

The Church as Boat: Building a Sea-worthy Church

Abstract: Travels in a boat provide the organizing motif for an important segment of the gospel of Mark. Specific texts related to the boat are examined, with particular attention paid to the way in which the boat functions in the story. The hypothesis that Mark might be using the boat as a metaphor for the church is considered, with the “points of comparison” being functions attributed to the boat which apply with equal validity to the church. Some implications of this for Mark’s understanding of the church and for modern practice are discussed.

Metaphor is a game we play with language. It is an inventive and forceful means of comparing one thing to another. By the clever use of words, metaphor allows us to associate two very different things and to show in what manner they are related, using a better known thing to explain or illuminate something lesser known.¹

Our language brims with metaphors. We talk about the *brain* of a computer, the *eye* of a camera, the *brow* of a hill, the *throat* of a carburetor (to name but a few of the metaphors based upon comparisons to the human body). Many of our favorite clichés (“beating a dead horse,” “going down the drain,” “on the rocks”) are, in fact, vivid metaphors. Metaphor is the heart of good poetry (“Being your slave, what should I do but tend/Upon the hours and times of your desire?”²) and good literature (“I have realized that we all have plague, and I have lost my peace.”³).

In fact, metaphor is the heart of good theology. It is only possible to talk about God and the spiritual realm metaphorically, comparing things of which we are ignorant with more familiar and common matters. When the Bible speaks of “the kingdom of God” or “God our Father” or “cleansing from sin,” it is speaking the language of metaphor, informing us of spiritual realities by using comparisons drawn from politics, family and hygiene.

The Gospel of Mark and Metaphors

Mark—being both a good writer and theologian—appreciates the power of metaphors. He makes liberal use of these comparative devices, sprinkling them throughout his book. Some are quite obvious, while others are more subtle. Many are from the lips of Jesus; others seem to be Mark’s own invention.

Take, for example, one of the most powerful and pervasive metaphors in this gospel—the cross. We know what a literal cross is: rough wooden stake and cross-bar. Jesus died on a literal cross. But when Jesus tells his disciples to “take up a cross and follow me” (Mk

¹ See G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980, pp. 16ff.

² William Shakespeare, Sonnet #57, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Boston: Ginn, Heath, & Co., 1881, p. 118.

³ Albert Camus, *The Plague*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972, p. 235.

8:34), we recognize he is speaking metaphorically. Jesus is not requiring his followers to take up a physical, wooden cross and follow in his literal, sandalled steps. Rather, there is a lifestyle of sacrifice and self-denial which must be adopted by followers of Jesus. That lifestyle is *symbolized* by the cross; it can be *compared* to a cross in significant ways; but it is not to be confused with the lumber on which Jesus died. The cross functions, then, as a metaphor to describe the life which we embrace as disciples.

Jesus, according to Mark, used many metaphors of this kind. He likened the work of an apostle to fishing (1:17). Sinners were sick people in need of a doctor (2:17). Those who did God's will were "brother and sister and mother" to Jesus (3:31-35). Jews were called children and gentiles dogs (7:24-30). The disbelief of the Pharisees was compared to yeast (8:14-21). John was referred to as Elijah (9:9-13). The parables of Jesus function as extended and complex metaphors.⁴

But Mark himself was fond of metaphors and used them extensively in the telling of his story. Many commentators have found evidence of this particularly in Mark's use of "narrative space".⁵ "The major settings in Mark's story are seldom neutral."⁶ Place and setting are used metaphorically by Mark to teach lessons which go beyond the explicit story line. Jerusalem is not simply the capital city of Judea; it is a place of judgment and destiny. The Sea of Galilee is a place of chaos and destruction. The mountain, wilderness, and "way" become more than simple geographical indicators. They symbolize respectively closeness to God, times of temptation, and humble submission to God's will.⁷ The perceptive reader is invited to see that such settings function less importantly as historical details than as symbols teaching lessons about discipleship. By understanding the metaphors and identifying points of comparison in our own lives, modern disciples can learn how to behave when faced with similar concerns.

The Boat in Mark

One of the frequently occurring settings in Mark's gospel is the *boat*. For reasons which will be made explicit below, it seems likely that Mark intends for us to understand the boat metaphorically—to read between the lines and to recognize in this symbol a wider application than the fishing scow which was its literal referent. In the boat there is safety from the storm, camaraderie with Christ, shared work and experiences, a common direction and purpose. I will suggest, as others have before me,⁸ that Mark's boat functions as a metaphor for the church. By comparing the known (i.e., the boat) to the lesser known (i.e., the church), Mark is able to paint a picture which serves to inform and

⁴ Caird, pp. 160ff.

⁵ See Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1986.

⁶ *Mark as Story*, p. 66.

⁷ See David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, pp. 63-68; and Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989, pp. 3-4.

⁸ See Ernst Best, *Following Jesus: Discipleship in Mark*, pp. 230-234.

refine our understanding of the church. In particular, the *functions* of the church are clarified by thinking through the manner in which the boat functions in this gospel.

For Mark to use a boat as a metaphor for the church would not be unusual. In fact, early Christians were prone to adopt the metaphor of a boat for their thinking about the church. They marked their meeting places with rough scratchings of a boat and sail.⁹ Among the earliest Christian artworks are representations of the church as a boat, transporting and sheltering Christians through stormy and dangerous times.¹⁰ The church fathers made references to Peter's teaching about Noah (1Pe 3:19ff) and went beyond the apostle in recognizing not just the water as a "type" of baptism but the ark as a metaphor for the church.¹¹ In a letter attributed to Clement, the apostle Peter is portrayed as laying hands upon Clement and ordaining him as a bishop. In the homily which follows, Peter describes the church in these terms:

For the whole business of the Church is like unto a great ship, bearing through a violent storm men who are of many places, and who desire to inhabit the city of the good kingdom. Let, therefore, God be your shipmaster; and let the pilot be likened to Christ. . . . Let those sailing expect every tribulation, as traveling over a great and troubled sea, the world.¹²

Though these examples are drawn from literature that post-dates the writing of Mark, it is clear that early church leaders were comfortable comparing the church to a boat.¹³ Whether the church fathers rooted this comparison in the gospels themselves is doubtful. But that Mark should think in these terms is not surprising, given the popularity of the image in later years.¹⁴

⁹ reference?

¹⁰ reference?

¹¹ Epistle 74, Firmilianus to Cyprian, *The Ante Nicene Fathers*, (Vol. 5), p. 394. "And as the ark of Noah was nothing else than the sacrament of the Church of Christ, which then, when all without were perishing, kept those only safe who were within the ark, we are manifestly instructed to look to the unity of the Church."

¹² Epistle of Clement to James, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (vol. 8), pp. 220-221. See also Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (vol. 7), p. 421.

¹³ Evidence for the strength of the boat metaphor among early Christians can be seen in an interesting detail about the Medieval church. Church architects fixed on certain conventions during this period (e.g., the cruciform layout of houses of worship). Each section of the building had a specific name: narthex, chancel, apse, transept, etc. The central part of Medieval churches--where the congregation sat to worship--came to be called the *nave*. The word comes from the Latin *navis*, meaning "ship", and surely reflects the popularity and power of the metaphor of the church as boat. See *The American Heritage Dictionary*, New College Edition, William Morris (Ed.), Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981, p. 876.

