



The Art of Manfishing







The Art of Manfishing

A Puritan's view of Evangelism

Thomas Boston



Introduction by
J I Packer

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INTRODUCTION

By J. I. Packer

I

In January, 1699, 22-year old Thomas Boston, already a licensed preacher in the Church of Scotland though not yet a parish pastor, 'wrote a soliloquy on the art of man-fishing'. The soliloquy has the form of a sermonic meditation addressed to himself on Christ as his model for his ministry of the word. In the memoirs which Boston edited for his children in 1730, as his life neared its end, he recalled how it happened.

6th January 1699, reading in secret, my heart was touched with Matt. iv. 19, 'Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.' My soul cried out for accomplishing of that to me, and I was very desirous to know how I might follow Christ, so as to become a fisher of men; and for my own instruction in that point, I addressed myself to the consideration of it in that manner... That scribble gives an idea of the then temper of my spirit...¹

The 'scribble', so Boston tells us, was never finished (not that it leaves any sense of incompleteness when read today), and no one outside the family saw it till





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it was published in 1773. Since then, however, it has been constantly hailed by evangelicals as a masterpiece on ministry, worthy to stand on the same shelf as Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*, and it is in those terms that I commend it now.

The idea of a beginner preacher of 22 producing a spiritual masterpiece is startling, no doubt. But Boston was an unusual man. He had been brought up by godly, conscientious Presbyterian parents (as a child he had on one occasion accompanied his father to gaol for the latter's nonconformity). He had been soundly converted at age 11, through the ministry of Henry Erskine, a veteran saint in his sixties who had been one of the two thousand Puritan clergy ejected in 1662 and who during the winter of 1687 was minister of a church four miles from Boston's home. His father took him to hear Erskine, a spiritual impact was made immediately, and then 'in the winter, sometimes it was my lot to go alone, without so much as the benefit of a horse to carry me through Blackadder water, the wading whereof in sharp frosty weather I very well remember. But such things were then easy, for the benefit of the word, which came with power.'² 'Sure I am, I was in good earnest concerned for a saving interest in Jesus Christ; my soul went out after him, and the place of his feet was glorious in my eyes.'³ He and two other Christian boys from his school 'met frequently in a chamber in my father's house, for prayer, reading the Scriptures, and spiritual conference; whereby



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we had some advantage, both in point of knowledge and tenderness.⁴ Boston's lifelong habits of self-scrutiny, prayer, and Bible reading with systematic meditation, were formed at that time.

There is more to be said. As Boston had a sensitive spirit, so he had a first-class mind, a retentive memory, and a way with words. He was always a man who thought best with a pen in his hands, writing out ideas and arguments as they came to him. He had matured early; his theological convictions were clear, his sense of call to a preaching and shepherding ministry was strong, and his insight into the vistas opened by biblical texts was already deep. The qualities that were later to lead Jonathan Edwards to describe him as 'a truly great divine' were already in evidence, and the power to speak to the heart that is sustained throughout his later and greater treatise, *The Fourfold State* (1720), was there too.

Put all of this together, and the star quality of *The Art of Man-Fishing*, while still breath-taking, becomes at least intelligible.

II

Boston was a mainstream Scottish Puritan (to use the word that fits; 'Puritan' was not used in Scotland as a label in the way it was in England). The Puritan type of faith and piety received its classic formulation in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, which were

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the authorised standards of the Church of Scotland in Boston's day. It will help us to appreciate the pastoral theology of the *Art* if we remind ourselves of the main features of the Puritan outlook, as the Westminster documents display them.

The Westminster standards were drawn up by the veritable cream of English and Scottish clergy. Working in the middle years of the 1640s, they had behind them as resources and models, establishing perimeters, parameters, and trajectories for their thought, the sixteenth century Reformed confessions, including the Anglican 39 Articles which they were charged to supersede; the legacy of theological exposition that began with Calvin and Knox; more than a century of intense international debate, carried on in print, regarding Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Arminian deviations from Reformed views; dozens of catechisms produced by Puritan pastors, and a great deal of catechising experience; much published exegetical and expository work on the biblical text, from both Catholic and Protestant scholars; and, last but not least, a mass of 'practical affectionate' English Puritan treatises on conversion and the inner devotional realities of the Christian life. Basic to Westminster's theological method was belief in the divinely inspired truth and coherence of the Bible, and a resolve to affirm only that which could be verified and vindicated





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from Scripture itself, as a faithful echo of God's own teaching. Drawing on the resources listed above, and hewing conscientiously at every point to the line of Scripture, Westminster theology was masterful in style as well as masterly in substance, and it is no wonder that it shaped Presbyterian and Reformed theology both sides of the Atlantic so decisively.

