faithful believers seeking God and making decisions in their own cultures. So our next step as we follow the Spirit will be somewhere in church history. Each week we’ll look at one case of that particular issue being addressed by the church. The Spirit has been at work throughout the history of the church. What can we learn from that? Finally, we’ll ask what the Spirit is doing in our own day. Based on our reflection of the Scripture and whatever we’ve learned from church history, how do we at Peninsula Bible Church, today, follow the Spirit of Christ into complex and difficult issues.

So it’s going to be a fun six weeks. It’s a bit ambitious, but my hope is not to say the last word on any of these issues, but to start a conversation as we follow the Spirit

together.

Today we’re starting with the issue of diversity. The fact that there are different cultures and languages and traditions and ways of doing things has caused a lot of problems in the history of the world. It’s also made the world a fascinating and exciting place. The fundamental question at stake is “How do you have a relationship with someone who is different from you?” Or should you even try? How do you relate in the midst of diverse cultures?

As I often do, I’d like us to explore how the culture we live in addresses this issue. I have an example of this from a movie that many of us have probably seen. This particular movie is a complex social commentary of what happens when two people who are very different fall in love. It’s a sophisticated film called *Shrek*.<sup>1</sup> There is a scene where Shrek, who is an ogre, is sent to rescue the Princess Fiona from a dragon. Fiona believes her one true love will rescue her and Shrek is the one who actually rescues her.

Therefore, Princess Fiona thinks that Shrek is her true love until she finds out that he is an ogre. That he is just too different to love. She is a human. He is an ogre. They can’t fall in love. Differences separate people. We’ll come back to Shrek later.

This is the way most of us think. We trust people who are similar to us. We fear people who are different. This plays out on small scales when you have to learn to work with people who think differently than you. It plays out on large scales when ethnic groups try to kill each other. Differences cause problems. It’s hard for two different people to relate to each other.

So how do we come together? How do we as Christians think about living in a diverse world? How do we approach issues like the socio-economic divide in our local communities? Immigration issues in our nation? Ethnic wars across the world? Or, closer to home, sitting at church next to someone who prefers a completely different style of worship music? How does the Spirit lead us in our ability to engage with diversity?

To answer that question, we’re going to look at Genesis 11 to find out what God thinks about diversity. Then we’re going to look at how churches in the United States

handled the issue of desegregation in the middle of the 20th century. Finally, we'll ask what all this means for us today.

## Don't Force Sameness

With each of these sermons, we'll start with the Scripture. How does the Scripture reveal God's view of diversity? Our main passage to understand this is going to be Genesis 11:1-9. This is the story of the Tower of Babel.

But before we read Genesis 11, we need to understand its context. In Genesis 9 we see Noah's family after the flood. There's only one family on earth. In Genesis 10, we see Noah's family expanding and we read in verse 5, "clans within their nations, each with its own language." But then the beginning of chapter 11 says, "the whole world had one language." How is that possible if we had multiple languages in chapter 10? Well, Chapter 11 is describing how we got from chapter 9 to chapter 10. Chapter 11 tells the story of how things started with one language and one culture and ended up with many languages and many cultures.

Genesis 11:1-9:

**<sup>1</sup>Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. <sup>2</sup>As men moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. <sup>3</sup>They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. <sup>4</sup>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 and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." <sup>5</sup>But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." <sup>8</sup>So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. <sup>9</sup>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.**

Many of you are probably familiar with this story. But what you probably don't realize is that this story shows us something very important about how God views diversity.

Now once again, we need to rewind even further to understand what is going on here. What was God's first command to people when He created them? What were they supposed to do? It's recorded in Genesis 1:28, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." So God wanted Adam and Eve to have lots of babies. And He wanted those babies to move out and live all over the earth. That command is repeated to Noah when he comes out of the ark in Genesis 9:7, "be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it." Noah and his family were the new founders of the human race, so God repeats His command. People are supposed to spread out over the whole earth.

What happens when people spread out? I remember when I was in high school going on trips with my youth group to different parts of the country. We were from Texas and we'd meet people from Georgia, New York, Minnesota, and Idaho. And one of the first things we'd do is hold up a can of a carbonated beverage and say, "What do you call this?" All the answers were different. Pop. Soda. Coke. Soda Pop. It was amazing to us the variety of names referring to the same thing all within the same country. But that's what happens when people spread out. Different cultures arise. So if people had obeyed God's command and scattered over the whole earth, then diversity would have resulted. So it seems like God wanted people to scatter and become different.

