

Ecclesiology in a Mass Collaboration World

Sean McGever¹

It is hard to find a church today that doesn't have a website or a pastor who doesn't use email on a daily basis. Yet, while there has been widespread adoption of technology for improved communication and organization of the church, little has been done in the local church to work, share and collaborate together. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that past and present ecclesiastical structures have utilized mass collaboration and therefore should explore ways to leverage new technology for the sake of the church.

Biblical Examples of "Mass" Collaboration

The Tower of Babel

One of the clearest forms of mass collaboration in the Bible is the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. This is the last section of what is commonly called the primeval portion of Genesis (1-11). One of the main features of this section is the outworking of the fall (Gen 3). This is successively shown through the sin of Cain in his murder of Abel (4:1-16), and the subsequent spread of a godless civilization (4:17-26), which lead up to God's judgment through the flood (6:9-8:22). After the flood, Genesis 10 records the descendants of Noah and what is known as the "Table of Nations". At this point this nation of people was a people who had been commissioned to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth."² They were to increase in number and spread out across the earth.

The study of the church may not typically include a study of the Tower of Babel situation, yet at the time it shows the collective people of God and a prominent example of their organization and function. Thus, it is a worthwhile example as we study the church. The very first statement of the Tower of Babel account is that the whole earth used the same language and the same words. How this meshed with the various languages mentioned in Genesis 10:5, 20 and 31 is not of interest here. There may be a chronology issue, but that need not be examined. What is of interest is that there was unity of communication, which I will expand to include the term "collaboration". In verse 2 we see that the people were fulfilling the command as they journeyed east. As soon as they come to the plain in Shinar, they settle there and begin plans to make a permanent dwelling, thus shrinking from their original mandate to fill the earth. In fact, they explicitly desire to make a name for themselves through their tall tower. This begs the question, of whom do they desire to be known? Since they are described as the "whole earth" (11:1), it must be that they were seeking significance among themselves, in a self-defeating quest for meaning.

In verse 5 the irony is thick as the Lord "came down" to see their city and tower. Even in their strong collective effort the Lord couldn't even see their work. Yet, the Lord says that this is only what they had "begun" to do. It was clearly an unfinished work. It should

¹ Sean McGever, M.Div, is the Area Director for Paradise Valley Young Life in Arizona.

² This is initially instructed in Gen 1:22 and 1:28, but is repeated anew in Gen 9:1 and 9:7.

be noted right away that no matter what modern collaboration techniques or technologies evolve, there is no need for fear. God will stay God and we will stay human.

It is in this context of the Lord's unapproachable rule that He says "nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them." (11:6b). "The infrequent terms 'plan' [or purpose] and 'impossible... occur in tandem just once more in Job 42:2"³. There Job there tells us that no purpose of God can be thwarted. Even if the builders have an amazing collective power in their midst, its direction will never come to be fulfilled unless it is in accord with God's plan. We see this again in Psalm 127:1, "Unless the Lord builds the house the builders labor in vain".

We see the same type of idea earlier in the garden. There Adam and Eve are removed in order to hinder what might happen if they have access to the tree of life (3:22). "The mutual occurrence of intradivine dialogue ('one of us'/'let us') encourages the reading of Genesis 11 in light of garden events (3:22; cf. 1:28)."⁴

While it is established that God's plan is in no danger of being thwarted, it must also be observed that there is incredible potential in the effective collaboration of individuals. This power may be synonymous in scope with the earlier apparent potential to live forever (3:22). As we seek to strengthen the organization and work of the church today, we would be unwise to miss the potential of increased and improved collaboration.

Thus, given the purposes of the people of Babel, the Lord confuses their language and the people indeed scatter over the face of the earth.

