

ARE YOU A SPIRITUAL FISHERMAN?  
Dr. Reuben P. Bell, 1989

In Matthew 4:18-19 and Mark 1:16-17 we find the story of the fishermen who became disciples of Christ. As are many important factual episodes in the Gospels, this one is dealt with in the terse, unemotional style of a storyteller who is moving urgently along to the more important elements of the finish. The fact that Peter and Andrew, then James and John simply dropped their nets and followed Jesus of Nazareth at his invitation to “follow me,” is treated as any other element of the story. The enormity of the act on the part of these men is left to the reader’s appreciation. But follow him they did, without hesitation, from that moment forward.

What Jesus actually said to the men was “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” This was of course a figure of speech tailored to the moment, but in a larger sense it was a metaphorical statement of such magnitude that it has become a part of the consciousness of all Christians. Fishers of men... What could be more compelling than this image, as it has been applied over the centuries to the selfless labor of those who would be ministers in the church? It is an image that lives.

But as is so often the case, Swedenborg brings an expanded meaning to this idea in an addendum to his *Intercourse of the Soul and the Body*, a remarkable little publication of 1769. The book is a treatment of the notion of spiritual influx into the natural body, but the last entry, n. 20, is apparently freestanding and appendant. It describes an encounter with a colleague<sup>1</sup> who questions Swedenborg’s transition from philosopher (or scientist, as the word implied in Swedenborg’s day) to theologian. His reply is illuminating. He is a theologian, he says, because from his youth he has been a fisherman in the spiritual sense - a seeker of natural truths - in a similar manner to the disciples who were fishermen before their call.

He explains to his questioner that in the Word, each idea represents a spiritual concept,

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<sup>1</sup>This was likely Friedrich Oetinger, German prelate and mystic, with whom Swedenborg often corresponded. See Acton, Alfred, translator and editor, *The Letters and Memorials of Emanuel Swedenborg*, Swedenborg Scientific Association, Bryn Athyn, PA, 1955, p. 629, for the letter that likely prompted this recollection.

beyond the obvious intent of the literal sense, and in this case, “fisherman” represents “a person who hunts out and teaches natural truths.” These comments are followed by an explanation that references to water in the Word mean things that are true on the natural level, and that fish means those who are involved in these truths. By this principle then, fishermen means people who hunt out and teach natural truths. As a seeker since youth of these truths, Swedenborg explains that it is only natural for his journey to culminate in the pursuit of spiritual truths as well as the natural, for “these latter are based on the former.” “Besides,” says his companion, “what Christian theologian is there who has not studied philosophy in his school days?”

So in the Writings the idea of fishermen, or “fishers of men,” as they are called in the New Testament story, is enlarged to include a new category of person. Just as the Word presents ideas on two planes simultaneously, the natural and the spiritual, so shall we come to appreciate a new kind of fisherman for our New Church, to complement the well-known figure of the priest. The scientist, scholar, layman or philosopher who is called to “Come, follow me,” may be called just as surely as the minister, but from a different place, and in a different way. He or she is called to the pursuit of spiritual truths by systematically tracing the natural progression of knowledge to its source in the Lord - Creator of the universe; order itself. By following this call a different kind of fisherman is born, not to the duties of the chancel, or the government of the church, but to “hunt out and teach truths,” to any who will have them.