

“FISHERS OF MEN”

Up to this point in our study of Mark’s Gospel, we have been dealing with the material that serves as the prelude to Mark’s account of Jesus’ public ministry. But now, beginning in verse 14 of chapter 1, Jesus’ public ministry is clearly underway. Mark tells us that after John the Baptist was arrested by Herod, Jesus returned to his home region of Galilee and began preaching the gospel. John had completed his role as Jesus’ forerunner, and his arrest signaled that the time had come for Jesus to begin his ministry. And he begins in an unlikely place. Instead of going to Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish nation and the seat of its temple, Jesus went into Israel’s northernmost region, a region so surrounded by non-Israelite peoples that it was known as “Galilee of the Gentiles.” And this region would be the setting for most of Jesus’ public ministry.

It is worth noting what Jesus does at the very start of his ministry. He does not start a political movement or a lobbying group. He does not confront social injustice. He does not try to engage the culture. What does he do? He speaks a message. He comes proclaiming the gospel of God. As Jesus says in Luke’s Gospel, this is the reason why he came. He was sent for the purpose of preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Lk. 4:43). Jesus came as the Word made flesh. He came to preach. And his preaching provides the paradigm for the work that he would later entrust to his apostles and to his church. The church’s ministry is first and foremost a word-centered ministry. It is a ministry of

proclamation. Whenever the church loses sight of this, and it often has, it moves further and further away from the purpose for which it exists.

The message that Jesus proclaimed was very similar to that of John the Baptist. You will remember that John also called people to repent, and that he also announced the coming of the kingdom of God. However, there are a couple of significant differences between the messages that John and Jesus preached. Only Jesus is described as proclaiming the gospel, and only Jesus says, “The time is fulfilled.” The reason why Jesus said these things and John did not is because the time of fulfillment arrived in Jesus. John was only preparing the way for Jesus, and thus he could not declare that the time had been fulfilled. But with the coming of Christ and the beginning of his public ministry, history reached its climax. And that is the good news that Jesus came to proclaim. The kingdom is at hand because in Jesus God has invaded history in order to secure man’s redemption (Lane, 64). The king has come, and he is claiming his right to rule over all the earth. As we read in Daniel 2, the stone cut from a mountain without human hands, a stone which represents the kingdom of God, this stone has come to crush all the kingdoms of men. And that is why the only appropriate response to Jesus Christ is to repent and believe. As Herman Ridderbos writes,

“For the coming of the kingdom is the initial stage of the great drama of the history of the end. It throws man and the world into a crisis...It

confronts man with the necessity of making all-important decisions that will rule his whole existence. Its coming should rouse everybody from their false rest and complacency.” (*The Coming of the Kingdom*, 27)

This was true when Jesus first called people to repent and believe the gospel, and it remains true today. The kingdom has come. The time of crisis is here, every bit as much as when Jesus first proclaimed the arrival of God’s kingdom. You and I need to radically reorient our lives in response to the presence of this kingdom. That is what it means to repent and believe in the gospel. Repentance means admitting that you have sinned against the King of the universe; it means mourning over the fact that you have offended this King; and it means turning away from your sinful rebellion and submitting yourself to God’s rightful rule over your life. And faith is the flip-side of repentance. The two go hand in hand. Believing in the gospel means more than just accepting that the gospel is true. It also involves placing your personal trust in Jesus Christ and surrendering your life to him. It is perfectly illustrated in this passage by the response of Jesus’ first disciples when they left everything to follow him. True faith in Christ means placing your life in his hands, trusting only in him to save you from your sins, and surrendering even that which is most precious to you so that you might follow wherever he will lead.

That is what Simon and Andrew, and James and John, did when Jesus called them. And here we see something of the mysterious way the kingdom of God grows. Jesus does not

begin where a first century Jew would expect the Messiah to begin his work. He does not begin at the temple in Jerusalem, but in Galilee, way up north in Israel's equivalent of our Lakes Region. And he does not begin by calling priests and Pharisees and teachers of the law, but by calling ordinary working men.

Notice also the details that Mark provides for us in this passage: Simon and Andrew were casting a net into the sea as Jesus passed by; James and John were mending their nets in their boat; their father and the hired workers were left behind in the boat when they responded to Jesus' call. These are the sort of details that would stick in the mind of someone who was there - further evidence that Peter (who is referred to by his other name, Simon, in these verses) was Mark's primary source in the writing of this Gospel. Peter was there, and that is why Mark can record such vivid details.

These first of Jesus' disciples were all fishermen, plying their trade in the fish-rich waters of the Sea of Galilee. And as Jesus calls them to follow after him, he calls them to a different kind of fishing: fishing for the souls of men. This is an image that the church has embraced as one of the ways to describe its work of evangelism. The Puritan Thomas Boston once wrote a small book on evangelism entitled *The Art of Man-Fishing*. Jesus is the Great Fisherman, drawing up a harvest of souls in his nets by preaching the arrival of God's kingdom and calling people to repent. And as he calls these four fishermen, he calls them to join in his work of fishing for souls. Here is a foreshadowing of the work to

which Jesus would appoint the apostles in their foundation-laying proclamation of the gospel message, and also of the work to which Jesus would commission his church as the pillar and buttress of truth: the work of making disciples of all nations. The call to be fishers of men points forward to the Great Commission.

