

“CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS (#6):
WHY I AM A CHRISTIAN”

(John 3:16-17, NRSV)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 2-27-11]

-I-

1. [BOTH Services:] Read Text (9:30am NRSV; 11am NRSV): John 3:16-17 and Pray.

2. [SING first Verse and Chorus of “*Jesus Loves Me*”:
“*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong,
They are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me (3x)... the Bible tells me so.*”]

A—Many of us grew up with this simple song as an introduction to our Christian faith –
I remember learning it in my elementary Sunday School class.

B—But in the context of today’s multi-religious world (with people believing all kinds of
things), it highlights the question... *Why am I a Christian in first place?*

3. You know, some will point to this song as an example and say “*Aren’t you a Christian
simply because you grew up in a society where Christianity is the predominant religion?*”

A—Well, my first answer is... we’ll never know, because (like most of you in this room) I *did*
grow up in such a culture – and there’s no getting around that.

B—But the more important answer is that... even if we *did*, that doesn’t make it wrong:

1—After all, *everyone* is biased by the particular culture they’re raised in (including
those who are raised practicing no religion at all).

2—So the question really *isn’t* whether or not we practice a religion because we *grew*
up that way, but “*Does that religion help us make sense of life in our world?*”

C—And if it does, then it doesn’t really matter how we found it ...whether it was the religion
of our childhood, or one that we discovered later in life.

4. Now, I don’t know *your* story about why you’re a Christian (if you *are*), but today as we end
our series Christianity and World Religions, I want to share three reasons why *I AM one* –...

A—...Three reasons (illustrated in today’s scripture) why Christianity helps *me* make sense
of life in our world,...

B—...And why (after studying a bit about *other* faiths) I’m more convinced than ever that
following Jesus is the right spiritual path not only for *me*, but for the whole world. ¹

-II-

5. The first reason I'm a Christian is because I believe it offers **A Compelling Picture of God.**

A–You know, in my research for this series I was quite frankly surprised to learn that not all religions understand the nature and character of God the same way.

1–In Hinduism, for example, God (Brahman) is often viewed as an unknowable, impersonal life force (a universal consciousness of which we're all a part) – in Buddhism, God is either that, or doesn't exist at all!

2–In Islam, He's majestic and powerful, but never intimate or familiar, and even in some parts of Judaism, there's a sense in which God is so holy that it's improper to approach Him in familiar terms.

B–And yet, the very first words of today's scripture say, "*For God so loved the world...*"

1–In other words, the God of the New Testament is *not* an unknowable divine consciousness, nor is He a Monty-Python-like old man in a white beard who smites people down at the first sign of disobedience (I know some Christians who view Him this way – but that's not the God of today's scripture).

2–No. The God of Jesus is (in *addition to* being holy and powerful) *also* a close, loving friend who longs for a relationship with each and every one of us – He's a personal God who *knows us intimately* and *loves us extravagantly*.

3–Now I don't know about you, but *that's* the kind of God I'm drawn to more than to the kind I see in other faiths.

6. A second reason I'm a Christian has to do with the unique solution that the New Testament offers to the dilemma of our human condition – in other words... because of **Our Understanding of "Salvation" and How One Achieves It.**

A–In other religions, "salvation" consists primarily in the doing of certain things – ...

1–...Practicing certain duties and deeds (*dharma* and *karma*), adhering to certain rituals and forms of worship, being obedient to certain paths of faith, like the the "*Five Pillars*," or the keeping of *Torah*, or the living of a moral life.

2–In these other faiths, all of these help us to overcome things like meaningless living (*samsara*), suffering (*dukkha*), idolatry, and other undesirable things of life.

B–And yet, Christian "salvation" is unique from any of these, in that it begins with something that WE *cannot* do or earn for ourselves: *God's unmerited favor* (what we call "***grace***").

1–Today's scripture says that God "...gave *His only son* that *whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*"

2–In other words, we believe that when God wanted speak a final, definitive word about how to find salvation, He didn't give us "*Four Noble Truths*", or "*Ten Commandments*," or speak through a prophet to write "*Five Pillars*" in the *Qur'an*.

3–Instead, He became *one of us* – God "incarnate"/"in-the-flesh," who we call *Jesus Christ* – so we could understand and relate to him; and that the solution to our human condition lies *not* in our own *deeds*, but in our simple faith/trust in *him*.

C–You know, before I trusted Christ to be my Savior around age 13, I'd tried to live a good life, be a good person, and do religious things – but it never really satisfied.

