

Me? A Fisher of Men?

Matthew 4:19

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 6-20-2010

Introduction

One of the strangest debates on evangelism that has arisen in recent years is on who are the fishers of men. There are Protestants who are saying that average church members not only are *not* the fishers of men, but that they may not engage in evangelism; that evangelism is only authorized for ordained clergy. And this passage is one of their proof texts. They say that it was the apostles who were made into fishers of men, not just any Christian. And you might think, “Why even bother addressing such silly questions?” But I have decided to preach on this text for three reasons: First, it really is a growing movement in Baptist, Lutheran, and even Reformed circles that is gaining traction and needs to be addressed. Second, even though we may not say that we believe this theology, if we are not attempting to be fishers of men, then *we are acting out the theology* even though we don’t believe the theology. And then third, while none of us is full time fishers of men, I think we will find this passage to be very encouraging. I could have picked much easier passages to prove my point, but I thought I would pick one of their strongest passages and show how even this verse is an encouragement for every-believer-evangelism.

I. The only pre-requisite to being fishers of men (“Follow Me”)

The first point is rather simple. The only pre-requisite that Jesus gives to being fishers of men is being a disciple. Jesus said, “**Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.**” It’s the followers of Jesus who are the fishers of men.

And the proponents of this new theory will say, “No, no, no. It’s not following Jesus as a *disciple*, but following Jesus as an *apostle* that qualifies you to be a fisher of men.” In a moment we will get the meaning of the phrase in the Gospels and see that it is a reference to every believer. But let me begin by giving a small sampling of Scriptures that speak of every believer being a witness.

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A. The natural result of saving faith (Is. 2:3; Matt 10:32-33; Rom. 10:9; Acts 1:8; 8:1-4; 1Pet 3:15; Rev. 22:17)

Isaiah 2:3 prophecies of the time of the Messiah that the average Christian will be inviting people to church, and leading people to Jesus. Commenting on that passage, John Calvin said, “Nothing could be more inconsistent with the nature of faith than that deadness which would lead a man to disregard his brethren, and to keep the light of knowledge choked up within his own breast.” He was saying that when a believer has experienced the reality of God’s grace, it cannot help but bleed out; he can’t help but be a witness.

Don McKenzie tells of a night when he was on duty at the hospital. It was quite late at night, and the hallway he was walking down had most of the lights turned out, and was completely deserted. Well, halfway down the hallway, a man suddenly darted out of a room, and when he saw Don, ran up to Don and said, “She’s going to make it. She’s better. She is going to make it,” and then he made his way down the hallway. Don said, “I had never seen him before... I do not know who he was talking about. I assume it was someone very near and dear to him, and he had just received good news. He could not wait to share it.” That excited man didn’t even have to know the person that he shared his good news with. Why? Because it was such good news that it *had* to be shared. This man didn’t have to be a professional doctor to share this news with others. He just had to be excited. And in the same way, Isaiah 2:3 indicates that you don’t have to be a professional evangelist to open your mouth and witness about Jesus. You just have to be excited about what you possess.

Romans 10:9 says, “**that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.**” But it’s interesting that Paul says, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus.” Confession with the mouth is what witnessing is all about.

Jesus said, “**Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will deny before My Father who is in heaven.**” (Matt. 10:32-33) He’s not just talking about apostles. Every Christian must confess Jesus before men. And you cannot use a passage like Matthew 4:19 to overturn these Scriptures.

Acts 8:1 says, “**Now Saul was consenting to his [Stephen’s] death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Therefore those who were scattered**

went everywhere preaching the word. The apostles weren't scattered. The text says that everyone *except* the apostles were scattered. Yet those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word. These were the ordinary average Christians who were spreading the Gospel. One pastor used the illustration of sheep. He asked, "Who gives birth to sheep? Is it shepherds, or is it sheep?" Sheep reproduce sheep.

And so Peter tells his church in 1 Peter 3:15, "**But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.**" Every believer is supposed to be able and ready to talk about salvation.

Just one last example: Revelation 22:17: "**And the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' And let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.**" The ones in this verse who are inviting others to Christ are 1) the Spirit, 2) the bride as a whole, 3) and the ones who are hearing this message. That means that every believer is a follower of Jesus, and every follower of Jesus is telling new people to "Come" and to become new followers of Jesus. In fact, there are so many clear Scriptures like this that it is amazing to me that this theory is even surviving, let alone growing.

But I suspect that one of the reasons why this is a popular theory is that people are scared to death of evangelism. They don't know what to do or to say. So let's go back to Matthew 4:19 and see that this really is an encouraging passage. It's not asking you to be experts.

B. Meaning of the phrase (Matt. 8:21-22; 11:28; 16:24-26; 19:21; John 10:4-5,27; 12:26)

Matthew 4:19 says, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men." Jesus uses that phrase "follow Me" nineteen times, and there are many more examples of people who are said to follow Him. This call, "Follow Me," is merely Christ's standard call to discipleship that was used of the 12, the 70, the 120 and the 500. This means that you don't have to be an expert. All you have to be is a brand new baby Christian. Let's look at how Matthew uses this phrase.

