

Column

“By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed . . .” Many if not most churchgoers will recognize these lines as coming from the hymn “The Church’s One Foundation.” Generations have sung them since they were written in 1866, but they seem especially relevant today as congregations and even denominations battle over how to read the Bible and live out the Christian faith.

The crisis that caused the author, a clergyman by the name of Samuel Jones Stone, to write this hymn was a bishop in South Africa who was teaching what was perceived at the time as being beyond the bounds of Christian orthodoxy (right belief). As a result, John William Colenso was removed as Bishop of Natal. The whole affair, as you might expect, created not a little stir.

The Christian Church is never entirely free from ‘stirs’ because honest debate is part of life. Nevertheless, in recent decades these seem to have intensified and become more numerous as Western culture has moved farther and farther away from her Christian moorings.

The Church, at least in some quarters, has responded to culture’s shift by accommodation . . . by hooking her wagon to ‘what’s happening now’. In so doing, she has done the exact opposite of what St. Paul urges in Romans 12:1: “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould” (J.B. Phillip’s translation).

Regardless of how current debates and controversies came about, there are bright spots. Christ has not left Himself without witnesses. Christians of all stripes continue to seek to live out their baptismal promises by feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, seeing Jesus’ face in those the world ignores or discards, praying for those in positions of power in church and nation and sharing their faith one person at a time.

As an example of the latter, my niece who works at a local shop shared with me something she did. She noticed a homeless man -- someone I knew and had told her about -- outside of her workplace, but instead of seeing someone unkempt, off-beat and a nuisance (as some may well have seen him), she saw the face of an angel and went out, talked with him and prayed with him. Before going back inside, she gave him \$6, all the money she had.

Standing for right doctrine and high moral practices is good and praiseworthy. Jude in the New Testament enjoins as much when he says “contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”

We should go down this road, but just perhaps my niece’s approach is the more convincing . . . the real proof of orthodoxy . . . the one we should begin and end with. After all, it was none other than Jesus Himself who said: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”

GRANT to us, Lord, we beseech thee, the spirit to think and do always such things as are right; that we, who cannot do anything that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, the Book of Common Prayer).

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