

“One Lip”

What Binds Us Together and What Divides Us

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
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“Now the whole earth had one lip and their words were one.” (Genesis 11:1)

“Mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one.” (AC 1285)

Peace, harmony, togetherness, respect, appreciation, support, cooperation—what a blessing it is when these things are a reality for us and the people with whom we interact. In contrast, positioning, argument, superiority, stubbornness, inflexibility, forcefulness, control—these things make life miserable for all involved.

Our challenge for today is to remind ourselves from the Word what brings people together, and what separates us. We do so by examining the story of the Tower of Babel. At the beginning, the group of people described is unified, yet very quickly they are scattered across the earth, unable to understand each other’s language.

In explanation of this story, we begin with two very powerful teachings. The first presents a picture of the divisions that exist amongst churches or religious belief systems. It focuses just on the Christian realm, which has hundreds of divergent groups: Catholics, Lutherans, Evangelicals, and so forth. Then it says, “This situation would never exist if they were to make love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor the chief thing of their faith” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1799).

That’s a bold statement, but it doesn’t take much thought to see the truth of it. On the negative side, we know that religion, which is supposed to teach about love for one another, so often divides. History books are full of atrocities done in the name of religion, out of some warped sense of doing God’s will by hurting other human beings. In a less destructive sense, we also know how easy it is for religious arguments to spring up, often leaving people mad at each other because of their differing beliefs. What is it that we are sometimes reminded not to talk about at social gatherings? Religion and politics.

So the teaching concludes, “If people made love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor the chief thing of faith, all the disagreements which stem from doctrine alone would disappear. Indeed the hatred that one person holds against another would be dispelled in an instant, and the Lord’s kingdom on earth would come” (*Ibid.*).

A second teaching describes the same theme of what divides and what brings unity, in a slightly different way. It uses the Biblical phrase from the Tower of Babel, that “the whole earth had one lip.” Literally that means they all spoke the same language, but symbolically it stands for having a shared doctrine or driving teaching that centers on mutual love or charity. That mutual love or charity causes people to have one shared end in view, namely the common good, the Lord’s kingdom, and the Lord Himself (*Arcana Coelestia* 1285). It concludes by saying, “Mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one” (*Ibid.*).

Bringing these principles closer to home, we could postulate and test, as a hypothesis, the statement that all our arguments, and all our feelings of distance or hurt in our relationships come from a failure on someone’s part to put charity or mutual love in the first place. Apparently, the Lord is teaching us that charity and mutual love bring people together, and a failure to lead with these attitudes of heart and mind separate. Let’s test that hypothesis by examining the story of the Tower of Babel.

“From the east.” The story is a negative one, or the events have a downward trend. That trend starts with a journey from the east. It’s a benign description, really. The people happened to live in the east, and they moved westward. But that detail is included for a very important symbolic reason. The east is a symbol for the Lord, and also for a way of regarding others as the Lord teaches, namely from charity (see *Heaven and Hell* 141). We learn that people in heaven orient themselves toward the east, because they want to have the Lord who is seen as the Sun of heaven in the east, in their lives in all that they do. They also want to have charity or a genuine desire for the welfare of others driving all their interactions.

But these people journeyed “from the east.” This is a symbol of moving away from the Lord, and away from that central motivation of love (see *Arcana Caelestia* 1290, 1292). Any time there is such a departure, what is opposite creeps in. The opposite of love to the Lord and charity is selfishness. What is being described, then, is a human dynamic where self-interests begin to take the lead, and a focused energy on cooperating or respecting or looking for the good in others takes a back seat.

Making bricks. The next thing we hear in the story is the people talking to one another about making bricks and firing them. This part of the story describes, symbolically, what happens when something self-serving begins to take the lead. We are taught that making bricks stands for “the falsities which we fashion for ourselves” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1296), and the fire in which they were baked stands for the evil desires that spur those falsities in the first place (*Arcana Caelestia* 1297).

It’s interesting to consider why this simple activity of making bricks would represent something so negative. There’s another place in Scripture that helps us to understand. The Israelites in Egypt were forced as slaves to make bricks to build the great cities of Pithom and Raamses (Exodus 1:11, 5:7-8). The bricks there stand for the falsities formulated by the Egyptians which led them to justify that it was okay to enslave another nation, and to force them to do hard labor (see *Arcana Caelestia* 7113). We all grieve today about the slavery that existed in this country, and in others, and that still exists in certain parts of the world. All of it is a horrific use of other human beings for one’s own selfish purposes.