¹⁴ Ernst Best takes the argument one step further. In his discussion of the church as ship, he wonders whether the metaphor of the ship as the people of God might not ante-date Mark in *Jewish* thinking. He speaks of "the development within the later church of the ship as a symbol for the Christian community" and notes that this metaphor "may already underlie Mark's use, for the image may be pre-Christian and Jewish and have been taken over." Best, *Op. Cit.*, p. 232.

A Context for the “Boat” in Mark’s Gospel

The “boat” becomes important to Mark’s story in one narrow portion of his narrative—4:1-8:21. Only in this section do Jesus and his disciples appear “in the boat” and “on the sea”. Prior to this, Galilee defined the scope of Jesus’s activity, while “the way” and “Jerusalem” dominate the sections which follow. But over these four and one half chapters, it is the boat which provides the primary organizing motif for Jesus’ travels and work.¹⁵

This is especially interesting given the fact that Mark’s narrative focuses increasingly on the twelve from chapter four on. In the first three chapters, the disciples play a significant but understated role. Mark introduces the reader to different “audiences” who come into contact with Jesus: the crowds, the religious authorities, the family of Jesus, and the disciples. Jesus is “heard” by a variety of groups, but Mark makes it clear (the Parable of the Soils—4:1-20) that he is effective with only one. The crowds want his miracles but not his message. The Pharisees are convinced he is demon possessed and plot to kill him. His own family is concerned for his sanity and comes to “take charge of him” (3:21). Only the disciples hear and obey, leaving their livelihoods and families to follow Jesus.

The Parable of the Soils (4:1ff) represents a turning point in the gospel. Jesus equates the “good soil” to these disciples who have been given “the secret of the kingdom of God”. From this point, he spends proportionally less time with unproductive audiences (the “hard”, “thorny” and “shallow” soils, to use the words of the parable), and increased time and effort with soil which will “produce a crop”. At precisely the point where the boat becomes the dominant motif, Jesus begins to focus more narrowly on the twelve whom he has chosen. They travel with him everywhere (4:35ff; 5:1, 21; 6:1, 6b-7, 31, 53; 8:10), witness powerful signs, are commissioned to minister in Jesus’ name (6:6b-13), and receive increasingly rigorous instruction (6:8-11, 37, 51-52; 7:17-23; 8:14-21). Though Jesus is actively engaged with the sick and demon-possessed and with large crowds during this phase of his ministry, the distinct impression gained from a reading of 4:1-8:21 is that these people and events are background for the primary work of Jesus—the shaping of the twelve.

It is in this context that the shift from Galilee and a general audience (1:14-3:35) to the boat and the disciples (4:1-8:21) becomes significant. For if (in the context of Mark’s narrative) the reader is intended to see Galilee as a setting in which many will hear but few will listen, the boat, by contrast, is a setting in which those who do listen and respond are gathered together with Jesus. Galilee, representing the set of all possible hearers of Jesus’ message, is contrasted with the boat, representing the subset of those who hear and obey. As we will see, the disciples “in the boat” with Jesus are sharply distinguished from those “on the outside”. All of this prepares the reader to understand that the boat is more than a mode of transportation; it is a metaphor for the community of disciples who leave and follow.

¹⁵ See an excellent discussion of the structural implications of this in Norman Petersen, “The composition of Mark 4:1-8:26”, *Harvard Theological Review*, 73 (1980), pp. 185-217.

Specific Texts Related to the Boat

Mark uses the word “boat” eighteen times in his gospel (πλοιον = 17, πλοιαριον = 1), fifteen times in the section we have identified as focusing principally on the twelve and their life with Jesus (4:1-8:21). Following two references to the boat early in the gospel (the “introductory” stories below), nine separate incidents are described relating to the boat, with various miracle and teaching pericopae inserted between.

Two Introductory Boat Stories

The first two incidents are preparatory. The inner-circle of disciples are called from their boats in order to follow Jesus (1:16-20) and Jesus has the disciples prepare a small boat “to keep the people from crowding him” (3:9). Though each of these incidents occurs prior to the section outlined above (4:1-8:21), they prepare the reader for seeing in the boat something of greater consequence than hull and rigging.

When first we meet Peter, Andrew, James, and John, they are at work in boats on the sea (**1:16ff**). For the only time in Mark, Jesus calls disciples *out* of a boat to follow after him. But this is an exception which proves the rule. For even here, the boat they leave stands for something more than a literal skiff. They are “fishermen” and nothing symbolizes their vocation quite so much as the nets and boats which are its primary tools. When Mark reports that they left “their nets” and “their father Zebedee in the boat,” he is speaking metaphorically of the leaving of an entire way of life. By heeding the invitation of Jesus and stepping out of their boats, the disciples left behind their lives, their professions, and their families. As the gospel unfolds, it becomes evident that Jesus has asked them to leave one boat so that they can enter another—*his* boat. It is his lifestyle, his profession, his business, his family to which Jesus invites these men. By including Jesus’ call for the disciples to leave their boats and former lives, Mark prepares us to understand the boat as a symbol containing deeper levels of significance.

The use of the boat in **3:7-10** does the same thing, and anticipates a similar and more dramatic boat scene in 4:1ff. Here, Jesus withdraws “with his disciples” to the lake but is followed by a large crowd. They press on him, having “heard all he was doing,” and demand further healings for their own sick and demon-possessed. Though Jesus does not enter the boat in this instance, he does ask his disciples to prepare a boat for his use. Implicit in this scene is Jesus’ desire to be with his disciples, to distance himself from the pressing of the crowd, and to use the boat as a means of accomplishing both ends. The boat, in essence, promises to become the boundary between Jesus (and those he wanted to “be with him”) and the crowds who must remain on the shore. This incident reflects a possibility which in 4:1ff becomes reality.

After these two anticipatory boat incidents, there follow nine glimpses of life with Jesus in the boat which comprise Mark’s dominant teaching on the subject.

Jesus teaches from the boat.

The first major boat scene—where for the first time Jesus and his disciples are “in the boat” and “on the sea”—is found in **4:1-9**.¹⁶ In this pericope, Mark uses the boat as a means of distancing Jesus from the crowds and solidifying his identification with the disciples. When Jesus gets into the boat (4:1), he does so to put space between himself and the crowd who are “along the shore at the water’s edge.” If, as seems reasonable to assume, Jesus is encountering the same problem now as the last time a large crowd gathered around him by the sea (the people were crowding him—3:9), then the distance between Jesus and the people takes on more than simply spatial connotations. They press him for miracles; he wants to teach them. They want physical healing; he offers them insights about God’s kingdom. They are insistent to the point of becoming dangerous; he finds a way to teach them in spite of their demands.

