

Taking Men Alive

BY CHARLES GALLAUDET TRUMBULL

Though Charles G. Trumbull's *Taking Men Alive* was written seventy-five years ago, this selection from it offers us timeless help in answering these questions: What should I be thinking about when I am trying to help a non-Christian become a believer? How can I develop tact in speaking about Christ? What do I say about sinful habits in a non-Christian's lifestyle? How can I help him be interested in my message?

When we are face to face with a witness-opportunity — which means face to face with one whom we should win to Christ — how shall we begin? What are we thinking most about as we prepare to come in close? Shall we be hunting in our memory for a Bible text to quote? Shall we be running over in our mental notebook the various groups or classifications of “cases,” so we can decide in which pigeonhole this “case” belongs? Shall we try to remember how this or that noted soul-winner worked?

If we concentrate on any of these, we miss the most important factor in the situation. When a man is fishing with rod and line and fly, and is about to cast what holds his chief attention? It is the fish, is it not? He must forget everything else in an absorbed, alert watching. He must know his fish and its interests.

If we would take a man alive for Christ, we must first of all know something about that man and his present interests. Our knowledge may be gained in ten seconds, or in ten months. But as a first step toward winning the man himself, we must devote our whole energy to knowing the man.

Therefore it is he who must fill our whole horizon as we prepare to come close to him. We must not be thinking about others, but about this other — this one person out of the whole universe.

This is the simple secret of “tact” — that mysterious power which a few favored ones seem to possess. But “tact” is simply “touch” — a touch on the right spot rather than the wrong, a touch which will win another rather than antagonize him, a touch in keeping with his present interests, rather than opposed to them. The art of taking men alive calls for tact at the very beginning — which means, first of all, knowing your man.

Concentrating all our attention on the individual at the outset, so that we know what interests him, enables us to put forward something that will attract and hold his attention. In fishing, the attractive thing thus put forward by the fisherman is called “bait.” And bait is the prime essential in the man-fishing to which Christ called his disciples, and in which he promises to train them to expertise.

For let us bear in mind that we are in the business of winning men to Christ. We cannot win by antagonizing. And we must win by drawing men to us as a first step in drawing them to Christ.

REACHING TIRED, DISCOURAGED MEN

It is the other man's interests — just as they are, not as we think they ought to be — that we must recognize and work with. We cannot expect others to cross over from their interests to ours until we have first crossed over from our interests to theirs.

The Master Fisherman has given us a striking instance of the use of this bait principle in how he won some of his first disciples.

He had the whole world to choose from when he began the special training of the few men with whom he was to entrust his work of winning the world to himself. Several of these chosen few were fishermen, and one of their earliest lessons in soul-winning was taught through a miraculous fishing experience that Jesus gave them.

Even the Son of God did not take for granted that men would be interested in him or his message until he had first interested himself in them. Shall we expect to do better than he? If not, we must be willing to work as he did.

In Luke 5:1-11, let us watch him at work on the lakeside.

He is teaching the eager multitude the word of God. But — always more interested in the individual than the crowd — he is watching some fishermen nearby home he knows, and whom he has been trying to awaken to a sense of his mission. So he asks one of them to help by permitting the use of his boat as a pulpit, and then he goes on with his message to the multitude.

What indication of response or interest do we have from the fishermen at this point? None at all. The reason is plain enough. They had had a profitless, exhausting night of it in their trade. A fisherman does not mind getting tired out by hard work if he has a boatload of fish to show for his efforts. But to work all night and take nothing! The physical exhaustion then is doubled by the discouragement. And the nets have to be cleaned, too, just as though the catch had been a big one! Washing nets, at its best is pretty dull business, but washing nets that have stayed empty all night is enough to take the heart out of any man.

It was a cheerless, discouraging day that was just breaking for those bred men by the sea. What if a great teacher was expounding precious spiritual truth within earshot? Human nature wanted none of that — just then. Could any human being have been expected to be interested in spiritual matters under those circumstances? Jesus knew how it was. It did not call for his supernatural insight to appreciate that the men he was trying to train were more interested in the fish they had failed to catch that morning than in anything else in the universe.

Yet this fact instead of making him impatient or deterring him from any attempt to go on with their training, was to him a challenge and an invitation. It was his opportunity to use tact. He must touch them at the pint of the present interest, unworthy though these interests might seem in comparison with higher spiritual matters. He must use a bait that would attract these men just as they were, without waiting until they should come of their own accord to worthier interests.

Fish — the fish they hadn't caught — were their present interest. Fish, then, must be the bait. So his first word to them is, "Put out into the deep, and let down your nets for a catch." They protest, of course. But because his very manner showed them that he was intent on giving their own temporal interests his supreme attention, they yielded. And then — after he had given them such unforgettable proof of his genuine interest in them, and they had taken care of the nets that were breaking and the boats that were sinking from the fish which he had helped them catch — they were ready to think of other things than fish. They were ready to be interested in *anything* Jesus had to offer, because he had first interested himself in them.

Now, and not until now, can Christ hope for a response as he says, in effect, "I have helped you to catch fish: I want you to help me catch men. From now on you shall take men alive." Christ took them as they were, not as he would have liked them to be.

