

THE TOWER OF BABEL

Genesis 11:1-9

With all classes above Primary the teacher will need to prepare in his mind a brief summary of the story of the flood and of Noah. Present the flood as the inevitable end of those who turn away from the Lord and rely on their own judgment, and the saving of Noah as the Lord's provision for the preservation of the race He had created. Then show how history repeated itself because of human conceit and folly and so introduce the lesson for today. The teacher should have in mind an example of a modern building of a Tower of Babel which will come close to the experience of his particular class.

Doctrinal Points

In the Bible the East is a symbol of nearness to the Lord.

The first seven chapters of the Bible were taken from the Ancient Word and are pure symbol stories.

If we build on our own ideas instead of on truth from the Word, we are always in a state of confusion.

The desire to set ourselves above others is destructive.

Notes for Parents

The story of the flood is the symbolic description of the end of the first great "church" on the earth. Most of its people were swallowed up by the wrong ways of living which they developed as they became more and more selfish. Those who still wanted to serve the Lord are pictured by Noah and his family. The Lord gave them a new revelation of truth—the Ancient Word, which existed before our Bible and is referred to and quoted here and there in our Bible. From this they learned the truths which the earlier church, as long as its people remained simple and innocent, had been given by an inner perception.

The people of the Ancient Church—this second church—became very wise from their study of the Ancient Word, much wiser than we are today, but gradually they began to be proud of their wisdom, as learned people sometimes are, and to forget that the Lord was the source of all their knowledge and that none of it was the product of their own minds. So they, too, separated faith from charity and strayed further and further from true worship of the Lord and true goodness.

The story of the Tower of Babel is the description of the end of this second church. Spiritually its people came to live in a low valley—a low, worldly plane of thought—and built their lives according to their own selfish ideas—the brick and slime—instead of with the stone of truths from the Lord cemented together by mortar—charity in the heart. This was because their object was to make a name for themselves.

When people are seeking only their own advantage, they cannot live together in harmony or work effectively together. Each one speaks his own language and they do not understand each other. They have to go their separate ways.

We know that the earliest historical records find men actually scattered over the surface of the earth, practicing many forms of idolatry, many of them at war with each other, and many in savage states. This is not the original state of mankind, as some historians assume. It is the condition which followed the breaking up of the Ancient Church. Mythology tells us of the Golden and Silver Ages before recorded history, and most peoples have such traditions, handed down by word of mouth through the centuries. The Lord Himself gives us this knowledge in the first seven chapters of our Bible, wonderful symbolic accounts of the two great civilizations which had risen, flourished, and died before written records began.

Primary

At this age level the desire to make a name for oneself appears in the childish tendency to “show off.” The story may be made the beginning of developing

in the children an objective attitude toward their own conduct which we all need to cultivate as early as possible.

These children can see in a simple way the meaning of the confusion of tongues. Be sure they learn the name *Babel* and its meaning.

This story took place long after the time of Cain and Abel. Many generations of people had come and gone, but people were still living in the same part of the world in which the Lord had put them in the beginning. They had learned a great deal since the first simple times, and they had come to think themselves very wise. But you know that people who think themselves wise are sometimes not wise at all, because wisdom is not in having a great deal of knowledge but in using the knowledge we have as the Lord wants us to use it.

Let us read a story about these people, and as we read it, see if you can find some things in it which show how foolish they really were. [Read Genesis 11:1-9.]

In the first place, they were foolish to imagine that they could build something that would reach heaven, weren't they? Then they were foolish to begin in a low valley instead of on a mountain top. And finally they were foolish to use anything but the best materials.

What did they use to build the tower?

Of what should they have built it?

They were very silly, weren't they? But you see they were not trying to do something good and useful, but just to make a name for themselves; that is, they were trying to "show off," as we say. Do you ever try to show off? People who do are apt to do things which are very foolish. Instead of making other people admire them, they usually get into trouble.

How did the Lord stop them?

Today we use the word *Babel* to mean confusion.

When people are thinking only about themselves, they cannot work together.

They do not understand each other.

Selfishness and conceit separate people just as the Lord scattered the people of Babel.

Something like this happens to you sometimes. When you are playing with another child and each of you wants to have his own way, neither of you can understand why the other does not agree with him. You fall to quarreling and go off home. The pleasure you might have had together is spoiled. This is what always comes of thinking we are wiser than everyone else.

Junior

Something can be done in this class with the real meaning of the successive churches, the reason for their decline, and the general correspondence of the Tower of Babel story. The last statement in the Junior notes should interest the children.

Who were the first two sons of Adam and Eve?

