

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

Dr. George O. Wood

In the next few weeks now as a church we're going to be going through a lot of change and transition. How will we respond to the change? A study has been done at the University of Washington and found 43 crises and changes not likely to cause us problems. He devised a rating scale that measured approximately the impact of the life changing events upon us. He had 43 things, which were ranked in order of impact upon us. Then to each event that occurred he assigned an impact unit. He said that if you have more than 200 impact units hit you in any given year you are a chief candidate for a possible physical or mental breakdown.

The top ten of the 43 were things like the death of a spouse which measured 100 impact units, divorce – 73, marital separation – 65, a jail term – 63, the death of a close family member – 63, personal injury or illness – 53, marriage – 50 (not every change is necessarily a negative thing. He's talking about the impact that marriage makes upon our life. It creates 50 impacts of stress. Some of you who are not married do not believe that.) fired from work – 47 impact units, marital reconciliation – 45, retirement – 45.

Some of the others down the list are things like in-law trouble, which only gets a 29. It may be higher as far as you're concerned. A change in residence or a change in schools gets about a 20 rating. Christmas gets 12. A minor violation of the law gets 11. But when you take all of the 43 things he has on the list and look through your life in the last 12 months, if you have more than 200 impact units he says there's too much change and stress going on in your life.

That got me thinking a little bit. I said to myself what are the 10 top stress producing events that a church could have. I've grown up in church. I'm a preacher's kid myself. So I think I've had a chance to observe what happens in churches, both on a personal level growing up as a young person and now in my experience of pastoring this church for the last ten years and watching other churches.

I am not a sociologist so I can't measure the stress impact units. But if you were to ask me to evaluate what 10 things can produce the most stress in a church in order of ranking I would put them in this category.

The moral failure on the part of the minister, the pastor I think I would rate as the number one stress on a church. I've watched churches that have gone through that kind of thing and the devastation produced is like nothing else a church can go through.

A split within the congregation over personality clashes. I'd rate as another high stress impact producing thing on a church.

Or next to it, a split over doctrine. I would rate a split over personality clashes as more severe than a split over doctrine.

A split within the church over direction. Some people wanting to do this, and some wanting to do that. And no reconciliation.

Another stress producing event. Dissatisfaction with the current church leadership.

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

Another stress producing event in a church – moral failure on the part of a church leader other than the pastor. Especially moral failure that is not dealt with in a proper manner.

Another stress producing thing – a building program that no one wants.

Financial cutback or bankruptcy would have to produce stress.

Destruction of church facilities through fire, flood or disaster. About five years ago we had a fire in the office. It produced a lot of stress. It meant a lot of things had to be changed.

I would rank tenth on the top stress producing events of a church as relocation. I looked at that list and thought, isn't it wonderful that we're only going through this tenth most stress producing event. We skipped all the first nine. It helps you get the current move in perspective, doesn't it?

That's not really my text today. My text is on coping with change and transition in environment and stress. I use that as an introduction. I'm going to do something I very rarely do as a preacher. I'm going to take a couple verses out of context. I'm going to quote them as a jumping off point to a topical message that I felt like I wanted to give to you on this last Sunday morning here.

One is Job 12:8 where Job simply has in his phrase "Let the fish of the sea inform you." And another is Matthew 13:47 where Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that is let down into the sea and caught all kinds of fish [which of course we are]."

I'm going to use the word "fish" rather broadly also to jump outside of its scientific classification to simply stand for animals that live in the sea. So I will ask the question, What kind of fish are you? I want to use four animals of the sea that represent the various kinds of people that are caught in the net of the kingdom of God and how these sea creatures respond to their environment and change maybe much like we do responding to our environment and change.

The first "fish" I will use is the clam.

Some of us in nature are kind of like clams in responding to our world. There are many different kinds of clams. I'm not a scientist, a marine biologist. But I'll simply make some broad generalizations that apply to all clams.

One thing about a clam that characterizes it is a generally a clam has a fixed location. It needs an exact kind of spot. It can be in the mud, in the rock or the sand. But it has to be in one spot to really survive well. I've found that there are times in my own Christian experience that I manifest this kind of fixed location behavior. It may be the fact that always I find myself more comfortable sitting right here but why do I never set on that side? Because part of me is fixed.

Some of you are like that in respect to were you set in the sanctuary. You're going to be terribly disoriented next Sunday in looking at a different arrangement of pews. They're on two sides but they're longer. It's a whole different environment. One of the things we have to do with a clamish nature is to recognize we like fixed locations.

