

Prevailing Winds

by Gary Montgomery

Forerunner, "Ready Answer," November-December 2011

"... that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men . . ." —Ephesians 4:14

It is common for people to take the easy way, the path of least resistance. They allow themselves to be blown along with the prevailing cultural wind, whether in fashion, sports, art, music, politics, or sadly, ethics and morals. Taking no thought to their course or direction, they follow along with the current trends because it is easier to "go with the flow."

When bad things happen or when they realize that they have ended up somewhere that they never imagined they would be, instead of deeply considering the course of their lives, many merely shrug their shoulders and call it "fate" or "circumstance." In doing this, they show that they are ruled by the swirling winds of society around them. Rather than exercising control over their lives, they allow those trends to direct their journeys through life. They simply refuse to set a course, man the tiller, and make for a set destination.

At one time or another, we, too, have been affected by what is happening in the world. We have allowed ourselves to be driven by the prevailing winds of this society and its standards. Whether we admit it or not, we have been affected by our culture's television, movies, fashion, politics, and even religion.

We were all young once. As young people, we wanted to "fit in" with our friends and peers, so we followed along with whatever was "in vogue" at the time. We wanted to be "popular" at school, so we wore the trendy styles of the day. Remember bell-bottom jeans and leisure suits, mullets and big hair, platform shoes and ripped jeans? Enough said.

Charting a New Course

We have been called to come out of this world (Revelation 18:4). God wants us to find a course contrary to the prevailing and normal way of life that seems right to those in the world. As Proverbs 14:12 tells us, "There is a way which seems right to a man *and* appears straight before him, but at the end of it is the way of death" (*The Amplified Bible*). History is strewn with examples of human ideas that did not end well.

In his book *Intimacy with the Almighty*, Charles Swindoll quotes "The Winds of Fate" by American author and poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919):

One ship drives east and another drives west
With the self-same winds that blow,
'Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales
That tell them the way to go.

The prevailing winds of this Satan-inspired world (II Corinthians 4:4) sweep millions along in its intense velocity. It is beating against us all the time, and the struggle to resist is wearying. Out of sheer exhaustion, some give in to these winds and conform to their whispered suggestions. It is especially easy to succumb to them when surrounded by peers, employers, friends, and neighbors who want us to follow them and their way of thinking. It is just far less stressful to go along.

However, we are not to conform to the course that the world takes (Romans 12:2). Instead, we are to set our sails to follow a different line, obeying God and rejecting the popular trends of this world when they disregard His way of life. This means that we must take the time to consider and decide where we want to end up. What is our destination? Where is our home port? Then, we have to learn to make right choices so that we will one day arrive there.

The force that is in the world—dominant, popular, and widespread—is contrary to God. If we desire to obey God, we must face it and overcome it, having enough strength to endure its ceaseless, insistent pressure to return to its easy lifestyle. How can we prevail against the dominating wind of this world?

In Ephesians 4:14, the apostle Paul encourages us, writing that God has given us gifts of His grace to equip us so "that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting. . . ." He is referring to a process of spiritual maturity that will keep us solidly grounded and on a steady course to the Kingdom of God.

Two of the phrases Paul uses in this passage deserve expounding by commentator Albert Barnes:

[That we henceforth be no more children] . . . children have other characteristics besides simplicity and docility. They are often changeable (Matt 11:17); they are credulous, and are influenced easily by others, and led astray. In these respects, Paul exhorts the Ephesians to be no longer children but urges them to put on the characteristics of manhood [adulthood]; and especially to put on the firmness in religious opinion which became maturity of life. . . .

[And carried about with every wind of doctrine] With no firmness; no settled course; no helm. The idea is that of a vessel on the restless ocean, that is tossed about with every varying wind, and that has no settled line of sailing.

As we know, children have short attention spans; they change directions seemingly in an instant. They will begin to play with one toy only to be distracted by another a moment later. A parent will tell them to do something, and the intention to obey escapes them as soon as something else comes up.

While Jesus tells us that, in our conversion, we are to "become as little children" (Matthew 18:3), He is not referring to this kind of simplicity, changeability, and distractibility. Putting these two admonitions together, Christians are to be mature in their convictions and faith, yet open and humble as little children. In this way, they are receptive to God's truth and the guidance of His Spirit, yet sure and uncompromising in their beliefs.