Look at verse 25: "**Great multitudes followed Him – from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.**" That helps to define what it means to follow Jesus.

Turn first to Matthew 8:18-22. "**Now when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side. Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, 'Teacher, I will follow You**

wherever You go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’ Then another of His disciples said to Him, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead.’ Now he is letting this disciple know that there is a cost to following him, but I find that last phrase interesting. To follow Christ was to leave the realm of deadness. He was pointing to the difference between spiritually dead people and followers of Christ. So a follower of Christ was a true believer, a disciple, not necessarily officer training material. He was someone following Jesus out of deadness and into life.

Turn next to Matthew 11:28: “**Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.**” Notice that His invitation is to everyone who labors and is heavy laden. Following Christ is equivalent to being saved and to taking Christ's yolk of discipleship. Here it is obviously not a reference to a call to officer training.

Look at Matthew 16:24-26: “**Then Jesus said to His disciples. ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.** [There's that phrase. To follow Christ is to be a disciple. Well he goes on to describe that discipleship by saying,] **For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.**” The words “anyone...him...his...whoever...whoever...his own soul” etc all show that to follow Christ means to become a believer or to become a disciple. It is not dealing with officer training. Every believer is a follower.

Look at Matthew 19:21-26: He is talking to the rich young ruler in verse 21: “**Jesus said to him, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’** But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘**Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.**’ When His disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, ‘**Who then can be saved?**’ But Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘**With men this is impossible, but with God all things**

are possible.” When Christ told the rich young ruler to follow Him, He was speaking about entering the kingdom of God and being saved. We won't turn to it but in the Gospel of John Christ distinguishes between the unbelievers and the believers with this phrase. He says, **“My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me” “yet they will by no means follow a stranger.”** (John 10:4-5,27). **“If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.”** (John 12:26). The point that I am making is that the twelve disciples were not singled out as apostles until later. They started as disciples.

C. Similar Scriptures (Luke 9:57-62; Luke 10; the Greek syntax of Matt 4:19 and Acts 16:31)

Turn to Luke 9:57-62 for a very similar command that is tied to the evangelism of every believer. **“Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, ‘Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.’** [Those are the exact words in the passage we were reading in Matthew.] **Then He said to another, ‘Follow Me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.”** [He is telling that person that the implication of following Christ is that he must witness or declare the kingdom of God.] **And another also said, ‘Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”** So here is a clear case where Christ is asking all new believers to talk about Him. And then chapter 10 naturally goes into the subject of the 70 disciples evangelizing. These are ones that the twelve won to Jesus in the previous chapter. In chapter 10 all the disciples went forth two by two and did exactly that. This was one of the remarkable things about the church in Ethiopia – every Christian was a witness.

So back to our passage in Matthew 4. If “follow Me” means “be my disciple,” then that means something very significant in the Greek. The Greek syntax then implies that every follower is by definition a fisherman, and the only pre-requisite to being a fisherman is to be a follower. Since you don't know Greek I will just demonstrate with the same syntax in another verse. It is the same syntax as Acts 16:31, which says, **“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”** Though it is a different subject, it is the same grammatical logic. Belief results in salvation. The saved are the believers and the believers are the saved. That is the kind of

relationship implied in the Greek of Matthew 4:19. Following results in fishing. The fishermen are the followers of Christ and the followers of Christ are the fishermen. Every believer must be a missionary or there is a question about whether he is truly a disciple; a follower, a person who has taken up his cross, denied self and followed Christ.

Now some of you may be feeling very nervous at this stage. You know that you have a responsibility to witness, but you don't know how. Well that is what discipleship is all about. It is one of the reasons why we are having the evangelism training classes on Tuesday evenings. You wouldn't need to be involved in discipleship if you had it all put together. And that is why Christ said, "I will make you fishers of men." Christ gradually trained disciples over a period of time, little by little getting their feet wet. And then He had those disciples train the 70 and those 70 were involved in training others. And evangelism is just one little part of that discipleship training. This verse indicates that you don't have to be smart; you don't have to talk real good; you don't have old or young. The only prerequisite to being a fisher of men is following Jesus.

II. The divine empowerment for such fishing (“I will make you”; see Luke 10; 1Cor. 1:26-31)

But the second point is encouraging too. The divine empowerment can be seen in the next phrase, “**I will make you.**” And Christ's promise of "I will make you" continues to hold true today. Though we model Christ in discipleship, it is not Phil Kayser, or Ray Comfort, or Brian Fox, or Donald Metcalf who are ultimately going to be making you a fisher of men. We are merely the instruments. Christ continues to work through us, empowering us to be disciples. Why don't you turn back to that Luke 10 passage where Christ sends out the 70 disciples. There is a power that Christ gives to them that enables them to witness, and we continue to need that power.

Verse 1: “**After these things the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go. Then He said to them, ‘The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few; therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go your way.’** [Now go down to verse 17] **Then the seventy returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.’ And He said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Nevertheless,**

do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’ In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, ‘I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes.’”