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

There are certain kinds of ways that I like to eat. I like to slip away in the morning for my cup of coffee, my newspaper. I've now learned to eat one egg and a piece of toast. But I still have my chocolate doughnut for desert. That has to be almost as regular, very fixed.

A person who becomes extreme in the clammy nature begins to adopt an attitude in respect of this matter of having a fixed location, like "Don't confuse me with the facts; my mind's made up. I'm planted and fixed and I'm not changing."

Another quality of the clam is not only does it need a fixed location but it has a very limited appetite. The clam is not able to go out and actively seek food. So it feeds on whatever happens to be there. Not only that but it cannot use food that is too large. Nor can it use food that is too small. It needs food that is, in effect, prepackaged. If the food is too large it can't digest it. If it's too small it won't take it in. This speaks to me in a spiritual sense of a limited tolerance of spiritual food, coupled with an immobility to go out and seek it so that in effect we have to look at the spiritual diet we receive. Are there some books we stay away from, some parts of scripture we stay away from, some sermons we don't really get anything out of because they are in effect too large a bite for us and we don't want to be expanded.

On the other hand is it possible that sometimes we miss out on the smaller things God is sending or way to help us become more alert in the specific details of our life as a Christian person?

One of the things that we have striven for and sought for and prayed for in our church fellowship is a wide variety of Christian expressions across a lot of other of areas.

A clam is marked by a fixed location, a limited appetite and...A defensive response.

What does the clam do when it is confronted by change or danger? A clam, true to its name, clams up. The clams do have a little mechanism on it that allows it to bore into the sand. It digs in. Therefore it has become a symbol for us of locking things up on the inside. When we are confronted with something which is unpleasant rather than getting it worked through, the tendency in our life might be to simply lock up on the inside and to not talk things out or talk things through. Turn on the TV or withdraw into the closed room and isolate ourselves from communication.

Any attempt of communication with the clam and it's muscles only grow stronger and it closes its shell tighter.

Interesting enough that although the clam thinks it is very safe in its closed down shell it is actually a very vulnerable being. One of the most vulnerable of marine life. I'd like to say that in response to the changing environment if we attempt to respond to change and stress in our life by simply claming up and acting as if it wasn't there by pulling the shell over our life. We're in a highly vulnerable position although we may think we're safe by retreating.

That's one kind of fish we can be in the net of the kingdom – a fixed location, a limited appetite, a defensive response.

Another kind of fish that it's possible to be is a jellyfish.

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

Several qualities. And again there are many, many different kinds of jellyfish. It would be impossible to describe them all. But some generalized characteristics in respect to the jellyfish.

The jellyfish is first of all a passive floater. He has some means of locomotion but he is subject to the currents. His habitat will change as the currents drive him onward. As a passive floater therefore he must go in the direction that the tide is going in. On a spiritual experience of course we can see the ramifications of that in our life if we are the sort of a person who doesn't have a locomotion system of our own in Christ. We simply float with whatever dominates the scene at that particular moment.

The jellyfish as a passive floater does not make an effort to capture food or to change location. It simply waits for the food to come to him.

My point today in terms of, What kind of fish are you? is not so much to say you're a clam or a you're a jellyfish. Or I am. But to say that these things are in us all. Even as I said there are some parts of me that are like a clam. There are some parts of me too that from time to time are like a jellyfish. I'm the kind of person who waits for food to come to me in a physical sense. / My wife should not send me to the grocery store for example. I'm not the kind to go with a predisposed idea of what I'm going to get. But I like the rest that's there. So it comes to me. I'm a sucker for those end corner sales that the merchandising people really love.

The passive floating idea brings to us the question, Do we bring discipline to our life or do we simply go with whatever happens? When we arise at the beginning of the day, do we wait upon the Lord for a moment? Do we begin to get a perspective as to what God is calling us to that day? Or do we simply go day after day which becomes week after week, month after month, year after year floating with whatever is going and looking at the end of the day and saying, Why didn't I accomplish that? Or looking at a child when he's grown up, Why didn't we ever do that? Am I a passive floater or am I bringing direction to my life?

In spiritual decisions, do I make decisions emotionally or do I make them volitionally from my will? Do I decide to make those decisions or do they just happen to me? Is life happening to me? Or in Christ am I bringing some direction and some sense that Christ is in me, controlling me and directing me?

