

## “Fishing For People”

Do you like to fish? Some of Jesus’ disciples were fishermen by trade. When Jesus began His ministry, He walked by the Sea of Galilee, and saw two brothers – Simon and Andrew – casting out their nets. He said to them, “Follow me”. Immediately, they dropped their nets, and followed Him. He went further and found two other fishermen brothers, James and John. He called them too to follow Him. They left their boat and their father Zebedee, and followed the Lord. Perhaps they had heard about Jesus. Maybe not. But Matthew writes how they dropped what they were doing, walked away from their jobs, and followed this young Galilean. And that began a journey that changed their lives.

But Jesus said something else as He called these fishermen to be disciples: “Follow me, *and I will make you fish for people*” (Matthew 4:19). No more fishing just for *fish*! There was something more important for them to do with their lives. *Fish for people!* He was saying to them, “The new life you will experience as you walk with Me will be shared with others and reproduced in them! Did those words of Jesus come true? Yes! Read the New Testament! See how others came to Christ through them!

***If you are a follower of Jesus, you are meant to bring others to Christ! Every church is meant to fish for people!*** Where did anyone get the idea that our faith is just a private thing that we keep to ourselves? This view is certainly not expressed in the Bible! We are called to fish for people!

I want to say some things about being a fisher of men and women, as it applies to us individually and collectively. ***First of all, fishing for people takes preparation and effort.*** You have to get your fishing gear together, make sure you have bait, clear your schedule, travel to a lake or river, etc. If you have a boat, your preparation can be even more involved.

When I was growing up, my dad and I would go fishing Sunday mornings on the Chesapeake Bay. Our neighbor’s brother had a cabin cruiser. Dad and I would water the lawn and catch nighcrawlers a day or two before. Sunday we would get up early, get our gear together, stop on the way to buy other bait, and each spring take the boat out of the water for maintenance. It all involved a lot of time and effort. Right after I retired from serving a church fulltime I bought a nice fishing boat. I found out it was work, maintaining the boat. We would drive to the storage unit in Elizabethtown where it was kept, then drive to the river. Getting it off the trailer and into the water was a really chore for a novice like me. Then, of course, we had to make sure we had all the rods and reels and drinks and snacks etc. There was very little time actually fishing for the time spent just arranging for it to happen. I kept the boat a few years then sold it.

I don’t know of any man, woman, or young person winning others to Christ who doesn’t put preparation and effort into it: learning or memorizing Scripture, praying for God to open the hearts of family members, neighbors and friends to the gospel, reading books, taking courses on how to share your faith, talking to others who are farther along in the art of faith sharing.

The same hold true for churches. Unless a congregation has a deliberate strategy for winning the lost to Christ, it probably isn’t happening! Unless there is a conscious effort to make new

disciples, and that mindset is built into the fabric of a church, that congregation will most likely succumb to the natural tendency to turn inward, and focus on themselves. There may be a lot of activity in the church – doing a lot of good things – but not resulting in conversions, and seeing lost people find salvation in Christ!

United Methodist Bishop, Richard Wilke, wrote a book titled *Are We Yet Alive?* He spoke of how the church has strayed from its calling to win people to Christ. He noted that some experts believe the typical pastor spends 97% of his or her time nurturing members, ministering to people already in the church. “Most pastors are not lazy; they are busy. But they are not busy making new disciples or busy helping the lay people learn how to make disciples. Ministers are hurrying about caring for the surviving fellowship.” (Wilke notes that this approach is based on a 19<sup>th</sup> century model of ministry that comes out of rural America). Then he goes on: “Basically we live in an unconverted generation, although the religious trappings are there. People still sing ‘Silent Night’ at Christmas time, and women wear crosses around their necks”, but the majority of people are not yet disciples of Jesus

*If we’re going to fish for people, it takes preparation and effort. Also, if we are going to fish for people we have to go where the fish are!* Do you know where my favorite place to fish is? Our bathtub! I don’t have to leave our house. It’s convenient. I can fish in comfort even when it rains. Now, to be honest, I haven’t caught any fish yet! But it sure is convenient!

If we are to “catch” people for Christ, we have to go where unconverted people are! Some of us aren’t influencing people for Christ because we aren’t building meaningful relationships with unsaved people. Some of us been Christians for so long, we no longer have any unsaved friends. Lloyd Ogilvie tells about the woman in his congregation who said, “I have no friends who aren’t Christians.” Lord’s response to her was, “Shame on you”. She got angry, and stopped coming to church. Then she thought more about it. She started a bridge club, invited some unchurched ladies, and was instrumental in leading a number of new friends to Christ and the church.

A lot of *churches* aren’t catching people for Christ because those in the congregation are spending too much time in the church building! Pastor and author Bruce Larson tells about vacationing with his wife, their 3 children, and a daughter’s friend. They were at a Canadian lake where the fishing was good. But they weren’t having any luck. One morning he was out on the lake with his daughter and her friend, and they had no luck again. As they were heading to shore in the boat his daughter’s friend Jean said, “Gee, Mr. Larson, I’m sorry we didn’t catch a big one to impress the boys with.” No sooner were the words out of her mouth when a 15 inch Northern Pike jumped out of the lake, hit Bruce on the side of his face, and fell into the boat, flip-flopping wildly at his feet. A problem then emerged: hardly anyone believed him when he told what had happened!

Many congregations operate this way! They expect to win people to Christ by sitting and waiting for fish to slap us on the face and jump into our boat! We conduct business as usual in the church and expect unconverted people to be pushing and shoving and jumping all over one another to get through the church doors! Or we take the attitude, “Well, our church is here. If

people want us, they can find us!”

