

Mark 1:17
***Fishers of men* reconsidered: first significance, then application**

By Chip M Anderson
March 19, 2006

And Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”

When Jesus invites us to follow Him, he promises, “I will make you become fishers of men.” Many understand this to mean that Christians are to *catch* the unsaved for Christ. If you assume this interpretation of Mark 1:17 (and Matthew 4:19), the act of fishing is, then, an illustration of evangelism or a “picture of winning people to Christ.” Interpreting the “fishers of men” text in this way is based on two assumptions:

- 1) *Fishing* is a biblical metaphor for evangelizing (“fishers of men = evangelism/witnessing”), and as such, the metaphor would have been understood, without explanation, as such by the disciples.
- 2) The *fishing* metaphor is transferable to today’s fishing context, and thus, can be utilized to call Christians to evangelize (i.e., to fulfill being “fishers of men”).

I can’t count how many times I have heard preachers, evangelists, “special speakers,” Sunday School teachers, popular Christian media celebrities, and even Bible professors say that Jesus’ words in Mark 1:17 (as well as Matthew 4:19) is a call to evangelism. In the summer of 1978, soon after my conversion, I was instructed to memorize the “fishers of men” verses as “evangelism” or “witnessing” texts.

While I completely appreciate those who have become such *fishers of men*, that is, have made commitments to witness and catch men for Christ, I believe we should pause long enough to consider one thing:

If fish are unsaved people, imagine evangelism *from the fish’s* perspective.

Something’s wrong with the metaphor

Messages on evangelism and witnessing using “the different types of fishing” are commonplace. This text and such images are utilized to enforce the Christian call to evangelize and to exemplify the various ways one can “fish” for people: Fly fishing, deep sea fishing, catching fish in nets, and using bigger nets to catch lots of fish (i.e., more people).

I began to think differently about Jesus’ words, *fishers of men*, when a preacher once suggested, “Sometimes you have to use a club, or even throw dynamite in the water to blast the fish out. Likewise, sometimes you have to use extreme methods to win people to Christ.” At that moment, many years ago now, I knew something was wrong with this use of that particular biblical metaphor.

Not so self-evident—fishing is *never* good for fish

Evangelism and fishing, at first glance, seem to be a match. So when we read or hear the biblical phrase “fishers of men,” it appears to be a self-evident metaphor. Or, is it? However neatly these words fit in our stories, illustrations, and anecdotes about witnessing and evangelism, we should not simply assume that *fishers of men* is a self-evident metaphor to the modern reader of the Bible.

Think seriously about the “fishers of men = evangelism/witnessing” imagery. Carry it through as a metaphor. Is fishing ever good for the fish? The coming of the fisherman for fish is not good; it is not a blessing. It is dangerous, menacing, ominous, dire, and presents a very life-ending possibility. Fishermen use tricks, lures, false hope, traps, cons, and don’t forget hooks. If winning souls to Jesus is the meaning of this metaphor, then it loses its seemingly clear metaphorical nature when it is transferred to the world of Christian activities of witnessing, outreach, church growth, and evangelism.

Fishing is, simply put, not good for fish. The presence of fishermen is not a good sign for them at all. This, all by itself, suggests that we need to look elsewhere for the background that gives meaning (and interpretative depth) to the *fishers of men* metaphor.

Self-evident to the *first* hearers

As this **Rough Cut** will bear out, these words were actually self-evident to the *first* hearers, not because they were fishermen or familiar with fishing, but because they had a familiarity with the Old Testament. They also lived within certain eschatological (“end time”) expectations, which also form the background and framework in our Marken context. The picture Jesus was intending to invoke, perhaps, has little to do with casting out fishing nets or someone casting out a line in hopes of catching a fish. I am going to suggest that a radically different metaphor is in mind.

More than “fisherman” being called

Agreed, most of the disciples were fisherman by trade and livelihood, which actually makes it seem there is a correspondence to the activity of fishing. But still, there were others, and the symbolism falters with their call to become “fishers of men.”

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them. As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth, and He said to him, “Follow Me!” And he got up and followed Him (Mark 2:13-14).