A jellyfish is not only a passive floater but a jellyfish also has basically a negative orientation. The goal of the jellyfish is to avoid unpleasant situations. It generally will not move to positive conditions. The marine biologist I talked to said that the jellyfish basically will move up or down depending on whether it's a sunny or a cloudy day. If it's a sunny day he'll move down because he likes to be a little bit cooler. If it is a cloudy day he'll move up because he'd like to be a little bit warmer. Its tentacles as it floats along in the ocean simply hang down. And it doesn't respond unless he's touched.

I wonder if there are times in our Christian experience when we're like that? Everything's floating along and then somebody comes along and touches us and all of a sudden we become very active. The jellyfish reminds me of the possibility that we sometimes in our life make decisions not on the basis of what's right. But what will avoid the most amount of flack? What is comfortable to do rather than what is right to do?

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

A third characteristic of the jellyfish is that the sort of has (in my opinion) a mindless existence. Kinds of swims and floats along with really no head and no vision. He simply has a ring of nerves around the top and it's tentacles hang down. But watch out for him because he sometimes stings.

The third kind of fish that it's possible to be in the net of the kingdom of God is the sponge.

I know you haven't recently thought of that as a fish. I said I was using the term fish kind of widely. But the sponge is a marine creature. Like clams and jellyfish there are many varieties of sponges. But most are marine and most are attached to one place.

Some characteristics of the sponge: very simplistic organism. Its cellular structure is among the most simple of all the animals. While sponges have cells for different purposes, the cells are individualistic and have little coordination within themselves. Basically the sponge pumps in water and pumps it out and doesn't do much more than that.

Individualistic Christian sponges have a lifestyle that exists for feeding purposes. Not very complex at all. They basically want to take water in and take it out. Therefore they're very, very simple.

A second quality of the sponge is an exacting diet. A sponge has to take whatever is there. I can't go out and look for it. To me this in terms of Christian application reminds me of having a Christian lifestyle that feeds off only one teacher or one style of teaching. There's some in the body of Christ that are particularly glued into the way someone says something or the kind of language that is used. I would simply say to you that even though I'm gratified that you're faithful in hearing me preach and teach please do not let me be your only school master in Christ. There is sense in which we need the support and variety that is in the teaching ministry of the body of Christ to have our life fully developed. Don't get stuck on one emphasis somewhere that maybe blows doctrine and distorts it out of shape. Have diet that is more full in response to the word of God,

Some of us were out yesterday nailing boards for the walkways. I must admit, I am not very coordinated in this regard. I had started out nailing the boards on a walkway putting in one board after another. Thinking as I looked at each board that it was straight with the board that preceded it. The board I was lining up with the previous board. I wasn't lining it up with a straight line. I wasn't looking back either because it was more comfortable to sit on the board I'd already nailed. I wasn't keeping the real view mirror in perspective.

About 6 feet and the walk was crooked. As I was nailing one at a time they looked straight. But when I got perspective it was the crookedest walk out there.

That reminds me in our life in terms of our diet. We need a diet from the totality of the word of God so our lives might really measure up with God's will and God's program. Not just getting stuck on one favorite verse, one favorite chapter, one favorite book. Or one favorite preacher or one favorite sermon. Because in that perspective we can begin to get out of line. We need a broader perspective.

A third characteristic of the sponge is it has an unresponsive mentality. It really has no nerve cells. Unlike the clam and the jellyfish, the sponge can't hurt anyone. Probably if you were

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

going to have a choice in a church between having jellyfish, clams or sponges you'd much rather have sponges. Because they won't hurt anyone. A church full of sponges will never give the devil any problems at all. Because they're only concerned with getting fed. They're oblivious to the pain of the world that is around it. As long as we pump it in and out who cares about what's happening "out there." We're going on.

The fourth kind of fish that I would like to point to is the dolphin.

That is the model that I would like to use that I'd like for us as a church as we swim from these waters down the street. The dolphin has some characteristics that are admirable in a spiritual comparison. One characteristic is the characteristic of complexity. The dolphin as a complex animal is probably the smartest of all mammals, even smarter than the monkey. Flipper taught us, by the way, how smart the dolphin really is.

The reason why the dolphin is so complex is that it has a wide cell differentiation. That is, it has many different functions, which the sponge or the clam or the jellyfish don't have. Because of that it has specialized cells.