*Many churches spend a lot of time and energy on maintaining the institution.* Dr. George Hunter once headed the United Methodist Church Board of Evangelism. Some years ago he suggested too many of our members ceased being “fishers of men”, and became “keepers of the aquarium”. “They equate the church with the building. They assume you do the will of God by coming to the building. And if you merely attend, serve on committees, and do good church work, you are somehow involved in the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ.” He then notes that Christians are called to leave the building and reach out to people on secular soil. I like that question: Are we “fishers of people” or “keepers of the aquarium”?

*If we are going to catch fish, we have to go where the fish are.* Here’s another thing: ***If we’re going to catch people for Christ, we need bait – something to attract the fish.*** You don’t catch many fish with a bare hook. You have to have worms, or corn, or minnows, or lures (artificial bait).

What we may not realize is, if you and I have a genuine, ongoing relationship with Christ, we really do have some “bait” that can attract people. For example: Can share your “story” with people? This is what I was like before I came to Christ. This is how I came to faith in Him. This is how He has made my life different. You can also take an interest in people. Listen to them. Take time to build caring relationships with people. These simple things can attract people to the Lord. When you think about it, how many people take an unselfish interest in you? How many of the people you know and meet can have a conversation where they listen to you without coming at you with their own agenda? Just truly listening to people can be powerful.

Ask questions of people: What do you believe about Jesus? Why do you think God put you here on earth? If you could have anything you want, what would it be – and how long would satisfy you? Be creative, playful! These kinds of questions can be “bait” that get people thinking more seriously about the spiritual side of life.

If we’re going to catch people for Christ, we need bait to attract them. *This is also true for the church.* We sometimes forget that the *church offers something that all people need.* Something not offered at school, the local fitness club, the sports arena, the department store – that is, we offer the *Lord Jesus Christ!* A basic need of every person is for a relationship with God, ultimate meaning for our lives. We are “incurably religious”. If we don’t get connected to the *real God*, we will manufacture our own little gods and worship them. So our “bait” is to present the claims of Jesus, to lift Him up. There is universal appeal in that! Jesus once said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32).

*It’s important for the church to remember what business we’re in. We are in the business of redemption!* A few years ago in London, England, the city was besieged with complaints about its mass transit system. It seems the city’s buses tended to drive right past bus stops even though there were customers standing in line waiting to be picked up. In response to complaints, the London Transit Authority released the following statement: “It is impossible for us to maintain

our schedules if we are always having to stop and pick up passengers.” They forgot what business they were in!

Our job as the church is not to compete with TV or movie theaters to entertain people, nor to compete with local restaurants for the best dinners. Our purpose is to lift up Jesus as the One who forgives our sin, connects us with God, and gives meaning to our lives.

Lifting up Jesus is what we might call “throwing out the net” – like fishermen in Jesus’ time who threw out a net, and caught all kinds of fish. Christ has appeal to young and old, and to all different kinds of people. When He is proclaimed, all kinds of people are drawn to Him.

***Yet, the truth is, many churches today are discovering that this “net approach” is not as effective as it once was.*** We live in an age of specialization. This affects the church’s evangelism outreach. For instance, some churches have said, “We want to reach everyone.” Churches who have that as their goal generally reach no one!

So, there is a shift in our time in outreach and evangelism; some churches decide to target who they want to reach! We might call this the “specialized bait” approach. The kind of bait you use is determined by the type of fish you want to catch. I remember as a boy once going fishing with my dad at one of the streams in Lancaster Country. We were using worms as bait, and only had a few nibbles. We might have caught one or two small fish. A friend of dad’s came by. He put on hip boots and went into the water. He started catching bass right and left. When we asked him about his success, he said he was using minnows for bait. With the advent of professional fishing shows and tournaments, we are learning even more that choosing the right lure has become a very specialized science (which is a lot different than what I remember growing up – where you put a worm on the hook and then waited and hoped for the best)!

We need to use different “bait” to catch different people. For instance, a church that wants to reach single young adults and young families has to offer a very different worship experience than a church that wants to reach elderly people. If you want to reach “bikers” a church will look different than if your aim is to reach highly educated upper class residents of Philly’s Main Line.

We’ve had three country gospel services so far. Basically, we have attracted middle age and older adults. If we go to a monthly country gospel service we ought to be realistic. We will probably not draw teenagers. That’s doesn’t mean we have failed or it’s a bad thing, it just means we should be realistic about who this kind of worship experience will attract.

You may say, “Harry, I don’t feel comfortable with this – *targeting* people you want to reach. That sounds too crass and commercialized to me.” Why not? In the New Testament, Peter’s ministry targeted Jews. Paul’s outreach was aimed at Gentiles. Matthew wrote his gospel and targeted it for Jews. Mark wrote his with Gentiles in mind.

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19).

Some time ago, a news release told of some pelicans that were feeding off the coast of California. Working in that same area were fishing boats. Men on the boats were cleaning their catch and leaving the parts they couldn't sell – throwing them back into the ocean at water's edge. These pelicans observed what was happening and decided they could just eat the waste without having to work for food. For weeks, they got food by just sitting and waiting for the fishing boats to come in.

After a while, the fishermen discovered that the waste could also be sold. When they stopped dropping the fish waste into the sea, this caught the pelicans off guard. The birds just sat there on shore and waited. They grew thinner and thinner and seemed to be able to do nothing about it. The authorities concluded this: the pelicans had forgotten how to fish!

Then wildlife officials came up with an idea. They brought in pelicans from another area to teach these poor starving birds how to fish again!

Sometimes I wonder if the church hasn't forgotten how to fish! If you're a Christian...if we're the Church...we were meant to go fishing!

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