This gap between the boat and the shore is underscored in the material which follows. The crowds are “those on the outside” to whom “everything is said in parables” so that they will not grasp the secrets of the kingdom (4:11). They are the unfortunates whom Mark describes with Isaiah’s words as “ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding” (Mk 4:12). They are probably represented allegorically in the Parable of the Soils by the rocky places, receiving the word gladly enough, but “when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (4:17).¹⁷ They are certainly not privy to the explanations Jesus gives to the parables (4:34). In the end, as evening comes, Jesus departs in the boat “leaving the crowd behind” (4:36).¹⁸

The contrast between the crowds and the disciples could not be more complete. To the twelve, as insiders, Jesus gives the secret of the kingdom (4:11) and interprets the parables (4:14-20, 34). In contrast to those who have ears but do not hear, the disciples

¹⁶ Though the disciples are not explicitly put in the boat in 4:1, the echoes of 3:9 (where Jesus “told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him”) reverberate strongly enough here to imply the disciples’ presence in the boat with Jesus. Certainly, the structure of chapter 4 demands the presence of the disciples in the boat with Jesus: later, when Jesus is “alone” (i.e., away from the crowds), he is with the twelve (4:10, 34), and travels with them to the other side of the lake (4:35).

¹⁷ reference commentary making this point?

¹⁸ The chronology of this entire fourth chapter is problematic. 4:1-9 has Jesus in a boat, teaching the crowds. 4:10ff shifts to a scene where Jesus, the Twelve, and “others around him” are “alone”—i.e. away from the crowds. Is Jesus still in the boat? Did he and the disciples leave the sea and return to Capernaum? Did they push the boat farther from the shore so Jesus could interpret the parable? It seems most likely that the context of Jesus speaking parables to the crowds was simply a handy place for Mark to insert an interpretational aside regarding the Soils parable and to include other parables on related subjects. In this view, 4:10-34 represents a temporal discontinuity, an editorial insertion which should not distract us from the main story line:

1. Jesus is by the sea.
2. A large crowd gathers around him and he begins to teach them.
3. He has the disciples launch a boat to use as a pulpit to continue his teaching of the crowd.
4. He teaches the people “many things by parables,” though probably the private interpretation in 4:10-20 and possibly the additional parables in 4:21-32 occurred at another time and place.
5. As evening falls (4:35), Jesus travels with his disciples to the “other side” of the lake.

are expected to perceive, understand and turn (4:12). They, in the words of the parable, are the good soil, who “hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop” (4:20).

In this pericope, then, the boat functions as a *gathering place* (where the disciples enjoy the immediate presence of their master), as a *boundary marker* (to indicate a distinction between those “on the outside” and the inner circle of disciples), and as a *teaching platform* (from which both the crowds and the disciples are informed of spiritual matters).

The Boat in a Storm

At the end of that day, though Jesus has finished with the crowd, he is not done with his disciples. “[H]e said to his disciples, ‘Let’s go over to the other side.’ Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat.” The second major boat incident (4:35-41) occurs as they journey across the Sea of Galilee into gentile territory. On the way, they encounter a fierce storm that frightens even the seasoned fishermen among the twelve. In seven short verses, Mark identifies three conflicts which seem characteristic of life in the boat.

The conflict between the sea and the boat is obvious. The waves are breaking over the boat, threatening to swamp it and drown those on board. The boat, attempting to make headway against the sea, is in danger of foundering. There is, at least in the minds of the disciples, a real question as to which of the two will prevail.

Equally obvious is the conflict between Jesus and the disciples. The twelve are frightened enough to awaken Jesus and offer a rebuke for his nonchalance. As for Jesus, he calms the storm with a word and then offers a rebuke of his own: “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4:40). The scene ends with the disciples expressing terror not of the storm but of their ship-mate.

More subtle is the conflict between Jesus and Satan. This storm is not to be seen as an impartial act of nature. As is true with demon possession and sickness, the storm is a work of the Devil. The sea, and the chaos it represents, is the Devil’s domain. It—like the demon in 9:22 and the religious leaders in 3:6/11:18—threatens to destroy and kill (απολλυμι). Mark uses the same word (επιτιμαω) to describe Jesus’ “rebuke” of the wind that he uses when Jesus speaks to demons (1:25; 3:12; 9:25) or to Satan working through Peter (8:32). Even the command to silence (φιοω) mirrors the word used by Jesus to hush the demons (1:25). In many ways, the calming of the storm has the characteristics of an exorcism rather than a miracle story.

In this pericope then, the boat functions paradoxically both as a *place of testing* (where the disciples feel threatened) and a *place of safety* in the storm (where disciples are protected by Jesus). Further, the boat serves as an *environment for building faith* (where disciples are challenged to trust in Jesus), a *spiritual battle ground* (where God meets and defeats Satan), and a *place to experience the saving power of Jesus*.

Ultimately, however, the boat functions in this pericope to underscore the imperative of the presence of Christ. When Jesus is absent (i.e., when he sleeps in the stern), the boat is endangered and the disciples are afraid. But when the presence of Jesus imposes itself, the power of God is unleashed, the storm is disarmed, and the disciples are invited to believe. Both the boat and the disciples in it require the presence of Jesus for safety and power. That lesson will be repeated in 6:45-52. For now it is enough to note that, while the presence of Jesus is necessary, it is not always comfortable (“They were terrified”—4:41).

The Trips to Gerasa and Capernaum

The third and fourth boat stories—landing in the region of the Gerasenes (5:1-2a, 18-20) and returning to the area of Capernaum (5:21-22a)—are quite similar. In each instance, the boat is used as a means of transportation across the Sea of Galilee to a destination on land, providing the context for the incidents which follow.

The story of the Gerasene demoniac is framed by references to the boat. Jesus and his disciples, having battled the storm, complete the journey begun the evening before. Jesus then meets and assists a demon possessed man. Asked by the town folk to leave the region, Jesus steps into the boat once again to journey back to Capernaum. The main action here is on the land. Travel by boat makes the interaction with the Demoniac possible, but the focus is on the shore, not the ship. And since no other activity of Jesus is reported by Mark on this visit to gentile territory, it is implied that Jesus made the journey in the boat specifically to encounter this tortured soul. The boat becomes, in this pericope, merely a means which enabled Jesus to reach his goal.

Similarly, the fourth boat incident serves more to set the stage for what follows than to draw attention to itself. It introduces an extended tour through Galilee (5:24-6:30), beginning with two major healings (Jairus’ daughter and the hemorrhaging woman) and ending with the apostles being sent out to preach and heal. Again, the boat is used by Mark as a means of transport, getting Jesus to Capernaum where his land-based ministry continues.

The emphasis placed here by Mark on Jesus “leaving” (5:2) and “entering” (5:18) the boat is interesting (cf. 6:34a, 45, 51, 54; 8:10, 13).¹⁹ The language stresses that, by “entering”, Jesus separates himself from the larger world, cloisters himself with his disciples, and teaches them “secrets” of the kingdom. In similar fashion, when Jesus “leaves” the boat, the focus is on his reentering the public arena, his interaction with the crowds or their representatives, and his teaching in “crowd-appropriate” ways.