The Sin of Babel

There has been debate over the primary sin of those in Babel. The first view is that the root issue was their pride of wanting to ascend to heaven, and in some way, be like God. Harland puts it this way, "the striving after a name in Gen XI therefore is inappropriate ambition."⁵

The second view is that their sin was defiance against their original mandate. If this view is taken then, "The story then becomes an account of an attempt to find security apart from God through building a fortified city."⁶ Or in other words, "where the people of Babel go wrong is in the desire for human autonomy."⁷ It is this same desire to be self-sovereign, or to be like God that we find in the original fall (Gen 3:5). Similarly, deClaisse-Walford suggest that the sin involved is that the people were "not being satisfied or trusting enough to allow themselves to be 'just' human and allow God to be God."⁸

³ K. A. Mathews and K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11: 26* (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 484.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 484.

⁵ P. J. Harland, "Vertical or horizontal: the sin of Babel," *Vetus Testamentum* (1998): 526.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 528.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 525.

⁸ N. L. deClaisse-Walford, "God Came Down... and God Scattered: Acts of Punishment or Acts of Grace?," *REVIEW AND EXPOSITOR* 103, no. 2 (2006): 412.

Bridging these comments with our study of mass collaboration allows us to see that there is a need and an opportunity to have a lower view of “me” and a bigger view of God, His plan, and his outworking as we collaborate together. In this collaboration, our name drops from the marquee, from the top of the page and can be lost in a nearly endless list of contributors that can help us to say like John the Baptist, “He must become greater, I must become less” (John 3:30). This attitude can and should be adopted not only for individuals but also for churches and organizations. We must fear what might happen to our churches and organizations if they become more like the Tower of Babel in their desire for autonomy.

While the sin in Babel could be titled, “the power of community gone wrong”, there is a subtle idea snuck into this story which could easily be overlooked. It is in this study of collaboration that this insertion shows its genius. In verse 7 the plural “let us”, which is also seen in Genesis 1:26 and 3:22, is used when the Lord plans on his response. This seems to counter the usage of “let us” in 11:4. Both are plural. It is as if one community confronts another community! The first community is one gone wrong, either full of pride or defiance, probably both. The second hints at some type of conversation that has the collaborative purpose to make things right. Whether this is an early allusion to the trinity or as Wenham suggests, the Lord was speaking to the angels⁹, or any other number of explanations of the plurality, it seems the two are juxtaposed as “community gone wrong” and “community done right”.

It is interesting to note that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with their common language, but the denial of their purpose. In fact we see a community of perfect collaboration and language, of which I suggest the trinity, here. If anything this is an indictment of closed-off “one-language” communities who refuse to participate in the greater mission of God. Those who do so have a mission of their own and act independently, to their demise *a la* Babel.

The Early Church

I believe that we see another fine example of collaboration in the early church as recorded in Acts. At this point we find the early church huddled together in prayer with “one mind” (Acts 1:14). In a sense we can say that the church had a unique moment of clarity and simplicity, they knew they needed to pray. Collaboration at this point was minimal.

When the day of Pentecost came, much of what had been done to scatter the people at Babylon came full circle. On this day in Jerusalem, Pentecost had drawn “devout men from every nation” (Acts 2:5). Certainly these were the descendants whose ancestors were initially driven apart by the Lord Himself. They have effectively filled the earth and were prepared to be reunited through the recent work of Christ. The crowd was bewildered because they heard voices in their own languages (2:6) The work of God had confused their languages for His own purposes and now the work of God through the

⁹ G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Books, 1987), 241.

Spirit was allowing them to understand each other for His own purposes, namely for salvation and the forming of the early church. We can see how God is pulling together people for the sake of the kingdom.

One of the hallmarks of the early church was how they shared their resources. They held “all things in common” (2:44), using their collective resources “as anyone might have need” (2:45). Again, at this point they were said to be in “one mind” (2:46). In this atmosphere of community and collaboration it is recorded that the Lord was adding followers day by day (2:47).

Once again, Luke highlights how the early church shared their resources (Acts 4:32-37). It is amazing that “not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own”. As this paper concerns the church, we should deduce that a principle of ecclesiology should be generous sharing not only among all believers, but among churches. How wonderful it would be for churches to help churches, to step across denominational or theological differences and share the burden and blessings of the body of Christ. I believe this is a lost witness for the kingdom of God and that the church, at least in America, is known more for their isolation and disunity rather than their charity toward each other. The principle can, and should, be applied in many ways, but let me suggest that a step in the right direction would include the sharing of intellectual property.