What about Matthew, the tax collector, and the two who were revolutionaries or zealots? The same call using their vocations probably would not have worked as well symbolically, that is, in moving from their current vocation to a new calling. Was Matthew to rephrase the concept in his head, “Follow Me and I will make you collect people like taxes”? Or, to Simon and Judas, “Follow Me and I will make you revolutionaries of men”? The metaphor breaks down with the other vocations. Perhaps, it wasn’t the vocation of fishing that was the referent (i.e., the thing, concept, or marker that gives meaning) in the first place.

Translations don't always help

In order to find meaning in a text of Scripture, we are prone to make a leap from the English words or concepts in our New Testament translations to whatever corresponds in our contemporary experience. Sometimes it is helpful to turn to various translations (actual translations, not paraphrased versions!). In this case, the translations do not help us.

The Mark 1:17 text, in the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB, the primary English translation that I use in **Rough Cuts**), following the Greek word-for-word, reads:

And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."

The NASB for Matthew 4:19 similarly reads:

And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Other versions render Mark 1:17 in relatively similar ways:

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (*New International Version*).

And Jesus said unto them, "Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men" (*King James Version* and *American Standard Version*).

Then Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (*New King James Version*).

And Jesus said to them, "Come ye after me; [and] I shall make you to be made fishers of men" (*Wycliff New Testament*).

Most translations are very straightforward with little interpretation. However, some newer translations like the *NETBible* reinforce the "fishing = evangelism/witnessing" understanding:

Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will turn you into fishers of people" (NETB).

The publishers of the *NETBible* offer a footnote to explain: "The Greek term ἀνθρώπος (*anthrōpos*) [men] is used here in a generic sense, referring to both men and women, thus 'people'." The *NETBible* expands the Mark 1:17 text, offering more an interpretation than a translation.

Again, the problem of a paraphrased version

Paraphrases and transliterated versions, with few exceptions, go in one direction: they assume that "fishers of men" is a self-evident metaphor for evangelizing (i.e., catching sinners for Jesus). For example, the *New Living Translation* paraphrases (really interprets) Mark 1:17 and offers:

Jesus called out to them, "Come, be my disciples, and I will show you how to fish for people!" (NLT).

Furthermore, *The Message* paraphrases (again, really interprets) both Mark 1:17 and Matthew 4:19, not only asserting the supposed self-evident metaphor of “fishing = evangelizing,” but adds words not in the original Greek to make us think Jesus actually said these things.

Jesus said to them, “Come with me. I’ll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I’ll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass” (MSG).

Paraphrased versions interpret, rather than translate, insisting that Jesus is making a correspondence between fishing and soul winning. This however, might move the reader further from what Jesus had in mind.

Approaching popular texts

Approaching this text, and in particular the phrase “fishers of men,” is difficult on two levels. First, it is a favorite and very popular text, often turned to support and promote the activities of evangelism and witnessing. Very noble activities, of course. It is hard to argue against anything that could dissuade from such important Christian activities. This very popular understanding of Mark 1:17 (and Matthew 4:19) makes it difficult to hear another (possible) interpretation. Second, the seemingly self-evident nature of the metaphor makes it difficult to convince others that there is another, more biblical, referent to the metaphor. Especially one that is not so self-apparent to the contemporary believer.

I hope, nonetheless, that what I have pointed out so far—that is, the self-evident nature of the “fishers of men” metaphor isn’t actually a workable correspondence to evangelism and “catching” people for Jesus—warrants another look, further investigation. Please bear with me. I promise this might even be fun.

Don’t automatically project a contemporary correspondence

Don’t be so eager to attach contemporary terms, concepts, events, meaning, or even experiences to biblical terms, concepts and words (or imagery) as if that’s what the Biblical authors (or in this case, Jesus) meant by them. When seeking to understand New Testament imagery, or its use of words and phrases, we need to make sure our referents (the thing, concept, idea) that give definition and meaning are correct or, even, possible. Does the “fishing = evangelism/witnessing” correspondence have validity? Could this have been what Jesus had in mind?

The surrounding paragraph and literary setting

Before we tackle the *fishers of men* phrase, let’s review the surrounding paragraph that the command (“follow Me”) and the promise (“I will make you become fishers of men”) find their place.