How differently most of us would have handled that situation! How we would have stormed and protested and argued with those men, indignantly urging them to forget their fish for a few minutes and turn I their attention to something worthwhile!

How surprised or hurt or discouraged we have been in our own experiences because those upon whom we have urged the blessings of life in Christ are obviously and persistently more interested in the unworthy affairs of this unworthy world! But have we ever studied their "unworthy" interests in any absorbing way in order to be of genuine service to them? If we have not, we are failing in a first principle of the art upon which depends our success in the Great Commission.

THE BAIT OF HONEST PRAISE

We cannot do today just as Christ did by the lakeside — work a miracle to win men's interest. But there is another kind of bait that is within the reach of us all, and which calls for no miracle. It is a bait that Jesus himself used freely in his soul-winning.

This is the bait of honest praise. It will land the most slippery human fish alive. No man can resist it. A heartily spoken word of sincere commendation for a fellow-being will disarm opposition and draw him to us more effectively than any other method. It is the best human bait in the world.

Perhaps one reason why honest praise is so effective in challenging a person's interest is because it is so rare. A friend of mine, passing through a town on his travels, saw an old gray-haired man hard at work on the roadway. He greeted the toiler pleasantly:

"That's a good piece of work you're doing."

The old man stopped, straightened up, looked the man over, then said slowly:

"Say, you don't live in this town, do you?"

"No, why?" asked the visitor.

"I've been working here twenty years, and you're the first man who ever told me anything like that." Which was probably sober fact.

But you may say, that's all well enough with a person whom you *can* praise, but suppose you are working with one whom you *cannot*?

Wait a moment! One whom we cannot praise? That person does not live. If we think that we have ever met such a one, the fault is with ourselves, not with the seemingly unlovely person.

And what shall we say of denouncing another's specific sin, or criticizing him for some shortcoming or fault? Would that be a good way to begin? Is criticism or denunciation likely to draw two people close together?

It certainly has no place in the work of individual soul-winning. Christ himself did not use it in that work.

Let us bear in mind that the first principle of this work is the drawing of men to us, not the driving of men away.

Fishermen do not thrash the water or throw stones at the fish when they begin fishing.

THE INDIVIDUAL HAS FIRST PLACE

Winning and caring for the *individual* soul is the most important work in the kingdom, given preferred place by Christ for himself and for ourselves. Christ's teaching and example on this are unmistakable.

Seven of the eleven apostles who stayed true to him were won by his personal appeal to them as individuals, and probably the other four were also.

Jesus taught that the ninety and nine are to be left in order to seek and find the one lost (Matthew 18:12-13).

In this picture of the judgment, one's eternal life or death is determined by the test of having ministered "unto *one* of the least of these my brethren" (Matthew 25:40).

On the evening before his crucifixion, alone in the upper room with his trusted eleven friends, Jesus prayed to the Father in joyous acknowledgment of the completion of the work for which he had lived: "These [my disciples] knew that thou didst send me: and I mad known unto them thy name" (John 17:25-26). He was not thinking now of the multitude that he had addressed, but of the little group of individuals he had won. His lifework was a success because these few had been won. And the work for which he had come and in which he had thus succeeded, was the continuing work which he committed to them and to us; "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21).

The cry of the individual rang louder and carried more weight with our Lord than the word of the crowd. Jesus turned from the many to ascertain the need of one, and to meet that need.

LOOKING CLOSER AT CHRIST'S EXAMPLE

While it is true that we have work to do *for* Christ, we have not *Christ's* work to do. He did many things, some of which we ought not to do, others of which we cannot do. We are not Messiahs. We are not Saviors. We are not to seek to imitate the details of all that the Messiah and Savior did. *But we are his messengers and representatives*, and we must work in accordance with his principles.

Christ's mission was to win men to him, not to drive them from him. He came not to tell chiefly about sin and death, but about salvation and life. "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). To dwell on the dark side drives men from us; to dwell on the bright side draws them to us, if they can be won at all.

Christ's method of revealing his mission was to give prominent attention to their present interests, and to commend the good in men rather than criticizing the evil.

HE BEGAN WITH PRESENT INTERESTS

With the sinful woman of Samaria who had come to draw water from the well of Jacob, Jesus began with a request for a drink of water, and from that starting point of her interest he led her — lovingly, skillfully, with out any direct condemnation of her great sin — to the point where she was ready to confess her sin, to believe in his declaration of Messiahship, and to bring a whole city under his influence (John 4:5-26).

With Nicodemus, a trained and scholarly Pharisee whose chief interest was the rabbinical study of the kingdom of God and the Jews' place in that kingdom, Jesus needed to use no indirect means at all. Seizing at once upon that which interested Nicodemus most, he revealed to him his ignorance of the kingdom, and his need for that which Christ alone could offer (John 3:1-21).

With the multitude that had been miraculously fed, Jesus went at once to the shallow bottom of their interest — more bread — and held them absorbed until he could tell them of the true bread out of heaven. To their cry, "Lord, evermore give us this bread," he could answer with the good news: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:25-35).