Several encouraging things here. First, Jesus is willing to take babes and make them fishers of men. And when He says, “babes” he’s not talking about beautiful women; He’s talking about young believers. God’s power can be at work in the youngest of Christians. These were the new believers that the 12 had won to Christ in the previous chapter. And yet because of Christ’s power that was present in every baby Christian alive, their witness was so effective that they were able to strip people away from the clutches of Satan. They were able to bind the power of demons through prayer. Though Satan had power to hurt and is likened to serpents and scorpions, and Revelation shows the incredible power of these scorpion-like demons, yet they are no match for the simplest babe in Christ.

In fact, historians point out that the success of the Gospel in the first five centuries after Christ was due to the fact that all members were expected to witness. In fact, that was one of the criticisms leveled against the church by a pagan philosopher. He didn’t like the fact that that Christianity was being spread by common people rather than philosophers. He found that insulting. “How can I be part of a movement that is being spread by common people?!” But God loves to humble the proud, doesn’t He? Paul said in 1Corinthians 1, **‘God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen.’** If you feel foolish, weak, base and despised, you are the best candidate for God’s power to shine through you. And the reason is that your effectiveness in witness is not dependant upon you. Otherwise salvation would not be sovereign and we could forget about this business of divine appointments. God is orchestrating these things. It is Christ who will make you fishers of men. He will empower. In Acts 2 the church was filled with the Holy Spirit and from that time forth they witnessed with boldness and with power. In Acts 4 the Spirit comes upon them and fills them again, and they speak the Word of God with boldness. And that is why Revelation says, “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” It’s not just us speaking; it is the Spirit speaking through us. Our call for sinners to repent and to come to Jesus must be accompanied by the Spirit’s inward call in their hearts. And let me tell you that if the Spirit is calling sinners through your witness, they cannot help but answer the call.

So as you think about your responsibility to witness, don't get discouraged by your lack of resources and your fears and inabilities. Follow in obedience and pray for Christ to make you a fisher of men this day and next day and the next. He will give you His Spirit in abundance as you step forth in faith. But notice that in Luke 10 that power was not displayed in them until they actually went forth. When they went forth they would find someone who was sick, would ask permission to pray, and as they prayed they would find God doing miracles that made them very excited. The making and the following must go hand in hand. You can't say to God, "Fill me with Your Spirit so full, that people will come off the streets and from the highways and byways into my living room to be saved". No, Christ says that we must go out into the highways and byways, but especially witnessing to your family, friends, neighbors and business associates.

III. What should we expect? ("fishers of men")

Finally, the object of all of this is that men actually get caught by the Gospel. I have seen too many people who throw out the net on occasion hoping that people won't get caught because they don't know how to clean the fish. But God wants us to do more than throw out the nets. He wants us to catch men. We aren't truly fishermen until we catch fish, and that means that our goal and vision needs to be expectant. If we go out expecting not to catch anything, the Lord will not bless our lack of faith. If you throw out a fishing line and hope upon hope that no fish will bite, that isn't faith.

In faith we need to claim the promise that God has already begun in a mysterious way to set aside our families, and to invade with His peace our families, our extended families, our neighbors, friends and business associates; whatever our oikos might be. And we will have more to say about this oikos or this web of close relationships that God has set up for every-believer-evangelism in the future.

But today I would encourage you to lay claim to this promise - that He will make you fishers of men if you will follow Him in faith. Expect a harvest and expect an increase. When you blend a belief that every believer is responsible to witness, with the fact that Christ has promised to empower you, together with the Great Commission, and then blend that with His promises concerning oikos evangelism, you have a tremendous recipe for success.

Conclusion – Is the lake fished out yet? No. (Heb. 8:7-13)

In conclusion let me say that the fishing is not done yet. Some have approached evangelism as if the lake has already been fished out and our job

is almost over. But there are still more men to catch. How do I know? Turn to Hebrews 8:7-13. The writer is quoting the prophecy in the Old Testament about the final results of the New Covenant, and he shows that it will be the very reverse of the Old Covenant. Jeremiah shows that the Old Covenant was a broken covenant, and history for the most part was getting worse and worse until all forsook Christ on the earth. But the cross reversed all of that, and Jeremiah prophecies that in the New Covenant, which began at Christ's first coming, the process of world evangelization would begin. And take a look at the goal of the New Covenant in verse 11: **“None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ [that's witnessing] for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.”** There is coming a day when the lake will be fished out and every fish will be caught. The Old Testament prophesies that as a result of brother telling brother to “Know the Lord,” there will come a day when such witness will no longer be necessary.

But that goal has not been reached yet. There are still vast multitudes that have never heard our “Know the Lord” that Hebrews refers to. The lake has not been fished out. The harvest has not yet been completed. Matthew 28 is not yet fulfilled, since Matthew 28 mandates that we make disciples of all nations – Christian nations. And that means that Christ's command continues to hold true for every believer. **“Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.”** May each of us obey. Amen.

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