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were

fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed Him (Mark 1:14-18).

We already know that Mark’s gospel-tract’s theme is “the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). Jesus’ predecessor, John the Baptist, had been jailed. Afterward, Jesus moved into the area of Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God. In 1:15, Mark gives us the summary of Jesus’ preaching:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Certainly Jesus wasn’t just saying this set of words over and over again, so we can reasonably assume Mark intends verse 15 as a summary of the content or essence of Jesus’ preaching: The Gospel of Jesus Christ pertains to *the timing and arrival of the Kingdom of God*, which is to produce repentance and belief in *this* Gospel.

Fishers of men is a part of Mark’s summary of the Gospel

The first to respond are fishermen, and it seems that Jesus uses their “profession” to illustrate the call to join His mission. But, there is more here, right in the text. There is a sense of urgency, a serious call in light of the arrival of the Kingdom of God. As part of the summary, Jesus invites people to “follow Me,” and in this *following* they will become *fishers of men*. Mark wants us to feel the urgency by telling us, “Immediately they left their nets and followed Him.” Jesus’ words provoked an immediate response. Why? For what reason would they have responded so *immediately*, totally abandoning, on the spot, the livelihood that both they and their families depend upon? We move too fast in assuming it is something “positive” (i.e., winning people to Jesus) rather than something “negative” (i.e., a warning that some “time” has been fulfilled, warranting the necessity of repentance).

Following the flow (thought) of the text

The first major block of material is bookended by references to Jesus being the Son of God: 1:1 and 3:11 (where the demons acknowledge who Jesus is, “You are the Son of God”). Mark skips the birth narrative, and in verse 2, indicates that this Gospel was “written about” by the Old Testament prophets, moving the reader to a blended Old Testament quote:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT’” (Mark 1:2-3, compiling Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:1).

This “gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1) is fulfillment of Old Testament promise, having arrived in the coming of Messiah Jesus and in His proclamation. Immediately, we hear that John the Baptist is *the* “One crying in the wilderness,” connecting him to the Old Testament promise. He is “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Sounds ominous to me!) John’s preaching gathers crowds and some, confessing their sins, seek his baptism of repentance.

John's message includes the hint that Someone else was coming ("One is coming who is mightier," v 7) and that this One will baptize, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit (another Old Testament expectation). When this One comes to be baptized by John, the heavens open up and the Spirit like a dove descends upon Him, ushering in the age of the Spirit (an obvious Old Testament fulfillment). Then, a voice from heaven affirms Jesus as God's "beloved Son" (yes, another Old Testament allusion). (This *voice from heaven* will be a future **Rough Cut!**)

After facing Satan in the wilderness and John taken into custody, Jesus begins His preaching ministry, proclaiming the "gospel of God" (1:14; cf. Mark's theme in 1:1). In Mark's account, Jesus begins His ministry in Gentile territory, the region of Galilee (also an Old Testament fulfillment).

Right away, as Jesus moves through Galilee He encounters two fishermen, Simon and his brother, Andrew. This is the place where we encounter our text, for Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (1:17). Mark gives a sense of urgency to Jesus' invitation: "Immediately they left their nets and followed Him" (v 18). Shortly thereafter Jesus encounters James and John, both whom He calls, and they, too, "immediately" follow.

Soon Jesus and His first band of followers are in a synagogue teaching. As the crowds were amazed at His teaching, a man with an unclean spirit knows that Jesus' presence is ominous, threatening, for he cries out, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" (1:24).

Mark crafts his story in such a way to demonstrate that the arrival of this Gospel is fulfillment of Old Testament expectations, and that its presence is "good news" *and* ominous (requiring repentance of men and to the dismay of demons).

There is a self-evident Old Testament meaning

The presence of fisherman is not a good sign for fish. As mentioned already, fishing is never good for the fish. Caught fish face certain death. The act of fishing fits what I have described here (and above), making it basically impossible to import into this metaphor the idea that fishing equals witnessing (or "catching" people for Christ). So, if fly-fishing, deep-sea fishing, trolling, and using nets, clubs, and other means of "catching fish" is not the intended referent to *fishers of men*, then what is?