Storms of Life

As Paul says in Ephesians 4:14, to get the upper hand, men use trickery, cunning, and deceit to fool others into moving in the direction that they want them to go. Employing crafty and calculating "skills," they deceive and misdirect the unaware down a path that they never intended to go. They may speak smooth words—what they propose sounds great—but the consequences are destructive. Not all is as it seems.

Appearances can be very deceiving. A piece of fruit may look delicious on the outside, but the inside may be rotten. Consider a lake, for instance, which can seem calm and peaceful from the solidity of the shore, but from a boat on the water, a person feels the power of the currents and the violence of the wind that seems to blow almost a gale. A sea may be tranquil, with gentle breezes and water as smooth as glass, yet suddenly, it can be whipped into a dangerous and violent storm.

Matthew 8:23-27 contains the story of Jesus and His disciples weathering such a storm on the Sea of Galilee:

Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" But He said to them, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, "Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"

What did Jesus do while the small fishing boat pitched in the midst of a roaring storm? The winds whipped and churned the sea, and the waves crashed over the ship, creating intense fear in all aboard—except in Him. He was at peace—sleeping!—and His mind was at ease. Jesus' faith was mature and strong, not able to be "tossed to and fro." He knew how safe it was to be in God's protective hands.

When He was awakened, He reprimanded the disciples by saying, "Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?" They had allowed themselves to see only the terror of the storm, forgetting that their Creator—One who had power over all nature—was lying contentedly asleep. They did not reckon that God would not allow His Son to perish like this, since that would ruin His plan. All they saw was the storm. They could not see the malevolent spirit behind the storm and that the storm was intended to blow them off course, to weaken their faith, and to divert them from their planned destination.

What about us? Do we allow the fierce winds that blow around us to toss us violently about, as if we were sitting in a dinghy on a stormy ocean, bobbing on the waves like a cork? Just remember that, when sail is put to the wind, even a dinghy can be successfully steered to its intended destination.

Tacking Against the Wind

We are frequently admonished to "search" the Scripture to seek out the truth that God reveals by His Spirit. We are urged to know what we believe and why. God wants us to have faith and conviction to the point of even giving up our lives in obedience to Him and His truth.

We must carefully examine God's Word and learn what is true. And having found it, we should adhere to it always, not yielding an inch of ground when supposedly new teaching comes around from the mouth of smooth talkers. Not all church members have stood firm, as we know from experience. Some, making poor choices about what "truth" they will adhere to, have been blown off

course, sailing away from their original destination—the Kingdom of God. They will, of course, end up in a different port.

This may be what Paul is referring to in Ephesians 4:14—that some members of the church in Ephesus were not following Christ's path. They had become liberal and lax, no longer having the conviction to the truth fixed in their hearts and minds. The doctrines and truth they once held were no longer resolute in their minds. Their faith was weakening, and in consequence, they began to yield to every new opinion and submit to the guidance of every new teacher.

So, as it is brought out in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "There is nothing new under the sun." What has happened in the past happens in the present.

We must really *know* the truth of God, believe it, and be fully convinced of it in true faith. In addition, we have to have our glorious destination as our goal and steer a steady course toward it.

When faced with the prevailing wind, a sailor can "beat to windward," a technique that involves a maneuver called "tacking." Tacking, also called "coming about," is turning the boat at an angle to run against the wind so that one travels sideways in order to make forward progress. It takes some work and skill, but one can actually proceed on course to his destination.

It is a matter of control. Instead of being blown freely in the direction of the prevailing wind, one can gain control of his direction. Once again, it is the set of our sails, not the prevailing wind that determines our course. We have a Captain who knows the seas and the winds and how to get us to His port.

Christopher Columbus once said: "By prevailing over all obstacles and distractions, one may unflinching arrive at his chosen goal or destination."

This is what we have been taught for years. We are to gain control of our lives, to learn God's way, to be obedient to His laws and statutes, and to have faith and conviction. This path will lead us to become mature Christians.

All of this is based on God's truth. Jesus tells us plainly in John 14:6 that He is the truth. There is no falseness in Him. He also says in John 17:17-20:

Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I have also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they may also be sanctified by the truth. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word. . . .

We are those about whom Jesus prayed to the Father. We believe because God has chosen that we understand His truth through the words spoken and written for us to hear and see by those who have gone before us. These words of truth build our faith and hope in Christ.

Therefore, we need to have mature faith, not to be like children blown with every wind of doctrine. Let us do all we can to stay on course, using all the tools God supplies and doing our little part in the process. Let us sail towards His Kingdom in faith and not allow the prevailing winds of this world to distract us from reaching it.