How is this work of man-fishing to be done? What is the Master's plan of evangelism? These are the questions that are invariably asked by contemporary evangelicals whenever the topic of evangelism is broached. We want to know about method. How do we do this? And one assumption that has emerged over the past one hundred years or so is the idea that the most effective evangelism is done outside of the church. There is a widespread tendency to think that the church's ordinary ministry is insufficient on its own and needs to be supplemented with new and innovative methods of bringing the gospel to the lost if real evangelism is going to take place. What are we to make of this? Is this the right way of thinking about evangelism? Is this what the Bible teaches about evangelism?

Let me begin to address this subject by telling you about the ministry of William Still. Still served as the pastor of Gilcomston South Church, in Aberdeen Scotland, from 1945 to 1997. He served for over fifty years as the minister of one church, a church that had a considerable influence, even though it was fairly modest in size. When Still first began his pastorate at Gilcomston, his approach to evangelism was focused upon the kind of

efforts that went beyond the church's ordinary ministry. But it was not very long before he came to see things very differently. He came to see that the church's work of making disciples always needs to be firmly grounded in the ministry of the whole Word of God if it is going to be genuinely fruitful. Still reflected upon this in one of his monthly pastoral letters to his congregation. After reminding them of his involvement in a number of evangelistic crusades in the early years of his ministry, two of which featured Billy Graham, he wrote the following:

“I have therefore had some experience of large missions, with particular opportunities for assessing their fruits; initial and eventual. But I have since had experience of something else; namely, the systematic preaching of the whole Word of God, in one place, and over a good many years...[I]t appears to me that [the crusading approach] is not as good a way of evangelizing as...the fruitful witness of the members of Christ's Church built up in their faith and scattered throughout the community and the world.” (*Letters*, 81)

Still was not saying that he had discovered something new. He did not invent a new evangelistic technique. He was simply describing Jesus' method of evangelism. This is what Jesus described when he gave his church its Great Commission in Matthew 28. He said that disciples are to be made by baptizing them in the name of the triune God and by

teaching them to observe all that he has commanded. That really is what the Great Commission says about how the church should go about its evangelistic work. The verbs “baptizing” and “teaching” are participles, verbs that are dependent upon the main verb in the sentence, which is the command “make disciples.” These participles specify how the work of making disciples is to be done: by baptizing people into the church and by instructing them in the faith over the course of their entire lifetime. In other words, disciples are made inside the church. Jesus’ method of evangelism is the faithful exercise of the ordinary ministry that he has given to his church.

In spite of this, churches that decide to focus their evangelistic efforts in the regular preaching of the Word of God and choose not to place an emphasis upon innovative approaches to evangelism are sometimes accused of being uninterested in reaching out to unbelievers with the gospel. Here again is William Still:

“A teaching ministry is very costly, and, unhappily, the most painful part of its cost is the strange dissociation of evangelistic folk from it, as if it were a worse sin to concentrate on Bible teaching than to become [Roman Catholic], or liberal, or even morally reprehensible...The only reasonable explanation I can find is that which I first ‘hit’ upon when we turned from evangelism to teaching. We discovered that evangelistic folk who sat so benignly under the preaching of justification by faith became quite

fiendishly incensed when the Word was turned upon them for sanctification.” (*Letters*, 81, 82)

What Still is saying is that the evangelistic impulse is sometimes used by believers to excuse them from their need to sit under the sanctifying and nourishing ministry of the Word of God. How often do we see Christians who are bent on reaching the world for Christ but who have little patience for understanding the specific teachings of the Bible and applying them to their lives? The suggestion of a thirty week sermon series on the book of Isaiah strikes them as tiresome and irrelevant. But such Christians forget that it is only by the Word that God builds up his church. The preaching of the Word is the bait by which men are caught. Listen to Paul’s words to the elders in the church at Ephesus: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” (Acts 20:32) The Word of God, and especially the preaching of that Word, really is sufficient for the building up of Christ’s church.

Now, how does this apply to your life? If the ordinary, systematic preaching of the Word of God is the principle means by which disciples are made, then how can you join in the ministry of fishing for men? In any number of ways! In as many ways as the various contexts in which you all conduct your daily lives. Our church’s fishing net is spread as wide as your lives are spread across this community and beyond it. You can fish for souls

at your workplace, in the various activities in which you participate, in your neighborhood, in your friendships and family relationships, in the raising of your children, and in your life of prayer.

But the most important thing that you need to do as a fisher of men is to take the bait yourself. That is what Simon and Andrew did. It is what James and John did. They became fishers of men by being caught by Jesus' preaching themselves. This is the most important thing about fishing for men. Why would the people around you swallow the bait if they see that you are merely nibbling at it? Do people see that you take the Word of Christ with the utmost seriousness? Do they see you hanging on Christ's every word? Do they see how your submission to his Word causes you to order your life differently? Do they see you making weekly worship an uncompromising priority in your life because of your need to hear Christ speaking to you? Yes, Jesus is still preaching the gospel of God today. He preaches through those whom he calls to preach the Word in his church. That is why Paul could say in his letter to the Ephesians that Christ came and preached peace to them (Eph. 2:17). Jesus never set foot in the city of Ephesus during his lifetime. How could Paul say that Christ came and preached to them? He said it because Christ really preaches through his preachers. And this means that your hunger for the preached Word is a direct indication of how much you hunger for the Word of Christ. Do people see you hungering for his Word? Do they see you as someone like these Galilean fishermen, someone who has left his nets in response to the words of Christ? When

Sermon on Mark 1:14-20
OT Reading: Daniel 2:31-45

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people see that, when they see that Christ is everything to you, then your life becomes the bait that Christ uses to attract others to himself.