



“A Drifting Church”

Kevin Presley

If something is not anchored, it will invariably drift. This is not only true with a boat; it's true in our lives and it's true when it comes to the Church. An old gospel song likens the Church to *the old ship of Zion*, and that metaphor certainly works because the Christian life is implicitly and explicitly referred to this way in the New Testament. The writer of **Hebrews** was concerned about Christians abandoning the faith and turning back to Judaism. He challenges them to stay true to the course they had set out upon.

Hebrews 2:1 “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.”

The word *slip* is rendered *drift* in the New King James and other translations, and it refers to something being *carried downstream, away from its original place*. This is what happens in many a life. It's also the story of religion over the past 2,000 years. It is what's happening in many congregations of the Lord's Church today. Today, we'll consider the drifting church. Are you part of such a church? How can you tell?

The Christians to whom the Hebrew letter is addressed were under the increasing temptation to renounce the faith of Christ and return to the sacrifices and ordinances of the Old Testament. The inspired writer repeatedly emphasizes the inadequacy of those things and the superiority of the things found in Christ Jesus. The fateful decision to turn away from the truth was not something that would happen all at once—it never is. It was a gradual process. A building doesn't fall into a state of neglect and disrepair overnight, and neither does a soul. Neither does a church. It happens over time. Thus, the apostle admonishes them to be diligent and not let the truth slip away from them.

The verb *slip* can have several shades of meaning. It was sometimes used in classical Greek as a nautical term meaning *to drift or float away*, like a boat that is not securely tied drifts along with the current. It can also mean *to take a wrong course*. The metaphor is clear: when one is not careful and paying close

attention, he can drift away from the truth. Notice that the truth doesn't drift away from us; rather, we drift away from the truth. The truth doesn't drift because it is fixed and unchanging.

Psalms 119:89 “...For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven.”

So, if we become removed from the truth, it was we who moved, and not the word of God. The truth of God does not change with the times. It does not wax and wane in power, it is not bendable and pliable whatever times or circumstance we may find ourselves in. You see, the truth is always the same. If we become separated from it, it is only because we were carried away from it by the currents of life. It is possible—and more times than not, it is the case—that people drift slowly and unconsciously. If you're out on a boat in some large body of water and you're not anchored or tethered to something that doesn't move, you will drift. It usually takes some time to realize just how far you've gone. If you don't have a fixed point of reference, but merely look at the surrounding water or look inside the vessel, you will not realize you've drifted, sometimes until it's too late. That's the way it is when we drift morally, spiritually, and theologically. We become so accustomed to the culture of sin until it doesn't seem quite as bad as it used to. Or changes in doctrine occur so slowly, so insidiously that we don't realize how lax and liberal we've become when it comes to the teachings of the Bible. Or, little by little, we become lackadaisical and careless about spiritual things until we simply don't realize how worldly and full of apathy we've become as Christians.

Hebrews 2:1 doesn't mention some heinous and shocking sin that has suddenly been committed, but careless, thoughtless, gradual drifting. What's the difference between many a teenager who takes his first drink and a bleary-eyed drunk lying in some gutter? Time. What's the difference between someone who allows himself to compromise some moral standard when he defies his conscience in some manner and the person who embraces things that most would've seen as shocking a few years ago? Time. What's the difference in the person who begins to neglect church services now and then, who starts to get too busy to attend to the duties and responsibilities of the Christian life and the person who has left the faith altogether? Time. It's simply a matter of gradually drifting over a period of time. It takes no effort to drift.

The **Hebrew** writer takes this picture from the vast ocean where powerful underwater and often unseen currents are at work, and the vessel drifts away with them. That's the way it is in life, and so it is with the Church as well. There are always powerful currents at work, threatening to take the Church away from the established truths of God's word and from those doctrines and practices revealed by the apostles into uncharted territory. There were the Judaizers, the Gnostics, and other factions, groups, and people who arose—even in the first century—to draw away disciples to themselves (**Acts 20:29-30**). As a result of these currents, the old ship of Zion sometimes finds itself drifting along with them, moving farther and farther away from the truth, sometimes without realizing that that's the case. It's true in how and what the Church preaches, what it practices, and even how its members live.

