

Proper 11 (Series B)

"The Church's One Foundation" (Lutheran Service Book, #644)

This universally-loved hymn, written and first published in 1866 by the Anglican clergyman Samuel Stone, was originally the ninth of twelve hymns written by him, each one based on one of the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed. Its subject matter is the ninth of the twelve creedal articles: "I believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints." Now, nearly a century and a half later, the hymn continues to appear in hymnals of all denominations, and on nearly every list of hymns most cherished within Christendom. Perhaps the main reason for its ongoing popularity is that it reassures us, in clear and concise language, that in spite of the denominational divisions and schisms that may keep us apart from one another, we are nevertheless bound together in one Christian body (1 Corinthians 12:27) with Christ as our Head, or to use St. Paul's "building" word picture (1 Corinthians 3:11), with Christ as our Foundation. There is only "one Lord, one faith, one baptism (new birth)" (Ephesians 4:5).

Rev. Stone originally wrote seven stanzas, later expanding to ten for a processional. In deference to today's Christian congregations, for whom ten stanzas of any hymn would seem too many, editors have squeezed their content down into a mere five stanzas. But those five stanzas still manage to proclaim the Christian Gospel with vigor and clarity. They focus, in stanza four, not only on the Church's present "toil and tribulation", but also on its future—"till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blessed". And, finally, in stanza five, the Church here on earth merges gloriously with the Church in heaven—"that we, like saints before us, may see you face to face."

This writer has known this hymn for over eighty years and can still remember how thrilled he was, already as an eight-year-old boy, to be singing it—all five stanzas. Perhaps that was due, at least in part, to its words being wedded to the wonderful tune AURELIA, one of the many tunes in our worship books that are genuinely inspired. (Incidentally the name AURELIA is derived from the Latin word "aurum", meaning "gold" as in "Jerusalem the golden.")

The tune was composed by Samuel Sebastian Wesley, grandson of Charles Wesley, who together with his brother John was a co-founder (by default) of what eventually resulted in today's Methodist Church. S. S. Wesley was a distinguished composer and performer in his day (1810-1876). A cathedral organist himself, he also devoted his professional life to bettering the conditions, salaries, and status of church music and church musicians. He was also one of the first organists to advocate the use of a full pedal board on English organs.

In the end, however, this hymn lives on in our minds and hearts and on our lips primarily because it echoes so powerfully and poetically the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, when he prays in John 17:21 "Father, I pray that these (all my disciples) may be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, and they also may be in us, so that the world may believe thou has sent me."

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The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
she is his new creation by water and the Word.
From heav'n he came and sought her to be his holy bride;
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died.

Elect from ev'ry nation, yet one o'er all the earth;
her charter of salvation: one Lord, one faith, one birth.
One holy name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
and to one hope she presses with ev'ry grace endued.

Though with a scornful wonder the world sees her oppressed,
by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed,
yet saints their watch are keeping; their cry goes up, "How long?"
And soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.

Though toil and tribulation and tumult of her war
she waits the consummation of peace forevermore
till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest,
and the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest.

Yet she on earth has union with God, the Three in One,
and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.
O blessed heav'nly chorus! Lord, save us by your grace
that we, like saints before us, may see you face to face.

Text: Samuel J. Stone (1839-1900), altered.
Tune: AURELIA Samuel S. Wesley (1810-76)
Both text and tune are in the public domain.

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]