Westminster theology is trinitarian, and centres on the way in which mankind's Creator and Judge became mankind's Redeemer and Saviour through the outworking of a plan that casts Jesus Christ, the God-man, in the role of Mediator and the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, in the role of the Life-giver. The plan is like an ellipse with two foci: focus one is the covenant of grace whereby, on the basis of Christ's righteousness and blood-shedding, relations between the Creator and his human creatures are restored; focus two is union with Christ by the Spirit in regeneration whereby fallen human nature is remade. In all of this the Lord Jesus Christ himself, God incarnate who redeemed, rose, reigns, and will one day return to judgement, becomes the direct object of faith, hope, love and joy. The world-wide church, of which all Christian congregations are members, is the sphere of salvation as it maintains the ministry of the word and sacraments and worships God according to his command. Christ is the Head of the church and through the Spirit the



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source of all its spiritual life, and the church must be the Christian's home as long as he is in this world. Such in a nutshell is the theology of Westminster.

Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the Confession and Catechisms is the Puritan concept of conversion as a process that begins with awakening from spiritual complacency to spiritual unease as one faces the reality of one's sin, and leads on through questings for faith, repentance, and a new life with God, to a God-given confidence that one has been divinely enabled to turn from sin to a self-abandoning trust in Christ, the sin-bearer, as one's Lover, Lord, and Life, and that one's heart has been renewed in the process. Boston's idea of the minister as a 'fisher of men' is that through his public ministry in the pulpit and his private ministry of one-to-one admonition God will work in people's hearts to bring them to this place of settled commitment, where they can confirm their assurance of being alive to God by noting the ongoing change in their inner being.

Believing that the fallen human heart is desperately prone to optimistic self-deception, Westminster Puritans stressed the need for constant self-suspicion and self-examination. There was nothing of morbid introspection about this; on the contrary, it was experienced as a bracing and reassuring exercise, as the regenerate discerned within themselves the signs of life from the Holy Spirit. Boston, facing the fact that only



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those alive in Christ can follow Christ, himself takes time in the early pages of the *Art* to examine himself in this way.

I think I have Spirit; that is, that I have life... from the following grounds... I have light that before I did not have.... This light lets me see my heart-sins... and is still discovering the baseness of my heart to me.... It makes me see Christ as precious... makes me trust in him... I lean on him for help in his own work... in temptations and trials, I endeavour to lift up my soul to him. I feel help... from the Spirit.... Many times I have gone to prayer very dead, and have come away with life... I find a threefold flame, though weak, in my heart. (a) A flame of love to Christ... I have a love to his truths... I love the promises... I love his threatenings as most just . . . I love those in whom the image of God appears... I love his work... I love his ordinances... I love his glory, that he should be glorified, come of me what will. (b) I find in my heart a flame of desires toward the righteousness of Christ... My soul... acquiesces in justification by an imputed righteousness... Sometimes my soul longs... to be dissolved, and to be with Christ... (c) I find in my heart some heat of zeal for God... I move forward towards heaven... I am more acquainted with Christ and his ways than before... there is a growth of love in me... I can, I think, trust God more now than before... my soul is habitually more watchful than before. Nor do





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I dare give such liberty to my heart as sometimes
I gave... I see growth of contempt of the world.
And this, blessed be God, is on the increase in me
(pp. 50ff.).

Evangelism was not a word that Boston knew, but evangelism, in the sense of awakening the unconverted to their need of Christ, leading them to faith and repentance, and establishing them in the new life to which his own self-analysis testifies, is what 'man-fishing' meant to him, and it was this skill that he sought to learn from the example of Jesus' own soul-winning service.