How do churches drift? Why do churches drift with the tide of time? How can we tell if that's the case? First, I believe that when the Bible ceases to be the Church's sole authority, that ought to tell us that Church is adrift. When we become less concerned and conscientious about proving our beliefs and practices by the word of God, we're drifting away from the principles of truth. There used to be a time when people firmly held to doctrinal convictions because they earnestly believed that the Bible taught those things. It used to make a difference to people what the Bible actually said or where the Bible was silent about a practice. People at least made an effort to go to the word of God to see if their practice was true. They would contend for that practice if they believed it was true. But today, in the name of

ecumenicalism or union, people now think that it doesn't make any difference what the Church practices. Churches of Christ have long been known as a people who demanded book, chapter, and verse for what we believe and do.

I Thessalonians 5:21 "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

I Corinthians 11:2 "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you."

I Peter 4:11 "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God..."

That is, *let a man speak only as God has already spoken*. We can't go beyond or fall short of what the word of God says. It is our guide in all matters of faith and practice. Simply put, how do we know if a church is abiding in the truth? How do we know if it's practicing the truth and not error, and whether or not it is contending for the faith once delivered to the saints? Only by comparing what it believes and practices to the word of God. We don't measure a church's loyalty to the truth by church tradition, popular opinion, or human-written creeds because all of those things change themselves with time. And there are so many in existence, which one do you believe to start with?

Today, the standard in many churches is no longer "what does the Bible say," or whether the Bible teaches something by explicit statement, approved example, or necessary inference. Rather, many have begun to ask questions like "does it get the job done" or "do people like it," "is it popular," "does it draw people in," "does it feel right," "does the majority of the Church agree with it"...These become the standards instead of "what does the Bible say?" If we held ourselves strictly to that standard, I think we would shockingly find a lot of things that are going on in the religious world today don't come from the Bible, but are the result of human ideas, innovations, and traditions.

Folks, if the Bible does not authorize it, the Church has no business doing it. We are Christ's subjects. He possesses all authority in His kingdom. The Church is His to govern as He sees fit, and He governs it through the teaching of the inspired apostles, the New Testament. We are admonished to remain within the parameters of the things they wrote.

Jeremiah 6:16 "Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls..."

The people were at a crossroads: they could choose the path that led to the unknown or they could choose the old paths that were laid out long ago and walk in them. Unfortunately, they refused to walk in the paths of old and so have most churches today.

Friend, listen to me. Is your church changing? Is it becoming something you no longer recognize? Is the preacher or are the elders changing their tune, saying things like, *we just don't think those things matter anymore?* Are they embracing practices or trends that made you uncomfortable just a short time ago? Things that, perhaps, you never would've imagined a few short years ago? The truth doesn't change. God's standard doesn't change. The Lord's pattern for the Church as revealed in the New Testament doesn't change. Rather, times change, and people change along with them and drift with the times, unfortunately. When your church starts to drift, where will it end up? That's a question we should be willing to face. If a church starts to embrace unscriptural innovations, where does it stop? When that

becomes the mindset and trajectory of a church, do you really think it will stop where it is now? Of course, it won't!

People have asked, *what's happening to Churches of Christ?* I'm gonna tell you what's happening. The spirit of change and innovation is and has been at work and will continue to be if people don't stop it and start demanding a *thus saith the Lord*. Many Churches of Christ have simply become a denomination or community church with very few doctrinal moorings or convictions. They're embracing things that they flatly opposed just a generation or two ago. In many cases, those changes subtly and insidiously started sometime back with gradual compromises with error. Those churches are adrift. We need to wake up and realize what's happening before it's too late.

Secondly, when the pulpit fails to fulfill its purpose, the church will drift. The pulpit is to be a place of not only encouragement and edification, but sound doctrinal teaching and admonishment as well.

II Timothy 4:2-4 "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."