Returning to the story of the Tower of Babel, we note the negative direction indicated by “making bricks.” Again, when charity or a genuine concern for the welfare of others takes a back seat, self-serving motivations enter in. Evil desires—wanting to dominate, wanting what belongs to others, longing for what is forbidden—when these things heat up, justifications naturally follow: “I deserve to have...” “This is justified payback for what that person did to me.” “What can I say that proves in no uncertain terms that I am right and she is wrong?” It is easy to see that these things can fracture relationships.

A tower as a monument to self. The third and final part of the downward trend is the decision of this group to build a tower with its top in heaven, thereby making a name for themselves. The dangerous spiritual decision represented by this intent is to let self-love have “free reign” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1304). To make a name for oneself is obviously a testimony to the greatness of self—a “reputation of power” as one passage puts it (*Arcana Caelestia* 1308). Unfortunately, it is not too difficult to see examples of “tower building” or erecting monuments to self, in our world. Without suggesting that any of these things are bad in themselves, having the big home, the flashy cars, the expensive clothing, the jewelry that screams “success”, the vacation home, and so on, can become an all-encompassing goal in life. Especially if these things are pursued at all costs, or with an “ends justify the means” mentality, we can see the danger.

So we have the movement from the east—away from the Lord and the charity He calls for. We have the bricks—the self-serving desires which fire us up, and lead to all sorts of false justifications. We have the tower-building, or the obvious placement of self in the lead, with the intent of showing forth to all one's own greatness.

“Confusing their language.” It is that package of negativity that the Lord responded to by confusing the language of the people. It's fascinating to consider the dynamic at work here. The group is working in conjunction with one another. They're unified in their project of brick-making and tower-building. And then, all of a sudden, their cohesion as a group dissipates. The appearance is that this is at the hands of the Lord—He confused their language. What is actually happening is that a judgment that takes place within the Lord's laws of order. The fact is, groups of people all coming at their work from a point of view of self as most important don't work well together. They may indeed be able to combine for some mutually beneficial purpose for a while, but if the intention is to get the better of the situation, or to manipulate others for self-serving purposes, trust goes away, and any cooperation that was there fades. As one passage puts it, “All were at variance with one another, that is, one person was opposed to the next” (*Arcana Coelestia* 1322).

The law of order at work here is that internal variance—“me first” or “I'm more important than you”—leads to external variance eventually. Selfishness, justification, negative desires naturally lead to separation and hurt. The fact is, whenever there is any discord between ourselves and others, some form of internal variance is at play. It may not be hardened evil, but there may indeed be some selfish motivation at play, or some failure to let charity lead that is causing the variance. That is the “order” or the truth, which is a reflection of the way things work—or don't in this case. It's not that the Lord all of a sudden made it so those people couldn't work together. Rather He let things take their logical course, and the confusion just happened.

What binds us together. The amazing thing about this story, though, is that it teaches us, by contrast, what we can do to cooperate with the Lord in coming together with others. The fact is, every negative human motivation has an opposite positive human motivation. The things that cause distance and hurt between human beings, if avoided, allow for their counterparts to come into play, leading to togetherness and happiness.

So let's look at the positive trend that is indicated by this very story of the Tower of Babel. The first step is to turn toward the Lord. We recall that a journey from the east represented a turning away from the Lord and the charity that He calls for. Turning to the Lord, then, would mean a willingness to open ourselves His leading, and receptivity in our hearts of that desire for the welfare of others. A very practical and helpful thing to do, whenever there is disagreement between us and others, is to take time to bring that disagreement before the Lord. It could be in the form of a simple prayer, saying “Lord, what do You wish me to do in this situation?” It could be some time for reflection, instead of getting caught up in the heat of the moment. Such openness might be all it takes for us to try to view things from the perspective of the other person, or to wish well to that person even if we disagree with what he or she is doing.

A next step has to do with using stones instead of bricks. If our own ideas and justifications get us in trouble, the Lord's never will. So what are the true ideas from the Lord's Word that can help? One series of true ideas we've already reviewed. To the extent that we take to heart the teachings of the Word about self-love, about justifications, about tower-building, and so on, we will know what to avoid. But there are other building blocks that we can

use. Take the Golden Rule as an example: “Whatever you want others to do to you, do also to them” (Matthew 7:12). The simple reflection of how we might want to be treated in any situation, can lead us to act in ways that help the relationship rather than dismantle it. Or what of the truth that “mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1285)? Or that we should seek “the common good, the Lord’s kingdom, and the Lord Himself” (*Ibid.*)? These principles lead us to consider what is good for all of us, not just ourselves, and to consciously come from a place of concern for the welfare of others, not just our own welfare.

