

Fishers of Men

Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11

The Twelve developed an intimate relationship with Jesus, but it was done gradually. There are three distinguishable stages in the history of their fellowship with Him. In the *first* stage, they were simply believers in Him as the Christ and occasionally accompanied Him when it was convenient and during times of celebration. During this stage in the interaction between the disciples and their Master (according to the first four chapters in John's Gospel), they became acquainted with Jesus and accompanied Him to a marriage in Cana (John 2:1-2), to the Passover in Jerusalem (John 2:13,17,22), while visiting the scene of the Baptist's ministry (John 3:22), and on the return journey through Samaria from the south to Galilee (John 4:1-27,31,43-45).

In the *second* stage, their fellowship with Christ assumed another form. They were present with Him most of the time. In order to do this, they had to frequently, if not completely (like Matthew), abandon their secular occupations. The passages we have just read allow us to see certain disciples entering this second stage of discipleship. Of the four persons named, we recognize three: Peter, Andrew, and John. They are old acquaintances who have already passed through the first stage of discipleship. We meet one of them, James the brother of John, for the first time. Some suppose that this means the first and second stages may have been blended together. This would mean that their professions of faith in Jesus as the Christ were immediately followed by their renouncing their secular occupations for the purpose of joining His company. These cases, however, were probably exceptional and few.

The Twelve entered into the *last* and highest stage of discipleship when they were chosen by their Master from the masses of His followers. He then formed them into a select band of men whom He would train to accomplish the great work of apostleship. This important event probably did not take place until all the members of the apostolic church had been around Jesus for some time.

It appears from the Gospel record that Jesus began at a very early period in His ministry to gather around Him a company of disciples for the purpose of preparing them to carry on the work of the divine kingdom. The two pairs of brothers received their call at the beginning of the first Galilean ministry. The first order of business was to select Capernaum by the sea as the

center of operations and their main living quarters (Matt. 4:13). And when we think what they were called to, we see that the call could not come prematurely. The Twelve were to be Christ's witnesses in the world after He had left it. Their specific duty was to give the world a faithful accounting of their Master's words and deeds, an accurate image of His character, a true reflection of His spirit. This work could only be accomplished by people who had been eye-witnesses and servants of the Incarnate Word from the beginning. Except in the cases of Peter, James, John, Andrew, and Matthew, we have no specific insights from the Gospels about the call of those who later became Apostles. We must assume that they all occurred in the first year of the Savior's public ministry.

The Apostleship

These calls were given with deliberate reference to an ulterior purpose: the apostleship. This is apparent from the remarkable words in which the earliest of them was expressed. "Follow Me," Jesus said to the fisherman of Bethsaida, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). These words (whose originality stamps them as a genuine saying of Jesus) show that the great Founder of the faith desired not only to have disciples, but to have around Him men whom He might train to make disciples of others. He wanted to cast the net of divine truth into the sea of the world and to land a great multitude of believing souls on the shores of the divine kingdom. Both from His words and from His actions, we can see that He attached supreme importance to that part of His work which consisted in training the Twelve. In His intercessory prayer (John 17:6), He speaks about the training He had given these men as if it had been the most important aspect of His own earthly ministry. In one sense, it really was. The careful, painstaking, education of the disciples ensured that the Teacher's influence on the world would be permanent. His kingdom would be founded on the rock of deep and indestructible convictions in the minds of the few, not on the shifting sands of superficial, temporary impressions on the minds of the many. Our Lord Himself taught us in one of His parables (Mark 4:26), that the kingdom of God is like a seed cast upon the ground and left to grow according to natural laws. Therefore, had it not been for the Twelve, the doctrine, the works, and the image of Jesus might have perished from human history, with nothing remaining but a vague, mythical tradition. It would have had no historical value and little practical influence.

