

Column

Ending well and leaving a clear path for others to follow is a everyone's goal in life. No one, at least in principle, wants to go down as a loser, yet some do.

“Speak no ill of the dead,” is a truism that goes back to Chilon of Sparta (600 B.C.) and in many cases it is a good rule to follow. God, in the end, will render the final verdict, so we don't have to.

With that said, there are times when the truth needs to be spoken. A person who brings havoc in the church and who turns people away from the Gospel cannot, in life or in death, be commended. Today I am thinking of an American bishop by the name of John Shelby Spong who died Sept. 12, 2021.

Bishop Spong, a North Carolinian by birth, served as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Newark (New Jersey) from 1979 to 2000. Largely forgotten today by the general population, he was well known in the 1990s for his strident and very public denunciations of the doctrines of the Christian creed. Those that didn't make the grade included: the virgin birth of Christ, the divinity of Christ, the miracles of the Bible, Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice for human sin, the concept of sin itself and the existence of a theistic being as is generally conceived.

Spong claimed he was rescuing Christianity from its primitive roots, remaking it for modern man, so it could survive. Quite the opposite happened in his Newark diocese. During his time as bishop, membership plummeted by more than 43 percent, going from 64,323 to 36,340.

Why make the effort of getting up and dressed on Sunday morning if all the Christian church had taught for two millennia has in fact been a myth?

In 1998, Rowan Williams, who would go on to become the Archbishop of Canterbury, characterized Spong's “Twelve Points for Reform” as embodying “confusion and misinterpretation.”

Shall we praise this man recently deceased who unsettled the faith of many without theological training or sophistication and drove many from the church? No, how can we? All we can say is: “Lord, have mercy.”

We can, however, draw a positive lesson from his life. He was bright, glib of tongue and from all accounts possessed with nice Southern manners. More than that, he held a high church job and was very sincere in what he

believed and taught. But – and this is the lesson – none of that makes what he taught true.

It, therefore, behooves everyone to be a discriminating listener. Search the scriptures to see if what someone (myself included) is saying lines up. Don't throw out the wisdom of the past just because it is old. Ask God to give you the wisdom of right judgment.

Bishop Spong's exit from life was tinged with uncertainty and sadness. How much better that of the Apostle Paul who, as he made his final bow on life's stage, said:

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

That is what ending well looks like on the ground. Go for it in your own life.

O GOD, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 19th Sunday after Trinity, The Book of Common Prayer).

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