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If the church isn't about Jesus, it isn't about anything

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Hans Küng has long been an important prophetic voice, primarily within Catholicism but more broadly within Christianity.

He continues in that role in his latest book, *Can We Save the Catholic Church?*, just now published in the U.S. In it, he offers the sorrowful but hopeful pleadings of a priest and theologian who has sought for decades to reform the church in the liberating spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

Küng's battles with the church's hierarchy are well known, and much of that gets retold in this book. But what especially struck me about this volume is that Küng's familiar arguments to salvage Vatican II reforms are overshadowed by a different, more important call to the whole of Christianity, not just to Catholicism.

Here's how Küng puts it: "The crucial question is always the same: Does one's church faithfully incorporate and reflect the original Christian message, the Gospel, which to all intents and purposes is Jesus Christ himself, to whom each church appeals as its ultimate authority?" And again: "Without a concrete and consequent return to the historical Jesus Christ, to his message, his behavior and his fate ... a Christian church -- whatever its name -- will have neither true Christian identity nor relevance for modern human beings and society."

Here's how I would paraphrase Küng: Set aside your disappointment about the church's moves away from Vatican II and your objections to the historically regal papacy. Set aside everything else that bothers you about the church and return to the church's first, most important confession: "Jesus is lord."

Küng is arguing that we tether everything we do to that. And, of course, he's right.

The problem is that this core message often gets drowned out by Küng's and other voices that have been so insistent -- even strident -- about naming what is wrong inside the church. Those voices raise valid objections, and they point to real failures in the church universal. But eventually we must ask again this flat-footed, naïve question: What is the church all about?

And if the church isn't about honoring and following Jesus, it isn't about anything important.

Küng's book turns out to be an example of seeming to make the goal of being Christ-centered secondary. He spends so much time bemoaning the way the Vatican and bishops have handled the church, the ways in which they have undermined the Gospels' call to simplicity and love, that his message about returning to Jesus as the center of faith is easy to miss.

Some of that has to do with Küng's occasional drift into hyperbole. For instance, he says that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI proved himself "over the years to be incapable of learning anything ... on the issue of abortion."

"Anything" is like the word "all" in its radical inclusiveness. And to accuse the former pope of an incapacity to learn "anything" struck me as the bitter denunciation of a man who has been beaten down repeatedly by a church he loves and refuses to leave.

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Perhaps it's time to thank Küng for his tremendous contributions to the faith and to seek out voices of reform and renewal that aren't locked into all the old fights. Perhaps it's time to recognize that as important as Vatican II was, it did not accomplish everything it should have (as even Küng notes in this book), and what's needed now is some new way forward.

Küng had to go into his original book text and revise it in the wake of the hopeful beginnings of the papacy of Francis. It's an awkward revision. Küng seems to want to give the new pope credit for the new spirit he's evidenced, but because there's so much in the past to complain about, even that praise seems overly tentative, muted.

It's time to find a new generation of Christ-centered visionaries to move the church universal toward what we Presbyterians call "the church reformed, always reforming."

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