



**QUESTIONS,
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Do we really need Jesus any more? I mean, is there anything we need Jesus to save us from? It used to be that we needed him to save us from the wrath of a righteous God and eternal damnation, but is that still the case? Outside of conservative evangelical circles, does anyone still preach or teach that if you don't believe in Jesus and his atoning death, you're doomed to hell for eternity? Haven't all of the books, movies, and programs on the subject of near-death experiences convinced most people that after you die everything will be wonderful and that there's no reason to be afraid of death, no matter who you are or what you've believed or done in life? And if some people instead have had negative near-death experiences, is there any evidence that it's because they rejected Jesus as their personal Savior? Wasn't the whole point of believing in Jesus and going to church to have full assurance that all of your sins are forgiven so that you can go to heaven when you die instead of being lost forever? Isn't that what the gospel has always been about: Jesus saves?

But if that's no longer the gospel message we think we're supposed to go out and proclaim to the world with joy, enthusiasm, and a sense of urgency, what is? Is there now something else that we need Jesus to save us from instead? Do we perhaps need him to save us from something such as our own selfish and egotistical behavior, or from things such as hatred, bigotry, and broken relationships with others? Can't a good

psychologist or mental health professional do that just as well as Jesus, and maybe even better? Does anyone really think that believing in Jesus is the only way for people to find something such as unconditional love or real meaning and purpose in their life? Are we to claim that only marriages and families that have Jesus at their center can truly be happy and fulfilling? Or is faith in Jesus necessary because no one is better than Jesus at achieving social justice, promoting gender equity, fighting against racism, and combating climate change? Do we need Jesus because he alone has the answers to all of our problems, or at least is the one who has the *best* answers? Is that our gospel now? Is that what we want everyone to understand when we proclaim to the world that Jesus saves?

Or has it just become a matter of personal preference? Are we to invite others to try out Jesus, the church, and the Christian faith "to see if it works for you like it does for us"? Does believing in Jesus save because a lot of people have discovered that it can afford a more satisfying quality of life or may provide a more enriching life experience? Is following Jesus simply one more option that some individuals might find fulfilling in the same way that yoga, journaling, hiking, or joining a book club can be for persons who enjoy such things? Is the need that some people feel for Jesus and their church essentially no different than the need that other people feel to have some down time alone, go to a ballgame,

protest against gun violence, or hang out with friends?

Should we really be concerned or saddened when we see church membership dwindling so rapidly and one congregation after another closing their doors for good? I mean, if there aren't enough people interested any more, why not just resign ourselves to the inevitable? Why don't those of us for whom the church still means something just celebrate the past for what it was, cherish with fondness our memories, and face the fact that what we knew and loved years ago is never coming back? Isn't that simply the same aging process that everyone has to go through in life as they grow old? Why fight what you can't change? Of course, at present it certainly doesn't hurt to try to keep things going as long as we can and as best as we can, at least until we can make sure that our own future is taken care of, but what sense is there in striving to do anything more than that? And if some people in the church want to continue trying new things out and see if they can find creative ways to keep something that resembles a church going, can't we at least be glad and a little bit optimistic about that?

After all, even if the church and organized religion continue on their decline, we can be encouraged by the fact that there will always be *some* people who enjoy serving others in ministry and find Christian theology and the Bible interesting, can't we? And there are still plenty of churches that seem to be thriving, aren't there? They may not be *our* kind of churches and we may not feel too comfortable with the kind of Christianity that they preach, but don't they at least provide some glimmer of hope for the future? Don't a lot of people from those churches eventually grow dissatisfied with them and look for the type of

alternative that we may be able to provide? So even if things look pretty gloomy for the long run, we shouldn't be *too* pessimistic about the future, should we? Aren't there a lot of places where the church looks like it's still going strong?

But if the church stands for a message and it's no longer clear precisely what that message is, can we really say that the church is going strong even in places where there are still lots of people and plenty of activity? Is it all just about numbers and crowds and social events and food pantries for the needy? Is the church still about the same things that Jesus and his first disciples were all about? What exactly was that? Was it just about getting people to believe in Jesus and in God as his Father, as if that were an end in itself? If their purpose wasn't to save souls, what was it? Why did their activity and message generate such passion in them and such hatred and opposition in others? Why were they willing to endure persecution with joy and even die for what they believed and proclaimed? Were they just stubborn fanatics who rubbed people the wrong way? Or had they really found something worth dying for, something that over the centuries we have lost and need to rediscover? If so, what was it? And how do we find it again today?

