

## Week 2: Biblical Foundations

### Genesis 1–3 and the power of differentiation

- What does God do in creation? What do human beings do in the garden?
- Sin perverts the naming, categorization, and differentiation that was part of God’s good creation. It turns “us and them” into “us vs. them” and others into “the other.”

### Key terms defined

- **Ethnic Group / Ethnicity:** a group of human beings that perceives a common descent based in shared ancestry, language, culture, and/or memories. We see ethnic groups in Scripture.
- **Race:** a group of human beings socially defined on the basis of physical characteristics. Originates in the (false) idea of there being “genetically distinct subpopulations” of human beings. Though race appears to be based in nature, there actually is no biological basis to the concept of race. The concept of race originated long after the Scriptures were written.
- **Ethnocentrism:** “a belief in the normality and superiority of one’s own people and their ways of doing things.” Not the same thing as racism.

(Resource: Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann. *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. 2nd ed. 2007.)

### *Thanksgiving for the Diversity of Races and Cultures*

O God, who created all peoples in your image, we thank you for the wonderful diversity of races and cultures in this world. Enrich our lives by every-widening circles of fellowship, and show us your presence in those who differ most from us, until our knowledge of your love is made perfect in our love for all your children; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

Question: How does the fact that as Christians our first identity is “in Christ” change how we think about our racial, ethnic, and national identities?

### I. The cultural mandate (Gen 1:27-28)

- Why is it called the “cultural mandate”?
- God himself is a Trinity: unity in diversity. Diversity was a part of God’s plan for his creation from the very beginning. No one culture, people, or language could adequately reflect the full splendor of God.

### II. The Tower of Babel (Gen 11)

- In the context of the cultural mandate, we can see that in building the Tower of Babel, the people were rebelling against God’s command to “fill the earth.” God had said to spread out; they were settling in one place. They were refusing to spread over the earth and diversify, insisting instead on remaining homogeneous.
- Because of sin, ethnic diversity has been marked by division. Ethnic diversity is good, but ethnic division is not.
- The story of Babel has been repeated throughout human history.

### III. The promise (Gen 12)

- God's choice of Abraham, and of the Israelite nation, was *to bless the nations*. See God's command to Israel to welcome the foreigner and the stranger (e.g., Deut 10:19, Lev 19:34, 27:19). See also Isaiah 60.
- God's promise to Abram to be a promise, eventually, of the redemption of God in Christ. The Israelite people may have failed in their trust, but God did not fail in his promise.

### IV. Pentecost (Acts 2)

- At Pentecost, the divisions of Babel are undone.
- Pentecost affirms the beauty and value of all the ethnic diversity in the world: God will unify his people not by making them all the same, but in their very diversity.
- Acts (and the rest of the New Testament) goes on to show how the early church struggled to live out this new reality
- Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Colossians 3:9-11; Ephesians 2:13-14).

### V. Revelation

- The four-fold phrase—"every tribe, language, nation, and people"—repeated seven times throughout the book (5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, 17:15).
- This is the fulfillment of both the cultural mandate and of the promise to Abraham. God's intention from the beginning was for his people to be multiethnic and multicultural, but united in their worship of him.

### Questions for discussion:

1. Does God want us to be "color-blind" (i.e., people who say, "I don't see color")? Is that God's goal for us? To what extent is that a faithful and biblical goal, and to what extent is it not?
2. The gospel is not just a message about saving individuals, but about reconciling the nations. In what ways have we tended to read Scripture in ways that obscure this truth?
3. In what ways has our own culture set up a "tower of Babel"—a monument to our own cultural, political, military, and commercial achievements, to "make a name for ourselves"? That's a question we'll be exploring more as this series goes on, but the tower of Babel can be a useful reference point for us as we do.

### *For the Unity of the Church*

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*