

BALANCING MIND AND SPIRIT

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 14:1-25
21st Message
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1 Corinthians 14:1-25

How many of you have been to the Grand Canyon? Let me ask you a question: how many words would you need to adequately describe the experience?

Here's a follow-up question: would that many words be enough to let someone know what the experience of being at the Grand Canyon is like? Are words sufficient to describe it?

When my family and I went to the Grand Canyon in 2012, all five of our children were still young.

In a picture that we took as a family, we were probably about 8 feet from the edge of the Grand Canyon. That seemed to me a pretty safe distance, but to be honest, we were all scared. Our bodies were tense from being close to the edge. There are no words that I can use to recreate that experience for you. You have to be there to experience it.

That leads us to ask an important observation. There are some things in life that can't be described in words. Some experiences simply transcend the capability of language. I've never been skydiving. Can someone tell me what skydiving is like so that I understand the experience? I don't think so.

For the past few weeks, we've been looking at chapters 12 through 14 of 1 Corinthians. The apostle Paul has been responding to the issue of spiritual gifts. He has been trying to help them see that the same Spirit is behind all the different gifts. A few weeks ago, Dan pointed out that Paul is trying to teach the Corinthian church that gifts are about opportunities to serve the community. Last week Cormac led us through the beautiful passage on love, which is part of this effort to change the way the Corinthian church understands service to each other.

Today we get to 1 Corinthians 14, where the apostle addresses the issue of speaking in tongues. It's all part of that same section where the major concern is how the community of faith builds each other up through

the various needs of the community and the calling of its members.

This morning we'll see Paul's ideas flow through a few stages. First, he emphasizes the topic from last week: love. Then he addresses the practice of speaking in tongues as a way of talking about what it looks like to worship for the sake of each other rather than for ourselves. Then he talks about the value of tongues for those who know Jesus. He concludes by talking about how we should think about the experience of non-Christians in our worship service.

Lots of relevant material here. But it's all part of the same big idea. There is one Spirit. We are all different. So how do we come together in a way that's characterized by love? Let's see.

Priority of love

As we begin looking into the passage, we notice that the apostle Paul starts here so that everything he says is in the context of love.

1 Corinthians 14:1:

Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

This is Paul's concern for the Corinthians. He wants them to be characterized by love. He wants them to exercise the gifts of the Spirit for the sake of each other. Here he calls out his preference for the spiritual gift of prophesy—not because it's better than any of the others. After all, he just finished telling them that all the gifts were valuable. But this is an instruction for them.

Remember: this is not a handbook on how to have a Christian worship service. These are universal truths expressed within a particular moment in history to a particular people dealing with their own issues. As we read this text, we do what we always do when interpreting the Bible. We look for what we can learn about God and how we can apply that to the kinds of situations we face. The apostle Paul makes it easy here

by spelling out the umbrella principle at the beginning: this is all about loving each other well.

Tongues and prophecy

After establishing the priority of love, the apostle dives into the topic of speaking in tongues. Let's see what he has to say.

1 Corinthians 14:2-5:

For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit. ³ On the other hand, the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. ⁴ The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. ⁵ Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

This passage starts with "for" because he is unpacking the idea of what it looks like to pursue love in a community. And he begins by drawing a distinction between two things: speaking in tongues and prophecy. These are the two behaviors that he wants to compare. We can tell from what he says later on that the Corinthians were over-emphasizing speaking in tongues. They loved that gift. What he wants to do is to encourage them toward the gift of prophecy, especially in their public gatherings.

Let's start by defining our terms. What does he mean by "speaking in tongues," and what does he mean by "prophecy?" Some people think that when the New Testament talks about "speaking in tongues," it is referring to what happened in Acts 2 when followers of Jesus spoke in human languages they didn't know. It's clear that is not what Paul is talking about here.

He describes this phenomenon as "uttering mysteries in the Spirit"; he says that it is addressed to God and not to man; he says that it is primarily for the building of the individual. He is describing what some people call "ecstatic utterances." It's an unintelligible language that expresses spiritual truths that are too deep for words. This kind of worship is probably similar to what Paul describes in Romans 8:26 when he says, "The Spirit" himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

In contrast to speaking in tongues, prophecy is usually understood to be speaking for God in response to a particular situation in a particular moment. In contrast to that, teaching is interpreting the written word of God and revealing ever-present truths. This is why prophecy must be tested against events: it's not always immediately obvious whether prophecy is true. Teaching is tested against the text itself.

Notice that both are useful. Paul repeatedly affirms the practice of tongues. In this passage, he says, "I want you all to speak in tongues." He says that he practices it regularly. The issue is not whether to speak in tongues. It's when to speak in tongues.