Wasn't it the cross that lay at the heart of their gospel and defined for them who they were and what they stood for? Wasn't that the reason that they placed the cross at the center of their places of worship and their daily life? Didn't Paul claim to preach nothing except Christ crucified? Don't all four of the canonical Gospels tell a story about Jesus that focuses primarily on his death as the culmination and consequence of everything that he stood and worked for? But what did

that cross mean for them? Did it mean the same thing that it has come to mean for Christians since the time of Anselm of Canterbury and the Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians who took over his thought? Did Jesus' first followers actually think that he had gone to the cross because he needed to pay the price for the sins of humanity, satisfy the demands of God's inflexible justice, and placate God's wrath? Did Jesus and his apostles really believe that God needed his blood, his agony, and his harrowing execution on a cross to be able to forgive us all of our sins and receive us into heaven rather than damning us to hell?

Is that what the gospel and the cross were all about for them? Is that what the New Testament writers actually meant when they said that Jesus died for us and our sins? Or could they have meant something entirely different from what we understand when we hear those words today? If that is in fact what the New Testament writers meant, isn't such an idea sick and repulsive? Is that really the type of God we're supposed to believe in and proclaim? Haven't theologians shown how oppressive, damaging, and damning such a message has been for so many people, including especially women and other victims of the violence and manipulation that result from the claim that nothing can satisfy the demands of God's justice but blood, sacrifice, punishments, and death?

Well, if that's not what the message of the gospel and the cross is all about, isn't it about time we sat down together and finally figured out what it *is* about? Don't we need to declare openly and vigorously our adamant rejection of such a message and bring together theologians and biblical scholars who can not only show that it runs contrary to the New

Testament and the apostolic faith but also rediscover and reformulate for today the gospel concerning Jesus and his death that his earliest followers originally found so powerful, transforming, and life-changing?

But are we really willing to do that? Given that the explanations of the gospel that run throughout the writings of Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, and the Confessional documents that we still cherish are firmly grounded in the interpretations of the cross that we now find so problematic, objectionable, and even repugnant, are we really ready to declare to the world that we now reject those interpretations and the understanding of the gospel that has traditionally had them at its center? Or do we instead still believe that those interpretations of the cross are indeed biblical and reflect faithfully the thought of Jesus and his first followers? In that case, wouldn't we need to admit that our problem is not just with Luther, our Confessions, and the Reformation tradition in general, but the Bible itself? How would *that* go over in our churches?

But how can we continue to insist that the interpretations of Jesus' death and the gospel found in the writings of the Reformers are firmly grounded in the New Testament texts if biblical scholars themselves are increasingly questioning such a claim? Haven't Pauline scholars demonstrated that the "Lutheran Paul" of the Reformers never actually existed and that many aspects of their readings of Paul represent a distortion of his thought? Haven't all of the advances in New Testament studies over the past two centuries or so given us solid grounds to question many of the traditional interpretations of the cross and the gospel and made it possible to penetrate more deeply into the biblical texts to reconstruct a

much clearer picture of what Jesus and the apostles such as Paul were truly about? If we find the arguments of such scholars convincing, don't we need to have the courage to admit that there are certain aspects of New Testament teaching that the Confessional writings that we regard as normative do not reflect faithfully? Given that the New Testament never reduces the gospel exclusively to the remission of sins for Jesus' sake and that the work of Christ is never described there in terms of making satisfaction to God's justice or meriting God's grace—which as a free gift is supposedly something that by definition *cannot* be merited—, doesn't our commitment to biblical teaching require that we rethink what the gospel really is and reformulate it in ways that are grounded in the vision and worldview of those who originally proclaimed it rather than the legal categories of medieval scholasticism?

But even if we do succeed in reconstructing more faithfully the New Testament gospel, isn't it just as foreign to our modern worldview as the gospel of Anselm and the Reformers? Isn't that the whole problem in the first place—a gospel couched in language and modes of thought that are not only sorely outdated but even nonsensical and incomprehensible for so many today? Can we really expect people to be cut to the heart and filled with excitement by a message that proclaims that we have been justified and cleansed by Jesus' blood, redeemed from sin, death, and the law, and delivered from the wrath to come? Even if we instead speak of the gospel in terms of God's love for all humanity, the grace and mercy of Christ, or the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, do such phrases really mean anything today? Do they really touch hearts or change lives? Or do they just make people

yawn and at most nod their head in acquiescence?