There is an Old Testament antecedent concept of *fish*, *fishing*, and *fishers* that gives Jesus' words meaning. This Old Testament *self-evident meaning* actually utilizes the ominous nature of fishing, which gives us interpretative insight into the *fishers of men* text—as its self-evident meaning would have been to the original audience (and readers).

The Old Testament *fishing* antecedent

An investigation of Old Testament use of *fish*, *fishers*, *fishermen*, and *fishing* yields evidence of an antecedent background (a referent) that fits the "fishers of men" context. The concept of *fishing* actually works when Old Testament usage is taken into consideration:

“Behold, I am going to send for many fishermen,” declares the LORD, “and they will fish for them; and afterwards I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them from every mountain and every hill and from the clefts of the rocks” (Jeremiah 16:16)

The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness, “Behold, the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with meat hooks, and the last of you with fish hooks” (Amos 4:2).

“Why have You made men like the fish of the sea, like creeping things without a ruler over them? The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, drag them away with their net, and gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore they rejoice and are glad” (Habakkuk 1:14-15).

“I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws, and I will bring you out, and all your army, horses and horsemen, all of them splendidly attired, a great company with buckler and shield, all of them wielding swords” (Ezekiel 38:4).

“I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your rivers cling to your scales. And I will bring you up out of the midst of your rivers, and all the fish of your rivers will cling to your scales. I will abandon you to the wilderness, you and all the fish of your rivers; you will fall on the open field; you will not be brought together or gathered. I have given you for food to the beasts of the earth and to the birds of the sky” (Ezekiel 29:4-5).

“Because of your raging against Me and because your arrogance has come up to My ears, therefore I will put My hook in your nose and My bridle in your lips, and I will turn you back by the way which you came” (Isaiah 37:29).

Summarizing the OT background/referent

The Old Testament referent (i.e., *fishing/fishers/fish*) above is part of promise-fulfillment and judgment-blessing motifs. For example, the Jeremiah 16 reference to “fishermen” and the act of “fishing” is set within a context that promises future judgment and great distress for Israel.

“Then you are to say to them, ‘It is because your forefathers have forsaken Me,’ declares the LORD, ‘and have followed other gods and served them and bowed down to them; but Me they have forsaken and have not kept My law. You too have done evil, even more than your forefathers; for behold, you are each one walking according to the stubbornness of his own evil heart, without listening to Me. So I will hurl you out of this land into the land which you have not known’” (Jeremiah 16:11-13).

Verses 14-15 indicate the promise of restoration after judgment.

“Therefore behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when it will no longer be said, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ but, ‘As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land

of the north and from all the countries where He had banished them.’ For I will restore them to their own land which I gave to their fathers.”

Then in verse 16, God promises the judgment will come about through the imagery of *fishermen* and *fishing*. Similar language is used in both Amos 4 and the judgment passages in Habakkuk. As can be seen in the Ezekiel 29 and 38 references, the imagery of *fishing* and *hooks* are the tools of judgment.

Ultimately this judgment activity of God will reveal that He alone is the LORD (cf. Jer 16:21) and, through it, God will make Himself “known in the sight of many nations” (cf. Ez 29: 23). In Habakkuk, it is through the *fishing* activity (i.e., the judgment) that the ungodly, the unrighteous, and those who oppose God are gathered together for the promised judgment (cf. Hab 1:14-15).

Finally, almost all of the judgment passages utilizing *fishing* imagery promise the raising up of a remnant (usually through the judgment activity of God—i.e., the *fishing* or through *fishers*, or as a result):

The surviving remnant of the house of Judah will again take root downward and bear fruit upward. For out of Jerusalem will go forth a remnant and out of Mount Zion survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this. (Isaiah 37:31-32).

The above OT texts actually form a more plausible referent for Jesus’ promise, “I will make you become fishers of men.”