This is clearly exemplified in the story of the Demoniac. So long as Jesus is in the boat, the disciples have his undivided attention (at least between naps and storms). But when Jesus leaves the boat, he is thrust into the maelstrom of ordinary life and is confronted by

¹⁹ It is reminiscent of his descriptions of Jesus going into and out of the “house” (3:20; 7:17, 24; 9:28, 33; 10:10). See Best, pp. 226-229.

groups or individuals who have urgent needs. Here a demon possessed man comes running and screaming at Jesus. Immediately Jesus is consumed by the man's problems and devotes himself to healing this unfortunate.

The same thing happens when he recrosses the Sea to Capernaum. When he lands, a large crowd gathers. Among them is a father named Jairus who pleads for his daughter. By stepping out of the boat, Jesus once again steps into the untidy lives of those who are on the shore. As we will see, this dynamic drives much of the action surrounding references to the boat: Jesus lands and has compassion on the crowd (6:34); he lands and heals the sick at Gennesaret (6:53-56); he lands and confronts the skepticism of the Pharisees (8:10-13).

Far from begrudging these events as intrusions on his mission, however, Jesus appears to take it all in stride. Jesus makes good use of his time in the boat with the disciples. But he knows that his ministry is wider than the twelve and, hence, must be bigger than the boat. It is instructive to note that, apart from 4:1 where Jesus uses the boat not as transport but as pulpit, Jesus is always *going somewhere* when he enters the boat. On occasion, the destination is rather vague ("the other side"—4:35; "a solitary place"—6:32). Other times it is quite specific (Bethsaida—6:45; Gennesaret—6:53; Dalmanutha—8:10). But always it is the shore and the needs of people waiting there that determines the boat's direction.

A final comment is in order regarding Jesus' refusal to allow the Demoniac to enter the boat in 5:18-20. The refusal seems odd, considering the string of invitations Jesus issues for people to leave their former lives and follow after him (1:16-20; 2:13-14; 8:34; 10:17ff). Yet Jesus' demand that the Demoniac "go home" is characteristic of the manner in which he handled those he healed.²⁰ Evidently, gratitude was not sufficient motive to become a disciple of Jesus. Though Jesus does not discount the appreciation of the Demoniac and even gives him a work to do ("tell them how much the Lord has done for you"—5:19), he does not consider him ready for the rigors of life in the boat. Amazement at Jesus' power and gratitude for healing at his hand are not the criteria for discipleship. Jesus holds his boat-mates to a higher standard than that. They must "hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop" (4:20) to be the good soil Jesus wants in his boat (to use a hopelessly mixed metaphor).

These two boat stories, then, reinforce the idea that the boat is a *place for disciples*, and disciples only. In addition, Mark clearly portrays the boat in these passages as a *tool* in a wider ministry. It transports Jesus and his disciples to places where the word can be preached and people can be served. For all the blessings to be found in the boat, for all its

²⁰ The leper was "sent . . . away at once" with the command to "go, show yourself to the priest" (1:43-44). The paralytic he healed was told, "get up, take your mat and go home" (2:11). The woman healed of bleeding was told, "Go in peace" (5:34). The crowds that tasted his bread were "dismissed" (6:45) and "sent away" (8:9). "You may go" were Jesus' words to the Syrophenician Woman after exorcising her daughter (7:29). He "sent home" the blind man healed at Bethsaida (8:26). Even Bartimaeus, who afterwards "followed Jesus along the road," was told to "go" (10:52).

lessons and opportunities, in this gospel the boat always lands so that Jesus and his disciples can pursue their mission in the world and among the people.

Getting away by Boat

The fifth boat incident involves Jesus and his disciples attempting to escape the pressures of the crowds (6:30-34) by traveling “in a boat to a solitary place”. In the following narrative, which surely brings comfort to every harried pastor, we learn that even Jesus’ “best-laid schemes . . . gang aft agley”. For the crowd sees him leaving and races ahead to await his landfall. Once more, Jesus disembarks to be confronted by the needs of lost people. In compassion, his plans for the disciples are scuttled, and he proceeds to teach and feed the crowd.

There are no new functions for the boat in this story. Instead, Mark appears to be driving home points he has already made. The boat as a *means of withdrawal* from the crowd (“because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat”—6:31) and as a *place of communion* with the disciples (“So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place”—6:32) is strongly reinforced. Once again, the boat functions (albeit inadvertently) to transport Jesus and his followers to a situation where ministry on the shore and among the crowds is possible (“When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them”—6:34).

At the conclusion of this pericope, “Jesus made his disciples get into the boat” while he dismissed the crowd. As with the story of the Demoniac, this display of miraculous power is framed by references to the boat. A boat trip sets the stage for Jesus’ feeding of the 5000 and brings the interaction with the crowd to an end.²¹

²¹ Note the similar use of the boat at the conclusion of the feeding of the 4000 (8:9b-10).

Walking on the Water

Having forced the disciples into the boat while he dismissed the crowds, Jesus finds himself “alone on land” (6:47). For the only time in Mark’s gospel, the disciples are in the boat without Jesus. And as you would expect, they are in trouble. It is late at night, the wind is against them, and they are straining at the oars. The fact that they spend most of the night on the water (their journey begins sometime before nightfall but is not completed until after dawn ²²), and that they had been sent to Bethsaida (on the north shore of the lake) but end up at Gennesaret (on the west shore) indicates the severity of conditions. Perhaps they would have been on the water still had Jesus not “[gone] out to them, walking on the lake.”

The parallels between the story of Jesus calming the storm and this incident are striking. Jesus is initially absent in both stories (in the first, he is asleep; in the second, he is physically separated). In both incidents, the disciples are experiencing difficulties with the sea. In both, the presence of Jesus is needed (he is awakened; he walks to them on the water). In both, Jesus exerts power over nature (“the wind died down”—4:39; 6:51 ²³). Both stories are epiphanies, revealing the glory of Jesus (“Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him”—4:41; “It is I”—6:50). And the disciples react in the same way to each display of Jesus’ power—they are terrified (4:41; 6:50).

It seems obvious that Mark is reinforcing the lessons of the first incident with the second. Once again, the boat functions as a *place of testing* (where the faith and courage of the disciples are tried). It serves as an *environment for building faith* (where disciples are challenged to trust in Jesus). It becomes a *place to directly experience the saving power of Jesus*.

Ultimately, however, the boat again functions to underscore the imperative of the presence of Christ. When Jesus is absent, the boat is unable to make headway and the disciples struggle. But when Jesus “climb[s] into the boat with them”, power becomes available, the wind abates, and the disciples can continue their journey. Interestingly, Mark reiterates that, while the presence of Jesus is necessary, it is not always comfortable (“They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified”—6:50).

The Trips to Gennesaret and Dalmanutha

The seventh and eighth boat stories—trips to Gennesaret (6:53-55) and Dalmanutha (8:10-12)—echo the lessons of the third and fourth. In all these incidents, the boat functions to transport Jesus and his disciples to a scene where urgent needs are met and a wider ministry is possible.

The story of the trip to Gennesaret (on the northwestern shore of the Lake) caps the episode in which Jesus walks on water. Having “landed at Gennesaret and anchored

²² Compare 6:35 and 6:47 with 6:48 and 6:53-54.