Answers, anyone?

But isn't that precisely why it's so urgent and important for Christian theologians to be struggling with all of these questions today? Aren't these the things that theologians need to try to figure out? Isn't that what theologians are for? Doesn't the future of the church and the Christian faith depend on finding answers to such questions that are clear, coherent, and convincing, not because the church or Christianity needs to be saved but because the world is actually in need of the type of salvation that Jesus alone can bring? If we still believe that, shouldn't we at least try to articulate in terms that people can readily understand what that salvation consists of and why we believe in Jesus as the one who brings it about? And if we don't believe that any more or aren't sure, shouldn't we be honest with ourselves and others and say so openly? Are we doing anyone a favor by pretending to uphold and cling to a message about Jesus, the cross, and the gospel that even we ourselves no longer find convincing or particularly transforming? If deep down we regard the gospel concerning Jesus as just one of many possible paths to a salvation that can be defined in any way that people may find convenient, does it really make that much difference if it continues to be proclaimed and believed? Shouldn't we just let the process of natural selection run its course and let the world decide for itself whether it wants that gospel to sink or swim? Why lose any sleep over it?

And in that case, why not just leave the church to fend for itself in the same way? Or if instead we believe that the church really does

matter in this world and that we need to find ways not only to save it from extinction but enable it to thrive and flourish, shouldn't we at least be able to explain why? If a church such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America makes a decision to restructure itself and to implement a "future church" program aimed at reaching out "to engage one million new, young and diverse people by 2030,"¹ shouldn't it first attempt to articulate in a clear manner exactly what it hopes to accomplish by these things and define what it is that it wants to offer? What's the purpose? To save souls? To join hands to work for social justice or "make the world a better place"? To help people find new meaning and purpose in life? Or is it just about making available to people a life choice that we think they may find satisfying or attractive in the same way that joining a fitness center, taking up gardening, or becoming a Buddhist or a social activist might be?

Aren't all of these questions things that we need to be talking about and seeking answers for? Aren't they the questions that lie at the very heart and core of our understanding of Jesus, the gospel, the Christian faith, and the church? Isn't the primary task of a Christian theologian to offer answers to questions such as these, the fundamental questions on which everything that we say and do as Christians and as a church ultimately depends? If so, why is it so hard to find theologians who have any interest in talking or writing about such questions, other than those who simply want to defend and repeat the same old worn out

and jaded formulas of the past that are responsible for the crisis in the first place? How is it that one can attend meetings, conferences, congresses, convocations, and other gatherings of theologians for over three decades and not be able to recall a single session dedicated to discussing even one of the questions just raised? Could it just be a case of bad memory? How is it that one can write a book devoted entirely to exploring and proposing some possible answers to questions such as those raised above and have it published by a major theological publisher, yet over twelve years later never have been approached personally by a single theologian wishing to discuss or even mention anything in the book? Was it that bad or incongruous, are theologians just too shy, or was the subject matter just considered too boring to bother engaging, much less reading? Why is it that when one brings up the type of questions raised above in the presence of theologians, bishops, and church leaders, the only response one gets is silence, blank stares, and occasionally some garbled mumbling aimed at changing the subject or putting it off for some other time that never arrives?

Do theologians and church leaders just find these questions uninteresting? How can they be uninteresting if they deal with the most fundamental aspects of Christian faith and life and the church, the things that define more than anything else who we are and what we are about? If these are precisely the type of questions being asked by people in the pews, those who have decided to leave the pews, and the countless numbers of people who are profoundly interested in talking and thinking about God but currently have no interest whatsoever in pews, why aren't they at the top of the agenda of theologians and church leaders? Do they perhaps think that it's

¹ ELCA Church Council Considers Debt, Discipline and a Declaration to the Muslim Community (2022, April 6). Retrieved from <https://elca.org/News-and-Events/8136>.

