

(Knowing God's Way) 4. How a Spiritual Movement Declines

by Zac Poonen

A spiritual movement can decline when believers become more taken up with the letter of the Word than with the Person of Jesus Christ.

Scripture: Psalm 12:1, Matthew 16:3, Acts 13:36, 2 Corinthians 11:3, Colossians 1:28, 2 Timothy 2:22, 2 Timothy 3:1, 2 Timothy 3:5, Hebrews 8:11, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Spiritual Decline", "Personal Devotion"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches about the importance of sincere devotion to God in a world filled with deception and flattery. He emphasizes the need for believers to know God personally, not just through knowledge of the Bible, to avoid being led astray by cults and false teachings. Poonen warns about the dangers of seeking correctness in doctrine without pursuing personal devotion to Christ, highlighting the decline of movements that lose sight of true spirituality. He urges believers to seek shepherds after God's own heart, who prioritize building up believers in Christ rather than seeking personal gain or recognition.

Transcript

"Lord! Help! Godly men are fast disappearing. Where in all the world can dependable men be found? Everyone deceives and flatters and lies. There is no sincerity left" (Psalm 12:1 - Living).

The state of affairs described in the above verse is an apt description of Christendom today. We find nowadays that even believers who were once pursuing after godliness have started indulging in deception, flattery and lies - to serve their own ends.

Sincerity is what God seeks from all of us first of all. We may have a thousand and one faults and make an equal number of mistakes. But if we are sincere, God can do miracles with our lives.

In Matthew 16:3, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees by asking them a question: "Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?"

If we do not read the signs of the times in which we are living now, Jesus will have to rebuke us exactly as He did the Pharisees.

When people know the Bible but don't know God Himself, they can easily be deceived - for every cult in the world uses the Bible as its textbook and have their proof texts to promote their peculiar doctrines. This is why so many cults have mushroomed around the world in this century and become fashionable and acceptable to many people. Even believers are being led astray and are losing their salvation.

Under the new covenant, God wants every child of His to know Him personally (Heb.8:11), unlike as in old covenant times, when only the prophet (who rarely appeared) could know God personally. In fact, the new-covenant child of God can know God better and in a more personal way than the greatest prophet under the old covenant. Jesus said so, very specifically (Matt.11:11).

There are very few believers who have a passion to know God Himself. Most of them seem to be keen only on increasing in Bible-knowledge and on having spectacular emotional experiences.

All this is an indication that we have come to the very last minutes of the last hour of the last days in which Paul said it would be "difficult to be a Christian" (2 Tim.3:1 - Living).

It will be difficult to be a Christian in the last days, not because of persecution or opposition, but because many people would "have a form of godliness without its inner power" (2 Tim.3:5). In other words they would major on correctness of New Testament pattern and doctrine but would not be interested in personal devotion to Christ or in practical godliness.

Most of us who left dead denominations in the past, left them because we were searching for spiritual reality. We may have begun our search in earnest. But Satan is very smart to sidetrack believers into something cultistic, like the cult of the Pharisees in Jesus' time.

The history of Israel has been given us at such length in the Old Testament to teach us some important lessons. A wise man will learn from that history the way men pleased God and the way many displeased Him.

In Jeremiah 3:14,15, the Lord promises saying, "I will take you one from a city and two from a family and I will bring you to Zion. Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding."

"Zion" represents the true church of the living God. God brings one from a city and two from a family into His "Zion". And when we have come to this Zion - the church that the Lord is building - He promises to give us there "shepherds after His own heart", who will feed us on a knowledge of Himself (and not just a knowledge of the Bible) and on understanding of His ways (and not just an understanding of doctrine).

One primary identifying mark of the true church of God is this: It has shepherds after God's own heart.

God is love - and the primary characteristic of love is that it does not seek its own. So, shepherds after God's own heart are those who do not seek their own. Such shepherds will not seek for anyone's money or honour. They will seek neither to please men nor to impress them. Instead they will seek to build up the believers in order "to present them perfect in Christ" (Col.1:28). Wherever God can find a man with such a longing - in any town or village of the world - He will build His church.

On the other hand, we have seen many cases of believers who leave the mainline denominations and who seek to follow "the New Testament pattern", who have their doctrines all correct, but who love money and seek their own, and who yet imagine that they are building the Body of Christ. Confusion and chaos are

always the result of their labours and what is finally built through their labours is always Babylon.