When a heartbroken sister ran to meet him to tell him of her brother's death, his first word was to remind her lovingly of the resurrection in which she believed. From that he could tell her in whom was the hope of the resurrection for all, and it was not difficult to bring her to the confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of God" (John 11:18-27).

Jesus always seemed to connect himself intimately with the interest of the person whom he hoped to help. When the disciple Thomas showed that his chief interest was honest doubt over Christ's resurrection story as told to him by the others, Jesus unhesitatingly met the doubter just where he was, and dispelled the doubt (John 20:24-28).

HE DID NOT CONDEMN

Christ never began his message to any individual or group of persons by condemnation of sin. He did not hesitate to denounce sin and sinful persons under certain circumstances. But when he set out to win a person to himself, it seemed to be his resolute purpose to find something in that person which he could commend, and then to commend it in all heartiness.

For example, his first recorded word to faulty Simon was, “Thou art Simon the son of John: thou shalt be called Rock” (John 1:42), as though to say, “for you deserve a stalwart name.” So also with Nathanael. There is no reason to suppose that Jesus could not have found, and did not see, any sin in Nathanael, but instead of condemning that which was there, Jesus’ first word was in outspoken, hearty admiration of this man, in that he was particularly free from deceit (John 1:47).

We must learn to work in that way, if we would take men alive as Christ did.

Christ singled out Zacchaeus — a man in whom there was evidently little that was likable — for the honor of a visit, implying confidence in the man’s best side (Luke 19:1-10). The entire absence of any word of criticism by Christ of everything in the man’s life that was open to criticism, the triumphant outburst of the man’s higher nature as the result of this unexpected kind of treatment, and our Lord’s hearty word of commendation at his response — could there be a plainer example of Christ’s endorsement of the principle of approval and praise in soul-winning?

The scribe to whom Jesus said, after they had talked about love being better than burnt offerings, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God,” must have had a quickened sense of the power and saving work of the young Teacher from Nazareth (Mark 12:28-34).

Over and over again Jesus strengthened faith by recognizing or commending faith. Or, when faith in him was already strong, he did not hesitate to render a tribute to its nobleness which must have led faith on to still deeper possibilities. Study in Matthew the cases of the centurion of Capernaum (8:5-13), the woman who touched Christ’s garment in the crowd (9:20-22), the two blind men (9:27-29), or the Syro Phoenician woman (15:21-28), or Bartimaeus the blind beggar in Mark (10:46-52), or the sinful woman at the house of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7:36-50, or the grateful leper of the border of Samaria in Luke 17:11-19.

Jesus sought to find points of agreement with those whom he would win. To those to whom the law and the prophets were vital matters of religion and conduct he said, “Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I came not to destroy, but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17-19). And he enlarged upon this until there was no room for any honest doubt about his meaning.

He led his followers to think most about what they *believed*, not what they were in doubt about — another cardinal principle of success in soul-winning.

He refused to offer “proof” to those who he knew, had no honest desire for proof nor any wish to believe in him or to ascertain the truth. Yet he was ready to furnish proof to one who *wanted* to believe (John 20:25-27).

If the Scriptures were prominent in the interest of those whom he addressed, he recognized that interest by quoting Scripture. But if some other interest was more prominent in the immediate life of the one with whom he dealt, that other interest was given prior place at the outset.

Always his enduring purpose seemed to be to convince men and women that they were dear to him and to the Father just as they were. Faulty, sinning, unworthy, discouraged — it mattered not, if they would but let him come close alongside.

OUR ENDURING PURPOSE

The enduring purpose of Jesus as a man must also be our enduring purpose: to get close alongside of men, just as they are, in order to show them that they are dear to us and to our Savior who would be theirs.

Our own personal shortcomings must not deter us. What Christ is — not what we are — is our message. We speak as saved sinners, not as superior beings — though doing this work is bound to have a powerfully uplifting influence upon our personal life and character.

Our work is simply telling others of our experience of Christ’s love, so that they may share it. This does not demand an expert knowledge of the Bible or theology, nor skill and power in argument and discussion. It does call for unshaken knowledge of what Jesus Christ had done for us, and a deeply rooted purpose to share that knowledge with others. We must know Christ and we must know the one to whom we would make Christ attractive.

A life-resolve that every Christian worker ought to consider is this: “Whenever I am in close enough intimacy with someone as to be justified in choosing our subject of conversation, the Theme of Themes shall have prominence between us, so that I may learn his need, and, if possible, meet it.” Notice that this shuts our indiscriminate, haphazard efforts, such as approaching utter strangers with an enquiry concerning their souls. It conforms to the usual and proper courtesies of life. It respects a man’s individuality, but recognizes the Theme of Themes as worthy of a place in any conversation which we have the right to direct.

Because this is the most effective sort of warfare against the devil, it is the kind of effort which the devil most bitterly opposes, seeking always to persuade us away from it by the subtle, poisonous suggestion that we may harm the cause of Christ if we attempt it just now.

But the encouragements in this work are greater than the difficulties. We have only the devil working against us: we have God working with us.

The best way to begin in this work is to begin. The best time to begin is now. The only mistake we need really fear is the mistake of holding off.