

Many languages, one God: Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

by [Michael A. King](#) in the [May 18, 2010](#) issue

It's an ever new story—the building of a great tower, quickly followed by a descent into babble. We citizens of the 21st millennium seem to be standing amid the bricks from our own Babel towers. It all began when Christians aligned themselves with Emperor Constantine and commenced an effort to build Christendom, to reach to the heavens by seamlessly joining Christian faith and earthly nations. Then came Western thought, and humans seeking to derive from disembodied intellect the universal truths to which the West then expected others to bow.

Now, in 2010, I'd guess that if we agree on little else, many of us might concur that the *post* attached to *Christendom* or *modernism* rightly hints at cracks in their towers. Bricks are plummeting from the sky.

There is paradox here. The Internet girdles the globe. We tie into the global hive from the remotest jungle. With a click we access Democratic, Republican, Tea Party, Christian, Muslim, Palestinian, fundamentalist, hate speech and more. Another tower rises. One cocksure pontificator turns a bit of insight into *truth*, only to be met by an opposing bit. Yet I believe there are small truths to ponder even as the bricks of so many crumbling truths fall around us.

There are possibilities in Acts 2, where Pentecostal tongues and winds are made new even as Babel also falls and rises and falls once more. Acts tells of everyone speaking in his or her own language and of everyone understanding each other. This is a shift from Babel, where everyone shares one language in an effort to reach the heavens. In the Acts story, humans divided by national and language differences are bound together when the Holy Spirit descends from the heavens.

Are there wisps of strategies amid our present-day babbling? I doubt that we need to universalize any of our rebuildings of Christendom, modernism, a globally triumphant Islam or any faith or antifaith. What we need now are ways to understand each other across the ever thinner slices of truth that we seem too often to cherish as the whole truth. We must be careful as we dream of understanding, because even this wish is one more position among the warring ones.

Yet it is better to dream of mutual understanding than to be one more voice of hate. In a chilling column in the *Wall Street Journal* (March 27–28), Peggy Noonan highlights what hate is sounding like. She notes how even as we’re defending forms of life and advocating compassion or care for others, we regularly threaten to smash, disembowel and kill.

Noonan quotes a few of us from across the spectrum: “An American Hitler might be in the making who would purge the leftists.” “Republicans are criminals and terrorists.” “It’s what happens before the revolution . . . people are frustrated over not being heard . . . let the battle begin.” “I hope you bleed out your ———, get cancer and die.” “I hope you’re haunted the rest of your living days.” “There are people across the country who wish you ill, and all of those thoughts projected on you will materialize into something that’s not very good for you. Go to hell, you piece of ———.”

What is shocking is that such communication is no longer shocking. Go to any Web site allowing feedback and addressing anything but pabulum, and comments like those above are pretty much standard fare. Nor is the hate talk only in the media. I flinch when I remember the day a conversation with a friend over a controversial issue turned so heated that our relationship broke.

What I’m reaching for is a way that we might, across our various communities, begin to highlight resources for building up instead of destroying understanding. This is why I highlight Acts 2 as a resource for the babbling Christian community. We hate each other—many of us, much of the time. We won’t soon put down our swords. But what if at least we asked what it might look like not to try to change each other’s languages, not to change each other’s certainty that God does or doesn’t champion this or that cause, person or group, but at least to seek to understand each other’s tongue?

What would it look like if in our worship, our sermonizing, our Christian education, our delegate conventions, our speaking truth to power, we invited the Holy Spirit among us to bring us the miracle of understanding? What would happen if amid our ongoing speaking in our native tongues and worldviews and truths, we could at least marvel at understanding what the other was saying, whether or not we could shout amen? What if I could at least grasp that had I been shaped by another’s life, and that I might think as another does even though my life has shaped me to think that person is dead wrong?

What if instead of building Babel, that tower rising from our common language, our easy agreement with those of like mind, we built an altar and knelt before it as we waited? What if what we waited for was the coming of the wind and fire that would be able to help us glimpse that the others, so terribly and tragically mistaken, are still our brothers and sisters, because even in these days of sun turned to darkness and moon to blood, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”?