Since so much depended on these men, it was absolutely necessary that they possess extraordinary qualifications. The mirrors that are designed to reflect the image of Christ must be finely polished! The Apostles of the Christian religion must be men of rare spiritual endowment. It is a *universal* religion, intended for all nations. Therefore, its Apostles must be free from Jewish narrowness and have compassion that embraces the whole world. It is a *spiritual* religion, destined to abolish Jewish ceremonialism in short order. Therefore, its Apostles must have their consciences emancipated from the bondage of regulations. It is a religion which proclaims the

Cross, once an instrument of cruelty and a badge of wickedness, as the hope of the world's redemption. It is the symbol of all that is noble and heroic in conduct. Therefore, its messengers must be far superior to all traditional ideas about human and divine dignity. They must be capable of glorying in the cross of Christ and willing to bear a cross themselves. In short, the apostolic character must unite a free conscience, an enlarged heart, and an enlightened mind. And it must be done to the highest degree.

The humble fishermen of Galilee had much to learn before they could satisfy these high requirements. In fact, they had to learn so much that the time it took in their apprenticeship for their apostolic work seemed much too short, even considering that their training began from the commencement of Christ's ministry. They were indeed godly men who had already shown that their piety was sincere by forsaking all for their Master's sake. But at the time of their call, they were extremely ignorant, narrow-minded, superstitious, and full of Jewish prejudices, misconceptions, and animosities. They had much to unlearn of what was bad, as well as much to learn of what was good. And they were slow, both to learn and to unlearn. Old beliefs were already in possession of their minds. This made the communication of new ideas a difficult task. These men had good, honest hearts. The soil of their spiritual nature was prepared to produce an abundant harvest. But it was hard soil and needed a great deal of strenuous tillage before it would yield fruit. Then, to add to what has been said, they were poor men, of humble birth, inferior social status, and low-paying occupations who had never felt the stimulating influence of a liberal education or the social interaction with people who had cultivated minds.

The Spiritual Condition of the Twelve

As we proceed with this study, we will see abundant evidence that the spiritual condition of the Twelve was merely foundational, even long after the time when they were called to follow Jesus. Meanwhile, we may discover significant indications that at least one of the disciples was spiritually immature - Simon, son of Jonas. Note Luke's account of the incidents connected with his call. When Jesus was pressed by the multitude that had assembled on the shore of the sea to hear Him preach, He got into a ship (one of two lying nearby). It happened to be Simon's. Jesus, requesting him to push out a little from land, sat down and taught the people from the vessel. When He finished speaking, Jesus said to the owner of the boat, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4). Their previous efforts to catch fish had been unsuccessful. But Simon and his brother did just as Jesus directed and were rewarded by an extraordinary take. To them and their fishing companions, James and John, it was nothing short of a miracle. Simon, the easiest to impress and the one of the four who showed his emotions most, expressed his feelings of astonishment with typical words and behavior. He fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Luke 5:8).

This exclamation opens a window into the inner man of Peter through which we can see his spiritual state. We can observe in Peter a mixture of good and evil, of grace and nature, which so frequently reappears in his character. Among the good qualities he possesses are reverential awe in the presence of Divine Power, an immediate reflection on his sin showing us his tender conscience, and a sincere self-humiliation brought about by the unmerited favor he received from the Lord. These are valuable features of character. But they did not exist in Peter without alloy. He also possessed a superstitious dread of the supernatural and a fear of God that resembled the hopeless submission of a slave. His superstitious nature is implied in the reassuring exhortation Jesus spoke to Peter, "Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men" (Luke 5:10). His slavish fear of God is even more apparent in his own words, "Depart from me, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). Peter was powerfully impressed with the super-human knowledge revealed in connection with the great catch of fish. For the moment, he regards Jesus as a supernatural being, and as such, dreads Him as one whom it is not safe to be near, especially for a poor, sinful mortal like himself. His state of mind shows how totally unfit he is at this point to be an Apostle of a gospel which magnifies the grace of God, even to the chief of sinners. His godliness, even though it is sufficiently strong and certain, is not of a Christian type. It is legal (one might almost say pagan) in spirit.

