

Steer Away from the Drift

“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).

The church in the Book of Acts spread like a blazing fire. Persecution could not stop it. The church was vibrant, active, and powerful. Great signs and wonders were performed. Its members were strong, loved God and His truth, and shared it with everyone.

You would have suspected that the church would have continued in its greatness. It did not. It slipped from being a bright light into what has been termed the Dark Ages. Paul prophesied this would happen in Acts 20:29.

What caused the church to drift into darkness?

The church began to drift during the second century. The church, once persecuted, became publicly accepted. Nearly half of the Roman Empire accepted the Christian faith. As persecution lessened, the people’s devotion toward God began to cool. Uncommitted people started joining the church. False doctrine and teachings crept in. Constantine, hoping to gain political power, joined the church. He

pretended to be a Christian. The church opened its doors and beckoned the world to enter. The world rushed at the invitation; remained unchanged, and the church was weakened. Eventually the church and state became united. Constantine requested the backing of the church, and in return promised all persecution would stop. An answer to prayer, or was it? He promised the cross would become the standard of his army instead of the Roman eagle. It looked like the church was going to rule the world. Or was the world going to rule the church?

Constantine became both the political and religious leader. The government paid the preachers. Instead of spiritual men occupying church offices, political rulers took over. False teachers arose, bringing their own philosophies, popular teachings that replaced or diluted the Word of God. The church was permeated with the current ideas of the times. How sad. The church triumphant drifted to an impotent, sin-stained, weakened body of half-hearted believers.

History has a way of repeating itself. Vance Havner said, “All we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.” It does not have to be like that. History is a willing teacher if we are eager students. We can avoid the pitfalls that crippled previous generations.

Someone has rightly said that the challenge of the twenty-first century is to take the church to the world without the world coming into the church.

We must be careful we do not become like the men Paul met at Athens. They were “very religious” and “spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (Acts 17:21, *NIV*).

“See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8, *NIV*).

How can we steer away from drifting?

Arnold Cook in *Historical Drift* said, “Steer right to go straight. According to aerodynamic experts, when a propeller-driven airplane takes off, it naturally veers to the left unless it is steered to the right. Based on my observations of evangelical institutions and leaders over the past half-century, it appears to me that the same principle applies. The only way to keep on a straight orthodox path is to keep turning to the right. Churches, schools and even evangelical scholarship will naturally go left unless they are deliberately turned to the right. The prevailing winds of doctrine blow against us, and if we are to resist them then we must have a firm grip on the wheel of the good ship evangelicalism and steer it to the right.”

Imagine you are riding a bicycle down the road. Take your hands off the handle bars and place them behind your head. If you like, close your eyes and relax. How long do you think it will take before your bicycle begins to drift? How long before you swerve into oncoming traffic or bend into the ditch? A good rider knows that in order to stay straight on the road, it requires making small corrections.

1. Face reality.

Where are you? How far have you moved/drifted from where you should be? If necessary, repent!

“Those who live in the past are blind in one eye. Those who never consult the past are blind in both eyes.” (Arnold Cook)

2. Know your direction.

Have a vision for the future. Chart the course by having firm direction. Make decisions now concerning tomorrow. Stick with your core values, and beliefs.

Cook said, “Those who have most powerfully and permanently influenced their generation have been the ‘seers’—men who have seen more and farther than others.”

He adds that this becomes the lonely side of spiritual leadership. Often it translates into going with the minority report, e.g., Joshua and Caleb. No leadership style breeds historical drift better than consensus—going with the flow of compromise. Stephen was willing to take a costly stand for truth. Noah was another man of God that was willing to stand alone.

The trend today is that there are no absolutes—no one is wrong, and everyone is right. The denominational world pulls us toward tolerance. The prevailing viewpoint is everyone should be united.

C. H. Spurgeon once said, “I am quite sure that the best way to promote union is to promote truth. It will not do for us to be all united together by yielding to one another’s mistakes.”

Philip Melancthon said, “In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, charity.”

What does this mean to us? We should be united when it comes to the essential, major doctrines of the Word of God. We should always speak the truth in love.

Our association with others can either lift us up or pull us down. Let us learn a lesson from the trees.