²³ The wording is identical in the Greek. CHECK THIS OUT!

there” (6:53), Jesus is immediately recognized and mobbed by people bringing their sick. This incident introduces another “preaching tour”, only this time Jesus travels widely in gentile territory, including the “vicinity of Tyre” (7:24), “through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee” (i.e., the eastern shore) and “into the region of the Decapolis” (7:31). He ends up by the Sea of Galilee once again (probably the southern shore) where he spends three days with another large crowd, teaching and then feeding them (8:1-9).

At this point, Jesus gets “into the boat with his disciples” (8:10) and heads for the region of Dalmanutha. Why he does so remains a mystery, for the only incident recorded at the end of this boat trip is a confrontation with the Pharisees. They want to see a “sign from heaven” (8:11), but Jesus refuses to oblige. Again they enter the boat and sail toward Bethsaida.

Mark uses these stories to reiterate themes he has already explored. Once more, the boat is a place reserved for the twelve. Both of these pericopae explicitly and exclusively place the disciples in the boat with Jesus. And again, in these two stories the boat becomes a *means* which enables Jesus to broaden his ministry beyond the bounds of the twelve. His healing activity in Gennesaret and his confrontation with the Pharisees in Dalmanutha are made possible by travel in the boat.

A Debate in the Boat

The final boat story occurs in **8:13-21**. Leaving the Pharisees frustrated in Dalmanutha, Jesus directs the boat toward Bethsaida. On the way, Jesus uses the time to teach his disciples a lesson in humility.

Though in the boat, Jesus is still thinking of the Pharisees on the shore. He warns his disciples about the “yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod” (8:15). They completely misunderstand, taking his comment as a rebuke for not packing lunch. In the strongest terms, Jesus berates them for their incomprehension. “Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don’t you remember? . . . Do you still not understand?” (8:17c-18, 21). Eight stinging questions are directed at the confused disciples, to which they timidly answer two words (“Twelve” and “Seven”).

This confrontation with the disciples climaxes a series of instances where the disciples fail to be what Jesus expects of them. They are his chosen ones. They have been given the “secret of the kingdom of God.” Unlike the crowds, Jesus assumes that when his disciples see, they will perceive; when they hear, they will understand. He expects them to “hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop.”

Instead, their responses consistently indicate a dull incomprehension. The first time they are in the boat with Jesus (4:1ff), they do not grasp the important lessons he teaches. They must ask him to explain a parable, provoking his surprised response, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable” (4:13). The storm

on the sea (4:35ff) highlights not their faith but their fear, and prompts them to wonder, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (4:41). In the feeding of the 5000 (6:35-44), they underestimate the power of Jesus to provide bread for the hungry, and in the second feeding episode (8:1-9) fail even to remember what he had done in the first. They are struggling and afraid when Jesus walks on the water to them (6:45ff).

Now, with time growing shorter, they still myopically wonder if “yeast” refers to their having no bread. In language otherwise reserved for the crowds or the Pharisees, Jesus assaults his boat-mates with questions which function as accusations. They *are* blind and uncomprehending! Their hearts *are* hard! Their eyes and ears *are not* working! They *do not* remember! They *still* don’t understand! For all his hopes and high expectations, the disciples differ from the crowds and even the Pharisees by degree, not by kind.

Despite auspicious beginnings, the disciples, by the end of this series of scenes and miracles, show themselves to be like “outsiders.” Like “outsiders,” they “think the things not of God, but of humans” and regard reality from a this-worldly point of view. Of course, unlike “outsiders,” the disciples follow Jesus and are “with him” in commitment to his cause. Accordingly, incomprehension on the one hand and commitment on the other are hallmark traits of the disciples. Jesus’ struggle with them is to lead them to overcome their incomprehension lest it undermine their commitment to him. This is the central issue in Jesus’ relationship with the disciples . . .²⁴

Several themes are reprised in this pericope. Here, as before, the boat functions as a place for disciples to commune with Jesus, as a teaching platform (with the disciples as primary audience), and as an environment for building faith (and comprehension). Once again, the presence of Jesus is vital for the occupants of the boat, but uncomfortable.

The new theme Mark introduces here has been hinted at and foreshadowed in several of the boat stories we have examined. But never has it played the dominant role it takes in this final story. When all is said and done, the disciples are not “special people,” chosen for their spiritual perceptiveness and sensitivity. Their inclusion in the boat is based upon their decision to answer Jesus’ call and to follow after him, not on their superior theological insights. It is commitment rather than comprehension which distinguishes the disciples from the crowd. The hope is, given enough time with Jesus in the boat, that commitment can be transformed into understanding of who Jesus is and who he requires them to be.

The Church as Boat

²⁴ Kingsbury, *Conflict in Mark*, 1989, pp. 101-102.

Why Mark chose to write a gospel might be attributed to a number of motives: the personal bent of the author himself; the need to put in written form a “life of Jesus;” the desire to produce something that would transcend particular concerns and historical situations. Mark could have written a treatise on discipleship, a book on ecclesiology, or an occasional letter intended to address specific concerns. Instead, he writes a narrative about the ministry of the Lord.

But the fact that Mark wrote a gospel should not obscure the fact that he wrote to a particular audience and with specific themes in mind. A gospel is no less “occasional” because it is narrative and rooted in historical events. The needs of an audience still dictate the shape and emphases of a gospel as surely as they do the structure and argument of an epistle. Though the gospel uses the vocabulary and rhetoric of narrative, it does so with the intent of addressing the needs of a reader who stands at a chronological distance from the events of the narrative itself.

So Mark’s gospel is required to serve both a story and an audience. Its first readers must have come to this book with questions besides, “Who was Jesus?” and “What did he do and say?” They were surely hungry to understand what it meant to follow after Jesus and to function as a Christian community. Mark makes it abundantly clear that he intends to do more than write a biography of Jesus. One of his primary interests is to teach readers how to be faithful disciples. Judging from the amount of space devoted to teaching about the church in the correspondence of Paul, Peter and John, it is reasonable to consider that Mark is also interested in speaking a word about the church.

Now certainly, Mark’s method is determined by the genre he has chosen. He speaks in parable and pericope, hyperbole and asides, actions and reactions. He uses drama and plot and characterization to invigorate and propel his message. We should not expect teaching about the church to take didactic or propositional forms alien to the gospel genre. But the question remains whether Mark might use the language of story to make observations about the church. If he did, one of the most powerful tools available to him would be metaphor.

Points of Comparison between the Boat and the Church

All metaphors require an imaginative leap by which “the unknown is assimilated to the known”.²⁵ But such leaps are not taken in the dark. There are “hints” given in a text which guide the reader to consider an analogy he or she has not previously seen. In didactic texts, the hint is often quite obvious: “you are the body of Christ” (1Co 12:27), “you are a . . . royal priesthood” (1Pe 2:9), “you adulterous people” (Jas 4:4).