In the body of Jesus Christ, Paul calls the body of the Lord a very complex organism. We are not all like one another at all. But it takes many features of the body of Christ to make it really work. So in this church body we do not seek to all be doing the same task. Or to feel that somehow we have missed God's best will if we're not being like someone else. The most free person is the person who is being themselves in Christ Jesus. Complexity within the body.

This complexity also occurs in a sense that the dolphin is more active metabolically than a warm-blooded mammal. It must keep its temperature above the ocean level. So it spends a good deal of its time seeking food.

As a whole church body we also are living in a world that has a different temperature that we have. We need to spend our time seeking food spiritually in a personal and in a corporate level to maintain the high complexity of existence the Lord has called the body to.

Another feature about the dolphin that is admirable is its maneuverability. It can cover great distances through the ocean. God has made it with a propelling action, a quick tail action, and he's made it also streamlining. A smooth skin which permits movements through the water. In contrast to the clam or the jellyfish or the sponge, the dolphin is really free. The dolphin is not locked down like the other three to simply stay in one place. In fact the mobility of the higher creatures and the higher organisms allows it to get away from an area that is ecologically closing down. If oil hits the water and if it's where the clam or the jellyfish are, they can't get away. They're trapped and they're dead. But the dolphin because of its greater speed and mobility and complexity can shoot out of the area and escape. It can move away from an area that is ecologically closing down.

One of the diseases of church growth that specialists have identified is sociological strangulation. And churches need to get away from sociological strangulation. What is sociological strangulation? When more than 80% of your facilities are full you are at sociological strangulation so you cannot bust past that point in terms of serving other people in the community.

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

Part of what we're doing in a move if you want to put it in an ecological sense is we are moving from an area that I ecologically closing down spiritually to one that gives us more room and greater freedom. Maneuverability.

The dolphin is highly responsive to his environment. The early church developed great maneuverability and responsiveness to the new environment that God was placing upon it. At first the church was ready to be a clam. It was ready to be a local organization the gospel had come to Jerusalem and people really didn't want to go outside of Jerusalem. But the Lord through the power of the Spirit thrust the church out into the oceans of the world and made it highly maneuverable and highly complex.

A few years ago this article was translated from the Spanish. The author was anonymous. It has stood these years to represent the whole aspect of maneuverability and being open to God's call and God's will. "One of the capital sins against the Holy Spirit is that of pasteurization, inoculation or monotony. Another is that of recognition. The word religion comes from the same root as ligament or "to bind." The prefect are completes the thought. To rebind. Religion is the desire or the ambition for the human heart to bind God by placing him under the control of our thoughts, our values, our ideas of what is proper or improper with regard to conduct or in regard to our point of view of God. Religion is the effort to reduce God to the category of something manipulatable. One of the most difficult things I know is the study of the Bible and the worship of God. The God of the Bible does not allow us to fall into this sin of inoculation and religionization. The Bible is if we take off our densely smoked eyeglasses anything but a monotonous book and anything but a religious book. The God of whom the Bible speaks is all except a well-educated spectra of our pious mankind. Quite on the contrary. God is very much alive and escapes all manipulation. He is totally lacking in inhibition. The Bible is specifically a book that relates the love adventures of God, is passionate and moving matrimony for his bride who is extremely unlike him. Above all the bride of God suffers from this temptation. The desire for herself to establish a place to tie herself down. She lives like a bride, sighing for a place of protection, a place to shut herself in with her children and her belongings. Besides all of this she has secretly determined to reform her husband, to domesticate him, to tie him down to the place where she is bound and where she wants to remain. To tie God down to that which she has been is precisely the sense of religion. And religion in this respect is the corruption of the matrimonial tie of the church with her husband. God cannot be tied down. He is free. He is a missionary, a pioneer, an explorer, a man of frontiers, creator of things non-existent. He shakes the status quo. He tears out the old kinds of the calendar of the world so that each age will be a new one and each day a new adventure toward a future yet uncharted. He is a very turbulent husband. He is always on the go and never ceases to call his bride so that she may follow and enter with him into each new situation. The church however does not want to uproot itself. She wants to establish her residence in a given place. She desires security. The organized religion is interested in the organized religion. The church knows deep in her heart how dangerous it is to abandon all her defenses, all that is established and follow her Lord. Someone might be eliminated if she goes where God wants her to go or does certain things in a manner God wants hem done. Where does God want to go? What does he want to do? Some religion ones act like all God wanted to do was to go to church. Of course he wants to go to church, but just long enough to have a quick intelligent talk with his wife. A quick look at what is cooking, he gives the profound comprehensive and loving attention of a husband. But then he says, "Let's go on, dear. We must march on. We have work to do." And he crosses the threshold of the door so quickly and moves in such a totally unexpected direction that half other time the dear wife remains at the door watching him go. She does her best to maintain the little chicks under her

