

Part 2 of this series on *The Church* is entitled, Our Faith Statement. What comes to your mind when you hear those three words, and which one draws your attention most? Although all three are important, “Faith,” which appears in the center is central, so let’s focus there first. The Greek word for faith occurs 244 times in the New Testament, so it’s a common noun, but one with profound meaning. By definition, to have faith one must be persuaded or convinced about something or someone. So, before exercising true faith, we must be certain and confident in whom or what we believe, and know why. For the church, our faith statement is rooted in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, where the Apostle Paul writes, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Clearly, this statement is not original with Paul, because he was delivering what was given to him. Very likely, this is the faith statement of the early church, perhaps since its inception.

The significance of these two verses cannot be underestimated, and deserve our most careful consideration. Before touching on the mystery and meaning of “Christ died for our sins... was buried... and that He was raised on the third day,” we must first ask ourselves if we are confident that this statement is true. If true faith requires firm conviction, then I must be persuaded by the message. Am I? Are you? If so, why? If not, why not? These are crucial questions, and they rely on a phrase that I left out when restating the verses. The phrase, “according to the Scriptures,” is twice-repeated for emphasis to underscore the fact that this message is not only based on eyewitness accounts, noted in verses 5-8, but on the record of Scripture itself. Paul is referring here to the Jewish Bible, known as the Old Testament to Christians, and filled with Messianic prophecies, fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Most notable is Isaiah 53, where the prophet says that “He [Jesus Christ] was pierced through for our transgressions... and by His scourging we were healed,” that He was “like a lamb led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,” and that “His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death.”

I am reminded about my conversion experience, and what convinced me to believe that Christ died for my sins and rose from the dead. I was 23 years old, a brand-new ensign in the Coast Guard and just arriving on the island of Guam, my first assignment. The day after I arrived a fellow officer gave me a Bible to read, which I did for the first time, starting in the New Testament with the stories of Jesus in the gospels. I was immediately captivated with the person of Christ, what He said, what He did, and what He offered. Each account of His life and ministry climaxed with His death and resurrection. If those events were not true, then the entire story was a house of cards. It was a matter of faith then. It is still a matter of faith that must not be based on feelings, which ebb and flow, but on facts, which neither bend nor break. The death and resurrection of Jesus, as prophesied and affirmed in the most venerated and investigated document in history, are facts that have persuaded me to trust Jesus as my Savior and Lord. The subjective experiences that accompany the objective realities of my faith affirm what I believe to be true, but do not determine what I believe to be true. Now, we are ready to consider the mystery and meaning of our faith statement.

“Christ died for our sins.” These five words prompt these three questions: Who? What? Why? In answering the “who” question about Christ, let’s be aware that we are dealing with the most famous, most significant, most influential, most revered and most misunderstood person in history. With regard to the first four adjectives used, simply go online for confirmation. Regarding the last adjective, the “spin” that people throughout history have put on Jesus is endless. Bear in mind that the New Testament gospels are the primary source materials on the life and times of Jesus Christ, so anything else that is written or said about Him must be measured by those documents. When Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” they respond by saying, “Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.” Jesus then asks another question, “But who to you say that I am?” Immediately, Peter answers by stating, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then blesses Peter, affirming that his response was given by God, the Father in heaven. Therefore, Jesus is not just a great prophet, or good teacher or world-class humanitarian; He is the only begotten Son of the living God. Nothing less.

What has Christ done? Much can be said in response to this question, but what work of God in Christ is top tier? Everyone dies, which is something that everyone knows, but why Jesus died is a unique occurrence in history, and one that reveals the nature of God as love more than any other. “Christ died for our sins” means that He died for me, for you and for everyone who has ever lived or will ever live, something that no one else could ever do or would ever do. We are all accountable for what we say and do in life. Therefore, we must pay the consequences for our wrongs, which the Bible calls sin. Yet, for reasons that are beyond our comprehension, but within our appreciation, Jesus slips the noose around His neck on our behalf, and willingly takes our sin upon Himself. As written in 1 Peter 2:24, “He [Jesus] Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds, you were healed.” This is what He did, and that is what we believe.

Why did Christ do this? Now we get to my favorite part of the story, which is why the first four books of the New Testament are called gospels. The word, gospel, comes from the Old English word, god-spel, which literally means good story. And a good story it is for us; in fact, it’s the best story of all! In effect, the “Why” question of 1 Corinthians 15:3 is answered in verse 4, where we read that “He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” This is immensely important because, as Paul states in verse 17, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.” So, when I think about what Christ has done, the only answer for the reason why is His love – the amazing, gracious, unconditional, life-changing love of the Father expressed personally, profoundly and beautifully in and through His Son, Jesus.

How should we respond to such love? The answer that comes to my mind immediately is gratitude, which is exactly how we should feel when someone does something for us that we cannot do for ourselves, especially in a sacrificial way. Greater sacrifice on the part of others should result in greater gratitude on the part of us. This reminds me of my brush with death in Hawaii many years ago. While on the way to Guam, I had a short stay in Hawaii for Coast Guard

training. Wanting to make the most of what little free time I had in that tropical paradise, I ventured out to Hanama Bay on Oahu, known as a great place to snorkel. While there I met a Hawaiian, who told me about the “Toilet Bowl,” which is a lava formation where water from the ocean flows in at a high rate causing a flushing effect. We jumped in and thoroughly enjoyed being tossed around each time the water gushed in. Close to the “Toilet Bowl” is an 18-inch diameter lava tube that descends four feet vertically, and then extends about 20 feet horizontally to the open ocean. My new friend said, “Watch this,” and then disappeared into the lava tube feet first. Some 10-15 seconds later he appeared in the ocean with a big grin on his face. Immediately I said, “I want to do that!” The instructions were simple, but very important – wait for the water to come all the way in, drop into the tube, and go out with the current. Too easy, I thought. So, that’s what I did. What follows is forever etched in my mind. Just before getting all the way out of the tube, the ocean water rushed in again, pushing me back, almost to the starting point. Without the ability to go up or down or right or left, I had to wait for it to go out again. My concern turned to panic when I was unable to get out on my second attempt. Again, the incoming water pushed me back, regardless of my effort to stop the effect by pressing my hands against the lava tube wall. With fear increasing and air supply decreasing, I suddenly felt myself being pulled back to the starting point, and then lifted out of the tube by someone who had just become much more than a new friend I met hours ago. He saved my life, and I was immensely grateful. I remain immensely grateful.

If greater sacrifice on the part of others should result in greater gratitude on the part of us, how then should we respond to Christ? Bear in mind that Jesus not only rescues those who are perishing, but He does so at the expense of His own Life. All that is required to be saved is to let the Savior save us. Of course, for this to happen, we must first realize we are perishing. If you have realized your need, and let His act of sacrificial love save you, how are you responding? If you’re just now realizing your need and God’s provision, how will you respond?

Let’s return to Our Faith Statement, and consider again those two verses from 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” That good news, which was received by the Apostle Paul and delivered by him to people in Corinth, has now been delivered to you. What will you do with it? God lavishes His love upon us most fully in the person of Jesus Christ, and then lets us decide how to respond. His desire, as stated in 1 Timothy 2:4 is for “all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” But that’s not all. When we receive His sacrificial gift of saving grace, God wills to move in us and through us by His Holy Spirit for His glory, while blessing us and others in the process. Our heavenly Father invites us to receive His love, expressed in His only begotten Son, reflect on it, rejoice in it, and share it with all who have ears to hear it, not out of obligation, but from a grateful heart.