In narrative texts, the leap to understanding is more often founded on points of comparison built up between an element of the story (e.g., the boat) and a significant but

²⁵ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, p. 105.

ill-defined element in the reader's life (e.g., the church).²⁶ Often the latter element is left unstated, requiring the reader to examine himself to find an appropriate interpretation.²⁷ Rather than using explicit statements to draw our attention to the metaphor, in narrative the author piles up ideas and insights which apply with equal validity to both story and life. Through the accumulation of such implicit comparisons, the reader is encouraged to perceive the analogy for himself and to understand that the writer is preaching under his breath, using the narrative to whisper deeper insights.²⁸

It is not implausible to posit that discerning readers of Mark would see in the boat on the Sea of Galilee a parallel to the church in the world, or to assert that Mark intended his readers to make such a connection. If Mark has purposed to say something to his readers about the church, to do so in a way that is compatible with story form, and has chosen the boat as a metaphor for making his points, what lessons can reasonably be derived from the stories we find in his gospel? I suggest that the ways in which the boat *functions* in this gospel provide the points of comparison for "unpacking" the metaphor and learning what Mark wants to say about the church. There are numerous, frequent, and repetitive statements made by Mark about the functions of the boat which invite comparison to the community of faith.²⁹

1. In the story, the boat functions as a distinct environment in which disciples pursue a radically different agenda than in their prior lives. Before, they were mere fishermen; in Christ's boat they became "fishers of men." The decision to step out of one boat and into another involved a choice of lifestyle. Old relationships, occupations, priorities, and ambitions were abandoned. New concerns and ideals and relationships awaited the disciple who would sail with Jesus. The choice between the two boats was decisive and exclusive because the two lifestyles were distinct and incompatible. The disciples could not have been with Jesus had they not been willing to leave "their father Zebedee in the boat."

²⁶ Beekman and Callow categorize these three elements as "points of similarity" (which suggest in what particular aspect the following elements are related), "image" (the 'metaphoric' part of the figure), and "topic" (the item which is illustrated by the image). In their understanding, the boat would be an "abbreviated metaphor" in which the "topic" (i.e., the church) is not stated. John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974, pp. 127-130.

²⁷ "The receiver must search through his own experience, and must employ his own imagination, and if necessary engage in his own research, and only so can the meaning of a metaphor be realized". Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989, pp. 300-301.

²⁸ "[E]ffective metaphor depends on a common perception between the creator of the metaphor and the hearer. In other words there must be an appropriate common presupposition pool from which the hearer could correctly perceive meaning. The modern reader of the Bible might not have that presupposition pool . . ." Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, p. 302.

²⁹ In Caird's classification, a metaphor like the boat would have *high correspondence* (the degree of intrinsic comparability between two things) and *high development* (the degree to which those comparabilities are exploited by an author). Furthermore, since it is the *functions* of the boat which provide points of comparison to the church, he would label this a *pragmatic comparison*. Caird, *Language*, pp. 153-155; 147.

Similarly, the church, and the lifestyle it embraces, stands distinct from the world and the alternatives for living it offers. “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed” (1Co 6:11). “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Eph 5:8). “No one who is born of God will continue to sin” (1Jn 3:9). Here there is a new ethic, a different *raison d’être*, a unique understanding of purpose and mission. When Jesus calls individuals into the community of faith, they are challenged to leave old lives and take up a new one. The choice between the two is exclusive because the lifestyles are incompatible. Part of the cost of following Jesus is the rejection of other modes of existence which offer tempting and comfortable passage on life’s seas as one steps, trusting, into God’s church.

2. In the story, the boat functions as a place reserved for disciples. Its occupants are always Jesus and the twelve. It is used as a means of withdrawal from the crowds, as a place for communion between Jesus and his true followers, as a boundary distinguishing those who have been given the “secret” from those “on the outside.” Never are representatives of the crowd or members of the religious establishment in the boat with Jesus. The boat is for those who are called, who leave and follow, who hear the word and obey it, who are willing to share the ministry and the sufferings of their Lord. Of course, even the twelve are unable to live this out consistently. But they made the commitment and, in the absence of perfect faith, Jesus accepts their pledge to follow.

The church also is a community made up of disciples and disciples only. “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1Co 12:13). At times, particularly in its worship, it is a means of withdrawing from the world and communing with the Lord. By definition, membership in the church distinguishes disciples of Jesus from those who have made no such commitment. “What fellowship can light have with darkness? . . . What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” (2Co 6:14-15). The curious, the seekers after signs and wonders, the needy but unconverted always have a place near Jesus and his church, but must never be confused with the church itself. More is required of those who would be part of the church than interest or even gratitude. Commitment—as evidenced by leaving and following, by obedience and the adoption of the Christ-life—is the necessary precondition for inclusion in the Kingdom.

3. In the story, the boat functions as a teaching platform from which Jesus instructs the crowds and his own disciples. Some lessons are taught in the hearing of both audiences (e.g., the parable of the soils). When that is true, Jesus focuses on faith and the meaning of God’s kingdom and the need to consider carefully what is heard (4:1ff). He uses “crowd-appropriate” methods, speaking in parables and figures so that his hearers are transfixed even if they do not grasp his meaning. But other lessons are taught only to the disciples. The parables are interpreted, the “secrets” are made known, lack of understanding and faith is rebuked. It is interesting to notice that not all these lessons are verbal. Jesus exposes his disciples to difficult and dangerous experiences in the boat so that he might teach them deeper levels of faith. The disciples are “tested” in the storm and during the night to determine whether they are really listening and being transformed.

The church also is a teaching platform from which the good news of the kingdom is spoken to two audiences. Like Jesus in the boat, we bridge the gap between the church and the world with a message about spiritual realities. “He has committed to us the message of reconciliation” (2Co 5:19b). We “sow the word” to a pressing, demanding, hungry culture. They are not always receptive to the seed. We are not always perceptive in the way we communicate. But the prophetic and evangelistic function of the church is basic. There must be something of the preacher in every member of God’s church.

But the church is made up of students as well. Like the boat, the church is an environment where disciples are instructed “how to live in order to please God” (1Th 4:1). Here there is a “message of wisdom for the mature” (1Co 2:6), involving “rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2Ti 3:16-17—cf. Mk 8:14-21) with the result that disciples are “thoroughly equipped.” However, much of what Jesus is teaching us in the church is experiential rather than verbal. It is in the dangers of persecution and the difficulties of relationship that much is learned about the meaning of faith. We too are “tested” in storms and trials to determine whether we are hearing the word and being changed.

4. In the story, the boat functions as a spiritual battle ground where Jesus fights against the elements and for the hearts of his disciples. Satan’s destructive presence is evident in both the storm and the hard-heartedness of his followers. He actively seeks to sink the boat and drown the disciples. Behind their slowness to believe are his malevolent efforts to “take away the word that was sown,” to bring “trouble or persecution” so that they might “fall away,” to plant thorns that would “choke the word, making it unfruitful” (4:15-19). But Jesus is a powerful opponent. He speaks and the storm is stilled; he steps into the boat and the wind abates. As for the faith of his disciples, the battle for the heart is never as easy as the battle against the elements. But Christ’s power to save them from the sea is a potent symbol of his ability to help them succeed as disciples.

