

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In the past few weeks, you may have heard of a couple of prominent persons in Evangelicalism who have either fallen away from the faith or are seriously questioning Christianity.

The first, Joshua Harris (I don't think most of you will know him; I didn't), was a pastor who had written a lot about sexual purity that had made him famous in those circles. Essentially, he had taught, "do this, and all will be well with you." But now, having suffered his own divorce, calling into question what he had been teaching, he has cast aside Christianity.

Harris announced his decision on Instagram. And one of his followers tried to encourage him, saying: "Life is extremely challenging. ... I believe there is a tremendous amount of historical [sic] evidence and witnesses that support Jesus being the Messiah. However, my personal experiences, in the midst of all the trials of life, are what make me a hundred percent certain that Jesus is exactly who the Bible says He is." Nice try, but this attitude is part of the problem — personal experience as opposed to Scripture as the assurance of truth.

The second, Marty Sampson (I doubt you'll know of him either; I didn't) was a songwriter for the popular Evangelical Christian band Hillsong United. A lot of Christian pop songs on the radio are Hillsong songs. Well, he announced that "he is 'genuinely losing' his faith." "And it doesn't bother me," he said. "Like, what bothers me now is nothing ... I am so happy now, so at peace with the world ... It's crazy." (Paul Bois, "Hillsong United Songwriter Marty Sampson Announces He's 'Genuinely Losing' His Christian Faith," Daily Wire, August 13, 2019)

He got on his soapbox. Preachers fall, and no one talks about it. Miracles rarely happen, and no one talks about it. The Bible has contradictions, and no one talks about it. God is mean and sends billions of people to hell, and no one talks about it. "I want genuine truth," he said. "Not the 'I just believe it' kind of truth. Science keeps piercing the truth of every religion." And "Sampson concluded by saying Christianity 'just seems' like any other religion with no particular point."

Wow! Just like any another other religion? No point to Christianity? Maybe, in the world of Evangelicalism today. "I want genuine truth"? "I am ... so at peace with the world"? "*You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?*" says James. "*Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4). Greedy for "unjust gain," these leaders — these "*prophets and priests*" — have "*dealt falsely*" with themselves and their hearers, replacing God's word with their dreams and their lies. Rather than speaking God's word faithfully, they would rather seek

after and preach “*Peace, peace, when there is no peace*” (Jer. 6:14; Jer. 23:26, 28). “*Is not my word like fire?*” declares the Lord.”

That’s right! The Spirit’s work is “*blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke*” (Acts 2:19). Jesus said, “*I came to cast fire on the earth, and*” “*WHAT MORE DO I DESIRE IF ALREADY IT IS KINDLED?*” [my translation, following Voelz and KJV] Again, Jesus said, “*Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.*” Genuine truth is always a bit challenging.

Nevertheless, let me ask you ... what is the point of Christianity? And does that fit in with what Jesus preached to us today?

Well, lest you think we’re not in a Lutheran Church, let me also answer for you ... the point of Christianity is Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified, risen. Let me answer for you ... the point is salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. As we heard in the epistle: “*let us ... lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*”

This is the fire that Jesus came to cast upon the earth; this is the fire that has been kindled. Perhaps we could say that it happened at the incarnation, for Jesus was “cast down” from the Father’s side, descending from heaven to earth (John 3:13), to effect our salvation and the coming of the kingdom of God. Or perhaps, we could say that it began at Jesus’ own baptism, as He was anointed with the Holy Spirit’s fire and with power; and then Jesus was immediately cast out into the wilderness to endure the fiery trials of the devil, so beginning His distress.

And since this fire has been kindled, what more did Jesus desire? That it be brought to its conclusion — its *telos* — in another baptism, a fiery baptism, a baptism of suffering and cross by which Jesus is bathed in blood, through which the world’s sins are forgiven, and sinners are reconciled to God. That is, Jesus desired that peace with God be reestablished. And so He did, as Luther penned in his great Lord’s Supper hymn: “All our debt Thou hast paid; peace with God once more is made: O Lord, have mercy!” (LSB617)

This is the peace Jesus came to deliver, not a worldly peace, father with son or son with father, mother with daughter or daughter with mother, mother-in-law with daughter-in-law or daughter-in-law with mother-in-law, but peace with God. Isaiah was not wrong in identifying the child born unto us as the “*Prince of Peace*” (Is. 9:6). Zechariah was not wrong to herald Jesus as the one coming “*to guide our feet into the way of peace*” (Luke 1:79). The angel was not wrong in announcing Jesus as the “*Savior, who is Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:11), and joining with the multitude in singing His praises: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among*

*those with whom he is pleased*” (Luke 2:14)! When Jesus forgave sinners, it was not with words of earthly peace on His lips, nor when He sent out His disciples to proclaim *“peace to this house”* (Luke 10:5); He was bestowing a heavenly peace with God through their proclamation (Luke 7:50). Jesus Himself was not wrong — it was no contradiction — when He delivered peace to His disciples on the night of His betrayal: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you”* (John 14:27), nor again just a few days later in the locked room on the evening of His resurrection when He breathed out peace: *“Peace be with you”* (John 20:19, 21).

The fire had been cast, but the peace was not yet earned when Jesus spoke these words in our text: *“I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!”* That distress would become so great in the hours before His crucifixion that He would even sweat drops of blood. But there from the cross, Jesus would accomplish it. The root word is the same, here in our text and there at the cross — just a different form. Here: τελεσθῆ — until it should be accomplished. From the cross: τετέλεσται — it has been accomplished, or as it’s usually translated: *“It is finished”* (John 19:30).

St. Paul put it this way: that Jesus *“was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification”* (Rom. 4:25). But he doesn’t stop there. He continues: *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand”* (Rom. 5:1-2).

Moreover, Paul says throughout this book of Romans that the Gospel word is the power that brings about this faith: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith ...”* (Rom. 1:16-17). *“Abraham believed God [that is, he believed God’s promise to him of a son and heir, though he was ‘as good as dead’ (Heb. 11;12)], and it was counted to him as righteousness”* (Rom. 4:3). *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”* (Rom. 10:17).

Truly, the peace Jesus won is delivered through His word, received by faith; and yet that, admittedly, has often caused not peace, *“but rather division,”* even in a family: *“in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. ... father against son and son against father,”* etc. And that’s hard; it’s a cross to bear. We want our loved ones in heaven with us — they’re God’s gift to us. Yet how often do they reject this peace in Christ that we wish to share with them. Yes, it’s hard. Jesus also says, *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”* (Matt. 10:37-39).

Dear friends, the peace Jesus came to bring and the peace we are to proclaim is not an earthly peace. It's not a purity culture that we are doomed to fail at, though we try, and when we fail, that causes us to lose heart. That's not Jesus' message of peace. His message is not of a life without hardship and suffering; it's not of a life merely of following the law (though we want to and try to). That's not Jesus' message, and if that becomes the church's message, then there will be nothing but disappointment with the church — *“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom. 3:23).

Strive, to be sure, for being a Christian means we have kingdom work to do, but don't look for peace in your striving. Look for peace, real peace, peace with God, in Christ alone, joined to Him by Holy Baptism, abiding in Him by abiding in His word, partaking of His body offered up for you and drinking His blood shed for you.

In these, you are in Him; and in Him, you have peace. That's what Jesus said to His disciples on the night He was betrayed; that's what He says to us today: *“I have said these things to you, that IN ME you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33).

Yes, let us cast off our sin in repentance and look to Jesus. Let us consider His cross, His shame, His death, His resurrection. Let us consider *“him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that [we] may not grow weary or fainthearted.”* And thus abiding in Christ, God grant us His peace that surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.