

FISHERS OF MEN

Once upon a time a group existed who called themselves fishermen. And lo, there were many fish in the waters all around. In fact, the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes filled with fish. And the fish were hungry.

Week after week, month after month, and year after year, those who called themselves fishermen, met in meetings and talked about their call to go out fishing. Continually they searched for new and better methods of fishing and for new and better definitions of fishing. They sponsored costly nationwide and worldwide congresses to discuss and promote fishing and hear about the ways of fishing, such as the new fishing equipment, fish calls, and whether any new bait was discovered.

These fishermen built large, beautiful buildings called "Fishing Headquarters." The plea was that everyone should be a fisherman and every fisherman should fish. One thing they didn't do, however, they didn't fish.

All the fishermen seemed to agree that what was needed was a board, which could challenge fishermen to be faithful in fishing. The board was formed by those who had the great vision and courage to speak about fishing, to define fishing, and to promote the idea of fishing in far away streams and lakes where many other fish of different colors lived.

Large, elaborate, and expensive training centers, whose purpose was to teach fishermen how to fish, were built. Those who taught had doctorates in fishology. But the teachers did not fish. They only taught fishing. Some spent much money on study and travel to learn the history of fishing and to see faraway places where the founding fathers did great fishing in the centuries past. They lauded the faithful fishermen of years before who handed down the idea of fishing.

Many who felt the call to be fishers responded. They were commissioned and sent to fish. And they went off to foreign lands...to teach fishing. Now it's true that many of the fishers sacrificed and put up with all kinds of difficulties. Some lived near the water and bore the smell of dead fish every day. They received the ridicule of some who made fun of their fishers' clubs. They anguished over those who were not committed enough to attend the weekly meetings to talk about fishing. After all, were they not following the Master who said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people?"

Imagine how hurt some were when one day a person suggested that those who don't catch fish were really not fishers, no matter how much they claimed to be. Yet it did sound correct. Is a person a fisher if year after year he or she never catches a fish?

"And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishers. And He saith unto them, Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets, and followed Him." Matthew 4:18-20.

Someone once asked why Jesus had used the expression "fishers of men" in describing His witnesses. "Does not that imply trickery, deception, and entrapment?" he wondered. "You see, fishing involves nets, hooks, baits, and coercion. Could not Jesus have used a better expression for conveying what true personal witnessing is all about?" They are good questions that many sincere people raise.

Jesus had no inclination or bias toward the fishing profession. He simply met people on their level and tried to channel their temporal interests into eternal ones. Remember that Jesus' reference to being "fishers of men" was primarily an illustration, or analogy to point to greater spiritual realities.

The disciples happened to be fishermen by profession, so Jesus called them to go beyond catching fish for themselves to attracting people to Himself. It is certainly not unreasonable to conclude that if the disciples had happened to be shepherds, Jesus would have called them to be shepherds of men, or to feed His sheep as He commissioned Peter to do (John 21:15-17). Or if the disciples had worked on farms, He would have called them to be harvesters of souls.

Many automatically think of bait and hook when they consider the topic of fishing, thereby conjuring up the negative connotation of deceit and ensnarement. However, the disciples did not fish with bait and hook for sport as many do today, but used a net. When Jesus performed the miracle of filling their nets with fish, He demonstrated His ability not merely to gather the fish of the sea, but more significantly to draw and gather human beings to Himself. The lessons that Jesus intended for us to learn from His illustration of fishing is His ability, manifested through our availability, to attract many people to Him.

John Wesley, upon announcing the good news to those who were ignorant of God, indifferent to his truth, and often so spiritually unconcerned as not able to care less; Wesley wrote in his journal come nightfall, "I offered them Christ." We don't pretend for a minute that Christ is "ours" to offer; we don't possess him or own him or handle him. We don't offer him in the same sense that we offer our favorite compact disc to someone who wants to listen to music. Jesus Christ isn't ours to dispense. Jesus has given Himself to every man. We simply come along to emphasize the gift, bringing it prominently to the attention of our friends and acquaintances.

Our attention is called to the Bible's teaching about predestination. We read that "whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son." Romans 8:29. Our Calvinist friends understand God's predestination to mean that before the creation of intelligent beings on this earth, God chose to favor certain ones with salvation and others He chose for eternal hell fire. There is no Seventh-day Adventist who would follow such an interpretation of God's predestination.

Nevertheless, we find that some understand the following words to pertain to believers only:¹ "Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." Romans 8:30. If God's predestination here pertains only to believers and not to unbelievers, then God has singled out only those who respond by faith to His offer of salvation as eligible for justification and glorification. This is Calvinistic predestination for believers minus the predestination for unbelievers.

¹ Quoting Romans 8:30, "These are the steps God takes with His followers. First He calls them to accept His Son. Then He justifies those whom He foreknew would accept His Son. . . . Ultimately He will glorify them." Jack Sequeira, *Romans: "The Clearest Gospel of All,"* Vineyard Ministries: Salem, OR, 2005, p. 154.