III



Puritan evangelism, as carried on by preaching and pastoral admonition, took time, and was expected to take time. Strong sudden impressions from God about particular spiritual issues would frequently occur as the word of God was preached, but ministers in the Westminster tradition were realistic about the likelihood that the conversion process from start to finish would take months, just as the gestation and final birth of a human baby does. In this, men like Boston have an important lesson to teach us today. Since mass evangelism on neutral ground, led by a freelance who specialises in this particular activity, became a regular feature of the Christian scene, the concept of

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conversion as typically a short, sharp affair that can be precisely narrated and dated has become normative for evangelical minds. Clearly, its source is the evangelistic rally, where, after warming up and softening up preliminaries, the evangelist speaks of human sin and divine grace, appeals for commitment to Christ, and passes on those persuaded to counsellors, who help them to make their commitment firm. Our romantic imaginations are right to recognise receiving Jesus Christ as Saviour from the guilt and power of sin and Lord of one's life henceforth as the essence of conversion, but wrong to fancy that the whole process ordinarily starts and ends within an hour or two; just as we are wrong to imagine, as we sometimes do, that any happy results from the rally depend in a decisive way on the evangelist's special gifts and the quality of his performance.

Realism requires us to face the fact that though God may prompt special evangelistic ventures, and use them in a spectacular way to advance or complete the conversion process, that process usually has many other stages, in all of which the decisive factor is the sovereignty of God's grace. The main way in which God advances conversion, in our day as in Boston's, is through the sustained faithfulness of parents, friends, and church teachers witnessing, instructing, and encouraging informally, and of preachers expounding the gospel from Scripture in worship contexts. The

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first requirement, therefore, in the church's unending work of 'man-fishing' is that these activities go on incessantly, shaped by clear and serious purpose and backed by earnest importunity in prayer.

IV

Boston wrote the *Art* when he was a probationer preacher looking forward to a life of parochial ministry. Naturally, therefore, it was the demands, problems, and pitfalls of his present and future role that concerned him most, and the second half of the work is taken up with exploring what following Christ in faithful ministry involves. From this standpoint, the *Art* is a classic text which any minister of the word in any age might well use for an annual check-up. Certainly, we who preach will never get beyond its clear-sighted, challenging, searching wisdom, of which the following is a rough summary.

The call of God to shepherd his flock (says Boston) requires us to model ourselves on Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master, in at least the following particulars:

1. Faithfulness, even when it runs the risk of upsetting people and turning them against us. We must renounce the 'carnal policy' of trimmers and time-servers who tone God's message down, and must present the realities of sin and grace forthrightly, rebuking where necessary, pulling no punches, and leaving the outcome to God.





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2. Evangelistic purpose. 'Christ had the good of souls in his eye.... When you preach, let this be your design, to seek to recover lost sheep ... to get some converted, and brought in to your Master.'

3. Prayerfulness. Christ spent time and energy in prayer both before and after his preaching of the word, and we need to do the same.

4. Single-mindedness, free from any form of the personal profit motive.

5. Enterprise in usefulness. Jesus took every opportunity 'to instruct, rebuke, etc., from such things as offered,' both one to one and in larger companies. So must we: so 'learn the heavenly chemistry of extracting some spiritual things out of earthly things,' and 'do not refuse any occasion of preaching when God calls you to it.' 'If Christ should come and find you idle, when he is calling you to work, how will you be able to look him in the face? They are well that die at Christ's work.' These are the last words of the book.

A century and a half after Boston's time, another Scotsman, Horatius Bonar, wrote a powerful hortatory hymn on Christian ministry which, whether he realised it or not, capsules perfectly the admonitions of Boston's Art. My guess (which of course I cannot prove) is that he knew his Boston so well that he could not think of ministry save in Bostonian terms. His hymn is certainly another admirable text for the minister's periodic self-assessment, and the best way to end this introduction

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will be to quote it in full. This, then, is what Boston's message to us amounts to.

Go, labour on; spend and be spent;
Thy joy to do the Father's will;
It is the way the Master went:
Should not the servant tread it still?

Go, labour on while it is day;
The world's dark night is hastening on;
Speed, speed thy work; cast sloth away;
It is not thus that souls are won.

Toil on, faint not, keep watch, and pray;
Be wise the erring soul to win;
Go forth into the world's highway,
Compel the wanderer to come in.

Toil on, and in thy toil rejoice;
For toil comes rest, for exile home;
Soon shalt thou hear the Bridegroom's voice,
The midnight cry, 'Behold, I come!'

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Notes

1. *Memoirs of Thomas Boston* (Banner of Truth, 1988), p.48.
2. p. 10.
3. *ibid.*
4. p. 11.





