

I got to visit Cairo back in 2011. The first day we were there, we visited the famous al-Hussein Bazaar. The merchants at this Bazaar are some of the most renown in the world, known for their ability to haggle.

Being an American who grew up with price tags and exact change, I've always been a bit intimidated by haggling. My only saving grace is that I love to argue, so the process is actually pretty fun for me.

If you've never haggled before, it feels *really* strange. You ask "How much?" and they quote you a price that's astronomically too high - easily double or triple what the item is worth (and what they expect to sell it for). You have to act offended and offer maybe 10% of their asking price. It helps if you insinuate that no thinking human would pay such an exorbitant price for such obvious garbage.

Then the seller acts equally offended and praises the superior craftsmanship of the item, assuring you you'll get nothing finer and no better deal at any of the other shops. You go back and forth until you land on something between 50-60% of the original asking price (if you're a decent negotiator).

I made it out of the al-Hussein bazaar with my souvenirs and a good story. It was fun.

And the next day we went to the Pyramids. While we were there, walking around in the heat, I jogged over to get some bottles of water from a vendor. I grabbed one for me and each of my two friends, and when I got back, our local friend asked how much I paid. I told him and he laughed and said, "Didn't you haggle?"

What? Haggle for water from a vendor?

No. I didn't.

He laughed at me, and that's when it *really* hit me. Haggling at the bazaar isn't a cute thing for tourists to do. It's a way of life in Egypt. It's a deeply embedded cultural practice. Egyptians haggled over cab fare, something that, since we were foreigners we were totally unequipped to do.

That realization about haggling revealed some deep-seated xenophobia in me. I didn't *want* to haggle for everything. I wanted to take a cab, buy a bottle of water, shop for souvenirs without wasting a bunch of time on arguing over how much to pay. I wanted price tags and barcodes.

It turns out, as open-minded and adventurous as I *thought* I was, I have some strong cultural preferences. While I might be flexible up to a point, at the end of the day, I'm *really* Euro-American.

Cultures value different things, and we're all a product of our cultures. Which makes being multi-cultural a real challenge. After all, it's not always possible to accommodate everyone's cultural preferences. Some cultures, for instance, value timeliness - if you're not 10 minutes early, you're 5 minutes late!

while others wouldn't dream of showing up to an appointment until at least 30 minutes after the start time.

So... which culture is right? And how are we all supposed to live together? That's a tough question, one that's important as our little corner of Dallas becomes more and more diverse. We'll see today that this is good news, because God has called us *from the beginning* to be one church of many people united but not uniform. We'll ask today how we can partner with God in becoming the Church God is calling us to be!

### **Message**

We always use November as a way to remember who we are as a church - what does it mean to say that God has called us to be this particular body called Catalyst in this particular place in North-east Dallas. This year, we're sketching out some of the big ideas that are going to be guiding us over the next few years. We began with the idea of friendship, that we want Catalyst to be a place where it's easy to make friends, because friendship is the heart of Jesus' good news. When we make friends with people, they see how God makes friends with them.

This morning, I want to explore another big idea that's shaping what's next for Catalyst: diversity. A lot more churches these days are asking what diversity looks like. In large part, that's because our culture is increasingly diverse. Certainly Dallas - and especially Rowlett - is becoming more and more diverse. So in one sense, asking what a diverse church looks like is how we remain faithful to the community in which God has called us.

But there's a larger sense in which diversity is important for every church, regardless of context. Today, we're going to study the whole Bible (brace yourself). Because we need to see that God's call for us to be a diverse church isn't just a cultural trend or a PC quota to fill. A truly diverse church has been God's vision from the beginning of history.

God calls us to unity, but unity is *not* uniformity. God's plan from the beginning has been for one people made up of every possible variation we could possibly imagine. Unity without uniformity is difficult, but there is no better expression of God's kingdom than a diverse people all following the same God together.

So for the next few minutes, we're going to explore our mythic past, our historical legacy and our mythic future.