Then there is the work that we set ourselves to do in conjunction with other people. Instead of tower-building, what good and useful purposes should we align ourselves with? If usefulness is the motivator, it will lead us to consider who shares the similar useful goal that we do. It could be cooperating with each other to paint part of the house, or working together with others on an event hosted by the Church, or gardening together to raise crops for those in need, or working as a faculty to provide a wonderful educational experience for children, or ensuring that an information site is user friendly and contains pertinent data. Whatever the purpose, if serving is the goal, the Lord can bless our efforts to work with other people in achieving it.

Finally we come back to the concept of “one lip.” What we’re asked to consider is that there is a common “language” being spoken in this good side of the equation. The language is the Lord’s, based on the truths of His Word. It is “spoken” by people who turn to Him, and strive to be motivated by Him to care for the welfare of others. It is the vocabulary of usefulness, of the common good, of things that build the Lord’s kingdom in this world and lead to heaven. It communicates the ideas that each of us have, that lead to healthy relationships with others and bring us all closer together.

Along these lines, we note a teaching about the life after death given to us in the work *Heaven and Hell*. It shares with us the fact that all in heaven speak the same language. They don’t have to learn it; it just comes naturally to them. It is the language of thought and affection which springs from love to the Lord and love toward the neighbor (see *Heaven and Hell* 238). Even though there are countless communities, each with different specific characters and beliefs, they are united in these universal principles of love.

So we return to the hypothesis we introduced earlier: All our arguments, and all our feelings of distance or hurt in our relationships, come from a failure on someone’s part to put charity or mutual love in the first place. We have explored the journey from the east, the brick making, the tower-building that leads to division. We have seen in contrast that turning to the Lord, using the stones of His truth to build something of use, or to do something contributes to the common good, brings people together. The story of the Tower of Babel is not quaint “cause” narrative about why so many different languages exist in our world. It is a powerful testimony to the truth of what divides, and what unites. Our calling is to learn the universal language of heaven in our dealings with others, so that we can be a part of the Lord’s work of teaching the world “one lip.” It happens when we let mutual love or charity take hold in our hearts, for then the Lord can bind us together with many others, into one heavenly host that serves Him. **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: Genesis 1:1-9; *Arcana Caelestia* 1285, 1322.

Genesis 11

¹Now the whole earth had one lip and their words were one. ²And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there. ³Then they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. ⁴And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

⁵But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. ⁶And the LORD said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. ⁷Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. ⁹Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

***Arcana Caelestia* 1285**

[The words of Scripture,] ‘The whole earth had one lip’ means that people everywhere held to the same doctrine in its general aspects.... Such was the situation with the first Ancient Church that although there were so many forms of internal and external worship—at the general level as many as there were nations, at the specific level as many as there were families making up nations, and at the particular level as many as there were people in the Church—they all nevertheless had ‘one lip’ and ‘their words were one’; that is, they all shared one doctrine in general and in particular. Doctrine is one when all possess mutual love, or charity. Mutual love or charity causes things, though varied, to be one, for it makes one out of varied things. If all, no matter how many—even ten thousand times ten thousand—are governed by charity or mutual love, they have but one end in view, namely the common good, the Lord’s kingdom, and the Lord Himself.

***Arcana Caelestia* 1322**

‘So that they do not hear each person the lip of his companion’ means that all were at variance with one another, that is, one person was opposed to the next. This becomes clear from the words themselves. ‘Not hearing a companion’s lip’ is not acknowledging what another says, This is similar to the situation that exists with evil spirits in the next life, who are distinguished into separate communities just as good spirits are. But they are joined and held together by their having similar delusions and evil desires, so that they act together in persecuting truths and goods. So they have a common interest to hold them together. But as soon as that common interest ceases to exist, one rushes at another, and their joy then consists in torturing one or more of their companions. The same applies in the world where doctrine and worship of this kind exist. People may be quite united in their acceptance of what is a matter of doctrine or religious practice, but the common interest holding them together is worship of self. And their acceptance is proportional to their ability to share in that common interest. But to the extent they cannot share or have any hope of sharing that common purpose they split up, for the reason mentioned just above, that not one of these people possesses any truth but everyone has falsity in place of truth, and evil in place of good. This then is what is meant by ‘Each person not hearing the lip of his companion’.