THE MEN OF BABEL VS. THE MEN OF BETHLEHEM*

—By Dr. Adam Clayton Powell Jr.—
Pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church

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Introduction:

The reason why there has been so little progress in the field of Christianity is due to man's emphasis upon the externals of religion—the Tower of Babel—rather than upon the Internal—the Man of Bethlehem.

The other day Nasser and Krushchev pushed the button to bring to pass the great reservoir of Aswan. Priceless memorials of the past will be inundated and obliterated, but the country of Egypt's arable land will be increased one-third, and forces of hydro-electric power will be made available.

All this reminds me of another great memorial of the past which long ago has vanished from the scene—the Tower of Babel. The Tower of Babel was built by descendants of Noah. They lived a prosperous existence on the fruitful plains on which early civilization was cradled between the Tigres and the Euphrates Rivers. In the years to come the great city of Babylon would rise to dominate the Empire to which the city would give its name—the Babylonian Empire. The men of Babel were men of enterprise, initiative, power, confidence, and also men of religion. They pooled their resources in startling and unique adventure. In order to reach God, they set about building a tower which would relate earth and heaven. They undertook their enterprise with the utmost confidence and cooperation, but they never completed it. Instead, confusion, dissent, disagreement, and dismay settled upon them. Their partially completed Tower is left standing as a monument to the failure of man to find God through his own resources, his own strength, guided only by his own wisdom.

But, unfortunately, as true as many of the great stories of the Old and New Testament, the years have come and gone and the experiences have been forgotten. Today the message falls on deaf ears; its wisdom goes unheeded. But, I believe it is well worth remembering, well worth considering. Somewhere between the Tower of Babel and the man of Bethlehem lies the reason for man's pathetic and tragic failure to discover God and to possess the "peace that passeth all understanding." Today we must discover the weakness and the stupidity of the men of Babel, or we will never be able to find the wisdom of the man of Bethlehem. One would suppose that after so many centuries of experience man would be wise in the ways of God; yet, it is an amazing fact that the vast majority of Christian people are no better prepared, no better informed, no wiser than the general run of people two thousand years ago.

Section I

Modern man shares the conviction of the men of Babel, that God is a distant person far removed from the toil and tribulations of earth. He resides in some place afar, isolated and insulated. And so with this faulty reasoning, the men of Babel decided to storm the presence of God, to take the initiative. And, many of us today have the same reaction. We do not believe that God is concerned. But, God is—

> Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for one day they shall be filled. (Matt 5:6)

The men of Babel said, "We must build a tower and get through to God." The Man of Bethlehem says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man open to me, I will come in" (Rev 3:20).

To attain the peace that passes all understanding is not a question of activity, but a question of sensitivity. It is a question of recognition, not reorganization. Look around you—He still comes to his own, and His own receives Him not. He is still in the world, and the world knows Him not. His light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness comprehends it not. (John 1:9-11)

Section II

Let us examine God's approach to man and man's approach to God.

In the first place, man's efforts are infrequent and inconsistent. God's efforts are eternal.

The next is, man tries to accomplish his ideals with material means. The men of Babel erected a gigantic structure of brick and mortar and stone. They failed. They were worse off in the end than they were in the beginning because confusion was all that they reached. They were farther away from God than they were before.

Compare Jesse Gray and the fight for good housing with the Republican announcement of rebuilding Harlem:

> The proposed public authority would seek the construction in Harlem of an industrial park, office buildings, hotels, motels, a major shopping center, a city civic center, State offices, City-State education complex, and a Federal narcotics hospital. Its name will be HURDA — Harlem Urban Renewal Development Action.

Do you know what that means? That means urban renewal equals Negro removal. This has happened before. Under the wisest man of history, Solomon, they reached out for God. They built a permanent temple, rich in ornament beauty, ritual. The adventure ended in confusion and dismay, and they never recaptured the sense of God until the centuries passed and one day God's man spoke, "What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifice, sayeth the Lord? Who hath required this of your hands? Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:10-17).

You cannot find God through brick and mortar.

"Why seek ye the living among the dead? He is not here. He is risen. He goeth before you" (Luke 24:5, Mark 16:6,7).

GOD IS ON THE MARCH.

Section III

Man's approach to God fails whenever there is a material emphasis.

Too often when men are discouraged, disappointed, disillusioned, they have turned like the men of Babel to trying to find God in a building. There is an easier way, but there is no easy way.

> Let him who would follow me take up his cross, deny himself, lay down his life for his brother, be slapped on both cheeks, walk the last mile, part his raiment with his friend, care not for his life, or what he shall eat or what he shall wear. Yea, all that shall live Godly shall suffer persecution.

Section IV

You cannot attain a sense of God by what you do, but by what you are. Too many are judging their lives by what they are doing, by activities. But I come to ask the question, "What are you?"

One thing—the men of Babel were correct. They knew that God was higher than they were. It was partial attempt to try to find a vast truth, but God is not above us in terms of distance, but only in terms of moral quality—"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, for as the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8,9). Yes, God is beyond the reach of our lives. Yes, there is a definite chasm between us and God, but no building can bridge that chasm. And this, now, is the fundamental point of our talk. God comes to us down the valleys of life, and gives us the strength to climb to the mountain tops. Not by our strength, not by our wisdom, but by His grace.

"They that wait upon the Lord shall mount up with the wings of Eagles and they shall run and not weary, they shall walk and faint not." (Isaiah 40:31)

WHAT ARE YOU?

THE ANSWER: You are what you are by the grace of God.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

—By John Newton

** Sermon delivered by the Reverend Adam C. Powell, Abyssinian Baptist Church, Sunday, May 31, 1964.*

Printed in the Abyssinian, Vol. I, No. 4, June 15, 1964.