Now let's get back to Genesis 11. These people came together to build a tower. And we're given two reasons. The first is that they might make a name for themselves. This is how a group of people establishes their identity. It's like when you get split up into teams in third grade—the first thing you do is come up with a name for your team. So these people wanted to establish one identity to keep them together. The second reason is that they didn't want to scatter. They wanted to stay together. A huge tower would provide a geographical rallying point. They could always find each other by meeting at the tower. So the reason for building a tower was to establish a common identity and keep them together.

And that would have been fine. Except that God commanded them to do exactly the opposite. God commanded them to scatter across the earth. So their building a tower was a direct disobedience of the command God gave them to fill the earth. What does this mean? It's actually quite significant. They wanted to stay as one culture and God wanted them to develop multiple towers. They wanted to

stay the same, God wanted them to develop differences.

This issue arose as a significant one for Christian missionaries several hundred years ago. In their zeal to convert people to Christ, they tried to convert them to Western culture as well. They wanted them to be the same. Missionaries today are a lot more savvy about helping people follow Christ within the context of their culture rather than replacing their culture with a Western one. Because we've learned that God wants different cultures.

But the people in Genesis 11 didn't want to become many people. They wanted to stay one people. So they built a tower.

And what did God do? Well, it says that God confused their language and scattered them. This has been referred to as God cursing them, but it's never actually called a curse. I think we can see it more like a nudge in the right direction. The first thing God did was to confuse their language. What this probably means is that He caused them all to speak nonsense. They still had the ability to speak, but their words didn't make sense to each other. It was all babbling.

So let's think about what would happen if God did this. Let's imagine that God did this right now in this room. You may think I've been talking nonsense since I got up here, but let's imagine that God did this for real. What would you do? Well, I'd probably find my wife and children and I'd get them into my car and drive away pretty quickly. And if I still couldn't understand anyone else I'd try to distance myself from other people. Because what's my attitude toward someone I don't understand? I fear them. Living in Mountain View would probably be too close to other people, so I'd move out to the country where I could make sure that no one could hurt me if they wanted to.

And that's probably what these people did. If they couldn't understand each other, they would probably gather in small groups of people they knew they could trust, even if they couldn't understand them. Families, clans, or tribes. Then they'd move out to somewhere else to put some space between them and other people who can't be trusted. They would scatter. So when the text says that God scattered them, it probably means that the result of God confusing their language was that they scattered.

Then, after some time, they developed a way to understand each other. And then they would come up with traditions, clothing, foods, and everything that makes up a culture. So what God did is to force His creation to do what He wanted them to do all along, what He commanded them to do when He created them: scatter and

become different.

But some people say that diversity is a result of sin. That God wants us to be the same. Maybe even that He is in the process of removing our distinctions. But that's not the case. Because when we read the end of the story, we find out the differences are still there. Revelation 7:9-10 says this, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Even at the end of the age, in the new creation, people are different. Different nationalities, different languages. But they're all praising the one God. We'll get back to that in a minute.

So God wants people to be different. And we want to stay the same. But when we try to stay the same, God might just force us to scatter. So what does this mean for us? That we need to stop building towers. Stop forcing everyone to be the same. Allow people to be different. Don't force sameness. Don't force sameness.

Well, you might be thinking that you don't force sameness. But I would argue that every community has a tendency to direct people into some form of conformity. And it can be quite strong in the Christian culture. Sometimes I'm afraid that we're trying to build a tower of a single Christian personality and gather around it. We want everyone to look the same, act the same, sing the same songs, vote for the same people, read the same books, and think the same thoughts. This tendency is made even stronger by our media driven culture where we can all become like some image that the media creates for us. There are worldly media images, but there are also Christian media images. The right way to be a Christian. And that might be a great way to be a Christian, but it's not the only way. And if we try to force everyone into the same mold, then we lose something powerful as a community. We may even lose part of our ability to represent God.

I see young people all the time rejecting this image of what it means to be a Christian because they just can't force themselves into that mold. The tragedy of this is that many of them end up rejecting Christ because they think there is only one way to be a Christian. I'm constantly telling young people "your faith doesn't have to look like that guy's." Your faith is a relationship with God and relationships look different for different people. Don't be threatened by that. Enjoy it. Find out what your

relationship with God looks like. Don't force sameness on others and don't allow others to force it on you. Find your unique relationship with Christ.

## Find Oneness in Christ

So we must allow each other to scatter, to become different. But in Revelation we saw a picture of everyone coming together. They were all worshipping God. And the Bible has a lot to say about unity and coming together. How do we get from scattering and being different to coming together in unity?

In John 17, Jesus prays that His followers would become one. The basis of the oneness that He prays for is that His followers are all in Him. So according to the Bible, we scatter and become different, but then we come together in the person of Christ. And we become one with Him. And one with each other. So we should be different, but united in Christ. Don't force sameness, but look for oneness. Find oneness in Christ.