What was Cain's occupation?

What was Abel's occupation?

What offering did Abel bring to the Lord?

What offering did Cain bring?

Why was Cain's offering not accepted?

What did Cain do to Abel?

What was his punishment?

How did the Lord save him from destruction?

What do Cain and Abel represent?

The Bible story tells us that the early people, after they once decided to depend on their own judgment instead of obeying the Lord wholly, became worse and worse. This is what always happens when anyone decides that he does not need to obey the Lord. Their selfishness and their false ideas finally became so great that they were destroyed by their own evils, just as a criminal eventually "comes to a bad end." Their destruction is pictured in the story of the flood.

But you remember in the story of the flood that some people who still wanted to obey the Lord were saved.

What were these people called in the story?

How was Noah saved?

What sign was given to him after he came out of the ark?

What promise did the Lord make?

Do you suppose that all the people after Noah kept the covenant the Lord had made with them? No, people again began to think selfishly and to forget that they owed everything to the Lord. This made them feel very important. They were not giants of selfishness like the last people before the flood, but they thought a great deal of themselves and of their own ideas. They gave themselves credit for their knowledge. They even thought they could reach heaven by their own way and be like God.

In the story we have today how did they try to reach heaven?

What was their purpose in building the tower?

Read the lesson and see if you can find three great mistakes they made to begin with. People who think themselves wise are always really foolish.

Where did they begin to build their tower?

What building material did they use?

What did they use instead of mortar?

What did the Lord decide to do?

Why did they have to stop building the tower when their language was “confounded”?

You would find it hard to work with anyone who could not speak English. But sometimes you do not understand other people even when they are speaking English, because they use words you don't know, or because they are talking about things you are not old enough to understand, or because you are not paying attention. And sometimes you don't understand because you don't want to understand. Selfish people are never interested in anything other people want. So selfish people never really understand each other. And people who “know it all” don't even listen to other people. So you see why it is said that the Lord “confounded” the language of the people in the story. They were so selfish and conceited that they could not work together at all.

What was the name of the tower?

Babel today is a synonym for “confusion.”

What happened to the people after their language was confounded?

The people described in the story of the Garden of Eden were the first great church upon the earth. This is called the Most Ancient Church. The people described in the story of Noah were the second great church, the Ancient Church. When this church departed from the Lord, it was really scattered all over the world, and all the religions in the world today except the Jewish, the Christian, and the Mohammedan are based on traditions handed down from this Ancient Church.

Intermediate

In its application to our own lives the lesson is very easy to illustrate for this age group. Its correspondences are simple and clear. Because of its brevity the lesson lends itself to verse by verse interpretation, and it may be a good thing to take advantage of this method, as we do not often have time for it in a Sunday School period. The class should also be given specific teaching concerning the character of the Ancient Church, why it declined, and how it ended, as there will be further references to it during the year.

In past lessons we have studied the stories which immediately follow the story of Cain and Abel—the stories of the flood and of Noah and the ark. These are such familiar stories that we need only speak of their spiritual meaning. The flood was a flood of falsity and evil which finally overwhelmed the people of the Most Ancient Church once they had turned from the Lord to self. Even an innocent child, once he determines to close his ears to instruction and advice, is likely to become worse and worse until finally he may actually become a criminal. A criminal is not made all at once, but little by little by accepting and acting upon false ideas instead of true ones. But all the people of the Most Ancient Church did not reach the state represented by the destruction in the flood. Some, even though they were in false ideas and had yielded to some evils, still recognized the Lord and meant to obey Him; so the Lord could save them. This good remnant is represented by Noah and his family, and their character is represented by the ark. And you will remember that when the flood subsided and they

came out of the ark, Noah built an altar and worshiped the Lord, and the Lord made a new covenant with him, the sign of which was the rainbow. This was the beginning of the second great church, the Ancient Church.

The Ancient Church was of a different character from the Most Ancient, in that its people were no longer instructed by the Lord through an inner perception of truth, but had to learn truth by an outward way, just as we do, before the Lord could enlighten their minds. The very fact that they had to study and learn gave these people a great respect for knowledge. Their particular study was the study of correspondences, which they developed into a science. At first, of course, they studied the correspondence of the world about them for the purpose of learning how the Lord wanted them to live. But after a while they began to forget the purpose and to study just for the sake of knowing more than other people. You can see how this might happen. A boy, for instance, may decide that he wants to be a doctor because he feels that as a doctor he can help a great many people. But by the time he has completed his long years of training, he may have fallen in love with his science and want to go on with it just in order to make a great name for himself, regardless of whether or not what he is doing is really helping people. You see we are getting close to our lesson for today, the story of the Tower of Babel; for the people in that story were working to make themselves a name—not with any thought of serving the Lord and the neighbor.

