

Sample Chapter

From God's Family Business: Missiology for Spirit-Empowered Disciple Makers

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Chapter 13

Babel and Pentecost in the Mission of God

The theme of the overarching narrative in scripture is the story of God's unyielding focus on blessing all nations.

Babel and Pentecost form the matching theological cornerstones for the development of the mission of God. The accounts of God's dramatic act at Babel (Genesis 11) and God's dramatic outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) each mark out the boundaries for the unfolding action in the mission of God. Both accounts are accompanied, somewhat unexpectedly, by detailed lists of nations (Genesis 10, Acts 2:7–12). Both are immediately followed by God taking action to select people to represent him and his mission.

Both Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3) and the church (Acts 1 and 2) are sent out into the world to usher in a new spiritual chapter in the ongoing story of the dealings between God and man. Craig Keener points out these passages' mission-oriented connection:

From the church's inception as an identifiable community, the Spirit proleptically moved the church into multicultural diversity under Christ's lordship. Among suggested backgrounds for the list of nations here, the most compelling proposal is that Luke has simply updated the names of nations in the table of nations in Genesis 10 ... [this nations in this list] were in the very next chapter scattered at the tower of Babel, where God judged them by making them unintelligible to each other; here [in Acts 2] God transforms the judgment in a miracle that transcends the language barrier.⁶

The accounts of Babel and Pentecost both reveal profound, miraculous interventions of God that change the future of mankind. These events impact the entire human family. Both accounts focus attention on the full range of languages, cultures, and peoples of the world. They set the parameters in which the lives and callings of God's people on earth will operate from that point forward.

The Sound of Many Languages

While both accounts record events that change the course of human communication and impact the spread of human spirituality, they do so in inverse ways. At the tower of Babel, a sinful humanity speaking one language was interrupted by a direct act of God, which resulted in the frustration of human communication by a new diversity of naturally spoken languages. At Pentecost, a sinful humanity speaking many languages was interrupted by a direct act of God, which resulted in a free flow of communication from God through humans by a new diversity of spiritually spoken languages.

The ultimate social result of Babel was the erection of imposing social barriers that splintered a formerly unified humanity into distinct people groups. These new groups developed increasingly diverse cultures, worldviews, and religions. The ultimate social result of Pentecost was the launching of the world's greatest intentional crossing of the social barriers that separate humanity, a crossing of cultures achieved by the Spirit-filled people of God. This new socio-spiritual group immediately began uniting the people from the world's diverse cultures into a unified people of God (Ephesians 2:13–20).

The ominous power of universal human cultural coercion toward evil was mercifully limited by God at Babel. Never again would God have to destroy all mankind in response to the universal corruption arising from a single human society's socially enforced, lock-step rebellion against him. God could now deal with the corruption of individual sinners and individual societies in separate, localized ways, as he indeed has done ever since Babel.

God had promised Noah after the flood that such a universal judgment of humanity would never happen again (Genesis 8:21). God made this promise even though, in his sovereign knowledge, he knew that human beings and their societies would keep on rebelling against him and corrupting themselves and the earth. God did not tell Noah that he would never again bring an end to an entire people group in a decisive judgment for their sin; but rather, he would never again judge the world's entire population along with all the life on the land they occupy at one time "as long as the earth endures" (Genesis 8:22).

The only way to reconcile humanity's relentless bent toward sinning and creating godless societies with God's merciful decision to never again repeat the destruction of ninety-nine percent of humanity in one act of judgment was to divide the world's sinful people into cultures that couldn't understand or agree with each other, so that they could find no practical way to coerce each other into a unified rebellion against God. God divided humanity into people groups by miraculously dividing the languages of the people at Babel.⁶ In this enormously powerful and creative intervention among sinful humanity, God was limiting the unchecked spread of human sin and, by so doing, preserving the peoples of the world intact for a promised future day of salvation (Genesis 3:15).

Understanding the theological significance of Babel in the overarching narrative of the mission of God can also help us to understand Pentecost. Why was Christ's church launched with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a divine compulsion to witness to the nations, and the unexpected and unusual sign of speaking in tongues?

The result of what happened at Pentecost was that diverse people were gathered by the action of God, began reaching common spiritual understanding, and then started immediately to fill the Earth with the distinctly new culture of the kingdom of heaven. Pentecost united the world's scattered people groups in God's story of redemption. At Babel, humanity began a painful journey away from one another into a world of separate cultures and worldviews. At Pentecost, God was acting to reverse the necessary social isolation of humanity by launching a redeemed people on a painful cross-cultural journey back toward the scattered peoples and cultures of the world. In doing this, God's people would obey his direct command and also copy the life model of Jesus himself.

