



March 19, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Eunbae Doh

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

“Back to the Cross”

According to 1 Corinthians, there was a problem in the Church. What happened? We don't have any detailed information about their problem. We are just assuming there might be some conflicts between Greek Christians and Jewish Christians.

I have been deeply involved with the ministry of conflict mediation. As a co-director of the school of reconciliation ministry, my main concern is how we can develop the biblical way to solve conflicts that we have to face in our life so many times, interpersonal conflicts and church conflicts. I am hoping we can have an opportunity to learn Biblical peacemaking as an adult class in our church. There is a basic guideline to lead the people in conflict into a solution. The first step is to find their differences which cause them to conflict. And the next step is to find some commonalities they can share and agree with. I'm not going to explain any more about this process. What I am trying to say is that Paul was using this peacemaking skill, “difference and commonality”.

Let's take a moment to think about difference. Difference comes from various aspects and conditions of our life, ethnic, social, political, or economical. For example, if you come to my home, you may easily see my daughter Sarah reading some book, my son, the great artist Joshua drawing something in his mind and imagination, and the last one Daniel; he is pretending to be a power ranger or batman. They have the same parents and same genes. But they are so different.

How about church? It is a more diverse community than a family. Therefore, there are many conflicts in church. Where a church is, conflict is. Especially, a church like the Corinthians which has many different people. Different nations in the Roman Empire were exposed to conflicts. The well known conflict issues of the early church were raised from the people, Greek and Jewish Christians. They were arguing about the matter of food, circumcision, and even theological issues.

Particularly, Greeks and Jews have different religious tendencies. According to Paul, Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks desire wisdom. Why did Jews demand signs? They experienced and confessed God who intervenes in their history and saves them from suffering and oppression. To them, God was a being who can be experienced in their life and historical context. God was not an object of human reason and thought. So, they demanded some signs from God as an evidence of Divine action.

On the contrary, Greeks loved wisdom. They preferred something reasonable or understandable. They lived in the age of Great philosophy like stoicism and Hellenism. In other words, if Jews were a people of heart, Greeks were a people of head.

I know some Christians, who loved philosophy like the Greeks. When I was in Dayton, Ohio to study at Seminary, I was in charge of adult education at Dayton Korean Church. I had an adult bible class and I published a handout for bible study every Sunday. I wrote down notes and the important points about the given text. At the bottom of the handout I left some space so that the participants can fill in their question, whatever it is. I collected them every Sunday and gave my answer to their question. Many participants filled out various questions. Among them, there was a man who tried to make me embarrassed by giving some difficult questions every Sunday. He was a retired engineer and had a doctoral degree in chemistry. He was a long time member of the church. The questions he raised were like following,

Explain scientifically, biologically how a virgin can conceive a child without any sexual relationship with a man.

Why did God allow a thousand babies in Judea to be killed to save God's baby, Jesus from King Herod?

Not only were those questions very hard to answer but also some questions made me angry and humiliated me. I had to face that kind of question every Sunday and I tried to do my best to give an answer for two years. If I had studied like that, I would have taken honors in my degree program.

When I finished my studying, I was appointed to be a pastor of a small church in Toledo. Before I left Dayton, he invited me to dinner at his home. At the end of the dinner, he said, "Pastor Doh, I have to tell you this... to me you are the best pastor in the world. I have met many pastors in my life and I raised many difficult questions to them, but they didn't listen to me. The more they ignored me, the more I challenged them with such a difficult question.

I said, well, thank you for telling me that. But frankly, I'm not sure whether you got the right answer from me that you wanted. Were those answers I gave to you satisfactory? He said some of them yes, some of them No. I was a little bit upset. He

said, “You know, I didn't expect anybody can give a correct answer. What I wanted was not an answer but a love and concern from pastor. Pastor Doh, Can I ask something? Oh NO more questions!! He said, would you conduct my funeral? I was surprised and said yes. I will. Why? It was the easiest thing I've got from him. Strange as it may sound, since I came to USA, I have not done any wedding ceremonies, but I got three requests for funerals from those who are still alive.