This story—like the story of the flood—describes the end of a church, this time of the second or Ancient Church. Let us think for a moment of the particular correspondences in it. Up to this time “the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech.” This means that in general and in particular people agreed as to the doctrines of their religion. But now they were journeying “from the east.” This means away from the Lord, for the East, where the sun rises, corresponds to the Lord and the love and truth that come from Him. And they went down into a valley, a low state of life, and there they decided to build a city and a tower whose top

should reach to heaven, for the purpose of making a name for themselves. A city represents doctrine and a tower the worship of self. We are building just such a city and tower when we think of ourselves as the most important thing in the world and form our ideas according to what we think will be most to our own advantage, so that people will admire us and do what we want.

The builders of the Tower of Babel had brick for stone. Stone, you remember, represents truth. Brick represents man-made ideas, and these bricks were burned thoroughly in the fire of self-love. And they had slime or pitch instead of mortar. Mortar, which binds stones together, represents true charity; but pitch, which melts when heated, represents self-love.

We can see from all this why it is said that the Lord confounded their language and scattered them abroad over all the face of the earth. When each person in a group is thinking of himself, each is unwilling to hear and accept any ideas which are not to his advantage. So they do not understand each other and cannot work together. Sometimes two boys or girls are friends for a while when they are looking for the same kind of pleasure, but it takes very little to break up such a friendship.

The Ancient Church actually did break up and scatter all over the earth. Some of its knowledges were handed down by tradition and appear in the Greek and Roman myths and in the hieroglyphics of Egypt and the magic of India. But the Lord was no longer in that church.

Basic Correspondences

- a city = doctrine
- a tower = the worship of self
- stone = truth
- brick = man-made ideas
- slime = selfishness

Senior

In addition to the general lesson on the folly of setting up human intelligence

above revelation from the Lord, stress the different interpretation of history which the knowledge about the Most Ancient and Ancient Churches makes possible for us, and the many things in the modern world which this interpretation explains.

The people of the Most Ancient Church, after the separation of faith and charity and the consequent destruction of charity as pictured in the story of Cain and Abel, developed more and more monstrous evils. This is what is meant by Genesis 6:4. The “sons of God” are the truths handed down in that church, the “daughters of men” are selfish loves, and their marriage pictures the falsification of truth when it is used selfishly. That this process actually developed physical giants we know from later history in the Word. All the giants—including the well-known Og, king of Bashan, and Goliath of Gath—were evil remnants of the Most Ancient Church. The destruction of the Most Ancient Church is pictured, as we know, by the story of the flood, and the establishment of a second great church—the Ancient Church—by the story of the salvation of Noah and his family in the ark, and the covenant of the rainbow. This church was of a new character, having lost the inner perception of truth by which the good in the Most Ancient Church were led. The will and the understanding in man had been separated, and men now had to acquire truth in the memory by an outward way—as we do—before they could be enlightened by the Lord. In its best days this was a church of great wisdom, delighting in the study of correspondences and developing varied and beautiful forms of worship according to correspondences.

But gradually pride in their own wisdom undermined the purity of their life and worship. The history of the decline of the Ancient Church is covered by a long chapter of genealogy (Genesis 10), each successive generation picturing some new development. Such a chapter may seem to us a mere tiresome succession of names, but Swedenborg tells us that it is nevertheless very useful for us to read it, for as we read, the angels who are with us are understanding the inner meaning.

The story of the Tower of Babel describes the end of the

Ancient Church. In only nine verses we have a wonderful picture. The people were journeying “from the east”—away from the Lord—and they came finally to dwell in the plain of Shinar, a low valley, representing a state far from the Lord. Read Isaiah 55:9. There they decided to build a tower whose top should reach to heaven in order to make a name for themselves. Their ambition was to become great by their own unaided efforts. We hear people boast of being “self-made.” An understanding of the folly of such an idea is expressed in the taunt, “He is trying to pull himself up by his own bootstraps.” Reason tells us that in order to rise a person must take hold of something higher than himself; yet we are always trying to exalt our own ideas and our own powers.

“They had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.” Stone represents truth. It is God-given; no man can make it. Brick is man-made and represents our own ideas used as a substitute for the Divine truth. The slime or pitch (the word in the Hebrew is *bitumen*) symbolizes self-love. Self-love will hold people together for a time, as long as their interests coincide, but a very little heat of angry passion will melt the bond. Every man-made philosophy of life is a tower of Babel, begun in the valley and built up of brick and slime in an effort to reach heaven—to “make a name” for oneself.