Grasping the purpose of a world divided at Babel helps us to understand the purpose of a church born at Pentecost. The separation of the human family into nations, a painful mercy from God, must now be undone by the new painful mercy of the sending of God's people into all nations with the world-changing Gospel of redemption in Jesus Christ.

The linguistic barriers God set in place at Babel were not meant as a random punitive retribution against sinners. Instead, they functioned to preserve as many distinct peoples as possible intact for a day of salvation. God purposed that such a day would come to each people group. The God who raised humanity's cultural and linguistic barriers is now calling his children to cross these same barriers with his message to humanity, and to do so in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is clear in Jesus' words in his first appearance to his disciples after his resurrection. He uses this dramatic teachable moment to interpret the scriptures and to tie them to God's missionary plan in the disciples'

minds: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:46–49).

Jesus made it clear that even if your Bible teacher and spiritual mentor was the Son of God in the flesh, you still needed additional empowerment to do the challenging work God has entrusted to you. In his first appearance to the disciples after the resurrection, Jesus said, “As the Father sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). Immediately after saying this, he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” In both Old Testament Hebrew and in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament, the same word translates into “breath” and “spirit/Spirit” (ruah in Hebrew, pneuma in Greek).⁶ Jesus, the Son of God, breathed on the disciples and told them to wait in Jerusalem for the breath of God to come upon them in the person of God the Holy Spirit.

Jesus himself had been sent out of the wilderness and into the ministry “in the power of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:14–19). Then he was informing the disciples that even though they understood the facts of his teaching and had true faith in his resurrection, they still must wait to receive the promised gift of the Father (Luke 24:48). They too must be sent out in the power of the Spirit, just as he had been sent out.

Acts 2 gives us the pivotal account of the day that the Father poured out this gift and the disciples actively received it. By this time, the term disciples referred to about 120 people, not just the eleven remaining immediate disciples (Acts 1:15). The Feast of Pentecost occurred fifty days after the Passover, which was the festival at which Jesus was crucified (pente was the Greek word for fifty). Whereas Passover had to do with blood sacrifice that atoned for the sins of the people, Pentecost was the harvest feast in which the people came back to celebrate the gathering of all the crops they had worked so hard to grow.

It is not accidental that the church of Jesus Christ was empowered by the Spirit and launched immediately into fiery participation in the mission of God on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is focused on harvest. The Pentecostal gift of the Spirit is precisely and particularly given to launch God’s people into the harvest of the peoples of the world—the people of our nation and of all the nations.

Before Pentecost, the 120 disciples already had burning faith and incomprehensible joy in the resurrection of Jesus and the powerful forgiveness of sins they had experienced. They already had a precious communion with God and one another. They already understood the Gospel and had put their faith fully in its truth. They were already thrilled with what God had done. However, they could still hold themselves back from speaking publicly about all of this. Once the Holy Spirit came upon them, things changed. As Spirit-filled people, they would soon testify, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20 NIV).

People in the Old Testament predictably began to speak out and prophesy when the Holy Spirit came upon them. In the same way, when God’s New Testament people felt the Spirit come upon them, they too were given power to speak prophetically. They began speaking in tongues, and soon, they started speaking out prophetic truth in their own languages, too. They gave prophetic messages and carried on anointed conversations with people who did not understand the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus. People who were listening could sense the presence of God in their words and on their faces. When these listeners responded, they were not responding to the personality of the believers or to the culture of the gathering. Instead, they were responding to the manifest presence of God on people right in front of them, and to the conviction of the Holy Spirit in their own hearts. When they began to pray, God’s presence came down upon them on the spot,

accepting their repentance and changing their lives. This was the Spirit-empowered launching of the last-days missionary people of God.

Tongues and Prophecy in Mission

As soon as the Holy Spirit first came upon the disciples, they began to speak in tongues “as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1–4). A dramatic change took place inside the disciples as well as in the words that began flowing out from them. Every good thing about God and the gospel began to pour from their mouths with new fluency in prophetic declarations and praises. Their spirits were caught up in the powerful words and purposes of the Holy Spirit. Like never before, their spirits were given a voice and a profound awe and joy in God’s presence, but they were declaring profound spiritual truths in languages they had never learned!

When this first group spoke in tongues, they were speaking in the languages of the international pilgrims present in the Temple courts for the Pentecost harvest festival (Acts 2:5–6). They were given the Spirit’s own wonderful words to prophesy “the wonderful works of God.” The Holy Spirit took over the gathering. Any scheduled plans, Bible studies, or liturgies that the disciples had prepared for the group that day were forgotten. Those who gathered to listen soon announced that they were hearing God’s wonders declared in “our own tongues” (Acts 2:11).