Nowhere in the Bible is it suggested that speaking in tongues is a requirement for those who follow Jesus. There are some Christians who believe tongues to be a necessary indication of the presence of the Spirit in someone's life. There is no evidence for that position in the Scriptures.

However, there is evidence that it can be a powerful part of worship for many people. It helps to realize that speaking in tongues may not even be a distinctly Christian experience. In the ancient world, other religions sometimes spoke of ecstatic utterances. Even today, in other cultures, there is evidence of a similar practice.

This is also true for other practices that we describe as spiritual gifts. Hospitality is not unique to Christians, nor is teaching, leading, or exhortation. But as Dan described a few weeks ago, when the community of Christ has a need, God empowers individuals to meet those needs in different ways. There is a complex and often mysterious interplay between natural abilities and spiritual gifts.

We don't need to think of tongues as a uniquely Christian spiritual experience. It's a human experience that God can fill with his Spirit to help Christians experience and worship Christ. A friend of mine who speaks in tongues regularly says that it "helps me to access something deeper than words." It's one of the ways that God uses to allow people to express their love and their worship for him. It's not necessary. But it can be helpful. We'll talk soon about how it might be beneficial for us.

That said, let's return to the text and see how the apostle spells out the value of tongues within the corporate gathering of worship.

Value for believers

In the next two sections, the apostle Paul addresses two different concerns. First is how the worship gathering benefits those who already know Christ. Then he addresses how the worship gathering affects those who don't know Christ. Here's how he talks about the first question.

1 Corinthians 14:6-9, 12:

Now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?⁷ If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is played?⁸ And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?⁹ So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air.

¹² So with yourselves, since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.

His point is simple. If speaking in tongues can't be understood by other people and the purpose of the worship gathering is to love each other, then tongues aren't helpful here. With several different metaphors, he makes the point that an unintelligible language can't build up the community. He concludes by saying that their goal should be to build up the church.

At PBC, we don't have the same problem the Corinthians did. We aren't "eager for manifestations of the Spirit" like they were. So how do we apply his instruction: "strive to excel in building up the church?"

I heard someone share a story recently of the early days of their faith. They had just come to know Jesus and were growing in that relationship by leaps and bounds every day. They described a time when they came to church and felt like the message had been poured out from God directly to them. They turned to the person beside them after the service and said, "Wow, wasn't that incredible!"

That person answered, "Well, the drums were too loud; I didn't like any of the songs, and the preacher looked at his notes too often."

What are we doing when we come together in worship? Are you here for yourself or the person sitting next to you?

There's a story about the difference between heaven and hell. A man went down to hell and was surprised to discover that there was a huge banquet table full of delicious food. He had a hard time understanding how this could be hell. But then everyone arrived at the table, and he realized that they couldn't bend their elbows. Their arms were locked straight out. So all they could do was sit at the table and look at the food without eating any of it.

But then he was taken up to heaven. Again, he was surprised to see the exact same table with the exact same spread of delicious food. He was even more surprised to see that as people came into the room, their arms were locked at the elbows too. They couldn't feed themselves either.

But he finally understood when they sat down. Because in heaven, they simply fed each other. And everyone had an incredible meal.

To be honest, sometimes, the church can feel more like that depiction of hell. Everyone is here to get their own needs met. But other times, you get a glimpse of heaven. The other day one of our older members came up to me and said that they didn't like the songs, but they were so encouraged to see how passionately the younger people here worshipped them.

That's what the apostle Paul is talking about, "strive to excel in building up the church". Not in getting our own needs met.

As the passage continues, the apostle talks more about the distinction between tongues and prophecy. It can prove helpful for us.

1 Corinthians 14:14-18:

For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.¹⁵ What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.¹⁶ Otherwise, if you give thanks with your spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say "Amen" to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?¹⁷ For you may be giving thanks well enough, but the other

person is not being built up. ¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.

I want us to notice the distinction that Paul is making between the spirit and the mind. He says that praying in a tongue engages the spirit while praying with your mind engages the other people around you. His point is that praying with our minds is particularly well suited to loving each other in a public gathering.

But again, he says that he speaks in tongues more than anyone else. So he isn't at all diminishing the value of engaging our emotional side—what he calls the spirit. In fact, it seems like he really values it. In our passage next week, we'll see that he encourages speaking in tongues during the worship service as long as there is someone who can interpret. He's encouraging the right mix in the right settings.

The Corinthians needed to grow in praying with their mind. They were too focused on the spirit. I'm interested in where you think we are. Let's do a little exercise. Let's pretend that there is a spectrum of engaging the spirit and engaging the mind to use the dichotomy of Paul's language. I'll walk along that spectrum, and you tell me by raising your hands where you think PBC is.