“And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language.” This pictures the fact that up to this time the people had had but one doctrine of truth. Now this state was to be broken up. When men look to themselves for truth, there is no fixed standard. Men’s ideas differ. Each follows his own selfish line of thought. They begin to argue and quarrel and cease to understand each other because each is interested only in his own ideas. So the Ancient Church broke up in a “confusion of tongues,” or conflicting religious ideas, and as a result actually was “scattered abroad upon the face of all the earth.” *Babel* has become a synonym for “confusion.”

Historians make the mistake of assuming that the state of men at the beginning of history was but a step in a constant upward

development of civilization. So they believe that men started as godless wild beasts. Instead of this, the state of the world at the opening of recorded history was the end of a great civilization, the second great civilization since the beginning. Mythology, with its golden and silver ages, is really much nearer the truth than the modern naturalistic interpretation of history. The Greek and Roman myths are full of true correspondences, and the hieroglyphics of Egypt, as well as the magic practiced there and later in India, are based on the knowledges of correspondence handed down by tradition among the scattered remnants of the Ancient Church. In the Bible story itself we have Balaam's use of correspondence in his effort to curse Israel and—on the good side—we have the correspondential gifts brought to the infant Lord by the wise men of the East. All the pagan religions of the world have their roots in the Ancient Church. This is why in all of them there is enough genuine truth to form the basis of a good life, so that those who choose to believe in God and to live in love to the neighbor may reach heaven.



Adult

The reasons for the decline of the Ancient Church and the picture given of it in the series Noah, Ham, Cush, Nimrod, Babel are important for the Adults, especially in connection with the modern approach to Bible study. We might note that the First Christian Church followed the same historic pattern of decline which the Ancient Church presents.

The decline of the Most Ancient Church is described in Genesis 5 in the genealogy from Adam to Noah, and its final state of gross self-love in Genesis 6:1-7. The destruction of the people of the Most Ancient Church had to be permitted because they were so constituted that all their knowledge of truth came by perception through the will, and when the will became wholly selfish, they could think nothing but what was false. We are familiar with the general meaning of the story of the flood, the salvation of Noah and his family in the ark, and the new covenant whose sign was the rainbow. With the people of the Ancient Church which was

founded on this covenant, the will and the understanding were separated so that men could receive knowledge of divine truth by an external way, as all men have received it since that time.

Because of the brevity and simplicity of these early Bible stories we are apt to forget that, like the six days of creation, each of them describes a development which took centuries. The world does not pass suddenly from one state to another any more than an individual does. The germs of evil as well as the remains of good are often unnoticed for a long time and grow little by little. So the tremendous pride of self-intelligence which brought about the end of the Ancient Church was the culmination of a long, slow process of decline.

In our lesson for today we find them journeying “from the east”—away from the Lord—and they have come to a plain in the land of Shinar. There they build a city and a tower, which is called Babel. Babel is first mentioned in Genesis 10:10 as one of the productions of Nimrod, who was a son of Cush and a grandson of Ham. Of the three sons of Noah—the three different branches of the Ancient Church—Ham represents external worship without internal, or faith without charity. Cush represents the “interior knowledges of the Word, whereby such men [men who are in faith without charity] confirm false principles.” Nimrod represents the external worship of those who place religion in externals and not in internals. Nimrod was a “mighty hunter” and Swedenborg tells us that this is because the greater part of mankind do not know what internal things are, but only external things; and most men abide in things of sense, in pleasures and in cupidities, and have in view themselves and the world; and therefore they are easily captivated by such a religion.” (AC 1178) This gives us a background for our thought concerning the Tower of Babel.

In Isaiah 14:13-14 it is said of the king of Babylon: “For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High.” The word

Babylon is merely the Greek form of *Babel*; by a play on words they are both connected with a Hebrew root (*balal*) which signifies confusion. The state which causes spiritual confusion is the exaltation of self. The pride of the king of Babylon and the pride of the people of the degenerate Ancient Church are both described in the Bible in similar terms, but the older story, being part of the Ancient Word, uses the picture of the actual building of a tower “whose top may reach unto heaven.” “And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar.” Stone is one of the symbols of truth, standing particularly for the fundamental truths upon which we build our lives. So the Lord Himself is called the “Cornerstone,” and many times the “Rock.” Bricks are made by man out of the earth itself to take the place of stone. They picture principles which man makes up out of his own mind to take the place of the Lord’s truths; the fire with which he burns them “thoroughly” is the fire of self-love; and self-interest is the slime or *bitumen* with which he sticks them together, in place of the enduring mortar of neighborly love.

