

Is My Church Drifting?

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears”
(Acts 20:28-31).

Ruth Rieder in *Covenant by Sacrifice* tells a story of two fishermen on the reservoir. Caught up in the excitement of the trip, the men neglected to put down the anchor as they reached their favorite fishing spot. Unmindful of the subtle undercurrent of the water, they began to fish. Hours quickly passed; suddenly one of the fishermen looked up. To his horror, the boat was drifting dangerously close to destruction. He shouted a warning to his partner, and they began rowing with all their might, seeking to escape the deadly rapids that lay just ahead. After a furious effort, they made it safely to shore. The fishermen were shocked that they drifted so far. It had happened without notice. The danger went undetected until it was almost too late.

The writer of Hebrews warns, “So we must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it” (Hebrews 2:1, *NLT*).

The *King James Version* admonishes us to “give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip” (Hebrews 2:1). It is as if the truth could slip out of our hands, and we could slip out of His grace.

John Trent, author of *Heart Shift*, and a professional counselor, tells of a plane trip where he sat beside a NASA petroleum engineer. He took advantage of the opportunity to ask the missile scientist, “How many degrees can a space rocket be off before it becomes a huge problem? Could it be two degrees off?”

The man pulled out his calculator and started punching in numbers. “To be two degrees off from when you blast off, and taking into consideration the time and distance traveled, you’ll miss not only your point of orbital entry, but you’ll miss the moon by 11,121 miles.”

Trent goes on to say, “Just be two degrees off from the right heart attitude, add in enough time and distance, and an entire church can end up miles from God’s heart.”

Just a two degree shift in doctrine and convictions can cause change for the worse, pulling the church away from God. And a two degree shift toward correct doctrine and appropriate

convictions can bring a church closer to God. “Even small shifts in a positive direction could move a person from ruin to renewal.”

“Drift” refers to something that has carelessly been permitted to become lost. It is another word for “shift.”

In his excellent book *Historical Drift*, Dr. Arnold L. Cook posed the question, “Must my church die?” His timely book teaches us how to detect, diagnose, and reverse the trends that churches have toward drifting from fundamental truth. This book has been a primary source used in writing this lesson.

Cook explained that the biblical word *drift* means “to let something slip away—can describe a ship, which drifts by the dock due to the carelessness of the mariner who failed to calculate carefully the wind or tide.”

“That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14).

When do churches begin to drift?

1. Churches drift when they fail to pass on the truth to successive generations.

2. Churches drift when they move away from their foundational doctrines.

The trend is for church denominations to drift (or move) away from their foundational doctrines over time. It does not have to be this way. Drifting can be prevented. It must be prevented.

John Wesley once said, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist...But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having a form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline which they first set out.”

The *Charisma* magazine (October 1993) quoted the Assemblies of God general superintendent as saying, “We might be Pentecostal in doctrine but we’re not Pentecostal in experience.”

“Too many people,” George Wood said (in the same meeting), “are leaving our churches unchanged, unmoved, unsaved, unfilled, unsanctified and unmotivated to turn their heart and will over to God completely. We need a holy fire which sets aside business as usual in the church until Jesus comes.”

Hold on. Before casting a judging eye on another’s church, there is a question for consideration. Could this same thing be said of your church?

3. Churches drift when they move away from soul winning.

L. R. Scarborough, a Southern Baptist once said, "It is found that so long as the heart of an institution burns hot with the fires of soul-winning, it is not likely to drift in its theology."

4. Churches drift when they concentrate on maintaining the organizational structure.

Arnold Cook said, "As a result of their position on the aging side of the life cycle, congregations are being sustained by their management rather than fueled by their vision. Generally, the more aged the congregation, the longer it takes to produce lasting change."

5. Churches drift when seminaries and Bible schools fail in training the leaders.

Timothy Beougher and Alvin Reid in *Evangelism for a Changing World* cautioned, "When a denomination's theology changes, that change almost always begins in the seminaries that train its leaders."

6. Churches drift when Satan lulls us into sleep rather than the church experiencing revival.

Revival means "to bring back to life." As believers backslide they become a corpse. Revival is imperative.

Stuart Piggin in *Firestorm of the Lord* said Satan likes to threaten us. "I will cool you insensibly, by degrees, by little and little. What care I ... though I be seven years in chilling your heart if I can do it at last; continual rocking will lull a crying child asleep."

George Barna in *The Frog in the Kettle* explained the drift in this way: "Place a frog in boiling water and it will jump out immediately because it can tell that it's in a hostile environment. But place a frog in a kettle of room temperature water and it will stay there, content with those surroundings. Slowly, very slowly, increase the temperature of the water. This time, the frog doesn't leap out, but just stays there, unaware that the environment is changing. Continue to turn up the burner until the water is boiling. Our poor frog will be boiled, quite content, perhaps, but nevertheless dead."