The powerful curiosity of the onlookers was stirred up, and questions were asked (Acts 2:12). Peter then shifted from proclaiming God’s glories in Christ in a tongue he didn’t know. He began declaring the same Gospel prophetically with great insight and dynamic spiritual power in a language that both he and his hearers understood.

This is the normal progression of the Holy Spirit’s impact on us: we are baptized in the Spirit and declare his glories in languages we do not know, as the Spirit enables. Then filled with the same Spirit, we begin to share the wonderful truth of Jesus and what he has done for us with new fluency and power to people around us in a language that we both know, also by the Spirit’s enablement.⁶

When the Spirit fills you, a spiritual urgency arises that has some similarity to the physical urgency an expectant mother feels when the birth process begins. The question is no longer whether you have to speak in tongues or whether you can speak in tongues. Self is no longer in the center of the picture. Personal ability is no longer the issue. Your spiritual voice begins to take center stage for a while, away from the more familiar mental and physical parts of your identity. You feel as if you must find a moment to speak out in response to God. It is not an ecstatic loss of control, but a spiritual decision to step into the flow of the Holy Spirit so that you can stand and testify to the presence of God among us, to the reality of who Jesus is, and to what the Father requires of us.

A person being baptized in the Spirit (as well as a person being filled with the Spirit again to prophesy) is not being spiritually possessed or commandeered to speak. This is the way of the dark, evil spirits that are present in our world. Instead, a person being filled or refilled with the Holy Spirit (1) has begun to sense the overwhelmingly clean and pure presence of a Holy God enveloping them and (2) is freely choosing to allow the great Holy Spirit to access their own limited human spirit and to allow the urgent message of the Lord to be spoken through their own human voice despite how truly limited one’s own spirit and voice really are in a supernatural verbal gift (a grace-gift or charism). The gift is given to you by the Holy Spirit so that it may be given through you to build up someone else. It’s as if God is tapping you on the shoulder and inviting you to join in with him on some aspect of his work.

This grace-gift may consist of speaking in tongues (as in Acts 2:4), the interpretation of tongues (described in 1 Corinthians 14:1–19, 27), a prophetic message (reported frequently in both Old and New Testaments), a word of knowledge (things God chooses to reveal that we had no other way of knowing, as in Acts 5:3, 21:10–11, and probably 14:9), a word of wisdom (a hope-giving spiritual insight coming from God about what to do in response to a specific situation facing God’s people or a specific truth which he has just revealed to them, as apparently was occurring in Acts 2:38–39), or as expressions of a miraculous gift of faith (as in Acts 3:1–8). Whatever the gift, it must honor God and bring life, godly insight, and hope to someone who is listening.

Speaking in tongues is a spiritual miracle focused on declaring the glory of Christ Jesus that breaks into our physical world (we begin doing new things and saying new words) and mental world (the restlessness of our minds slips into the background for a season as our internal spirit is given the floor, finally gaining its own voice to speak by the helping hand of the Holy Spirit about the glories of Christ and the stunning love of God). This initial step of speaking in tongues is the experience of being baptized in the service of the Holy Spirit. It is a definite event that serves not as an exalted spiritual destination, but as a prequel to ongoing moments of empowerment for many kinds of service that come next. We spend our lives being filled again and again with the Holy Spirit and obeying him out in the world.

There is a logic in this pattern that develops like an internal conversation: “If God is able to do this first miracle, so that I am right now speaking in a language that I do not know, then he can surely follow it up later by using me to speak about Jesus in a language I do know, as well! And I’ll know it’s the right moment and that the Holy Spirit is upon me, because I will feel the same spiritual sense of God’s holy presence, urgency, fluency, and power that I’m feeling as I’m speaking in tongues right now!” If God can use me to speak in tongues, he surely can also use me to witness to someone in a language we both know.⁶ Once we have heard the sound of the Spirit speaking through us to the nations, we long for God to use us to gather his scattered people home.

Promise Fulfilled

As soon as the biblical account in Genesis establishes the origin of nations (Genesis 11), God called a man and gave him a spectacular promise (Genesis 12:1–3). If Abram obeyed God, God would multiply his descendants until they became a people who would bring God’s blessing to other peoples. He would do this for one great reason: now that humanity was divided and the viral spread of human evil was temporarily contained in separate nations, God intended to act to bless each one of those nations. Abram’s family was going to be God’s tool to bring the blessing of renewed life with God back to every nation on earth: “Now the Lord said to Abram ... ‘I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Genesis 12:1–3).