After the church was able to get some unified momentum in purpose, practice, and community, there was a “great persecution” that arose after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1). This scattered most of the early church into Judea and Samaria¹⁰. The disciples stayed at the church in Jerusalem and was in-sorts the mother church of those dispersed. When those in Jerusalem heard of Philip’s missionary service, they sent Peter and John to investigate (Acts 8:14). Similarly, when the church in Jerusalem heard about what was happening in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to find out more (Acts 11:22).

It was at this point that the Jerusalem church discovered even further the richness of the gospel as it was able to go out to gentiles. It begins with Cornelius and Peter who see the Holy Spirit descend in power on the gentiles (Acts 10:44-48). This gospel enrichment continues as Paul and Barnabas battle Judaizers who insist on circumcision as a requirement for salvation (Acts 15:1-2). What we see is that as the gospel is pushed out beyond the geographical and ethnic bubble, the gospel is clarified for all of its fullness. As we choose to collaborate with those outside of our own bubble, we may grow to understand the gospel in a richer way than what we have experienced in the past. It is not that the gospel changes, but rather we are able to see it in a different light. The church at Jerusalem was able to appreciate the genuine work of God, even among “outsiders”, challenging some of their strongest-held beliefs (i.e. circumcision). As churches collaborate in the future, I hope that the church, local and abroad, will have the wisdom of the Jerusalem church of old.

¹⁰ This scattering is a fulfillment of Acts 1:8. Just as the episode at Babel was an act of God to accomplish His mission, this scattering will further the spread of the gospel and the enrichment of the fullness of the gospel.

There are at least a few more illustrations of collaboration in the early church. One is that the church would circulate letters. The letter that the Jerusalem church wrote to the church at Antioch is a primary example (Acts 15:23-31). At the end of Colossians, the church is instructed to have their letter read in the church of Laodicea, and then in-turn, to read the letter that the Laodiceans had received (Col 4:16). This circulating of letters appears to be common enough that Paul has to warn the Thessalonians against possible letters written not by him (2 Thes 2:2). Modern churches should communicate back and forth often. A final example is the multitude of people sent between the churches to deliver news, funds, instruction, leadership, etc. Often times this was short-term.

The activities at Babel and in the early church are just two brief observations of Biblical mass collaboration. As we have looked back at mass collaboration, we will now look at some of the enormous changes happening world-wide in collaboration today. Our generation stands at the opening of a technological explosion. It is worthwhile to see how the powerful tool of mass collaboration is being leveraged today.

Mass Collaboration Today

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is an offspring of a previous project called Nupedia, which was an attempt to produce a free encyclopedia. Though it had highly qualified authors and a formal peer-review process, only 12 articles were written in the first year. In January 2001 the project transformed into what we now know as Wikipedia. The first Wikipedia article was posted on January 16th, 2001. Less than one month later, on February 12th, there were more than 1000 articles online. In the first year there were 20,000 articles created. As of March 2009, there are more than 2.9 million articles on Wikipedia.¹¹ Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales has described Wikipedia as "an effort to create and distribute a multilingual free encyclopedia of the highest quality to every single person on the planet in his or her own language"¹²

Wikipedia at its core is simply a community bulletin board or notebook. Anyone can create or edit articles. Currently there are about 75,000 authors, and of those there are about 1,500 who have authority to maintain article policies and standards.¹³ Authors are instructed to adhere to the "Five Pillars" which state that: 1) Wikipedia is an encyclopedia which must "strive for verifiable accuracy, unreferenced material may be removed. 2) Wikipedia must have a neutral point of view, which includes "When a conflict arises regarding neutrality, declare a cool-down period and tag the article as disputed, hammer out details on the talk page, and follow dispute resolution." 3)

¹¹ "History of Wikipedia - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Wikipedia; Accessed 25 March 2009.