Only where God can find a man who does not seek his own, can the Lord build His true church. One man like that, who shares the concern of God's heart for people, is far more valuable to God than a thousand believers who seek their own.

To be a shepherd after God's own heart will involve sacrifice, inconvenience, and suffering. It will mean being willing to suffer misunderstanding, opposition, ridicule and slander joyfully. And if such a shepherd is blessed enough to have a wife who also does not seek her own, so that their home is open for the Lord to do whatever He wants, then there will be no limit to what God can do through their lives.

I am not talking now about gathering many people. Numbers are not a mark of God's blessing. Many of the well-known cults gather more numbers of people than anyone else. That does not prove anything.

I am talking now of quality - the building of the Body of Christ, where every individual member comes into a personal knowledge of God.

Without such a development, any group will only be a place where one blind man has led a whole lot of other blind people into the ditch. All their prayer meetings will be in the ditch, their Bible-studies will be in the ditch and their conferences will be in the ditch too!!

In Jesus' time, He looked around and saw that people were like sheep without a shepherd. It is the same today.

The great need everywhere is for shepherds after God's own heart. I am not talking here about just being an elder in a church. No. A large church needs many shepherds - those who have a heart that cares for God's people. Such people may not be elders at all. But they will feed and encourage the sheep - serving them gladly.

As I said earlier, the history of Israel is given us at such length in the Bible to show us good examples in their history that we can follow and the mistakes that men made there that we should avoid.

There were two significant starting points in the history of Israel as a nation:

Firstly, when they began as a nation in Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.

Secondly, when they had a fresh beginning under King David, after centuries of backsliding.

Let us consider these two cases.

Joshua was a godly man who gave excellent leadership to Israel. He was determined to follow the Lord with his whole family, even if the rest of Israel decided to forsake the Lord (Josh.24:15).

Only such a man, who is willing to stand alone if necessary, can provide godly leadership to any church today. During Joshua's lifetime, Israel went forward from one victory to another.

But then Joshua died.

And there we can see in what followed, what happens when a man whom God has raised up at a particular time for a particular purpose in a particular country finishes his earthly course and passes on.

Joshua's fellow-elders took over the leadership of Israel (Josh.24:31). These elders belonged to the next generation after Joshua. Joshua died when he was 110 years old and the new leaders were in their 60's and their 70's - for Joshua's own generation (except for Caleb) had all perished in the forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

During this time - when the second generation was in leadership - things were not as good as in Joshua's time. We read in Judges 1 that during this period, there were a few victories (v.1-21), but many defeats as well (v.22-36). A slow decline had started.

The second generation had no steam in themselves, but were surviving on the momentum that they had received from Joshua's leadership in the previous generation.

Like a train-wagon that has been pushed by an engine, the second generation moved very fast initially, but gradually slowed down and finally came to a grinding halt!

By the time we come to Judges 2:11, things become really bad. Israel now does open evil in the sight of the Lord.

Thus we see how what started in a good way in one generation, gradually became evil by the time of the third generation.

The second watershed in Israel's history was when David became king of Israel.

Saul was the first king of Israel. He had started in great humility, but backslid so greatly that God removed the anointing from him. Saul's life is a picture of those movements that decline in the first generation itself - and there are many like that in Christendom too!

God told Saul through Samuel that He was now going to give the kingdom to "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam.13:14). That was David. This made Saul extremely jealous of David. Saul hated David so much that he even wanted to kill him.

Those in Israel however, who recognised where God's anointing lay, joined David. Thus a small group gathered around David. But they were chased and persecuted and hunted by Saul all across the land and had to run for their lives. But God was with that small group.

Saul however continued to sit on the throne of Israel for many years - just like many Christian "leaders" rule their flock today, even though they have lost the anointing of God from their lives long, long ago.

But Saul still had a following of those who fawned on him - just like many Christian "leaders" have in their own groups. Such a following means nothing. Many dead denominations and even heathen religious leaders have a large following. But God is not with any of them.

The important question we need to ask ourselves always is this: "Do the grace and anointing of God rest upon me now?"

Church history has proved again and again that God has always done His greatest work in every generation through a small minority of His people who stand wholeheartedly for Him. As in Gideon's time, the victory in the battle with Satan is always won by a small group of a few wholehearted disciples (Judges 7).

Such a group (as in the case of David's group) is hated, misunderstood and persecuted by the established systems in Christendom, who have no understanding of what God is doing in their time.