The church also is a spiritual battleground. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil” (Eph 6:12). Satan is at work to sink the church and to snatch faith from the hearts of those who sail within her. Yet Jesus remains a powerful opponent. For 2000 years he has enabled the church to withstand bitter storms. His power to save is the foundation upon which the community bases its confidence and hope. What he has done for the church corporately he continues to do for disciples individually, protecting and encouraging the delicate blossom of faith in the teeth of Satan’s fiercest attacks.

5. In a related manner, the boat in Mark’s narrative functions to underscore the imperative of the presence of Christ. It is his presence in the boat which makes it exceptional, distinguishing it from others sailing on the Sea of Galilee. It is his word that enables the boat to serve as a pulpit. It is Jesus who gives the boat direction and purpose throughout this gospel. The boat is endangered only when his presence is missed—when he sleeps in the stern or remains on the shore. When Jesus is awakened or climbs back into the boat, power becomes available, the storms abate, and the disciples can continue their journey.

While the presence of Jesus in the boat is necessary, however, Mark assures us that it is frequently disquieting. While in the boat, the disciples are bewildered by his words, confused by his calm, afraid of his power, terrified by his transcendence, and cowed by his rebukes. Perhaps one of the most powerful points Mark makes about life in the boat is that the disciples cannot live without Jesus, but neither is it easy for them to live with him.

So it is with the church. The presence of Jesus is central to the life of the church. In its worship, sacraments and witness, the community confesses that Christ is with us still. It is Jesus as “Emmanuel” who distinguishes the community of believers from all other human gatherings. His word continues to be heard in the world through the church as we recognize his presence and authority. He remains head of the body, directing and empowering his earthly instantiation. Like Mark’s boat, the church is truly endangered only when his presence is forgotten. In times of revival, when the church remembers who is in their midst, power becomes available, the storms abate, and disciples can continue their journey. That presence is not always a comforting one. When Jesus is living in the church, he often challenges and terrifies and rebukes. In a word, he is Lord. But the church cannot live without him, even if, at times, it strains us to live with him.

6. Though the boat distinguishes disciples in Mark, it does not absolve them from the requirements of ministry. Just the opposite. The disciples are taught, trained, rested and challenged in the boat, but it is not the primary site of their activity. The boat is always going somewhere so that Jesus and the twelve can disembark to pursue ministry on the shore and among the people. The crowds, with their sickness and sin, define the wider ministry of Jesus, a ministry in which Jesus includes his disciples. In fact, forced to choose between quiet hours with his disciples or the pressing needs of a crowd, Jesus elects to land the boat and serve the people. When all is said and done, the boat in Mark is a *means* to ministry, not an *end* in itself. The disciples are called into the boat for the very purpose that they might be thrust back into the world.

The church, though we often forget it, functions in much the same way. Membership in Christ’s community is a great privilege, but it must not insulate us from contact with those “on the outside.” The ministry to which we are called is broader than ourselves and, hence, must be bigger than the church. It is the world, with all its hurt and need, which defines the wider scope of our work and constitutes the primary site of Christian activity. After all the preparation and encouragement and healing we enjoy in the context of the church, Jesus still thrusts us back among the crowds to minister and to serve.

7. Finally, the boat functions in Mark to keep the disciples humble and to remind them that they have been chosen to accompany Jesus not because of their spiritual perspicuity or the largeness of their faith but because they have been granted a gracious invitation. Early in this gospel, the twelve said “Yes” to Jesus, and on the basis of that commitment they are allowed to be with him in the boat. But they constantly struggle with faithlessness and fear. They are often fatigued and frustrated. Most of all, they fail to

understand who Jesus is or what he is trying to do.³⁰ The last words heard in the boat are Jesus' rebukes for their dullness and hardness of heart (8:14-21). Before the gospel ends, one in the boat will betray Jesus, another will deny him, and all will desert him. It is a truism of life in the boat is that even the best of disciples is more like the crowds than he is the Christ. That the twelve are permitted in the boat at all implies little about them and much about the abundant mercy of the Lord towards those who have committed to follow where he leads.

This lesson is fundamental to our understanding of the church. We are called into Christ's community through no merit or goodness of our own. We too struggle with all the foibles which plagued the twelve. In the end, it is Christ's mercy rather than our deservedness which determines inclusion and continuance in the church. It is a basic function of the church to constantly remind itself of that great truth and thus engender the kind of humility that makes us useful servants in the kingdom.

In summary, Mark's boat acts as a complex setting in which numerous and important events unfold. It functions to define a unique lifestyle, as a boundary between disciples and the crowds, as a teaching platform, as a spiritual battleground, as a place to experience the presence of Jesus, as a means to further ministry, and as a gathering of people noted more for commitment than for competence. In each of these ways, the church offers an analogous function, leading the reader to wonder whether Mark might be talking about the church as he describes what Jesus and his disciples did in the boat. If Mark has taken a lowly fishing boat and packed it full of metaphorical meaning, he has found an inventive and colorful way to talk about the church. He leaves it to the church, however, to unpack the metaphor and discern the lessons to be gained by comparing itself to a boat full of disciples.

Metaphor as Prescription

A metaphor addresses two horizons. On the one hand, the boat metaphor can provide insights into Mark's understanding of the church. To the degree that we have been perceptive in identifying the boat as a metaphor with which Mark has spoken of the church, we have a means of discerning what Mark thought to be important about the functioning of the church—how a community of disciples in the *πλοιον* or in the *εκκλησια* is defined. At this level, the metaphor is *descriptive*, stating verities about the church and the human condition which reflect Mark's understanding of the subject.

The second horizon, however, addresses *our* understanding and experience of the church. The metaphor informs us of not only what the church *was*, but what it *should be*. It identifies functions which—at least in our day—may have ceased to be primary characteristics of the church, and confronts us with the need to reevaluate and restore. At

³⁰ Many commentators believe the incomprehension of the disciples is the primary theme of this section of Mark. See for example: Kingsbury, *Conflict*, pp. 95-103; Werner Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979, pp. 30-42.

this level, the metaphor is *prescriptive*, defining purposes and duties the church must rediscover to be true to the wishes of its captain.

When, for example, Mark speaks of life in the boat as distinct in purpose and ethic from life on the shore, he may well be *describing* metaphorically his view of the church. The New Testament church *was* different from the world and provided a distinct alternative for living. Yet the metaphor is also *prescriptive* in that it reaches across the centuries to confront the modern church, tempted constantly to differ as little as possible from the prevailing culture. To a church that is becoming less distinct from its surroundings, less incompatible with opposing lifestyles, less strident in its call for holy living, the picture of disciples consciously stepping out of one boat and into another is disquieting but instructive. If the church is to be more like Mark's boat, it must reexamine whether the alternative it offers to the world is distinct and compelling enough to merit a change of venue.

How else might the boat inform our understanding of how the modern church should function? Can the power of metaphor allow the boat to sail over the years and dock next to today's church?