And that brings us to the aspect of church history that we want to look at today. How has the church done at finding oneness? Have we been able to be different, but united? Have God's people been leaders in embracing diversity and seeing a reflection of Him in it? Have we been able to encourage people to be different, but united in relationship with God? Well, the answer is yes and no. I think the history of the church has shown some incredible examples of just this sort of thing: Jews and Gentiles coming together; Israeli's and Palestinians coming together; people whose tribes have hated each other for centuries brought together by the power of Jesus Christ. So yes, this has been true of the people of God. But we've also had our difficulties.

We can learn from our mistakes though, so I want us to look at one disturbing season in which we didn't do a great job at this to see what we can learn. We're going to look at how churches in the United States, particularly those in the South handled the process of integration, of bringing whites and blacks together in schools, in communities, and particularly in churches, during the era of the Civil Rights Movement.

After slavery ended in America in the 19th century, people had to figure out how to live together: former slaves and former slave-owners living in the same community. They quickly settled on a way to make it easier by deciding that whites and blacks couldn't be in the same groups. So they established what they called "separate but equal"

schools, public institutions, restaurants, and neighborhoods for white people and for black people. These were the infamous "Jim Crow laws."<sup>2</sup> This system was called segregation and for a while it succeeded in making things work better. But the problem was that separate wasn't equal.

So this kicked off a series of social reforms aimed at allowing all people access to the same resources. This is what was called desegregation, or integration. I remember a conversation I had with Danny Hall, who used to be a pastor here at PBC. He said that he remembers as a kid when his church in Atlanta desegregated. When they changed their official policy to allow people of color to come to their church. This wasn't that long ago.

Unfortunately, this was not a clean process for the Church in the U.S. I want to introduce you to one of its heroes though. His name is Reverend Dunbar Ogden.<sup>3</sup> Ogden was a white pastor of a small church in Little Rock, Arkansas. One Sunday in 1957 he preached a sermon from Colossians, emphasizing that Christ unites people in their differences. He believed in integration. Three years earlier, the Supreme Court had declared segregated schools to be unconstitutional. But the Reverend knew that this was going to cause a lot of problems in Little Rock. He ended by praying for the process of integration in their local schools.

The next day was supposed to be the day that black students were first admitted to Central High School of Little Rock. But they didn't go because the governor had called in the Arkansas National Guard to prevent them from enrolling in the school. The KKK had threatened to murder any black students showing up for school that morning. But that night, Reverend Ogden received a call from the editor of the black newspaper in town. She asked him a difficult question, "Would you gather together a group of white ministers and accompany nine students to Central High tomorrow?" Can you imagine?

The next morning, he led a few other pastors and nine students into an angry mob, threatening their lives. They walked through that mob up to the front door of Central High School. Those students didn't make it to school that day. The mob turned them back. But it started a process that eventually led to their being the first black students at Central High School.

But Reverend Ogden paid a price. He watched his actions divide the churches in Little Rock over the issue of what he had done and what he continued to do in fighting for integration. His family received constant threats of violence and death. Still he continued to fight for integration. Finally, his church fired him because attendance had dropped so low and he was forced to move away.

Reverend Ogden became a leader in a movement to bring people together. His unity was motivated by who Christ is. The saddest part of this story is that Christians fought him in this movement. It took a long time for churches to complete the process of integration. Some would say we're still not there. There was an article in this year's January issue of TIME magazine<sup>4</sup> asking the question whether American megachurches can desegregate. Other recent articles have asked the question why Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week for many Americans.<sup>5</sup>

And we realize that while at times Christians, like Reverend Ogden, have courageously led people to find unity in Christ, this hasn't always been the case. It seems that the church even has particular difficulty embracing diversity and achieving unity. Christians have often opposed unity, sometimes defending their views that sound convincingly like biblical exposition. So it seems that the Spirit's leading toward unity has sometimes been obscured by the fears and insecurities of the church. We have stories that we'd all too soon forget. Embarrassing, shameful stories. We have repented of many of these stories, but they are still part of our history.

## What do we today?

And that brings us to the final skip of this stone. What do we do with all this today? We've seen from the story of the Tower of Babel that God intended for His creation to be culturally diverse. We've also seen Jesus praying that His people experience unity in Him. We've seen the example of Reverend Ogden leading toward this goal within his own culture.

So how do we find unity? Well, let's go back for a minute to our movie example, *Shrek*. There's one more scene toward the end of the movie when Shrek and Princess Fiona are able to finally fall in love.

In a surprising turn of events, Shrek doesn't become a handsome prince. Fiona becomes an ogre. And then Shrek and Fiona can live happily after ever. Why? Because they've become the same. They can be one because they are the same. And this is how fairy tales are told in our culture. Differences are overcome. People become like each other. Their distinctions are erased. People need to realize that we can all get along by realizing that we're all the same.

