

FISHING FROM THE DOCK

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The common Christian symbol of a fish is a metaphor for what Jesus said as he called several of his disciples: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19).

Fishing for souls is a major concern of living Christian churches. In the secular world avid fishers know many secrets concerning where to fish, what bait to use, how to bring them into the net, and perhaps above all, how to clean and store the catch so as to preserve its freshness and desirability. But in many churches today we seem to have forgotten the secrets of catching and preserving our catch.

First, we seem not to know where to fish. Our comfort level is highest if we fish from the comfort and safety of the dock. But what do we catch when we fish from the dock? Generally, it's known species of fish who favor the environment under the dock. We can almost predict what we will catch.

So what happens if a new species of fish just passing by suddenly darts under the dock to grab our bait? What if it's big, fierce, and strong, like perhaps a barracuda or small shark? We can do several things. One is to cut the line. Another is to land the fish and see what it is and whether it's edible or usable before we decide to keep or release it. Another is to bring it in, impale it on a stringer, and allow it to slowly die while we decide what to do with it.

The bait we use is vital to our success. You've all been fishing with someone who seems to catch ten fish for every one you catch. Perhaps it's bait, or maybe it's technique. In any event the bait and methods we use while fishing are important, especially if we don't want to scare the fish away.

Even when we fish in the right place with the proper bait, we must still bring the hooked fish under control. This requires careful, smooth handling because fish are usually slippery and struggling against our intervention into their world.

Lastly, even if we follow all the techniques of successful fishing and succeed in bringing the fish to our net, we must still preserve them if they are to be useful.

Why do we so often persist in fishing from the dock when "out where the full tides flow" there may be millions of fish of all known sizes and species? Mostly, it's a lack of vision and our fear of being personally uncomfortable that prevents us from taking the risk of venturing where the water is deep, the tides strong, and the wind often fierce.

If we dare to leave the comfort of the dock to extend our fishing to deeper, more unfamiliar waters, we might catch some fish that are considerably different than the kinds we're used to. Some might be of a different color, or perhaps look quite different. They might resist our well-intentioned attempts to bring them into the boat. They might have been raised in a religion we tend not to understand, or even to reject. In other words, they might be a "strange breed of cat" in our monoculture of racial, social, economic, and cultural similarity. Our placid security in the womb of spiritual tradition and sameness is threatened by people who are different. They force us to look at the ways we treat strangers; the ways we fervently clutch spiritual practices they may not understand or accept; and why we are so fearful of venturing beyond the known into the danger-filled unknown. We may even have to face the sobering fact that we don't really believe what Scripture says about "going into all the earth" to reach those people in need of a Savior

But according to Scripture they need the same spiritual regeneration we do and are capable of receiving the same blessings. So perhaps we need to accept the challenge presented by Jesus when he ate and fellowshiped with tax collectors and other scorned and vilified figures of that day. Perhaps we need to say to the modern-day Pharisees advocating extreme adherence to ritual and legalism and fearing to leave our comfort zone that there are people perishing for want of truth and justice, and that they won't be reached if we remain safely comfortable on the dock of tradition and certainty