¹² "Wikipedia:FAQ/Overview - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Overview_FAQ; Accessed 25 March 2009.

¹³ "Wikipedia:About - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>; Accessed 25 March 2009.

Wikipedia is free content that anyone can edit. 4) Wikipedia has a code of conduct. 5) Wikipedia does not have firm rules. Authors are encouraged to be “bold in editing, moving, and modifying articles.”¹⁴

I see Wikipedia finding success through its near-anonymity of authors. No single author can claim to have authored a popular or obscure item themselves. The collaborative process includes an imposed sense of humility in which I feel is part of its inherent success. Those in Babel were seeking to make a name for themselves and for their own purposes; the Wikipedia project seems to have a different aim.

Some have raised concerns about the accuracy of Wikipedia. In an article titled, “Internet Encyclopaedias Go Head to Head”, *Nature* magazine did a comparative analysis of forty-two science entries in Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica¹⁵. In this article *Nature* found there were 162 mistakes in Wikipedia versus 123 in Britannica in the forty-two articles, which are roughly 4 inaccuracies versus 3 per article. This analysis leads me to believe in the general collective strength of collaborative editing. One triumphant strength of the “wiki” approach over a static, “closed”, approach has been pointed out that, “errors cited on Wikipedia have long since been changed, while the Britannica errors remain”.¹⁶

Facebook

Another example of contemporary mass collaboration is the social networking application Facebook. Facebook is one of many popular social networking applications such as MySpace, LinkedIn, and Flickr. Each has their own focus, for example, Flickr focuses on photography, LinkedIn focuses on professional communication and business opportunities. Facebook began in February 2004, and in ten months it had grown to nearly one million active users.¹⁷ Facebook initially was limited to specific colleges and universities, such as Harvard, Stanford, Columbia and Yale. Over time it opened up to all college and university students, then to high school students, and eventually anyone could join. In January 2009 Facebook had 150 million active users, and by February 2009, there were 175 million¹⁸, adding 25 million active users in one month.

Other examples

While the prior examples dominate the current online mass collaboration world, there are a few significant Christian efforts currently. The first looks nearly identical to Wikipedia, it is Theopedia¹⁹. Theopedia calls itself “an encyclopedia of Biblical Christianity”. As of April 2009, there are 1,644 articles including analysis of every book from the OT and

¹⁴ “Wikipedia:Five pillars - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia,”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Five_pillars; Accessed 25 March 2009.

¹⁵ “Access : Internet encyclopaedias go head to head : Nature,”

<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v438/n7070/full/438900a.html>; Accessed 25 March 2009.

¹⁶ Tapscott, 75.

¹⁷ “Facebook | Timeline,” <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?timeline>; Accessed 25 March 2009.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ <http://www.theopedia.com>

NT, all the primary and relevant subtopics of systematic theology, articles on church history, biographies of the apostolic father, NT scholars, authors, and pastors, to name a few. In a review of the article on the baptism of Jesus, there were over 6900 words supported by 67 footnotes from various well-known academic books and articles. This included analysis of the Greek and textual variations. This article was created in February 2005 and has been continuously edited since then.

Another online tool, World Wide Open²⁰, is a free, not-for-profit, online tool that helps connect and empower Christians by allowing them to post and share resources (such as files, videos, Bible studies, etc.), and needs to all of its users. It is designed for three types of users: individuals, churches, and non-profits. Think of it as a collective hard drive that Christians all over the world can share, and allows them to all communicate.

One individual church has excelled in its collaboration. LifeChurch.tv has several offerings including sharing virtually all their internal resources through their “open” resource site²¹. On this site they post their message series artwork, themed videos in full resolution, message outlines, and layered graphic files. They created the YouVersion²² phone and internet Bible application which has over one million active users on the iPhone alone²³. It includes 16 English versions of the Bible (including the NASB, NIV, ESV) and 22 other languages. Additionally it allows users to share comments, videos, downloads and links keyed to each verse of the Bible. They have also developed a free online application called Church Metrics that helps churches keep tabs on attendance, giving, salvations, and baptisms²⁴. Virtually all of these projects are things that their local church, or network of churches, needed and they went the extra step to develop them for any church for free.