Agents of the Kingdom

It seems reasonable to assume that those who heard the promise (“I will make you become fishers of men”) understood it in its Old Testament context and as people for whom the *end of times* had arrived, as indicated by the presence of the Fisherman (Messiah Jesus) and the inauguration of the Kingdom. *To the ones being invited (or called), Jesus’ fishers of men reference would have indicated that they would be made to become agents of the end time Kingdom.* That’s the Old Testament referent. It fits the context of Mark’s first chapter. The Gospel of the Kingdom of God had arrived, and thus there is a need to “repent and believe in the gospel.”

Fish/fishing as gathering for judgment in Matthew

The parable of the dragnet in Matthew 13 affirms what I have suggested thus far.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away (Matthew 13:46-47).

This gathering is to separate good fish from the bad, the righteous from the unrighteous, and those who repent and believe at the call of the Kingdom and those who do not.

Furthermore, demons feel threatened

We also have contextual evidence that the presence of Jesus, the premier Fisherman, was ominous—at least to the demons. For we read, right after the *fishers of men* text, there is a confrontation between Jesus and some demons. The demons in the encounter said:

“What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24).

The demons were obviously threatened by the presence of the Fisherman. For Mark, this Jesus/demon interaction might have been a veiled reference to Jeremiah 16:

“Now when you tell this people all these words, they will say to you, ‘For what reason has the LORD declared all this great calamity against us? And what is our iniquity, or what is our sin which we have committed against the LORD our God?’” (Jer 16:10).

As you recall from above, Jeremiah 16 also contains one of our *fish/fisher* judgment texts.

Our fixation on application and being practical is actually a problem

It can be too easy to resort to popular interpretations because they are, however misleading (away from the text), often easier to grasp. We shouldn't exclude difficult to understand allusions just because they are harder to relate to, or are more difficult to apply personally. I pause to point out that we, in the contemporary American Church, are fixated on application. There is a tendency to skip and even to eschew the vital step of interpretation (by which I mean exegesis). Somewhere along the way, we abandoned the discipline of exegesis and biblical interpretation in exchange for American pragmatism. The Bible often becomes, with each individual part (i.e., each text, each verse, and even sometimes just a word here and there in a verse), a utilitarian tool to give detail instructions and application—specific do's and don'ts. Every text has to be *practical*. This makes it all the harder to offer interpretations that—on the surface—do not seem practical, or easily applied. I hate to say it, but the *fishers of men* text is one of these difficult to apply texts. Nonetheless, I will offer something that will underscore the significance of the command and promise found in Mark 1:17.

Interpreting Mark 1:17: *Fishers of men* = disciples of Jesus

Mark chose to include the call to follow Jesus and the promise that Jesus would make His followers *fishers of men* in the same text that summarizes the mission and message of Jesus (1:14-18). It bears repeating:

Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” As He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed Him (Mark 1:14-18).

The “nearness” of the Kingdom of God initiated the need for *fishers*, that is those who would be God's agents to fulfill the Old Testament expectation of judgment and promise (i.e., repent and

believe in the Gospel) and as well, the calling out of God's remnant people (note Old Testament texts discussed above). This was, for the first disciples, a defining moment: acknowledging the arrival of the Kingdom necessitates becoming disciples of the One who has proclaimed its inauguration. Becoming *fishers of men* is all about becoming disciples of Jesus Christ, and being under His call to be agents of the Kingdom. *Fishers of men* = disciples of Jesus—this is why it is a promise, not a command. The command is to “Follow Me.” It is *in the following* that we become (*made to become*) *fishers of men*, that is, disciples. The rest of Mark's Gospel is, in story-narrative form, what it means to follow Jesus and to become His disciple and fulfill His mission.

First significance, then application

As mentioned above, the Old Testament *fish/fishers* terminology and contexts fit the Marken context very well. In Mark's presentation of “the Gospel of Jesus Christ,” there is an obvious Old Testament framework (i.e., a promise-fulfillment motif; cf. “it is written,” v 2; “the time is fulfilled,” v 14). The inauguration of the Kingdom (cf. “the kingdom of God is at hand, v 14) and the call for repentance support the plausibility that Mark is relying on Old Testament *fish/fishers* antecedent theology to frame the call to join Jesus in His Kingdom mission. The difficulty, now, is in applying this interpretation of Mark 1:17. Looking, first, at the significance of the text will help lead toward application.