Yes, right, there are many different people in a church. As the early church has many conflicts due to the differences among the Jews who demand signs and the Greeks who desire wisdom and philosophy, in this age, many churches are experiencing similar conflicts. Many churches were in battle for worship style, contemporary music vs. traditional music, pulpit vs. theatrical stage, emotional sermon vs. theological sermon, charismatic leadership vs. servant leadership, and so on.

Do you remember what I mentioned about the guideline to solve a conflict at the beginning of my sermon? There were two steps. Finding differences and Finding commonalities.

Yes, listen to what Paul said to the Corinthians about the commonality. He urged them to go back to the gospel of the Cross. Back to the Cross. That is the commonality they needed to share. But look at the reality of the Corinthian. The gospel of Cross, what did it mean to them?

Verse 23:

We proclaim Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles.

For the Jewish Christian, the Cross was a stumbling block! Why! The Cross was a sign of shameful death of a criminal, burglar, murder, or traitor.

How about the Greek Christians? For them, the Cross is a kind of stupid thing. That was a coarse, poor, rough, and unreasonable philosophy.

They considered the gospel of the Cross shameful, stupid things.

I want to share with you my memory about the cross that I thought was such a shameful and stupid thing. Frankly, this is a story that I have not wanted to share with anybody for a long time.

When I was a little boy, 11 years old, my father was appointed as a senior pastor of a church in the city of Inchon, Korea. It was one of the biggest churches in the city which had great buildings and 800 hundred people attending every Sunday. But nobody wanted to be a pastor of the church. The Church was struggling with serious conflict.

This is how it was. The founding pastor of the church was such a powerful evangelist and charismatic preacher. He made the church grow. But unfortunately, he became a God at the church. He abused his authority. He misappropriated church money. There was a bad rumor that he had some inappropriate relationships with some women of the church. So, the denomination made a decision and terminated him in his appointment. So, he left.

But the congregation which made a fetish of him was against their denomination. Of course the founding pastor was behind their resistance. He controlled everything even after he left. Whenever the denomination sent a new pastor to the church, the congregation persecuted the new pastor mentally, physically. So the new pastor ran away from the church. That was happening again and again.

Finally, my father volunteered for the church. Then, a huge tragedy began. The congregation asked my father to follow the direction of the founding pastor. My father refused.

Then, a terrible situation came to our family. They didn't pay my father's salary. He couldn't preach. They disconnected the power and phone line of the parsonage and came to our home to assault my father every night; they spit in my father's face and slapped him. I had to see the terrible scene, surrounded by the people who were making an assault upon my father; He was sitting in the corner of his room without doing anything to protect himself. That was a nightmare.

Everyday and night, I gave my word that I will take revenge for what they did to my father. That was continued for six months. Finally, the people were exhausted themselves. And also some members of the church changed their mind to support my father. After six months, the situation was settled. Isn't that great? No. Even though the church was recovered, I was not recovered. It hurt me deeply. Can you imagine how painful it was for an 11 year old child?

I had a scar in my mind for a long time. I cursed the people and roared with anger at my father. You are not a Good father. How could you give me such a terrible memory? In my thinking, that was a stupid, foolish, terrible, and shameful story I hate to remember.

But God healed my wounded heart when I realized that my father's suffering was Jesus' suffering. What was done to him was what Israel has done to Jesus at the courtyard of the Roman governor, Pilate, insulting, spitting, slapping. The cross Jesus took was a cross my father took and I have to take. The wound in my mind was changed into pride and joy. When I weary in my ministry, when I am angry with some people, when I am captured by the ambition to be a famous guy, great pastor of a big church, I see the Cross in my mind.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

What does the Cross mean to you?
Is it a stupid story like the Greeks believed?

Is it shameful story like the Jews believed?
Is it just a symbol of this religion?
Is it a boring and old fashioned story?

The Cross is our spiritual home and identity. The Cross is the place when you lose your way, you need to go back.

The Cross is a common ground where all different people and different congregations meet together. The Cross is something basic beyond cultural, economical, social, and denominational differences.

The Cross is the core of Christianity. The Cross is not an object of debate.

Brothers and sisters, I believe,

The true church is the church that proclaims the gospel of the Cross without any sense of shame.

True Christians are the people who experience the Cross and Resurrection in their life.

The Cross is the only power that makes us to be us.

Back to the basics.

Back to the cross.