1–And it wasn't until I stopped trying to reach God through my *own* works and instead put my faith in *His* work *for me* (thru Jesus) that my life began to change.

2–And it was then that I realized that my good deeds, religious behaviors, and all my attempts to live an ethical life are merely the *response to* God's grace, *not* a precondition *for* it (like in these other faiths).²

7. A final reason I'll mention today of why I'm a Christian is a practical one.. because of **the Redemptive Power Of LOVE**, demonstrated most fully in Jesus' life, death & resurrection.

A–Today's scripture says that "*God so loved the world that he gave his son...*" – in other words, God's love didn't just sit back passively and wait for us to reach up towards Him.

1–Instead, He took divine *initiative* by sending Himself (in the form of His son) to show us this kind of love that puts others first,³ to the point of even being willing to die for others, and then demonstrated power of this kind of love by raising him up from the dead.

2–It's the kind of love where we're called to love not only those who look like us, or agree with us, or who treat us well, but to love even our *enemies*, and those who *mistreat* us! – And this kind of love is *not* what we find in most other faiths.⁴

B–You know, when I think of the things I've experienced in my own life and observed in the lives of others, I'm reminded that the only times I've seen misunderstanding, hate, and violence overcome among individuals & groups is when *this* kind of love was employed.

C–And it's why I'm convinced (now more than ever before) that the only real solution to these kinds of problems between humans in our world today is through the kind of selfless, self-sacrificing love demonstrated by Jesus.⁵

8. Now, there are many other reasons I'm a Christian,⁶ but this series has highlighted for me the importance of these three : the compelling picture God I see through Christ; how faith in Christ achieves the purpose and means of salvation; and the power of redemptive love.

9. Before we end, let me return to one of the original questions from the first week of this series: *What's the fate of people in other religions?*

A–Well, you may recall that I mentioned basically three ways of answering:

1–The *Exclusivist* view says that anyone who has *not* accepted Jesus literally as their Savior is going to hell... period.

2–The *Universalist* view says that in the end *everyone* is going to heaven, because all religions are just different paths to God anyway.

3–And yet, I hope I've shown through this series why these first two views are not only *inadequate* and *naive*, but just plain *wrong!*⁷

B–And that's why I offered the third view – *Inclusivist*, which affirms that salvation *does* indeed come through Jesus Christ, but that God in His wisdom and mercy can and does determine what "*faith in Christ*" looks like in these other religions, and finds a way to offer grace to those who'll follow it in their own religious practice.⁸

C–Now, this doesn't absolve us of the responsibility of sharing faith in Christ, but it does mean that we should do so in humbleness and respect for the current faith of others.

–IV–

10. Now, we've talked about a lot of things in this series: what others faiths believe; how these compare with Christianity; and even how that knowledge help us better share our own faith.

A–But I believe more important than any of this is the place of our own faith journey.

1–Some of you have followed Christ for a good while. Others of you have attended church all your life, but have never invited Jesus to be Lord of it.

2–And still others of you have been sitting on the faith fence, and this series may have helped open your eyes to the wonderful gifts God wants to give you through Christ.

B–Well, my prayer is that wherever you find yourself, you'll allow God to help you discover and deepen a life with the One who is the "*way, the Truth, and the Life*"⁹ of the world.

11. [PRAYER: "*O God, we thank you for the commitment and devotion of people of other religions, and what they can teach us. But we thank you, too, that the fullness of faith is found in and through you and your son Jesus, who came to be 'the way, the Truth, and the Life' for us all. For those of us who've never accepted you as Savior, lead us to the place where we can invite and welcome you into our hearts to experience your joy, praying a prayer like this... 'Lord, Jesus, I accept you as my Savior. Forgive me of my sin, and help me to follow you the rest of my life.' And for those of us who already follow you, help us not to take your love for us or our faith in you for granted, but to light our world by unashamedly sharing Christ with those around us. Help us to share in humility, and in ways that respect the faith of others, but to share nonetheless, allowing your Holy Spirit to work in their lives. Wherever we are in our faith journey, Lord help us to listen to your guidance and learn from you as you speak about how we can be people of peace, love, justice, and mercy for those around us. We pray all of this in the name of Jesus our Savior and friend, Amen.*"]

12. [HOLY COMMUNION]

ENDNOTES:

