

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church
Philippians 3:4b-14
October 4, 2026

Why Christianity?

A few years ago, back in the days when I was a serving pastor, I was invited to have dinner with some students at FSU and to give a talk about the Christian faith. Always a sucker for a free meal, I was happy to accept, but not a little anxious about the specifics of the invitation. The text from the organizer read, "We want you to address this topic: "Why Christianity?"

Why Christianity? That's just the kind of question that one would expect college students – especially American college students – to ask. Not only does it sound scholarly and academic, but it also provides ample rope with which the speaker can hang himself.

Why Christianity? That's also the kind of question I might have asked when I was a student. Back then I was very interested in Christian apologetics – that is, in the defense of the gospel over against its secular critics -- those whom Friedrich Schleiermacher called "the cultured despisers of religion."

If I had been so inclined, I could have dug out my old lecture notes and sent the students into a deep sleep with classical arguments for the existence of God, the insights of Søren Kierkegaard, and the heresies of John Hick. The students who hadn't fallen asleep would have been texting, "Help! Get me out of here!"

I guessed rightly that the students planned to invite other dinner guests and put to them somewhat different questions. Why Judaism? or Why Islam? or Why Baha'i? Before the semester is up, they could have a veritable smorgasbord of religious choices laid before them. If they like, they could choose a small portion of each.

The problem with that way of talking about faith – any faith – is that most people don't come to faith by process of elimination. Speaking for myself, I didn't choose to be a Christian. I know it drives some Christians crazy to hear me say it, but I didn't choose Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, or at least I didn't choose him first.

Christ chose me. At a font like that one by the door, God put God's mark on me and claimed me as Christ's own. Before I had any inkling of just how much God loves the world, God loved me.

If you want to know the "why" of Christianity, you don't start with an array of world religions lined up on the steam table, ready to sample. You don't start with *Christianity* at all. You start with Christ. Or to put it more accurately, Christ starts with you.

The Apostle Paul is a good example of what I mean. He didn't set out to become a Christian, much less a pillar of Christianity. He was just doing his best to honor God in the covenant relationship he knew best. For Paul (that is for Saul, for that was his name at the time) honoring God meant being the very best Pharisaic Jew he could be and defending the true faith against those who would corrupt it.

Paul's religious résumé was stellar. He wrote as much to the church in Philippi: "... **circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.**"

If anybody had reason to be secure in his religious identity, it was Paul, and then he ran into Christ – or Christ ran into him – and all that certainty, all those credentials, all that intellectual accomplishment, collapsed like a house of cards.

None of that stuff counts, Paul writes. **"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ."** Forget the letters after his name. Forget his membership in Phi Beta Kappa. Forget his impressive efforts to crush the followers of Jesus. When Paul fell down in the dust of the road to Damascus, all that baggage fell down with him, and when he got up, he left it all behind.

So much to be proud of and yet so much to blind him from the God who loved him, from the Christ who died and rose for him. It's all rubbish, Paul writes (and that's the G-rated translation). It's all so much "b.s." compared to **"the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."**

As a good Jew of his day, Paul was striving for righteousness, but his understanding of righteousness changed when Christ met him on that road and claimed him as his own. Paul came to understand righteousness not in terms of what people do for God but in terms of what God does for the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That kind of righteousness is based on faith, Paul writes, not on accomplishments.

That word "faith" has come to mean a set of doctrines, a list of propositions, fundamentals on a checklist. That's not what Paul means by "faith." By faith he means "trust," "confidence," "reliance."

Faith is a toddler standing on top of the slide saying, "Daddy, catch me," before launching herself into space.

Faith is a parent handing over the car keys to that same child years later. "I have faith in you," her parent says.

Faith is where you put your trust. Faith is where you heart is.

I don't want the kind of righteousness that rests on what I can accomplish, Paul is telling the Philippians. That's a load of rubbish. What I want is **"the righteousness from God based on faith."** I want to die with Christ and be raised with him. I want to share his life and his resurrection.

To be a Christian is not to join the cult called Christianity. It's to press forward, like a runner in a marathon. It's to make Christ your own because he has made **you** his own. It's to **"press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."**

Christianity made a big mistake when it taught people to think of Christ as the answer to their problems. Feeling bad about yourself? Christ is the answer. Out of money and longing for material success? Christ is the answer. Feel the need to choose between this or that religion? Christ is the answer.

The problem with that version of the gospel is that following Christ just might cause you to ask more questions. How will I have to change, knowing that Jesus is my Lord? How should I treat my neighbors now that I know how much God loves them, too?

Paul wasn't looking for answers when was rounding up Christians and **"breathing threats and violence"** against them. He knew all the answers. He found out that those answers are so much rubbish compared with the surpassing worth of living in the love of Christ and for the world Christ loves.

I haven't reached the goal, Paul writes. I no longer have all the answers. Instead, **"I press on to make [that goal] my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."**

After my talk, the students who were still conscious asked good questions.

"What about evangelism? Isn't getting people saved the purpose of Christianity?"

I tried to suggest that it's God who saves, not us, and evangelism is about sharing good news, not scaring the hell out of people. But before people can *hear* the good news of Jesus Christ, they have to *see* that good news alive in us. Certain approaches to evangelism repel more people than they attract.

"What about other religions? Isn't it presumptuous for Christians to claim that Jesus is the only way to God?"

I trust that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, I told them. But I don't control how the Triune God works in the world and I don't possess the truth that sets me free. Too often we Christians behave as though we owned the truth. In fact, *the Truth who is Christ owns us*. We don't have to bring Christ to people of other faiths. Christ is already there.

Or, to put it another way, the Triune God is free to work in sovereign love and grace -- in your life and in mine, in the life of this community, even in communities of other faiths. Paul readily admits to the Philippians that he does not own Christ. Neither do we.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Every time we come to this Table to renew the Covenant sealed in this bread and wine, we are reminded that God's love and justice are for all people in all cultures. The church does not own Christ. The church is Christ's body in the world, called to live the good news we have received as a gift.

Why Christianity? It's an interesting question, but not a burning one. I'd say the burning question is, "Why aren't Christians more like Christ?"

Come to his Table. Chew on that.

Brant S. Copeland