Paul says that the pulpit is to be a safeguard against apostasy and error. You can't dance around or sugarcoat the truth or avoid preaching it and expect people to remain within the truth. Some don't believe the pulpit should be used to expose and warn against error. You can mark it down: a church that adopts that philosophy will become a drifting church if it hasn't already. When a pulpit becomes a place for vapid pep talks, motivational speeches, psychology, politics, feelgood devotionals, and not a place where the meat of God's word is taught and souls are challenged to truer, holier, and godlier living, that will quickly become a drifting church.

Does your preacher preach sermons that are soaked in scripture? Or are they filled with personal anecdotes, poems, stories, and statistics? Is he willing to call sin by its name? Is he a watchman on the wall crying out against those things that can lead souls astray and endanger them?

Acts 20:26-31 "Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. 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."

Generally, a church will never be any stronger than the teaching it receives on a regular basis. We all like to be encouraged and made to feel good. We like to see the rosy side of things, but if that's all a church hears, that church will drift from the truth. Whether it's popular or not, a preacher or leader is under a solemn charge from the Lord that he will give an account to the Lord for one day, and that charge is to *preach the word*. As unpleasant as it may be sometimes, sin needs to be condemned. Regardless of whether people get up and leave sometimes, error must be pointed out and souls must be warned. You can measure whether a church is drifting by what's coming out of its pulpit.

Thirdly, churches drift when they forget what they're here for. When they lose sight of their God-given mission, they lose their focus and drift. Why does the Church exist? That's a question that we need to remind ourselves of and answer on a regular basis. Why did Christ set up His Church to exist in the form of local congregations throughout the world? Just what are we here for? Are we just here to come together and worship, as important as that is? Well, no! A church that is in line with the will of God exists to hold out the light of truth in the community where it exists.

Phillipians 2:16 “Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain.”

That's the Church's posture in its community according to Paul, to *hold forth the word of life*. Friend, the Church is not a political organization. It has nothing to do with politics. It is not here to engage in political or social activism. That's what many consider their church to be all about today. Some preachers are all about that today. That's not what the Church of the first century was about. Christ didn't institute the Church to eradicate poverty or to enact social equality in the world, important as that might be. He didn't institute the Church to get certain people elected into office so they could affect a political agenda. It's not the Church's job to make the world a better place to go to Hell from. It is the Church's job to preach Christ and Him crucified, and to uphold and defend the truth of the gospel.

Romans 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

The Church is not a business. It is not here to raise money or make money. It's not here to sell things, to provide entertainment or recreation for kids or anyone else, for that matter. The Church is here to preach the gospel, to save the lost, to edify the saved by functioning as a body, and to edify and build itself up, ultimately by the word of God. That is the mission of the Church. Any church that forgets that has drifted. I see church campuses and facilities that speak rather loudly to me that those churches are in some other business besides just preaching the word of God.

What does a fitness center have to do with preaching the gospel? What do baseball leagues have to do with teaching the word of God? What do festivals or parties have to do with training disciples in the doctrine of the Christian faith? Don't misunderstand, I'm all for Christians getting together and I'm not opposed to individuals having wholesome fun in the process. But that is not the business or the mission of the Church. Resorts, clubs, and condominiums dotted along the seacoast don't save endangered ships; lighthouses do that. The Church and the truth it preaches is a lighthouse. It's not here for looks or to host a party. It's here to reach out and save those who are drowning on the sea of sin. It's not a social club and many people need to learn that.

Friend, is your church drifting because it is no longer anchored on the Rock of Ages, but is adrift on the sea of change and endless transition? The Church that drifts will lose its relationship to Christ because He will not drift with it. The Churches that drift, like those of Asia Minor in **the book of Revelation**, will spiritually die. That's the fate of a drifting church. It will meet the rocks of doom. The Church is drifting today, and we need to stop it before it's too late. If there was ever a time in the modern Church where Christians needed to stand up and be counted, and say along with the prophet Jeremiah, **Stand in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way**, that time is today. We are drifting away from the core principles of the gospel and the doctrines contained in the faith once delivered unto the saints, from Christian living, from the ideals of godliness and holiness that are set forth in God's

word. It's time we return to a *thus saith the Lord*. We hope our lesson today will challenge all of us to do just that.

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