**[Scripture Slide 1]** If you have a Bible, feel free to turn or click with me to Genesis 11. This is essentially the end of the Bible's prologue. Genesis 1 opens with the creation narrative. We get the man and woman, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel and the first murder, the spread of humanity across the Earth, the Flood and Noah's Ark, and God's covenant never to destroy the Earth with water again. This final story marks the end of mythic history - next up we enter into the world of Abraham and the Patriarchs.

We'll read this story with attention to how it connects to themes established in the first ten chapters. For now, let's dive into the Tower of Babel:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was 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. -- Genesis 11:1-9

I have to confess that growing up, this story confused me a *lot*. At first blush, it sounds like God is *afraid* of humanity, afraid we're going to break into heaven and oust God or something. So this 'confusing the languages' thing seems really petty.

But if we look closer at the story, and keep in mind the larger context of the preceding chapters, we see something else is happening. When God created humanity at the end of the first creation week, God gave us a clear mandate:

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it... -- Genesis 1:28

Multiply and *fill the earth*.

Look again at why humanity wanted to build the tower:

They said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

We didn't want to be scattered. We didn't want to fill the Earth. We were afraid to fulfill our divine calling. We were afraid to be what God created us to be.

At the heart of this fear is a fear of diversity. Diversity is a natural consequence of scattering. I've only lived in Texas four years and I already say 'y'all' and can't stand Mexican food from Oklahoma on up. We

knew that if we fulfilled God's creative mandate, if we scattered ourselves across the world, we'd become different. We'd develop different cultures, different languages, different worldviews and customs.

And that's scary. There's a safety in uniformity. So rather than spread out, we tried to build up. Skyscrapers rather than sprawl.

And when God saw we weren't going to fulfill our created intent, God took matters into God's own hands, accelerating the diversification process by creating multiple languages. We see the languages as a punishment, but that's not how God intended it. God's purpose for the world for *us*, from the beginning, was a world filled with diverse cultures, languages, people.

Diversity was God's idea.

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn with me to Acts 2. We see this in history, on the day of Pentecost, the day the Church received the Holy Spirit. Many scholars consider Pentecost to be a sort of undoing of Babel, but I'd like to suggest the opposite - that what we see on the day of Pentecost isn't the undoing at all, but the fulfilment. Acts tells us that, when those first Christians received the Holy Spirit, "All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." -- Acts 2:4-11

If this had been a reversal of Babylon, we'd have seen all the languages of the world recombined into one. People would've been saying, "Whoa, how can I suddenly understand Aramaic spoken with a Galilean accent?" But that's not what we see here.

When the Spirit descends, she doesn't erase everyone's native culture. Rather, the Spirit enables the Church to exist in all cultures, bound together by the common confession of Jesus' death and resurrection. Pentecost is a story of unity, but not uniformity. It's a story of *diversity*, the story God has been telling from the beginning. From the first chapter of the Church's story, we see a vision of God's endgame: people from every tribe, culture and tongue swept up together into one family.

That's not incidental to God's plan. Let's look at a vision from our mythic future. Among the many things John sees in the book of Revelation is a sneak-peek of Heaven, and the worship happening there. He tells us,

I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar,

“Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne  
and from the Lamb!” -- Revelation 7:9-10

A vast, innumerable crowd made up of people from every nation, tribe, people, language, all worshipping together. This is God's plan to "fill the Earth" fulfilled. A diverse, impossibly beautiful human race, united but not uniform.

Friends, this is what God will have. This is where history is headed. The question before us is whether we will get on board. Will we trust God that diversity is better? That unity isn't the same thing as uniformity?

What will it look like for Catalyst to be a church that celebrates diversity? How do we make room for that mosaic of voices in our midst? How do we make sure we're not just tolerating each other in our diversity, but *celebrating* the fact that you see the world differently from the way I do? How do we learn to cherish our differences and learn from each other?

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] God calls us all to the same table. We're unified around Jesus!

### **Assignment + Blessing**

I want to leave you with a simple challenge this morning (simple, but not necessarily easy). Spend some time today evaluating who you're listening to. Your professors, the books you're reading, the media you consume. How diverse are those voices? Do they all look like you? If so, you're *missing* who God created you to be. You're missing the great gift of a world full of difference God has given you and me. What can you do to find some other voices?