One Grand Virtue

With all their imperfections, these humble fishermen of Galilee had one grand distinguishing virtue at the outset of their career. And though this virtue may possess many defects, it is the principal one of Christian ethics and the forerunner of the ultimate in high achievement. They were animated by a devotion to Jesus and to the divine kingdom which made them capable of any sacrifice. These men believed that the One who asked them to follow Him was the Christ, and that He had come to set up God's kingdom on earth. So they immediately left their nets and joined his company to be, from that time on, His constant companions wherever He traveled. The act was acknowledged by Jesus Himself to be commendable. And we cannot try to discredit it by accusing the disciples of being lazy, discontent, or ambitious. That would be unfair. The gospel story shows that these four disciples were not lazy, but rather hard-working, industrious men. Neither were they discontented; they had no cause for discontent. The family of James and John seems to have been very comfortable materially. Mark relates that when they were called by Jesus, they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants and followed Him. But what about ambition? Did it have a place in their motives? We must admit that the Twelve, especially James and John, were by no means free from ambition, as we learn later. But to whatever extent ambition may have influenced their actions at a later point in time, it was not the motive which caused them to leave their nets. Ambition needs a temptation. It does not join a cause which is obscure and struggling, and whose success is doubtful. It strikes when success is assured, and when the movement it associates with is about to be exalted. The cause of Jesus had not gotten to that stage yet.

Only one accusation can be brought against those men, and it can be brought with truth and without harming their reputations. They were *enthusiasts*. Their hearts were on fire and their heads were turned by a dream about a divine kingdom that would be set up in Israel, with Jesus of Nazareth as its king. That dream possessed them, controlled their minds, and shaped their destinies. It compelled them, like Abraham, to leave their kindred and their country and to go forward with what might appear to be the journey of a fool. How wonderful for the world that they were possessed by the idea of the kingdom! For it was not a fool's journey that they made, leaving their nets behind. The kingdom they sought turned out to be as real as the land of Canaan, though not exactly as they had imagined it. The fishermen of Galilee did become fishers of men on a grand scale. By God's grace, many people were saved and gathered into the church. In a sense, they are still casting their nets into the sea of the world. By their witness to Jesus in the Gospels and Epistles, they are bringing multitudes to become His disciples today. And they had the joy of being His first followers.

The Twelve left all and followed their Master. Did the "all" include their wives and children? It did in at least one situation - that of Peter. The Gospels tell how Peter's mother-in-law was healed of a fever by the miraculous power of Christ (Matt. 8:14-15; Mark 1:29-31; Luke 4:38-39). From a passage in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthian church, it appears that Peter was not the only one among the Apostles who was married (I Cor. 9:5). From the same passage we learn also that leaving wives for Christ's sake did not mean literal desertion. Peter the Apostle had his wife join him as he traveled about; Peter the disciple may have done the same thing. It is likely that the married disciples were like married soldiers; they took their wives with them or left them at home as circumstances might require or allow. Women - even married women - sometimes followed Jesus. The wife of Simon, or of any other married disciple, may occasionally have been one of these women. At a much later time in the Gospel history, we find the mother of James and John in Christ's company far from home. And where mothers were, wives might also be (if they so desired). The infant church, in its original nomadic or itinerant state, seems to have been a motley band of pilgrims composed of all sorts of people. They differed as to sex, social position, and moral character. Yet they were united. The bond of their union was their fervent attachment to the person of Jesus.

This itinerant church was not an organized community. It was not necessary to be a regular member in order to be involved in true discipleship. Except for the Twelve, following Jesus from place to place was optional, not compulsory. And in most cases, it was probably only occasional. Yet when the object of their faith - the center of the circle - was in motion, they wanted to be there. Believers would naturally want to see as many of Christ's works and hear as many of His words as possible. When the object of their faith left the earth and His presence became spiritual, every reason for this nomadic discipleship was gone. To be present with Him then, men only needed to forsake their sins.