The fact that only disciples are present with Jesus in the boat offers a rebuke to the church where membership is increasingly defined in terms of attendance and regularity of financial contributions. Making distinctions between committed disciples and "friends of the church" is viewed with disfavor, and runs counter to the atmosphere of "unconditional acceptance" which is thought to be a prime characteristic of God's people. If people are curious about Jesus, interested in our sermons, and willing to spend time in our company—i.e., if they have all the characteristics of the *crowds* of Jesus' day—we welcome them into the church with open arms. But Mark's boat may insist that those who would join the church must be held to a higher standard. Commitment, evidenced by sacrifice and submission to the Lordship of Christ, was necessary to get into the boat with Jesus. Perhaps it should also be necessary to get into the church.

The teaching function of the boat—calling the crowds to faith and the twelve to deeper discipleship—confronts the waning witness of the church of our day. In post-modern America, where reason is rapidly losing its appeal, churches find themselves resorting to more emotional overtures—support rather than instruction, counseling more than preaching, relationship over revelation. Training in discipleship makes a church vulnerable to charges of cultism. A clear call to repentance and faith opens it to accusations of being judgmental and intolerant. What does the boat prescribe for such a condition? Perhaps we need to be reminded that the word preached from the boat was not always popular and often fell on "bad soil"; and that the training given even to the "good soil" was frequently uncomfortable and threatening. But such realities did not persuade Jesus to abandon his confidence in the word and his role as preacher. The boat challenges today's church to function as a platform where the words of Jesus continue to be spoken to our culture and honored in our fellowship. Called to be a witnessing community, we must be faithful to preach those words in the face of terrible odds. And

charged with the responsibility of equipping the saints, we must teach, rebuke, and even “terrify” one another so that we all can become “fishers of men.”

That Mark can transform a lowly fishing boat into a spiritual battle ground, where cosmic war is waged between the forces of Satan and the Son of God, is a testament to his skill as a writer and his insights into spiritual realities. The church today needs contemporary “Marks” to reframe present struggles in terms of spiritual warfare. Few things testify to the pervasive naturalism of our age (or to its encroachment upon even the thinking of God’s people) as the church’s failure to acknowledge the “powers of this dark world” and Satan’s active role in threatening the Christian community. Division, immorality, and materialism in the church are not simply “unfortunate realities.” That people leave the church must not be attributed to a “back-door phenomenon.” Lack of commitment and unwillingness to sacrifice is not primarily the result of a “consumer mindset” that leads inexorably to a “McChurch mentality”. There is a storm raging, threatening the church and all who sail in her. But to lay blame principally on psychological, cultural, or economic factors is to bail with a thimble. Behind every wind is the malevolent presence of Satan. To weather the storm, today’s church must find a way to awaken Jesus and allow him to command calm of the “spiritual forces of evil.”

Which leads us to consider how necessary was the presence of Christ to the work and welfare of those in Mark’s boat. It is perplexing how easily the modern church leaves Jesus out of its business. The presence of Christ is assumed and thereafter ignored. The routine of worship too often blunts the experience of his nearness. Ministries degenerate into programs, when they ought to be vivid demonstrations of Christ’s compassion and mission. The sacraments are administered as religious rites, but with scant recognition that through them we identify with the living Christ and participate in him. Members define their churches denominationally or theologically or even geographically. But an understanding that the church is the present incarnation of the transcendent Lord, the “fullness of him who fills everything,” the “body” that is linked organically to its “head” is sadly lacking. No wonder today’s church should feel so threatened in these difficult times. The boat is always endangered when the presence of Jesus is overlooked. Therein, of course, lies an opportunity. “God should have made all men sailors, for it seems that only drowning men can see him.”³¹ When the church can no longer afford for Jesus to lie quietly in the stern, we will ask him to rise up and save us. When our arms are worn out with rowing and our own efforts have proved futile, our sermons and worship and ministries will once again call us to remember his potent presence in our midst.

And what of the boat’s function as a means of bringing the disciples into contact with the crowds and allowing them opportunities for ministry? More often, the modern church functions as fortress rather than boat. The saved huddle behind the protective walls of the church, seeking comfort and calm. The pain and chaos of our age is kept at bay by the forbidding parapets of tradition and arcane dogmas. A vision of a ministry beyond ourselves so quickly degenerates into the practice of a ministry directed exclusively to ourselves. Selfless service of those who can return no favors is abandoned in favor of

³¹ Ron: what is this quote and who made the statement?

ministerial quid pro quo's. If the church is to be shaped by Mark's boat, we must recognize that the church is a tool for ministry to the world. So long as Jesus is the captain, he will require us to land where the crowds are and to address the needs we find there. We will serve each other in the church so that each may be equipped and fortified to serve well and bravely on the shore. Indeed, it is this sense of common mission that does much to foster a spirit of camaraderie and unity—a spirit absent in many churches today because a passion for ministry is also absent.

Finally, Mark's understanding of the boat as a place where disciples are rebuked and disciplined and upbraided for their foibles confronts the church of today where "seldom is heard a discouraging word". Perhaps we are cut from different cloth than these earliest disciples. Where they were dull, we are quick to perceive. Where they struggle to understand, we grasp fully and completely. Perhaps. Jesus was able to introduce into the boat an element which is so often absent from our churches—a constant call to humility, the immediate confrontation of hardheartedness, the loving but firm challenge of incomprehension and fear. In such an environment, self-satisfaction was impossible. Complacency was not allowed. No doubt, this attitude kept many from joining the disciples in following Jesus. It certainly kept life in the boat exciting. But the result was a setting where disciples grew dramatically because they were continually made aware of how far they had to go. If the church today could duplicate that environment, we might be more effective at making disciples who were growing into the image of Christ. If apathy is all too characteristic of the modern church, we have only ourselves to blame. "Where little is expected, little is given."

Conclusion

In these more literal times, the "church" of the New Testament is defined (almost exclusively) in terms of its various manifestations in Greece, Asia Minor, etc. We tend to look at the church in Rome or Corinth or Jerusalem as the primary exemplars of Christian community. As a result, Acts and the epistles become the principal sources of information about the ancient church and the primary models upon which we base our practice of the church today.

Yet Mark spends a considerable portion of his gospel talking about a community of believers. The disciples come together out of devotion to Jesus. They quickly take on a corporate persona which transcends (and even overwhelms) their individual identities.³² As a group, they must struggle with the meaning of discipleship and the way of the cross. As a unit, they minister and suffer and worship. Their "fellowship" is marred by pride, personal ambition, selfishness, and conflict. They knew the difficulties of following the "head" and the pain of not following closely enough.

³² The majority of the disciples are named only once in this gospel (3:16-19). Most often Philip, Bartholomew, Thaddaeus, and the others are simply "the disciples" or "the twelve".

If we come to Mark hoping to find detailed information about church organization and structure, public worship, or the tithe, we will be disappointed. But if we come asking, “How does God’s community function? What responsibilities have been given to the church? What role does the church play in the world and in the lives of its members?” we may well find that Mark also has a word to say about the church and that, in Mark’s boat, we are treated to a potent metaphor for living in a community of believers.

Fresh metaphors can enlighten us and give fresh insights into the meaning of “church.” It is my hope that exploring the “boat” will enable us, in these stormy times, to build a more sea-worthy church—one which can weather the winds of culture and withstand the waves which threaten to swamp us.