1. Consider these essentially to be things that I've learned or (more accurately, *relearned*) about my own faith through the things we've studied in this sermon series – things that have given me a new (or renewed) appreciation for the unique gift I've been given in Christianity, and things that I've perhaps too often taken for granted (perhaps you have too).
2. For a summary of how the five other faiths we've discussed in this series believe we can be saved, read generally Adam Hamilton, Christianity and World Religions (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), pp. 123-124.
3. The biblical, Greek term for this kind of love is *agape* (self-sacrificing, self-giving, love that puts the needs of others before one's own needs).
4. The one exception to this might be a sense of selfless love that we find in the Hindu/Buddhist concept of “*non-injury*” (from where Mahatmas Gandhi's practice of non-violent civil disobedience came). The difference, however, is that in these other faiths, love is understood essentially in “passive” terms – individual and self-focused. *Christian* love, by contrast, is not a “passive” live-and-let-live attitude (as in Hinduism or even in Judaism), nor does it detach itself from the world (as in Buddhism), but instead “actively” engages the world around it to be *different* – & it's characterized *not* by sheer obedience (as in Islam), but by selfless humility.
5. This kind of love may seem counter-intuitive and make no logical sense, but it's been proven true for over 2000 years – Godly, selfless love (Greek term *agape*) overcomes hate. Of course, it *only* works when we actually *practice* it (which we Christians often *don't*). But when we *do*, I've seen it transform lives around the world!
6. Some of these additional reasons include: (1) the **eyewitness accounts** of those who lived during the time of Jesus, who attested to not only his teachings and miraculous deeds, but also to the truth of his death and resurrection – these accounts tell us that the words of the New Testament are true and not fictional or warped versions of the truth (as claimed by some of our Muslim and Jewish friends); (2) the compelling vision of **life after death** that Christianity provides – our view of life after death is not one of endless cycles of life, death and rebirth (as in *samsara* of Hinduism), or one of meaningless existence of “non-existence” (as in life in Hinduism after *moksha*), or of becoming part of the “energy” of the universe (as in the *nirvana* of Buddhism), but is a view of an eternal life with a personal and loving God where we have our own identity, and share eternity with not only God but the host of heaven that includes our loved ones from earth; (3) my own **personal experience of Christ** – I am a Christian also because of the fact that I have experienced my own personal encounter with the risen Jesus and know that he is alive in my *own heart*; it is not an experienced that can be rationally proven or logically explained, other than to see how my own life has been changed and affected by its presence. In this sense, one cannot “prove” the presence of the risen Christ in one's life, but other should be able to see the “fruit” of that relationship if it is truly there (“*fruits of the Spirit*” like love, peace, joy, gentleness, self-control, etc., all described in Galatians 5:22-23).
7. You may remember from that sermon that I said that the **Exclusivist** view is inadequate because the way its proponents twist and interpret certain scriptures to make their point is, at best, inconclusive. And I said that the **Universalist** view is naive because it's simply *incorrect* – the differing world religions often have widely different goals and end focuses – far from being “*different paths leading up the same mountain,*” more accurately they may be differing paths leading up *differing mountains*.. It is therefore disrespectful and naive to lump them all together and say they're basically all just the same.
8. The **Inclusivist** view doesn't say that all religions are equal, or that all will be saved regardless of their beliefs (because not all beliefs in the other world faiths are *consistent* with the way of Christ). What it *does* say is that God can take the beliefs and practices of people in other faiths that point them towards the way of Christ, and credit them with Christ's grace in those particular places.
For example, *Hinduism's* concept of karma reminds us of what Jesus did for us on the cross – he took

the “*bad karma*” of the world onto himself and gave us his “*good karma*” (his *righteousness*). In *Buddhism*, we’re reminded that God doesn’t want us running *away* from suffering, but instead that He entered our suffering through Jesus so we would know that it’s okay (and desired) that we give our suffering *to* Him. *Islam* impresses upon us the value of complete surrender to God, and reminds us how great and awesome our God truly is. And in *Judaism*, we’re reminded of the intimate, personal *covenant* that God makes with each of us to be His children, a covenant first given through Abraham, but later sealed in the covenant of Jesus Christ (for which Holy Communion is a sign).

To borrow the words of Paul from Romans 4, people of other faiths can be “*reckoned as righteousness*” because of their faithful devotion and commitment to the ways of Christ found (*incognito*, of course) in their own faiths. [Read the entirety of Romans 4 for the many references and uses of to this phrase. Also read Galatians 3:6. To find out more about how other faiths point us towards Christ, read generally Hamilton, *Christianity and World Religions*, pp. 125-126].

9. John 14:6.