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

wings to avoid that they might be dispersed by the wind of God's sudden departure. That breeze is known as the presence of the holy wind, the Spirit. This holy wind, that rude gallantry of God has drawn with it the perplexed bride outside of her house and home at the precise moment when she thought to have established herself comfortably and when she thought to have managed to covert her tempestuous husband into a semi civilized being."

Wow! How profound.

The fish, the dolphin, has the maneuverability to respond to where God is calling it to be.

One other thing about the dolphin that we need to look at is the dolphin has a sense of community. Sponges don't have a sense of community, jellyfish don't have a sense of community, clams don't have a sense of community. One clam could care less about the clam occupying the next block. They don't talk to one another. Jellyfish doesn't get on the phone and call each other up. And sponges aren't really aware that they exist. How could they be aware of some other sponge existing?

But the dolphin is in communication. There are hundreds of dolphins in the water maybe at a given spot. And there's a clear social organization of the dolphins. There's intercommunication between them. When one of them finds food or finds danger an alarm is sounded and the others gather. Their security and their survival is dependent upon the pack. Unlike the clams or sponges or jellyfish which exist sort of on their own, the dolphins exist together for security and for feeding purposes. And the dolphins even communicate with things other than dolphins. The dolphins can communicate to the ocean depths to the whales the dolphin can also communicate with man. Marine scientists by the way have been conducting experiments with man communicating with the dolphins.

So what does this do to us as a believing community. Simply this. God has not called us to set on one seat of the pew and be unaware of who else is in the body. But he's called us to a living relationship to one another. We're not only able to relate to one another, we're able to relate to God. God has called us like the dolphin in the sense of community, to even play. One of the things you see as you watch the dolphins in the water is their ability to jump up. And they seem to be having the ability of having a good time. I don't know whether or not the dolphins realize they're playing. But we can. One of the things that ought to characterize the individual and corporate Christian life is the sense lightheartedness and joy. Isn't it something that as Christians we on the one hand carry a deep burden and care and concern for others and for our world but on the other hand we carry a deep sense of joy and play and exuberance. God has called us to be in community. If we get out of community and get alone out on the waters somewhere, if one of the dolphins, like a sheep gets away from the flock, then they're subject to the great danger of other organisms that feed and prey on them.

So I simply say as we look at these type of fish today, on the ecological chain, which one are we?

In a certain sense biologically, the clam, the jellyfish, the sponge and a dolphin are all important to the ecosystem. There are times in our own lives where we demonstrate traits that belong to each of them. The kingdom is the net with many kinds of fish. Sometimes the many kinds are in me all at once yet God has made us with a certain sense of freedom. We can choose the kind of personality we will be. For some time now we have sensed as a church body that the environment in which we have existed is gradually losing down and the Lord has called us to

WHAT KIND OF FISH ARE YOU?

strike out for new waters. There will be danger and inconvenience along the way. But God is bringing us to a wider place of feeding and a wider place of responsibility. And it's a joy to be at this moment in our lives and to have a sense that the Lord has called us to the kingdom for such a time as this.

How would you put yourself as you've heard this message today? Where are you? And are you where God wants you to be? That's the most important question of all. Are you in your own lifestyle where God wants you to be?

We think, Lord, of the word which you have spoken to us, "If the Son of man shall set you free you shall be free indeed." We think also, Lord, of the words of the woman of Samaria, how when you begin to teach concerning true worship, she protested that God could only be worshipped in a certain place. To which you responded, "God is Spirit and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." O Lord, you have created us as a church body to be free. To be free in your Spirit to sense when major and significant changes should take place. Then you've called us to swim together, to be strong in one another. And to have delightful appreciation of each other through communication, through play, through sharing together. God grant that in the stress of our environment around us on an individual scale and on the church wide scale that we will not become victimized by change or stress. Or be like the children of Israel who in the process of going into the promised land don't handle too well the stress that is upon them. But, Lord, help us to leap up and leap out and go in directions that you're calling us to. And we ask this in your name. Amen.