

The Pattern of Digression

Sometimes members of the Lord's church fall away with no advance warning. I have seen these instant changes a few times in my life. Usually, however, the departure from the faith is gradual. It follows a fairly consistent pattern. Recognizing this pattern can help us to correct others before it is too late. It can also help us to be on guard when we see these signs in our lives.

The first thing that happens is internal. The Christian does not think about the Lord or pray to Him as often as he once did. Perhaps his mind is preoccupied by work, entertainment, or problems. He no longer loves the Lord with all of his mind. His dependence upon God becomes blurry. He may see himself as succeeding without the Lord. He may find elements of the world more attractive to him than things that are found in the faith. He is drifting. We can see it if it is happening to us, but few observers are close enough to catch this early sign in others.

Heb 3:12 warns us, "*Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.*" The departure begins in the heart. We begin to doubt God's goodness or the benefits of serving Him. Like Eve, we listen to the serpent who impugns the motives of our loving Father.

Paul tells us in Col 3:2 to "*Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.*" We have the ability to decide what we are going to love. Love is a decision not an emotion we fall in and out of. When we are seduced by the world it is lust not love. We need to turn our affections back toward God.

The problem with many minds is laziness. We cannot read the Bible without getting distracted. We struggle to keep our focus during the Lord's supper. We doze off in the middle of our prayers. It takes no effort to watch TV or listen to the radio. These worldly sources are feeding us poison while we are barely

conscious. It takes effort to snap out of it and give our attention to godliness. Phil 4:8 says, "*Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*

After his mind has drifted from God, he then starts to **withdraw from his private worship.** He will forget to pray before meals and bed. He will stop reading the Bible and preparing for Bible class. More time is spent going to ball games, watching movies, and doing hobbies. He gets excited about his worldly interests and bored with spiritual pursuits. This is the behavior of the thorny soil in Jesus parable of the sower.

Luke 8:14 *And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.*

The thorny soil Christian does not have to leave the church. He can remain with the congregation for years. He is just inactive. Talk to him about spiritual matters and his eyes will glass over. Ask him if he saw the ballgame and he will come alive. He is not opposed to the church yet. He finds it dull, inconvenient, and an interruption of the things he would really rather do in his life, but he has not left it yet.

Like the Jews condemned by Malachi, he is going through the motions of public worship. He is bringing his contaminated sacrifices to the services. Instead of a lame lamb he brings a distracted mind and a disgruntled heart. He shows up, but that is all. He pretends to worship and care about God and His people, but has left his first love. It is just a matter of time before his public behavior is modified by his private convictions.

The third step is the **decline in attendance to public worship**. He lets his other interests take priority over God. This is the first sign most other members will see, but his heart and personal habits have changed long before his public behavior is witnessed. This is why it is so hard to rescue someone who stops attending. The attendance is a symptom of a sickness that infected him months before. We are often too far behind in our treatment to help him.

He has become indifferent to God and the church. It does not bother him to be told he is in sin. He is not concerned about the congregation's love or their warnings. Heb 6:4-6 describes why it is so difficult for us to reach such a brother. *For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.* People who have lived a life of faithfulness and have rejected it for the world are hard to persuade. They do not care about Jesus, His sacrifice, or their souls. They have already tasted what we have to offer and they do not want to have any more of it.

The final step is the **complete departure from the faith**. The congregation may eventually withdraw fellowship from him, but he was gone a long time ago spiritually. He gave up God in his mind **internally**. Then he stopped serving Him **privately**. In time he started avoiding worshipping God **publicly**. Then finally he ended his relationship with God **completely**. Even if the church fails to practice the command to withdraw (2 Thes. 3:6) he is still lost in sin and separated from God. He still needs to repent to make things right in his life. If he returns to the assembly without changing the mind and private behavior he is still on the road to destruction. May God grant him the time to see his need and reverse his path.

Ron Roberts