Ruth Rieder in *Covenant by Sacrifice* related the story of a man that met an overland traveler, who had walked on foot for a long distance. He was interested in knowing what the greatest difficulty the traveler had encountered was in his long journey.

He suggested that perhaps the mountains on the trail had been the greatest barrier, but the traveler assured his questioner it was not that. Then he suggested that perhaps the swollen streams, which cut across the road, presented the greatest hazard, but it was not that. After a little the traveler said, "What almost defeated me in my journey across the continent was the sand in my shoes."

Rieder points out that life is forever tripping over small things. It is not the big diversion that will send you down the path of compromise. It is usually just the subtle curve in the road. More than likely the giant assaults of the enemy will not destroy our consecrations. It will probably be nothing more than...little foxes. (See Song of Solomon 2:15.)

7. Churches drift because their leadership drifts.

Arnold Cook in *Historical Drift* stated, "Organizations don't drift, only their leaders."

There is a backsliding in the pulpit before there is a backsliding in the pew.

8. Churches drift when there is the lack of vision.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he" (Proverbs 29:18).

9. Churches drift when there is a desire for the world (and to be like everyone else).

Arnold went on to say that, "Robert Bork, in his book, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*, comments on the power of culture to unrelentingly squeeze us into its mold: With each new evidence of deterioration, we lament for a moment, and then become accustomed to it."

Look closely at what happened to Lot. The same picture could happen today.

- Looked toward Sodom (Genesis 13:10).
- Chose the ground near Sodom (Genesis 13:11).
- Pitched his tent toward Sodom (Genesis 13:12).
- Moved to Sodom and dwelt there (Genesis 14:12).
- Became like the people of Sodom. Acted like a citizen (Genesis 19:9).
- Gave his daughters to Sodom (Genesis 19:8).
- Hesitated in leaving the city (Genesis 19:15-16).

Even when the angels delivered him from destruction, he still wanted to live as close to Sodom as possible (Genesis 19). His wife even looked back to the city—longing to be there.

J. R. Ensey in the *Apostolic World Report* offered a book review on *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*. He said, "Prosperity urged him to move on into the city where he became a judge, or maybe a mayor. He never intended for things to turn out as they did for his family, but he pitched his tent too far in the wrong direction...If we don't want to go to Gomorrah, we shouldn't pitch our tent in that direction." Consider the short warning found in God's Word: "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32).

We should fight against compromise and the pull of the things of this world. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

The case of Sodom and Gomorrah is not the only biblical example of historical drift. In the Book of Judges the appalling cycle of drift is repeated seven times.

- The people fall into sin.
- God disciplines them with foreign oppression.
- The people cry out in repentance.
- God raises up a deliverer.
- Peace is restored.

God provided them with leaders called “judges,” but still “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

The following adaptation from *Historical Drift* is another illustration of the typical evidence of loss of commitment. (Several additions have been made.) Watch for these “lacks” in your life and in local church.

Lack of faithfulness	Inconsistent church attendance. Quest for fewer and shorter services.
Lack of stewardship	Not faithful in tithing and giving of time, talent, and treasure.
Lack of love and understanding for God’s Word	No apparent desire for serious Bible study.
Lack of biblical preaching	More interested in modern trends, methods, and current events than sound, doctrinal preaching and teaching.
Lack of worship	Not interested in consecrating one’s life, bowing, and submitting to God as King of kings.
Lack of prayer	No interest in attending prayer meetings.
Lack of repentance	No interest in deep soul-searching and conformity to God’s will and Word.
Lack of evangelism	No involvement in witnessing.
Lack of vision	No involvement in outreach or missions.
Lack of holiness	No apparent interest in godly living.

Study Questions

1. What does the writer of Hebrews warn against in Hebrew 2:1? _____

2. How does the story of the two fishermen relate to the church? _____

3. What is meant by “drift”? _____

4. When do churches begin to drift? (Provide five points.) _____

5. What did George Wood say (as recorded in this lesson)? _____

6. What did John Wesley say concerning the future of the Methodist movement? _____

7. According to Scarborough, what keeps the church from drifting? _____

8. How does George Barna explain the concept of drifting? _____

9. When a denomination’s theology changes, that change usually begins where? _____

10. According to Arnold Cook, organizations do not drift, but what does? _____

11. What steps led Lot and his family to destruction? _____

12. What short warning is given in Luke 17:32? _____

13. Provide a biblical example of historical drift. _____

14. List five "lacks" to watch out for in the church and our personal lives. _____

15. What appalling cycle of drift is repeated seven times in Judges? _____