These are some of the current resources available online today. Certainly these will evolve quickly and more will be added to the mix soon after this paper is finished. One thing that these resources do is remove the barriers and costs of ministry. Theological information and training is established and evolving online for free. Fantastic multimedia files reduce or eliminate many of the costs that a church would otherwise incur. Larger churches may not need these resources, but the vast world of smaller churches benefit greatly from these. Individuals can learn and interact with a vast array of Biblical information. Groups can share what they have learned and their needs easily across the world.

Conclusion

The sin of Babel wasn't their common language; it was their purpose. The arising technologies for mass collaboration give us the opportunity to leverage the incredible

²⁰ <http://worldwideopen.org/>

²¹ <http://open.lifechurch.tv/>

²² <http://youversion.com>

²³ “One Million YouVersion Users - LifeChurch.tv : swerve,” <http://swerve.lifechurch.tv/2009/03/31/one-million-youversion-users/>; Access 25 March 2009.

²⁴ <http://www.churchmetrics.com/>

power of communication and collaboration for the right purpose. As we are able to unite in the Spirit of the kingdom of God, we will see much fruit from these emerging technologies. As churches work together, those who seek to hold on to their individual influence on the church will be humbled and scattered. Those churches who choose to work together will be blessed.

The church will benefit from a broader perspective as it collaborates. I believe these new technologies and tools will allow us to learn from modern day “gentiles” the fullness of the gospel as it is expressed around the world and in the neighborhood down the street.

As the church chooses to engage collaborative and social media, it will engage a younger generation who already have their home there. We can be incarnational in a whole new venue as we allow ourselves to benefit from emerging technology. Furthermore, the church will save time and money as it utilizes free services and resources. It will benefit from the larger body of gifts and skills in the body of Christ. Some people who were underutilized in a local church will be able to contribute more in the vast pool of needs in the larger body of Christ.

Community can be enriched as the local and global church is able to keep-in-touch via social media technologies. Just as letters and notes were an effective tool for friendships, discipleship, and shepherding, tools like Facebook allow easier access than ever before to frequent communication. The real-time updates will allow for the meeting of needs, prayers, and resources as they happen. This will happen between friends who live next door and missionaries across the world. Where email revolutionized communications with missionaries, social media will bring a whole other layer of people and updates into the work on the mission field.

As the body of Christ collaborates in communication, resources and the meeting of needs, there will be a flattening of hierarchal structures. The priesthood of all believers will become more of a reality. Even secular observation on mass collaborations see a similar trend, “people in elite positions (whether journalists, professors, pundits, or politicians) must now work harder to justify their exalted status.”²⁵ Elders will be critical to lead and teach effectively. Pastors will need to shepherd their people intentionally. Professors will need to provide value and teaching techniques other than rote content that will be abundantly available for free online.

These changes will also bring challenges. In a private conversation with a church leader, he told me that, “In my opinion, the hardest thing for collaboration in the Church is its structure. I think that many churches are afraid of losing power if they were to truly collaborate.” There are many valid calls for concern regarding theology and the unique traditions that a given church or denomination may hold. With that given, the collaborative process will create a power-struggle in churches, but this is nothing new.

Another challenge will be that as everyone who chooses to participate is given a voice, some may choose to dominate any given process. One pastor told me, “I see authority

²⁵ Tapscott, 4.

shifting, in many ways, to bloggers who may or may not have any connection or accountability to the broader church, but they attract a following because of their posts.” I agree that this is a challenge. The openness of the collaborative process allows for these problems. Wikipedia and other collaborative tools have developed policies and procedures to limit the detrimental effect of an off-base contributor. In some ways we will have to trust that the body of Christ as a whole will be able to keep a collective core of beliefs and wisdom to recognize and deal with problem individuals. I trust that the body of Christ as a whole will leverage the potential of these technologies for the kingdom of God.