But the Father, without whose knowledge not even a sparrow falls to the ground, knew from ancient times every son and daughter of Adam who would ever live upon His earth. And “whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son.” Rom. 8:29. Who did God foreknow before the creation of the world? Surely He foreknew everyone who would be born into the human family. So instead of predestinating only those who would believe to be justified, God predestinated to be called, justified and glorified every one who was to be born into the human family.²

Paul says, “whom He did predestinate.”³ This is completed action. This predestination is in Christ. “In Christ we have already been blessed with all spiritual blessings.”⁴ God has decreed that everyone born into the human family are the objects of His predestination.

Paul says, “them He also called.” “All men are called to that which God has prepared for them.”⁵ God’s gift to every one who has been born would not be well-meant unless His call was particular to each individual. Calling involves conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit.⁶ The Holy Spirit does not scatter His conviction of sin in a general manner to the whole class of sinners. Conviction of sin must be a personal matter between the Holy Spirit and the individual sinner. Surely the Lord leaves no one who has ever been born out of this important step of conversion. “The call of God is addressed to every man individually.”⁷ “I have called thee by thy name; thou art Mine.” Isa. 43:1.

God has personally called every individual who has ever been born and “them He also justified.” This is past action on God’s part. Every one has been given the gift of justification of life. God has forgiven every individual—believer or unbeliever—whom He has called. This is temporary universal justification or forgiveness of sins given to saint or sinner.

But Paul continued further by saying, “them He also glorified.” In the eternal decree of God He predetermined to glorify every individual whom He called. How can the unbeliever be said to be glorified? In the same sense that Paul said his unbelieving fellow Jews—“kinsmen according to the flesh”—“who are Israelites” pertained “the adoption, and the glory” (Rom. 9:4). God had elected Paul’s racial family and given the gift of adoption and glorification. But they judged themselves unworthy of it rejecting Christ—the gift.

Glorification is the change that comes when Jesus returns and “this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:53), and we are no more subject to temptation. In Christ the eternal decree is that the unbeliever has been justified and glorified. This does not mean that if the unbeliever persists in rejecting the gift that he will retain his individual gift of forgiveness of sins and future glorification at the coming of the Lord.

² W. T. Bartlett, “The Election of Grace,” *The Present Truth* 17, 9 (February 28, 1901), p 132.

³ “He did not merely in His premundane decree, acquit them of sin, but also *clothe them with glory*: the aorist *edozaren* being used, as the other aorists, to imply the completion in the divine counsel of all these, which are to us, in the state of time, so many successive steps,—simultaneously and irrevocably.” Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament, Vol. II*, (Rivingtons: London, 1886), p. 599.

⁴ W. T. Bartlett, “The Election of Grace,” *The Present Truth* 17, 9 (February 28, 1901), p 132.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ “Calling is the drawing of the sinner to Christ, and it is a work wrought by the Holy Spirit upon the heart, convicting of sin, and inviting to repentance.” Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 390.

⁷ W. T. Bartlett, “The Everlasting Mercy,” *The Present Truth* 17, 10 (March 7, 1901), p. 147.

But still there are some who, because they vehemently oppose fishing (witnessing) by hook, insist that we should never have any ulterior motives—of any motives whatsoever—in witnessing to others. We can certainly understand such a point of view because so many do try to manipulate and coerce others in the name of religion. But, in our zeal, we must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We must always be motivated by *agape*, yet equally concerned to see those whom Jesus died for be eternally saved rather than eternally lost.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with such motives. In fact, something terrible would be wrong in our Christian experience if we did not have such compelling reasons for our witnessing. Christ journeyed to our hopeless world because of His love and concern for our salvation. In His great love He “came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). His motivation must be ours too. If we reach out to others without Christ’s loving desire to save them from their own lostness, we would prove that our own love for them is deficient, and at least shortsighted.

In Luke 5:10 the verb “to catch men” comes from two Greek words meaning to catch alive. Christ, in calling Peter and the disciples to catch men, and to capture them alive, intended to show the contrast between catching fish and catching people.

Obviously, fish, forcibly dragged to shore, eventually die there. However, when we draw people out from the turbulent waters of the world to Christ, they will not perish like fish out of water, but will live and thrive. He will not just merely allow them to exist, but He will give them abundant life. They will not suffocate for lack of oxygen, but will breathe the air of Jesus’ *agape* and fellowship demonstrated in our lives and in our congregation. Notice the contrast again in John 10:10. Jesus said, “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10, NKJV).

Christ’s method of witnessing results in enhanced life here, they have been given eternal life, and then they will be given immortality at His coming. On the other hand, baits deceive, and hooks coerce, hurt, and kill. People are to be drawn by the genuine *agape* of Christ revealed in our lives, not roped in by our pretense and craftiness. No one wants to be caught by somebody else. So I sit by the bank without a fishing pole in my hand and enjoy the scenery. Fish seem to sense that I’m not trying to catch them. They come to me just to talk about themselves and about life. Then from time to time, some do get caught by Jesus Christ and I am more surprised than they are.