The world's largest tree (and one of the world's oldest) is the Coast Redwood (of California). It grows from a seed that is no larger than the one from a tomato. It rises like a skyscraper (tall, towering building) to 367 feet. These trees can live for more than two thousand years.

These natural giants have an attention-grabbing root system. (Trees are held in place by anchoring organs called "roots." Roots grow constantly. We are to be rooted in the Word of God.)

The roots of the redwood only go down 10-13 feet deep before they spread 60-80 feet. How can such a tall tree with such a shallow root system withstand the wind? The roots often entangle with neighboring trees. This provides for greater stability. The trees grow close together and gain strength from being a forest. Through growing together and networking with other members of the body, we have the strength of the combined body. We become stronger through our association with each other. We also become grounded and settled in God's Word.

"Let your roots grow down into him and draw up nourishment from him, so you will grow in faith, strong and vigorous in the truth you were taught. Don't let anyone lead you stray with empty philosophy and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking..." (Colossians 2:7-8, *NLT*).

You now have a hint of the down side to these close relationships. Because the roots are entangled or fused together, it is conceivable that when disease strikes, it can spread throughout the common root system, as is common with the oak tree. The root systems of oak trees within fifty feet of each other can become grafted together. If one tree becomes

infected, the disease can easily move from tree to tree.

"It takes only one wrong person among you to infect all the others—a little yeast spreads quickly through the whole batch of dough! I am trusting the Lord to bring you back to believing as I do about these things. God will judge that person, whoever it is, who has been troubling and confusing you" (Galatians 5:9-10, *NLT*).

Our association with others can build us up, or pull us down. It has often been said that if you show me your associates, I can tell you a lot about your personal character. We are like those we hang around.

3. Stand firm for truth. Stay on guard.

G. K. Chesterton once said, "Whenever you remove any fence, always pause long enough to ask yourself the question, 'Why was it there in the first place?'"

The *National Geographic* magazine (July 1985) made this interesting statement that could serve as a potent reminder to the church, "They opened up the doors of the world, but they closed up the heavens forever."

Dr. Ralph Winter, founder of the U. S. Center of World Mission, said, "I would rather fail in that which will ultimately succeed than to succeed in that which will ultimately fail."

"Preach the Word of God urgently at all times, whenever you get the chance... Correct and rebuke your people when they need it, encourage them to do right, and all the time be feeding them patiently with God's Word. For there is going to come a time when people won't listen to the truth but will go around looking for teachers who will tell them just what they want to hear. They won't listen to

what the Bible says but will...follow their own misguided ideas" (2 Timothy 4:2-4, *TLB*).

4. Be committed.

The National Board of United Pentecostal Church International—Ghana came up with the following points in one of their annual prayer and fasting retreats.

They encouraged fellow ministers to be committed:

- To love and maintain unity among ministers and leaders (Acts 1:14; Acts 2:1; John 13:44-45).
- To respect protocol and ethics (1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17).
- To pray and fast (Luke 18:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:17).
- To be guided by the Word and doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13, 16; Job 23:12).
- To personal ministerial assessment (2 Timothy 1:6; 4:5; Acts 26:16-18; Acts 9:2).
- To develop spiritually for effective ministerial leadership (Philippians 3:13-14; Luke 2:52).
- To emphasis on evangelism and church planting (Mark 16:15-20; Matthew 19:19-20).
- To maintain discipline and cooperation (1 Timothy 5:19-20; 3:10).

5. Be courageous in your leadership.

Cook wrote, "Although drift is inevitable in all social structures, including religious organizations, it can be curbed and even reversed through renewal and wise, godly and courageous leadership."

Take a stand for righteousness and truth in your leadership. Lead the way. Others will follow.

Study Questions

1. What caused the early church to drift into darkness?

2. What does Acts 17:21 say about the men of Athens?

3. How can we steer away from drifting?

4. What lesson can we learn from the redwood tree?

5. According to this lesson, what trend is being experienced today?

6. According to Spurgeon, what is the best way to promote unity?

7. What leadership style breeds historical drift?

8. What type of men have powerfully and permanently influenced their generation?

