

IF YOU WERE about to buy a house, how would you know the right price to pay? Chances are you would think first of how much the sellers were asking. This would be your first reference point, the first anchor, and you would think that a feasible transaction price would be this number plus or minus, say, ten per cent. Then you would find out what similar properties have recently sold for, and adjust your broad sense of the value.

But what if no homes have been sold in the area recently? Then we get deeper into the interesting phenomenon of ‘anchoring’. It really comes into play when the housing market is going down and nobody is buying. Sellers assume houses are worth what they *used* to be worth, and won’t sell for less because they assume things must be worth as much as they used to be.

In the area where I live in Boston there are hundreds of houses for sale. The number rises every month. Why? One of the reasons is that people are anchored to previous prices. They forget that a house is only worth what someone is prepared to pay for it. They refuse to settle for less unless they absolutely have to, and so more and more houses sit there and inventory builds until someone finally gives in. Only when this single sale at a low price becomes a trickle of similar sales and then a flow do people start to tear themselves away from their old anchors.

Anchoring occurs in all areas of life, and is a favourite topic of behavioural psychologists. People are very suggestible. They assume Microsoft stock is worth \$19, for example, because that is what it has happened to trade at during the last six months. They assume stock prices are anchored to trends in momentum—that they will continue to go up because that is what they have been doing, for instance. People tend to wear clothes that other people wear, adopt behaviours they have seen others adopt. Have you been in one of those discussion groups where everyone in turn has to answer the same question? Notice how most people give the same answer. It is so difficult to think of something different from what has been said already.

An understanding of the phenomenon of anchoring can be useful to believers because it shows how chained human beings are to their environment; they cannot help but tie themselves

to anchors. We are very suggestible. We take our ‘normality’ from what is going on around us or what has gone on in the past. For all the warnings, we look at the familiar and use it as a guide to the future. We assume that things have the value that society says or said they have.

We can see anchoring at work when older people want to keep things the way they have always been, perhaps even when there are good reasons for change (they may be anchored to past routines that may be little more than the traditions of men). We can see anchoring at work when younger (and perhaps older!) people want to change things to make them more similar to things in society around them (yet new or ‘similar’ isn’t necessarily better, either!).

The biggest danger of all in anchoring, it seems to me, is when moral standards and patterns of behaviour in the world set the agenda, simply because of their familiarity. This happens in big things and small. The number of people getting divorced around us takes its toll as we start to think of it as just ‘what people do’. We may start to permit lower standards of parental respect from our children because it is so blatantly on display all around us. We may forgive ourselves from personal Bible reading and meditation because we sense that lots of other people in our ecclesia aren’t doing it, so it can’t really be either that important, or that practical, in our modern stress-ridden lives.

But our standards do not (or should not) come from what we see portrayed in movies, on TV, in the lives of our friends and neighbours, or even, perhaps, what we see in the lives of our brothers and sisters. What is portrayed in the world is *irrelevant* to what the true standards of God might be. It is not irrelevant to how difficult it might be to put them into practice, but it is irrelevant to what they *are*. We must each search the Scriptures to ensure that we are doing our utmost to uphold *God’s* standards and principles in our behaviour. It is not good enough to be following a line of standards better than the world’s but trending down along with it. God’s standards do not change. His Word is an anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, and it is to this anchor, not the suggestions of men, that we must moor our lives.

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