Significance #1: Obedience to the One who calls

Since, as I have suggested, there is an Old Testament background to Jesus' invitation, then there is a parallel in *the* One who is making the call and *the* One in the Old Testament texts who promised the *fishers/fishing* judgment-restoration. This is significant as we consider application of this text. As the disciples indicated with their abrupt response to Jesus' first invitation, He was acting as the very LORD of Israel who made the Old Testament promises. He is the One who bids them (us) to join in this mission as agents of the Kingdom of God that had arrived as expected.

Significance # 2: Imitate the One who calls (a call to the mission)

It is important to note that Jesus is God's premier (and primary) agent of the Kingdom. In the Gospels, “following” (and “becoming”) is to imitate the One who calls, that is, to imitate the premier Fisherman in carrying out His mission. The *discipleship* and *missionary* texts below have interesting parallels to the *fishers of men* context and its Old Testament background:

And He summoned the twelve and began to send them out in pairs, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits; and He instructed them that they should take nothing for their journey, except a mere staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belt—but to wear sandals; and He added, “Do not put on two tunics.” And He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave town. Any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake the dust off the soles of your feet for a testimony against them” (Mark 6:7-11).

Jesus summoned His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every kind of disease and every kind of sickness....And as you go, preach, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, raise the dead,

cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support. And whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it, and stay at his house until you leave that city. As you enter the house, give it your greeting. If the house is worthy, give it your blessing of peace. But if it is not worthy, take back your blessing of peace. Whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake the dust off your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city” (Matthew 10:1, 7-15).

Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them in pairs ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come. And He was saying to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace be to this house.’ If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. Whatever city you enter and they receive you, eat what is set before you; and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’ I say to you, it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom than for that city. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will be brought down to Hades! The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me” (Luke 10:1-16).

These texts have a commonality to the implications of the *fishers of men* text: The presence of the agents of the Kingdom is both blessing and ominous. The agents are to proclaim that the Kingdom has drawn near, and the absence of repentance means certain judgment. And, there is even a parallel between the presence of the Messiah (i.e., the premiere Fisherman) and the presence of His agents (i.e., the *fishers of men*), for we continue to read in Luke 10:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.” And He said to them, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven” (Luke 10:17-20).

The agents of the Kingdom (i.e., the followers who become *fishers of men*), through their presence, bring the “nearness of the Kingdom” to others.

Significance #3: There is an urgency and severity to obeying “follow Me”

Once the invitation to *follow* is obeyed, there is a promise that Jesus would make them *become fishers of men*. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) other “follow Me” texts have a similar nature of urgency and severity (i.e., cost):

But Jesus said to him, ‘Follow Me, and allow the dead to bury their own dead’ (Matthew 8:22; cf. Luke 9:59).

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8:34; cf. Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23).

Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Mark 10:21; cf. Matthew 19:21; Luke 18:22).

These “follow Me” texts affirm what we have learned from the *fishers of men* text in Mark 1:17, and, additionally emphasizing that there is a cost for accepting the invitation to be followers of Jesus.

A final word on discipleship (the real application of *fishers of men*)

When the Old Testament *fishers/fish* context and the *real* act of fishing (the imagery) are considered for understanding Mark 1:17, a little different “spin” is presented for interpreting the verse. I don't think Jesus was making a positive statement on evangelism, but a very serious comment about following Christ, that is the serious nature of discipleship. Therefore, the *fisher of men* text is ultimately about discipleship: fishermen making other “fishers of men” (i.e., *fishers of men* = disciples of Jesus). As pointed out at the beginning of this **Rough Cut**, the *fishers of men* text is in the midst of the summary text describing the essence of the Gospel. This implies continuation, a pattern to be followed by succeeding generations of readers, which are those who repent and believe in the Gospel of the Kingdom that has come near. This text is about our identity, namely who we are as followers of Jesus, which in turn defines our role and responsibilities as agents who are to bring the Kingdom near to others and other places.

© Chip M. Anderson, March 2006, **Rough Cuts**

Bible quotes are from the NASB, unless otherwise noted