

Drifting Away #1 -- Apathy

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One of my favorite senseless jokes from my high school days concerns two polar bears on an iceberg. You had to tell it in a group of people who knew the joke, but you had to have at least one newcomer who had never heard it before. The joke goes like this:

There were these two polar bears on an iceberg. As they were resting near the edge, a piece of the iceberg broke off with one of the bears on it. As the bears drifted away from each other, the one on the main iceberg yelled to the other, "Radio!"

Of course, this makes absolutely no sense. The point was that everybody that was in on the joke would laugh like crazy, and those that weren't had the most interesting look on their faces. They wanted to laugh with the others, but they just couldn't understand the joke.

There is something about the bear that drifts away, though, that sort of catches my attention. Many people in the church just drift away, too, and nothing more meaningful than yelling "Radio!" is ever done about it. This is a sign of apathy, a lack of caring. Not on the part of the one drifting away, but on those who could keep it from happening. My experience is that the one drifting away cares very deeply about things.

The symbolism of the iceberg may be appropriate. There is much more to people than what floats above the surface. People's feelings and problems can be very deep indeed. Many times those who drift away have been hurt, and are not bold enough to carry on in the church among those by whom they have received their wounds.

People also drift because there is no bond to keep them near; there is nothing to hold them. The church must provide that bond through caring relationships. Jesus cared enough about the sheep that wandered off to leave the 99 and seek it. This reflects not a financial decision but an emotional one.

The drifters can be gone for a long time without anyone noticing that they aren't around anymore. Have you ever left a child somewhere? Perhaps at a filling station when you were on a vacation trip? Or have you ever been left behind by a group because you drifted off? Getting too far behind on a hike can get you lost. This is why Scoutmasters have to be concerned when they are going on a trip with a bunch of boys. It is so easy to get into real trouble if you are allowed to drift off.

It is usually the quiet ones who aren't noticed when they leave. You know that in general you have to smooze around with the "leaders" to be considered an important part of the family. If you are part of the humble background, you may get passed over. If you aren't out in front, striving for attention, you may be ignored. As you know, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. The same principle works in the church: those who "confess" their troubles are the ones who get the attention. The victims who are hurting just as much and more but keep quiet are ignored even though their problems are also known.

This is why it is essential that the church watches out for drifters. We must try to understand what the problems are that have produced the drift. We can't be like those who might say, "I don't want to hear about it." We can't be selective about who we want to help and keep. God demands that we treat everyone on an equal basis. We must strive to "do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith" so that we can keep them in the bond of fellowship and keep them from drifting away.

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