God’s promise to Abraham was immense! If Abraham responded to God in faith, God would not only bless him but also use him to open the door to a relationship with the Creator for all peoples. What a story is unfolding. We now see the movement in the plot of God’s story on our planet—first came Babel, then came blessing!

Reading the first twelve chapters of Genesis is a dramatic experience. It’s like watching God playing cards with a crooked gambler. It hasn’t been going very well. The gambler has a condescending look on his face as he tosses down the next card. God seems to be losing every hand. Then just when it looks like the Almighty may lose it all, he plays a card that changes everything! That card is not a religion, a denomination, a list of

rules, or a certain style of worship music. That card is Abraham's covenant promise of worldwide blessing. The gambler, all the confidence draining out of his face, stares unbelievably at the card God just played. God's card implies redemption and salvation from sin and the final judgment. It's backed by the power of the Holy Spirit, it's funded by the bank of heaven, and it's strong enough to cover all people groups on earth. God just revealed what his secret strategy has been all along, and the infuriated gambler realizes that God now holds the winning hand!

After Babel, God chose Abraham, and after the cross, God chose us. "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'" (Galatians 3:7-8, NIV). Like Abraham's family, all of Jesus' followers have been called into existence as a brand-new people of God to bless all nations.

This is not a random requirement. God has had the nations in mind from the beginning. It is also not a requirement that will be fulfilled by accident. The mission of God among humanity depends on messengers who will intentionally cross worldview barriers to bless all nations. From now on, God is committing himself and the resources of heaven to bring his blessings to every people group on earth. Every new disciple whom God sends out into his mission is a new challenge to the enemy of our souls. He lays down our lives and our cooperative efforts in mission one after another, beating Satan blow by blow, moving on relentlessly until the inevitable occurs and the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Revelation 11:15). The true King will reign over all nations, and he will reign forever!

This promise becomes the theme of the whole Bible. Throughout the rest of scripture, God is fulfilling the promise made to Abraham. He keeps his promise one step at a time, journeying across the Bible's sixty-six books, all the way to the very end: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9-10).

In this passage, we see the final picture of the reversal of Babel. The earth's peoples, divided by God's great salvation-minded judgment at Babel, are here reunited through God's greatest salvation-minded judgment at the cross. Like Babel, this multitude is also gathered in unity of purpose. Like Babel, these people are gathered with worship on their minds. The difference is that the object of their worship has changed. This time, the peoples of the world are choosing to worship God!

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and first earth had passed away ... And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband ... the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it ... nothing unclean will ever enter it ... only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Revelation 21:1-2, 23-24, 27)

Like Revelation 7, this picture in Revelation 21 is a glimpse of the intended destination of God's work in the whole Bible, across all of human history. Revelation 21 is a picture of the fulfillment of the work God is doing in our lives today. Revelation shows us repeatedly that the vibrant relationship of all nations with God is a necessary part of the reality we will find beyond the door of the better world to come.

God won't take a partially complete bride through that final door. Heaven's bridegroom is worthy of a complete bride. Right now, the bride is missing some key parts. We look like some child's plastic doll that has

had a few limbs broken off and has been discarded in the toy box. The bride is not complete. There are hundreds and hundreds of cultures with essentially no worshippers of the one true God. Other people groups have some representatives, but don't yet have enough. The heavenly bridegroom's epic sacrifice for the world is fully capable of producing a complete bride, a redeemed humanity with all its missing parts restored. The Urdu, Kanuri, Afar, Acehnese, and Hopi cannot be absent. All humanity must be represented in that city where the kings of the earth will bring their glory, and yet where nothing impure will ever enter (Revelation 21:24–27). The gospel must produce its fruit in all the world.

The Lamb of the cross, now risen and glorified, stands looking down the aisle like a bridegroom awaiting the first glimpse of his full reward. His anticipation is electrifying. It courses through the spirits of all of us who love him passionately and owe him everything. He is waiting for his bride.

We need to be filled again with boldness for our next step in our partnership with the Holy Spirit. Our day is the day of salvation. We are alive in the great era of the mission of God!

61. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2014), 322–323.

62. This epochal event in human history may be reflected in the genealogical account of Eber's son Peleg (his name means "division"), so named because "in his days the earth was divided" (Genesis 10:25).

63. Taylor, 237.

64. Denny Miller, *Empowered for Global Mission*, 108-109. Miller cites renowned Pentecostal theologian Stanley Horton as an example of a published explanation of this concept. See Stanley M. Horton, *The Book of Acts: The Wind of the Spirit* (Gospel Publishing House, 1996), 30.

65. *Ibid.*