But that isn't what we've seen this morning. God wants diversity, but He also wants oneness. A oneness that comes from Jesus Christ. So our story isn't like the story of Shrek

and Fiona. We don't become the same. We stay different. But we do become one. Our goal is oneness without sameness. Seek oneness without sameness.

Oneness without sameness is hard. It even seems impossible. So we do one of two things. Sometimes we try to force each other to be the same. Parents want their kids to make decisions the way they would make decisions. Spouses try to manipulate each other into thinking the same way. Children mock their elders for being different. We think that oneness can only come with sameness so we make each other the same. This is what we saw in Genesis 11. It's what we saw in *Shrek*.

Other times we realize that we'll never stop being different so we give up on oneness. If we can't be the same, then we can't possibly be one. This was the basic idea behind segregation. This is why we get divorced. This is why friendships are broken. This is why we change churches or jobs or just stick to the people we understand. We give up on oneness.

We can see these dynamics at work in our individual relationships, whether it is people we work with, live with, or in our family. I've seen it in marriage. One of the hardest things that Rachel and I have had to face in marriage is how different we are from each other. Our natural tendency is for those differences to become threatening to each other. So, for instance, I feel like a bad parent because I think about some aspects of parenting differently than she does. Or we spend enormous amounts of energy trying to change each other to be the same.

And I think I got tricked. The Bible says that when two people get married, the two become one. So I just assumed that meant that Rachel was becoming me. It's been a huge growing process for us to allow each other to be different and not force sameness.

This is one of the major issues that most of the New Testament letters address: how can Jews and Gentiles worship together. How can they be one without being the same. The Jews wanted the Gentiles to become Jews so they would all be the same. But Paul, in particular, said 'No. You can be one without being the same. That's the glory of the gospel. Oneness in Christ. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, man and woman, coming together in the body of Christ.'

Our goal as the people of God is not just to integrate schools and public places. It's not just to sit in church together. It's to create real communities of people who are different. And that requires the Spirit at work within us and in our midst.

It's funny; people say very different things about PBC when they come here. Some are amazed at how diverse we are. Some are appalled at how non-diverse we are. We usually think about diversity in terms of ethnicity, but one of my favorite things about PBC is how diverse we are in terms of age. We are well represented in every life stage. We're not a young person's church or an old person's church or a young families' church. We've got it all. Since I work a lot with younger people, I try to always remind them that this is something the church can offer them. There's very few places in our culture where we get to be in such a diverse group of ages. The family used to be that, but not so much anymore.

That's one of the things that I love the most about Camp PBC—the camping trip open to the whole church in the summer. All day you see children playing with high schoolers and college students and adults all mixed together. Not just sitting in church together, but interacting, laughing, playing, eating. It's great.

As we try to follow Christ in our community, these ideas find all sorts of other applications. How do we promote diversity and seek unity in the world? How do we think about our living communities and school communities? How does this change the way we think about immigration reform in the U.S.? How does it change the way we think about sharing the gospel with the world? What other questions does this address?

## Conclusion

Each of the topics we're talking about in this series has so many application points, so many areas that can spark conversation and discussion. The topic of diversity is a good place for us to start this particular series. The topics that are coming up aren't exactly ones that everyone agrees on. Several of them have some pretty controversial elements and strong opinions on which people disagree. So the idea that God intends diversity is a helpful one to keep in mind as we move forward. What unites us is not that we think the same politically. What unites us is not how we think poverty should be addressed. What unites us is not how old we are or what stage of life we're in. What unites us is not whether we have a chemical addiction. What unites us is not our ethnicity, our language, our culture, our favorite type of church music, our parenting

philosophy, or even our favorite style of Bible study.

We are a diverse group of people. The creation that our Father has made is even more diverse than we represent here. But we can be one. Not by becoming the same. We don't have to be united by sameness. We can be one by one simple thing: Faith in Christ. It is Christ that makes us one. He does so, not by making us the same, but by making us one in our diversity. Christ unites what otherwise could never be united. May we not try to create a oneness that is based on sameness. May we not run away from those who are different. But may we come together to Christ. Let Him make us one. And we too will join with the chorus of many diverse voices at the end of the age. We will sing praise to Christ: the One and only who makes us one.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Shrek™ © 2001 Dreamworks Animation, L.L.C., All Rights Reserved.

<sup>2</sup>"Jim Crow Laws," <http://americanhistory.si.edu/brown/history/1-segregated/jim-crow.html>

<sup>3</sup>Material taken from *My Father Said Yes*, by Dunbar H. Ogden. Published by Vanderbilt University Press, 2008. All rights reserved.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1950943,00.html>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/wayoflife/08/04/segregated.sundays/index.html>