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AH! Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? This day seems to be a day of darkness and gloominess; the glory is departed even to the threshold of the temple. We may call ordinances Ichabod; and name the faithful preachers of Scotland no more Naomi, but Mara, for the Lord deals bitterly with them, in so much forsaking his ordinances as at this day. The Lord hath forsaken them in a great measure, as to success attending their labours. They toil all the night; but little or nothing is caught; few or none can they find to come into the net. So that Jeremiah's exercise may be theirs, 'If ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears' (13:17)

And thou, O my soul, mayst make this thy exercise, if thou hadst a heart that could mourn either for thyself or others. Though indeed it is no great wonder that God does not countenance with much success the like of me, who (if I may or dare class myself among those that are faithful) am the meanest, the most unworthy of them all, not worthy to take his covenant in my





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mouth, who am a child in piety and the mystery of godliness, though not in years; who am a poor fool, having a weak heart and a shallow head; who might rather be learning of others than teaching them; who can but wade about the outer parts of that depth, into which others can enter far; who have so little love to Christ, and so little pure zeal for his glory; can say so little for the truth, and so little against error; who am altogether unworthy and insufficient for these things; no wonder, I say, God does not countenance me, when others, that are as tall cedars in the Lord's vineyard, do so little good, even others that are great men in the church for piety and learning. But yet seeing I am called out to preach this everlasting gospel, it is my duty to endeavour, and it is my desire to be (Lord, thou knowest) a fisher of men.

But, alas! I may come in with my complaints to my Lord, that I have toiled in some measure, but caught nothing, for anything I know, as to the conversion of any one soul. I fear I may say, I have almost spent my strength in vain, and my labour for nought, for Israel is not gathered. O my soul, what may be the cause of this, why does my preaching so little good? No doubt part of the blame lies on myself, and a great part of it too.

But who can give help in this case but the Lord himself? and how can I expect it from him but by prayer, and faith in the promises, and by consulting his word, where I may, by his Spirit shining on my heart,

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(shine, O Sun of righteousness), learn how to carry, and what to do, to the end the gospel preached by me may not be unsuccessful?

Therefore did my heart cry out after Christ this day, and my soul was moved, when I read that sweet promise of Christ: Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men (Matt. 4:19), directed to those that would follow him. O how fain would my soul follow him, as on other accounts, so on this, that I might be honoured to be a fisher of men; therefore my soul would fain know what sort of following Christ this is, to which this sweet promise is annexed. I would know it, (Lord, thou knowest), that I might do it, and so catch poor souls by the gospel, and that I might know whether I have a right to this promise or not.

O let thy light and thy truth shine forth, that they may be guides to me in this matter; and let the meditations of my heart be according to thy mind, and directed by thy unerring Spirit. Grant light and life, O Lord my God.





PART ONE

THE PROMISE AND THE DUTY





Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. In these words there are two things to be considered.

1. There is a duty, *Follow me*

Wherein consider first the object, *me*, even the Lord Jesus Christ, the chief fisher of men, who was sent by the Father to gather in the lost sheep of the house of Israel, who was and is the infinitely-wise God, and so knew the best way to catch men, and can instruct men how to be fishers of others.

Next, consider the act, *Follow* (Gr. *come after*) *me*: Leave your employment, and come after me. Though no doubt there is a direction here to all the ministers of the gospel, that have left their other employments, and betaken themselves to the preaching of the word, viz., that if they would do good to souls, and gain them by their ministry, then they are to imitate Christ, in their carriage and preaching, to make him their pattern, to write after his copy, as a fit mean for gaining of souls.



2. There is a promise annexed to the duty

Wherein we may consider:

(a) The benefit promised; that is, to be *made fishers of men*; which I take to be not only an investing of them with authority, and a calling of them to the office, but also a promise of the success they should have, that fishing of men should be their employment, and they should not be employed in vain, but following Christ, they should indeed catch men by the gospel.

(b) The fountain-cause of this, *I, I will make you*; none other can make you fishers of men but me.

Thou mayest observe first then, O my soul, *that it is the Lord Jesus Christ that makes men fishers of men*. Here I shall shew:

- (1) How Christ makes men fishers of men.
- (2) Why unconverted men are compared to fish in the water.
- (3) That ministers are fishers by office.