But God took care of David and his little group. And the Bible records that "David served the purpose of God in his own generation and fell asleep" (Acts 13:36). Despite his faults, David was a man after God's own heart and gave Israel godly leadership during his lifetime. He was not perfect. But he was quick to humble himself and repent when even an ordinary prophet came to him and rebuked him for his sin (2 Sam.12).

But in spite of all of David's devotion to the Lord, and his humility and the anointing of God upon his life, he could yet serve God's purpose only in his own generation.

After his death, things began to decline very quickly. Solomon, his son, started well (1 Kings 3:3,5,10-14). The book of Proverbs shows us how wise Solomon was when he began. Proverbs is perhaps the finest book in the entire Old Testament. It is like a new-covenant book right in the middle of the Old Testament! And Solomon wrote it!!

But Solomon backslid very quickly and very badly - and ended disastrously. Initially, he had moved forward on the momentum he had received from his godly father. But he did not have enough of a passion after God, to continue for long in the same direction. He was led astray by wealth and by women (1 Kings 10:23; 11:1-9) - just like many Christian preachers in our time!

After Solomon died, his son Rehoboam (the third generation) took over. Then things became really bad. The younger generation joined hands with Rehoboam and took over the leadership of Israel, and Rehoboam despised the advice of the wiser, older men (1 Kings 12:6-15). This brought chaos into Israel and the kingdom soon split into two. All that Rehoboam could boast of now was that David was his grandfather. But he did not have any of David's spirit.

We find an exact duplication of this degenerative process in many movements that were started by godly people in Christendom during the last 20 centuries.

In the history of Christendom, we see that every godly reformer sent by God to bring Christendom back to Him could serve God's purpose only in his own generation. In almost every case, after the reformer died, his followers in the next generation laid greater emphasis on the doctrines their leader taught than on the life that he had. The form of godliness became all-important and the power of godliness was ignored. Thus decline and decay set in.

By the time such movements reached their third generation, the corruption and the decay within the group became total. The group thereafter bore no resemblance whatever to the godliness and the spirituality that had been found in their leader. They proclaimed the same doctrines he did and gloried in his name - but built Babylon.

A group can start as a spiritual movement, but still end up as soulish and carnal - and even demonic.

A movement started by a man of God can easily end as a cult.

The same story of decline that we saw in the history of David, Solomon and Rehoboam has been repeated again and again in Christendom. Just examine carefully any movement that started with God and that is currently in its second or third generation - and you will see before your eyes the truth of what I

have just said.

Why does this happen? The answer is simple: Because believers are more taken up with the letter of the Word than with the Person of Jesus Christ. When any doctrine becomes more important than personal devotion to Christ, then decay and self-righteousness and Pharisaism are invariably the result. We have seen numerous examples of how even the doctrine of "taking up the cross" has been turned into mere words, without the life of Jesus being manifest in those who preach it.

All of this should be a serious warning to us.

Consider the history of the church at Ephesus.

Paul stayed there for three years, preaching night and day (Acts 20:31). That means that the Ephesian Christians listened to many hundreds of sermons from Paul's lips. They had seen extraordinary miracles wrought by the Lord in their midst (Acts 19:11). From their midst, the word of God had spread to all the surrounding parts of Asia Minor during a short period of two years. They had experienced revival (Acts 19:10, 19). They were the most privileged of all the churches in apostolic times. They were also undoubtedly the most spiritual church in Asia Minor at that time. (We can see that from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he had to correct no error in their midst, unlike the way he had to, in the other churches to which he wrote.)

But when Paul was leaving Ephesus, he warned the elders there that things would take a turn for the worse in the next generation, under the new leadership of the church. He told them that savage wolves would come into their midst and that from among their own midst would arise men speaking perverse things, drawing people after themselves, instead of drawing people to the Lord (Acts 20:29,30).

As long as Paul was there, no wolf had dared to enter the flock at Ephesus. Paul was a faithful doorkeeper (See Mark 13:34), who had spiritual authority from the Lord, because he was anointed, because he feared God and because he sought the Lord's interests and not his own. But he also had enough spiritual discernment to know that the spiritual condition of the elders in Ephesus was bad - and so he knew that things would deteriorate once they took over the leadership of the church.

Paul did not give the elders a prophecy of what would definitely happen at Ephesus. No. It was only a warning. It did not have to happen like he predicted - if the elders would only judge themselves and repent.

Jonah once prophesied destruction on Nineveh. But it did not happen as he predicted, because the people of Nineveh repented. The church at Ephesus also could have escaped the fate that Paul predicted.

