

Nokesville UMC Sunday Worship [3rd Sunday after Epiphany]
January 22, 2023
Rev. YoungMin Kim

Diversity in Unity
1 Corinthians 1:10-18

(1)

According to the Lectionary schedule, we read 1 Corinthians 1:10-18. In one sense, the conversion event of Paul at Damascus marked a milestone in the history of Christianity. With the name Saul, he persecuted Christians out of his own righteousness. But after the dramatic conversion experience, he called himself by another name, Paul, and began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. The reason why we call Paul one of the greatest disciples of Jesus, even though he was not one of Jesus's twelve disciples, is definitely his missionary work. Most of Jesus's disciples remained in Jerusalem. However, Paul, as a Roman citizen, was free to travel everywhere in the Roman Empire and its subject countries. Using his privilege, he traveled to major cities in Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome, proclaimed the name of Jesus, and founded churches.

The foundation of the Corinthian church, which is the background of today's passage, is well described in Acts 18. On his second missionary journey, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth (Acts 18:1). There, he met a Jewish man named Aquila and his wife Priscilla who were tentmakers. Paul stayed with them making tents and earning money to support his missionary journeys (v. 2-3). Staying in Corinth, Paul founded a church and taught about Jesus and His teachings to the Jews and Gentiles in Corinth for a year and six months (v. 11). And he left Corinth and went to Jerusalem. Later, while visiting Ephesus during his third missionary journey, Paul came to hear that there were severe problems in the Corinthian church, so he wrote the first letter to the Christians in Corinth.

The problems in the Corinthian church are somewhat understandable because the members of the church were a mixture of Jews, Greeks, and other Gentiles coming from Asia Minor, Rome, and other countries. Because they had different backgrounds and understandings, even though they were united by Jesus's blood, there were arguments and conflicts among the church members such as marriage and singleness, food dedicated to idols, public worship service, morality, and spiritual gifts.

However, a more fundamental problem was disunity in the church. Paul said, "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas [Peter],' or 'I belong to Christ'" (1 Corinthians 1:11-12). In other words, there were schisms in the congregation. Some insisted that they followed Paul, and others insisted that they followed Apollos, Cephas, and Christ. Because of such schisms and claims of each group, the Corinthians church became a series of controversies. Thus, when Paul heard the problems in the church, he had to intervene.

(2)

Who were the people in each group, and what did they claim against each other? First, the people in Paul's group wanted to be loyal to Paul because he was the very person who founded the church and taught them about Jesus Christ. I believe most people in the church were in this group.

How about the people in Apollos's group? By the way, who was Apollos? Apollos first appears in Acts 18. He was a Jew born and raised in Alexandria in Egypt. He was eloquent, mighty in the Scriptures (Old Testament), fervent in spirit, and instructed in the way of the Lord (v. 24). However, he knew only the baptism of John (v. 25). In other words, he did not know about Jesus, His blood, death, resurrection, and ascension. And he had not been touched by the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, he was willing to speak boldly

what he knew and believed in the synagogue. One day, Aquila and Priscilla, Paul's missionary fellows, heard Apollos's message, took him aside and filled in the gaps in his understanding of Jesus Christ (v. 26). And then, he became a Christ-follower full of knowledge, passion, and eloquence and took care of the Corinthian church after Paul left. Later, Paul affirmed that he planted, but Apollos watered the church (1 Corinthians 3:6). Apollos was enough to attract the Christians to the Corinthian church. Thus, some in the church were attracted by the young, clever, passionate, and eloquent preacher.

How about the people in Peter's group? I assume that almost all people in this group must have been Jewish Christians in the church. Think about it! Even though Paul founded the church, he was not an authentic Jew born and raised in Tarsus in Asia Minor. Even though Apollos fed the church spiritually, he was also not an authentic Jew born and raised in Alexandria in Egypt. Thus, they must have wanted their authentic identity from Peter born and raised in Israel. And most of all, Peter was the most beloved disciple of Jesus Christ and the head of the Jerusalem church, so they believed that Peter had more authority as the church leader than Paul or Apollos.

How about the people in Christ's group? Is something wrong with the people belonging to Christ? It sounds more appropriate than other groups. But I believe they were the most dangerous group in the church. They felt no need for spiritual leaders in the church and for their faith. Instead, they pursued direct instruction from Jesus by the gift of prophecy. Who could judge true and false prophecies among them?

Likewise, the Corinthian church had been controversial due to the schisms by the four groups. Rather than delivering the gospel of Jesus in the church, the congregation imposed their own righteousness according to their beliefs. Rather than sharing peace and love of Christ in the church, the congregation aggravated segmentation and hostility against each other. In this situation, needless to say, Paul opposed the divisions within the church and all four groups. He said, "Has Christ been divided?" (v. 13a), and he continued, "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (v. 18).

(3)

At the last "Special Annual Conference" in October 2022, 10 churches in our annual conference disaffiliated from the denomination. And as far as I know, as of now, only two churches have promoted the disaffiliation process in the NOVA district. We are one of the two. Last December after we had the "30-Day Discernment Period," we performed a straw poll resulting that 27 (about 73%) agreed on disaffiliation and 10 (about 17%) against. According to the result of the straw poll, the council decided to proceed to the next step. And now, our Lay Leader and Trustee are working with our DS and attorney for the next step. The date is not determined yet, but sooner or later, it will be determined, and we will have the "Called Charge Conference." At the conference, if the straw poll result maintains, we will be the first church in our district to disaffiliate from the denomination.

For those who were of the 27 in the straw poll in December and who would like to support the traditional stance, I want to give you Paul's message: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you but you be knit together in the same mind and the same purpose" (v. 10). Please take care of the hearts of those who have a different opinion and embrace them. Please talk and persuade them to be with you in this church. The name of the church can change, but it will still be your home church that you have loved, supported, and devoted to with your tears, sweat, time, money, and talents. Please pursue unity—not division—in our church. Amen.