A businessman who believes that “the first duty of each of us is to look after himself” has definite principles upon which he carries on his business; he makes these up with the best of his understanding so that he may succeed. He may not lie or steal or cheat because he can see that “honesty is the best policy,” but his principles have nothing to hold them together except self-interest, and as soon as he is convinced that some other practice would serve him better, the structure that he has made falls to pieces, like the house founded on the sand: his “slime” has melted away. Every life that is built from the motive of self-love is a tower of Babel.

The people of the Ancient Church had a wealth of knowledges concerning spiritual things and how they work out in the substances of the material world. When they turned from the Lord to self, they began to use their knowledges and their worship to get power and fame for themselves, and if the Lord had not again interfered, they would have destroyed themselves as the people of

the Most Ancient Church had done. They would have become monstrous forms of falsity, just as the Most Ancients became giants of evil: “And now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.” So the Lord took away from them the understanding of the spiritual meaning of material things, so that they could no longer pervert and profane the holy things which are within all external effects. The Word says that the Lord “did there confound the language of all the earth.” That is, when the internal harmony which came from dependence on the Lord was destroyed through self-conceit, all the varieties of thought and worship, which had been like the harmonious colors of the rainbow, became sources of discord and division. So the people of the Ancient Church were divided and scattered, each group following its own form of worship from tradition instead of from any understanding of its spiritual significance.

This, we are told, was the origin of all the forms of idolatry in which the nations were found at the dawn of recorded history. Nature worship, ancestor worship, idol worship—instead of being the beginnings of religion as a prevailing modern theory holds—are the degenerate remains of the beautiful correspondential worship of the people of the Silver Age, the Ancient Church. Mythology is a corrupt survival of true correspondential accounts of the early peoples. Hieroglyphic writing has its basis in correspondence. The accounts of the flood found in the traditions of certain nations are corruptions of the original account in the Ancient Word which Moses copied from that Word for us. A very clear illustration of the building of a Tower of Babel is the “natural history” concept of the development of religion, which is made up by men from their knowledge of existing historical remains without any belief in Divine revelation or in spiritual causes. A knowledge of the spiritual meaning of the story of the Tower of Babel with reference to the Ancient Church should protect the minds of New Churchmen from infection by this “natural history” concept and its conclusions. Modern scholarship is so bound up with this concept that in examining its findings it is almost impossible to sep-

arate fact from imagination. When one starts with the premise that the Bible is merely the product of men, one's conclusions are unsound, no matter how painstaking and conscientious the research. It makes a vital difference whether we approach the Bible as God's Word to men or as man's "ascending search for God." The latter study builds a Tower of Babel. The former builds a church.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 1304: "The church is of such a nature that when charity toward the neighbor departs, and the love of self succeeds in its place, the doctrine of faith is of no account except in so far as it can be turned into the worship of self; and nothing whatever is accounted holy in worship unless it is for the sake of self, and thus unless it is self-worship. All love of self is attended with this; for he who loves himself more than others, not only hates all who are not subservient to him, and shows them no favor except when they have become subservient, but also, in so far as he is not under restraint, he rushes on even until he exalts himself above God. That this is the nature of the love of self when the reins are given to it, has been shown me to the life. This is what is signified by 'a city and a tower.' The love of self and every derivative cupidity is of all things the most filthy and the most profane, and is the veriest infernalism; and from this any one may conclude what the quality of that worship must be which contains within it an infernalism so absolute."

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Who were Cain and Abel? *sons of Adam and Eve*
- J. What were their occupations? *farmer, shepherd*
- J. What offerings did they bring to the Lord? *grain, lamb*
- J. Why was Cain's offering rejected? *insincere*
- J. How did the Lord preserve Cain? *mark*
- J. In our story for today, in which direction were the people journeying?
from East
- P. Where did they stop? *Shinar (Babylon)*
- P. What did they plan to build? *tower*
- P. What was the purpose of their building? *reach heaven*
- P. What materials did they use? *brick, tar*
- J. How did the Lord stop the building? *confused language*
- J. What became of the people? *scattered*

- J. The end of what church is described in this story? *Ancient*
- P. What was the tower called? *Babel*
- J. What other name in the Bible is the Greek form of the Hebrew word *Babel*?
Babylon
- I. What is pictured by the building of the Tower of Babel? *building life on selfish premises*
- S. What was the difference between the Most Ancient and the Ancient Churches? *perception–truth acquired by an inner way; and conscience–truth acquired by an outer way*