But alas, the new generation of leaders in Ephesus never took Paul's warning seriously and drifted away from the Lord.

By the end of the first century, the third generation had come into power. And then things became really bad. Their doctrines were still correct and they were zealous in Christian activity. They probably still had their all-night prayer meetings and their other special meetings. But their spiritual state was so bad that the Lord was about to remove His recognition of them as a church. What was their crime? They had lost their devotion to the Lord (Rev.2:4,5).

What does the history of the church at Ephesus teach us? Just this - that no doctrine is as important as a fervent devotion to the Lord Himself. There is one- and only one mark of true spirituality - that the life of

Jesus is manifested increasingly in our behaviour. and this in turn can come only by an increasing personal devotion to the Lord Himself.

Paul was a godly man - a fervent and faithful apostle who was devoted to the Lord Jesus until the very end of his life. And he warned believers everywhere that Satan would try every means possible to turn them away from "simple devotion to Christ" (2 Cor.11:3).

Errors in doctrinal matters such as "baptism in water" and "baptism in the Holy Spirit", are not at all as dangerous as losing one's personal devotion to Christ. Yet many believers never seem to realise this.

We see that even Paul could serve God's purpose only in his own generation. Those who lived with him like Timothy, imbibed his spirit and lived in selfless devotion to Christ (Phil.2:19-21). But otherwise, Paul could not transmit his spirituality even to the second generation of believers in the churches he had founded.

We see a similar pattern being repeated in every movement that God has raised up - in every generation, since the first century.

God has a passion to have a pure testimony for His Name in every part of the world, in every generation. For this purpose, he raises up a godly man in a country, in a particular generation, to restore to the church in that country, the truth that the apostles preached, and thus to lead people to a godly life. A movement gradually starts around that man and a few wholehearted believers who are fed up with the unreality and hypocrisy of the Christendom of their generation gather around him. Very soon a pure testimony is established for the Lord.

Such a group is always small in size at the beginning and intensely hated and persecuted by the older churches. The founder is hated most of all. And the hatred is usually most intense from the group that God had raised up in the previous generation - for the current leaders of that group, not realising that the Lord has left them, are jealous of the new group!! Satan too joins in the attack against this new group - and he does his work of accusation mostly through other "believers" - especially those from the older group.

All the persecution and the schemings of men and demons however, do not hinder God from establishing a pure testimony for His Name in the new generation through the man He raised up.

But what happens when this man dies?

Then the movement begins to decline. Personal devotion to Christ disappears and is replaced by emphasis on the doctrines that the founder preached. Those doctrines become more important to the second generation than the Person of the Lord Himself. And a cloud comes between them and God - as it did between the disciples and the Lord on the mount of transfiguration (Matt.17:5).

No doctrine, however important or good, can ever take the place of devotion to Jesus Himself. The founder knows the Lord. The second generation knows only the doctrine. Chaos results and by the time the movement reaches the third generation, there is open division and strife.

One of the commonest things that happens to every movement is that by the time it reaches the second and third generation, it becomes rich and wealthy, with the members owning plenty of money, houses, lands and properties etc., And wealth has a way of being accompanied invariably by pride, self-sufficiency and complacency - for very few believers know how to handle wealth.

The first generation of a movement usually struggles in poverty and is close to God. The second and third generations are usually closer to the world, with all their wealth - and lose out spiritually.

God then withdraws from that group, which has by then become a part of Babylon - and He raises up another man and starts a totally new work through him.

But alas, the same story is repeated all over again - for no-one ever seems to learn from the mistakes of those who went before them!!

Those who are wise will therefore look around them to see where the anointing of God is resting currently - in their own generation - and associate fully with such a church. They will not care to see where the anointing had rested in previous generations. They will look to see where God is moving NOW and not where God moved a generation or two ago.

Scripture tells us very clearly that we must AVOID those who have the mere form of godliness (2 Tim.3:5) and seek to fellowship with "those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tim.2:22). Those who have a pure heart are those who love the Lord with ALL their heart. Such believers have no place in their heart for money, for property, for anything of this world, for themselves, for their family members, or for their jobs. They love the Lord supremely and thus love their family members in a deeper way than they would have done otherwise. They are devoted to the Lord and not to any doctrine. We are told to seek fellowship with such believers at all times.

Thus God's work proceeds from generation to generation, without ever failing - for all the machinations of men and Satan cannot hinder any of God's purposes. Hallelujah!!

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