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# Of Babel and Luminescence (Work Station Two)

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Gary B. Swanson

**B**onnie Bassler, a Princeton University researcher, has found that bacteria talk to one another. They actually communicate.

Hunched over a counter in a pitch-black laboratory, she gently shakes a Petri dish containing a strain of marine bacterium, and the dish begins to emit a visible blue glow. Eerie!

Dr. Bassler explains: “When *one* of these bacteria is all alone, it doesn’t glow. . . . But it does send out chemical signals that say, ‘Hey, I’m here’ . . . and it listens back for other bacteria sending the same signal.

“When enough bacteria are doing this, they know they have a quorum. All of a sudden, they light up and do all sorts of other things to act in concert, like a super-organism.”<sup>1</sup>

This bizarre phenomenon would amount to little more than one of those little scientific curiosities that appear in Ripley’s except that this research has led to a potentially more significant discovery: Bacteria ap-

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pear to have a kind of universal language. The little blue-glow guys are able to communicate with bacteria of other kinds whether the others have the capacity to glow or not. All have a common chemical that facilitates this ability to “talk” to one another.

And this, of course, suggests the intriguing possibility that scientists could actually prevent or alter the harmful consequences caused by some bacteria by interfering in some way with their ability to communicate.

So once again bioscience may have stumbled across a familiar biblical theme. Where have we heard before of a case in which the harmful effects of a group of organisms have been forestalled by interfering with its ability to communicate? Is it possible that God may have a bit of a knowing smile on His face?

Though there are obvious differences in the two scenarios, the possibility that scientists could actually interfere with the communication of

bacteria resonates with the story in the Book of Genesis in which God confused the language of those who were building the Tower of Babel.

At that time, seemingly exasperated, He stepped in to prevent the completion of the city and tower that were being erected in direct defiance of His covenant with the survivors of the Flood to “fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1, NKJV). You don’t go about filling the Earth by mobilizing in one place and designing a strategy to protect yourself against an event that God had promised He wouldn’t repeat anyway. Yet that was the plan.

So God intervened in this effort by confusing their speech and thus “scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city” (Gen. 11:8, NKJV). Neat solution.

The parallels for our time are unmistakable. We’re still ignoring God’s promises and grasping at hopeless ways to save ourselves. Every false religion, every human philosophy, is nothing more than a variation on the Babel theme: to save ourselves by our own efforts.

And we are, in a sense, even today living in a cosmic Petri dish. As the beings on this Earth who have brought upon ourselves the disastrous path that human history has taken, we are being observed with rapt attention. “In this speck of a world the whole heavenly universe

manifests the greatest interest, for Christ has paid an infinite price for the souls of its inhabitants.”<sup>2</sup> The rest of the universe is intently watching our pathetic blue glow and wondering how it will all come to an end.

And God’s offering of this “infinite price” was nothing less than astonishing. God, the ultimate scientist, literally injected Himself into the Petri dish and *became* a bacterium.

C. S. Lewis has described this jarring image as the “irreverent doctrine.” That God should lower Himself to this level is beyond human imagination. Even to think about it seems almost a sacrilege. Yet this is what He did.

“What is beyond all space and time,” Lewis wrote, “what is uncreated, eternal, came into nature, into human nature, descended into His own universe, and rose again, bringing nature up with Him.”<sup>3</sup>

Of all the unfathomable mysteries of the universe, the Incarnation has to be one of the greatest. First, how could something like this—permanently “clothing” divinity in the form of humanity—be accomplished? Second, why would He do it?

We know more about the “why” than we’ll probably ever know about the “how.”

Simply put, the most immediate answer to why God would do such a thing is that He loves us, and this

was the only way to save us. No amount of tower building could ever accomplish that.

If it could ever be said that God was impulsive, this would have to be it. In giving up His own Son to save us, He was operating under an impulse of love. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16, NIV).

But beyond the mere salvation of our species, there is also the goal of demonstrating God's character to the watching universe. This issue is what is known to theologians and philosophers as theodicy: "A vindication of God's goodness and justice in the face of the existence of evil."<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, of course, God does not have to vindicate Himself to anyone anywhere. If He truly did have to prove Himself, then whoever it is He'd be proving Himself to would be superior to Him. There is no such thing as a court of public opinion before which God must defend Himself.

It's far more a matter that when all is said and done, when Christ returns and establishes His everlast-

ing kingdom, when sin has been blotted out finally and irrevocably, then everything will make eminently good sense to anyone who wishes to consider the meaning of it all. The only possible response will be, "Why, yes, of course!"

So in the meantime, while we await the final chapters in God's vast metanarrative, our role as Christians is to communicate to the world His love and His promise and His hope.

"The inhabitants of the heavenly universe expect the followers of Christ to shine as lights in the world."<sup>5</sup> And as we shine, if we surrender ourselves to the power that is available through God, it will amount to far more than a mere blue glow.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6061852>, accessed November 11, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 176.

<sup>3</sup> "The Grand Miracle," in *God in the Dock*, Walter Cooper, ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/theodicy>, accessed November 16, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 22.