While we do not have to hold fishing poles in our hands, we do not need to remain empty-handed, however. We should use a lifeline instead of a fishing line. Or we need to throw them a lifesaver while praying for them, appealing to them, and persuading them in the most attractive terms to choose to grab it, to choose life. The lifesaver does not mislead or force anyone. It is there to be chosen or rejected. But we must not make it difficult for drowning individuals to grasp it. And even more important, we need to jump into their troubled waters and help their weak hands get a hold of that lifesaver.

Matthew and Linda were a young married couple with whom a Christian had been studying the Bible for several months. In the process of their fellowship and study they became good friends, thanks to Christ’s method. But for some unknown reason, they did

not seem to be interested in attending church even once, not to mention getting baptized. Finally they confided that they could not make themselves come because they did not want to get hooked.

They actually thought that if they showed up once, everybody would expect them to continue attending. And if they stopped, there would be disappointed with them and would have terminated the friendship. They appreciated the Christian love and friendship so much that they did not want in any way to undermine that relationship. They were assured that that would never happen in the way they feared. “Do you mean to say that we can try it once,” Matthew asked in surprise, “and if for some reason it doesn’t work out, then we could stop attending?”

“Of course.”

“And that would in no way affect our friendship?”

“No, not at all.”

They both started going to church and soon enjoyed the services and the fellowship. But only God knew why they did not decide to be baptized at that time and the matter must be placed in His hands and trust Him to accomplish His will in their lives.

Matthew and Linda’s Christian friends moved away, and several years passed before they learned that they had been recently baptized, and were active in sharing their faith. The crucial factor in their decision, they emphasized, was the fact that they were accepted and loved regardless. It is true, isn’t it, that the people with whom we come in touch ultimately respond more to how we relate to them than by what we may claim?

You have to talk to God about people before you talk to people about God. Who are people who should be on our impact list that we pray about? The easiest ones are people we know—family, friends, co-workers, neighbors. Levi the tax collector was so excited about being called by Jesus that he threw a big party and invited all his tax collector friends. We work with fellow workers. We go to parties. We share meals. We golf together. We go to our kids’ sporting events together. Those are perfect times in the midst of those relationships to extend an invitation.

The second category of people is people we used to know. This is a great way to reconnect with past relationships. You wouldn’t necessarily call someone specifically for the purpose of inviting them to church, but that could be a nice benefit of rekindling that relationship. Are there people in your past whom you’d like to talk with again, people you’ve lost touch with over the years? Maybe this is the time to track them down and let them know someone’s thinking about them.

The third category of people is people you’d like to know. These are people that you may have a passing acquaintance with, but would like to get to know better. Maybe it’s a neighbor, or a co-worker, or the parent of one of your children’s friends.

There’s one more category of people, but it’s a harder one to define. It’s people you don’t know, or at least don’t know yet. On my impact list, there’s a big question mark there, because I have no idea who this will be, who God might send across my path. This one is also the hardest one personally for me, because I’m not always as open as I should be to meeting new people. If I’m on a plane, I make sure my nose is buried in a book. If I’m in a waiting room, I make sure I have something to occupy my time, so that the message being

sent is, "I'm busy, don't bother me."

I took a hard look at myself and realized I wasn't being as open as God wanted me to be. So I tried an experiment. I decided that when I was around people I didn't know, I wasn't going to close any doors. I might even be so bold as to strike up a conversation. And you know, surprise upon surprise, more often than not, people do talk to strangers. People are kind of tired being around others who insulate themselves from others and its kind of refreshing when someone strikes up a conversation with another.

My guess is that none of you know who Albert McMacon is, and yet he is one of the most influential people in Christianity in the 20th century. Because of Albert, literally millions of people have heard the good news of Christ all across the world.

In 1934, in Charlotte, NC, there was a 17-year-old boy who'd been invited to a local religious revival by a friend of his. Although his friend was gently persistent, this boy resisted invitation after invitation, until final he agreed to go only if he could drive his friend's truck.

So the friend reluctantly handed over the keys, and this boy drove the truck to the next meeting. He stayed in the back of the revival tent, listening to what the preacher was saying. And he was spellbound. He went back the next night. And the next night. On the last night, that 17-year-old boy, who only came because of an invitation and some truck keys, decided to give his life to serving Christ.

That 17-year-old boy was Billy Graham. Ever heard of him? But who's heard of Albert McMacon? Albert was the friend who owned the truck, the one who invited Billy Graham, to hear God's word for the first time. If it hadn't been for Albert's courage, patience, and generosity with the car keys, Billy Graham may have never become a Christian.

We can't all be Billy Graham. But we can all be Albert McMacon. Isn't it true that most of us arrived at our faith because someone told someone who told someone who told us? That's the way it's been working for 2000 years, and we are now bearers of the light who pass it on to others. That's evangelism. And we all have what it takes to be evangelists.