[spirit/mind spectrum exercise]

I'll make a bold statement that what we need to grow in is the spirit. If Paul were writing to us, I don't think he'd say that we were eager for manifestations of the spirit. I think he'd encourage us to grow in our appreciation of the spirit.

Paul affirms the value of speaking in tongues. I don't think there is any requirement that we do that particular practice. But I do think we could grow in what Paul calls praying with his spirit. I'd like to suggest that each of you say a simple prayer asking the Spirit to make you more aware of his work in your life. You can simply pray, "Spirit, fill me."

If you're concerned about whether that's biblical, rest assured. In Ephesians 5:18, the apostle Paul addresses people who have already put their faith in Christ. He tells them to be filled by the Spirit. So we are simply asking God to help us do what he has told us to do.

"Spirit, fill me." This prayer is simple, but it could be dangerous. The Spirit often surprises us. The Spirit is out of our control. Personally, I think that's why my temptation is to over-index on the Scriptures. I can read

the Scriptures; I can interpret them; they are, to a certain extent, under my control.

But as Jesus says, the Spirit "blows where it wills." So when I open myself up to the Spirit, I lose control. And that is a scary feeling. It can also be exhilarating. Let's ask the Spirit to grow us in that direction together.

Effect on unbelievers

So Paul has laid some principles down for how we gather together so that we build up each other. But in the last part of this passage, he turns his attention to unbelievers in the gathering. Long before it was ever a concept, Paul talks about how to make a worship gathering seeker-sensitive.

1 Corinthians 14:20-25:

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. 21 In the Law it is written, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord." 22 Thus tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is a sign not for unbelievers but for believers. 23 If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, 25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you.

As the apostle wraps up the section on speaking in tongues, he addresses how this practice affects believers and unbelievers differently. He starts by quoting the Old Testament to demonstrate the simple principle that people can't listen to something that they can't understand.

There's some confusion regarding the middle section with how he uses the word "signs." It's most likely a wordplay, but he states his point more clearly in the last few sentences. While his main concern in the previous few verses was the effect on each other, here he is concerned with the situation in which "an unbeliever or outsider" enters the worship gathering.

Remember that Paul has said repeatedly throughout this book that everything he does is motivated by the gospel reaching new people. As he said in 1 Corinthians 9:23, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." His motivation here is that people who come into the worship gathering without knowing Jesus would be drawn toward faith, not pushed away from it.

Keep in mind that Paul isn't advocating changing the message of the gospel. We are not supposed to make it easy to come to faith. Paul says that when someone new encounters God, they might be "called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so falling on his face, he will worship God." That's not watering down the gospel.

What he says here is to let the challenge of the gospel stand on its own. Don't add unnecessary difficulties on top of it. Our goal as we gather and worship Christ together is to do so in a way that invites people who don't know Jesus toward faith. Paul clarifies that we should be concerned with activities or practices that turn people off with unnecessary offense.

This principle made me think of the words in our worship center. For decades at PBC, the words that are now on our back wall were in the front of the building: "You are not your own; You were bought with a price." This is a beautiful quote from 1 Corinthians: we looked at it several months ago. Scott helped us to see that the context has to do with how we use our physical bodies. Paul uses the metaphor of a bond-servant to say that our bodies belong to Christ. It's a powerful reminder that our core identity is defined by God.

But over time, we became aware that this verse could be confusing if taken out of context. The metaphor needs to be unpacked to be properly understood. We realized that it could be off-putting to unbelievers entering into our worship gathering. And yet it was a beloved reminder for many who had worshipped here for decades. How should we proceed?

After many fruitful discussions, we landed on a solution. We wanted the words to continue to remind us of our identity as we go out into the world. But they might not be the ideal phrase as the first thing you see if you're a newcomer to our space. So, we moved them to

the back wall. Scott pointed out months ago that they are in some ways more powerful as a charge when we leave this space for us to carry our identity with us.

That decision was motivated, in part, by the principles that Paul outlines here in 1 Corinthians 14.

Our goal when we come together is to love each other well and be sensitive to newcomers in our midst. This is what Paul wants the Corinthians to wrestle with and have wisdom regarding the use of the gifts of the Spirit.

Conclusion

We began this morning thinking about the experience of being at the Grand Canyon. There are some things that simply can't be put into words.

That is how God works through the Spirit. The movement of the Spirit in our lives can't always be put into words. The practice of speaking in tongues can be a way to express that movement of the Spirit.

But in this passage, Paul cautions against that practice in the context of the gathered worship assembly. It can be distracting. It doesn't serve the community. It can put a stumbling block for unbelievers. He's issuing a corrective to the Corinthian community.

The question for us is, what does the Spirit want to say to us through these words? We've learned some great principles about the value of spirit and mind and how they must be balanced. What is the Spirit saying to us? What is the Spirit saying to you?