pointless to discuss such questions because they are impossible to answer or because any answer given will be unconvincing or overly simplistic? Or is it instead because they think we can never hope to reach agreement and consensus on how to answer them? Could it be that deep down they are worried that addressing such questions might upset the status quo by leading people to ask even more questions about Christian beliefs and the church, uncomfortable questions that might undermine their authority or expose just how fragile or critical the situation is? Might the problem be that theologians and church leaders really have no idea how to answer these questions or that they fear that if they said what they really think, they might get in trouble because some people would conclude that they are no longer truly Christian and have no business serving as church leaders or teaching theology in a Christian seminary or university? At the very least, if theologians and church leaders aren't interested in talking about questions such as these, couldn't we maybe sit down and talk about the question of why they aren't interested? Might we not settle for that to begin with?

Undoubtedly, these are all extremely difficult and challenging questions, but if the future of the church depends on finding answers to them, can we simply keep avoiding them if we want the church to have a future? Do we honestly think the problems raised by our traditional understandings of Jesus, salvation, the gospel, and the cross will go away if we just don't talk about them? While we may pay a high price for laying everything out on the table to address these questions openly and honestly and saying what we really think and believe in response to them, won't we pay an even higher price if we continue to ignore and avoid them?

But if we are going to sit down, roll up our sleeves, and engage these questions at length until we come up with the answers we need, how is that going to happen? How, when, and where is that discussion going to take place? Who's going to take the initiative to get it started? National church leaders and the organizations over which they preside? Bishops? Do church leaders and bishops even discuss theology any more when they meet? Seminary presidents or deans? Book publishers or journal editors? Theological networks or associations? Convocations of teaching theologians that don't meet any more because there's not enough interest and theologians have more urgent and important things to attend to? Why does one get the impression that the answer is none of the above?

Given that in seven years Lutherans and other Protestants will be commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of the presentation of the Augsburg Confession, the foundational document through which those who identified with the Reformation led by Martin Luther gave witness to the faith they taught and confessed, wouldn't 2030 be a wonderful occasion for those of us who continue to identify with that Reformation to prepare and share with the world a new confession of faith that articulates what we believe and teach today? Wouldn't it be the perfect opportunity to bring our theology into the twenty-first century, to define what we mean by the gospel and salvation and explain clearly why we think Jesus, his mission and message, and his community of followers do still matter very much? Couldn't we take advantage of the date, which many will also be celebrating as marking two thousand years since Jesus' death and resurrection, to draw up something that would articulate with

passion, firmness, and conviction what we believe, teach, and confess today and invite others to join with us in confessing that faith?

But could we really hope to reach agreement on such a confession? Wouldn't any such attempt just generate more problems, fights, conflicts, and divisions in the church, especially between those who simply want to cling to the traditional formulas of the past and those who want to reformulate the biblical faith in terms that speak to the realities and contexts of our modern world? Well, undoubtedly, but why would that be a bad thing? Isn't that the price we need to pay for standing up and fighting for a gospel that we truly believe in? Isn't that exactly what Jesus and Paul and Luther and those who signed the Augsburg Confession teach us, that the faithful proclamation of the gospel brings problems, fights, conflicts, and divisions, not only with those on the outside but with those on the inside as well? Isn't that precisely the most urgent question we are facing, whether we are going to cling stubbornly to a gospel that has ceased to be the gospel or reach out to the world with a gospel that is truly the gospel that kills and makes alive and sets fire to the earth?

So what's the alternative? Are we going to celebrate 2030 by inviting scholars, historians, and theologians to sit around a table talking about how wonderful and meaningful our Confessions are while everyone else in the half-empty room stares idly at them with a pleasant and puzzled smile on their face, wondering how long till the presentations are over? Are we going to celebrate by gathering to sing the same hymns and hear the same sermons that people sang and heard one hundred, two hundred, and even five hundred years previously, and then pat

ourselves on the back for having held fast to our tradition without having changed a thing? Or should we also celebrate the occasion by printing out and publishing online copies of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession of 1530, circulate them as widely as possible as we tell everyone that this is exactly what we still boldly and proudly believe, teach, and confess, and then make as much room as possible for the throngs of new, young, and diverse people who will be so deeply touched and transformed by what they read that they will be beating down our doors just to get in?

Well, I'm tired of asking so many questions, so I guess I'll just stop for now. What I would really like are some answers. But speaking from experience, I'll actually be surprised if I get any.

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