



VIII. A Boat or a Boathouse

Jesus set the bar high when He said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another," John 13:35. Loving one another is visible proof of being His disciples. Many people say that they love their church. Do they mean they love their fellow-disciples? Or do they mean that they love their worship services, their pastor, or the feeling they get on campus? None of these is necessarily wrong. However, the words of Jesus quoted above refer only to a love between fellow-disciples. A recent survey reported that one-quarter of church attendees compared their church experience to attending a public event with no real connection to the other attendees. There is no *disciple love* in that setting. And don't be mistaken ... turning to the stranger standing next to you on Sunday morning and saying *God loves you and so do I* is foolishness. The statistic in that survey is very unfortunate. However, the survey reported on people *attending church* ... rather than on people *being church*. That is at the core of a serious misconception about today's church. Attending gatherings of the church is very important. However, the emphasis must be on *being church*. A body or a building ... a boat or a boathouse? That is a good question to help us think through what our view of church may have become compared to what church was designed to be. *Ecclesiology* is the study of the church. When first used in England in the 1800's, it referred to the architecture and ornamentation of church buildings. That definition is rarely used today ... although in practice, it might often be appropriate. Today, the common use of *ecclesiology* refers to the nature and function of the church. This boat or boathouse analogy gives us a look at the true nature and function of the church. Be forewarned ... this analogy may cause you to take a radically different look at your being church versus attending church.

Boathouses have been built for centuries along the deepwater shores of lakes and rivers. Originally, their construction was driven by utilitarian function, as places for the protection and maintenance of boats. They were temporary structures with improvised framing sheathed in low-cost materials. A boat entered the deepwater level of the boathouse to be serviced there or disassembled and its parts taken to the floor above for more detailed service. For instance, a sailboat's mainsail could be removed from its mast and laid out on the upper floor for mending. When serviced and reassembled below, the whole boat could once again sail safely and efficiently across the rough waters beyond the relatively calm waters inside the boathouse. Those early boathouses existed solely to attend to the needs of the boat. There has been a boathouse evolution over the centuries. An example of a primitive purpose-driven boathouse is one found at the mouth of the River Gloy in Highland Scotland south of Inverness. It is little more than a two-story quonset hut with deepwater access. At the fully evolved extreme are Yale University's state-of-the-art 22,000 square foot Gilder Boathouse along Connecticut's Housatonic River ... and the elegant Boathouse Bed and Breakfast along Bolton Landing's millionaires row on Lake George in

the Adirondack Mountains. Many of today's boathouses have evolved into commercial enterprises with coffee bars, restaurants, and varied recreational facilities. Many no longer service boats but only provide a place to dock while accessing their nautically themed, non-boating activities and facilities.

For this *Boat or Boathouse* analogy, consider the *Hobie 16* sailboat. It is as thrilling to sail today as when introduced by the Hobie Cat Company in 1969. It is seriously fast and seriously fun ... producing a serious adrenaline rush. This classic can be sailed by one person – by an experienced and knowledgeable captain. The *Hobie 16* is beautifully designed and built to sail ... to really sail. Catching the wind in its mainsail, jib, and spinnaker, propels it across a windswept stormy lake. Sailing a *Hobie 16* is exhilarating ... much more so than sitting in an upscale boathouse lounge sipping a Frappuccino with strangers while watching a prerecorded regatta on multiple oversized flat screens. Imagine disassembling a *Hobie 16* into its many parts (sails, kick-up rudders, mast, trapeze, trampoline, harken and ratchet blocks, halyards, shackles, rigging, et. al.) and distributing those parts throughout a lakeside community up to twenty miles or more from the boathouse. Then once per week, on a Saturday night or Sunday morning, bring those parts together in the second-floor maintenance room. They are assembled there in orderly rows as a gathering of disconnected parts ... but never assembled into the sailboat they were designed to be. At the end of the hour, they scatter again to their individual locations and wonder why they never really sail. That is a picture of many churches today. The parts of the sailboat (the church) are never really assembled into a functioning sailboat and taken for an exhilarating sail. They assemble, but are never *assembled together* ... somehow thinking they have satisfied Hebrews 10:25 by their disassembled attendance. Their boat-life is only a boathouse-life. The boat is the church ... the boathouse is not the church. The boathouse is a place where the boat comes for regular maintenance. The church-house is the place where the boat needs to come for regular service (not just services) by the four kinds of maintenance men described in Ephesians 4:11-13, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." That is the job description for the leaders of the boathouse. Moreover, the individual pieces of the *Hobie 16* (the people of the church) do not sail alone. They were designed to sail assembled. Disconnected individual parts can do little more than float along with the current.

In today's church culture, it is too easy to be boathouse centric rather than boat centric ... church-house centric rather than church centric. When we become boathouse centric, our boathouse starts calling itself the boat. We speak of *attending boathouse* rather than speak of *being boat*. Consequentially, we measure success by the size of our boathouse and the number of parts at weekly services. Moreover, we cease to measure success by nautical miles sailed or nautical storms conquered. Too often, our boathouses evolve into commercial enterprises with coffee bars, restaurants, nautical bookstores, and non-nautical activities. Then sadly, the boat seldom sails. The *Hobie 16* is a great analogy for the church. Each is masterfully designed. Each has many parts. When their parts are assembled together into one and when each part does its part, both sail beautifully. Jesus is the experienced, knowledgeable captain of our boat. A boathouse leader is

not the captain of the boat. The sails catch the wind of the Spirit that propels the church across the stormy waves of life. The assembled boat does need regular maintenance ... and the boathouse should be a great place for that to happen. The boat was designed to sail ... to really sail. It was not designed for perpetual docking in the boathouse. The boat is a boat 24/7 ... not just for one hour each week as disassembled parts gathered on an expansive second floor of a boathouse. Is your church a boat or a boathouse? You can sail a boat ... but you cannot sail a boathouse. You can attend a boathouse ... but you cannot attend a boat.

My hope and prayer is that this analogy has made you think about your view of, and experience in, the church. This was not written to assess the liberal institutional church-house. It was written specifically to challenge your view of, and experience in, the conservative evangelical church. It is purposely descriptive (assessing a problem) rather than prescriptive (offering a cure). The prescription for each of us is become a disciple, be a disciplemaker, and become part of a community of disciples.

Some thought provoking questions:

Do you see the church as a boat or as a boathouse? Asked another way, do you have a boat ecclesiology or a boathouse ecclesiology?

Do you attend church? Please do not answer yes. Church is something you *are* rather than something you *attend*. By all means, attend a Biblical boathouse ... one that understands the difference between the boat and the boathouse.

Does your boathouse focus on servicing boats or boathouse services? How much of your boathouse budget is for maintaining the boathouse ... how much of it is for maintaining the boat?

Has your boathouse hijacked your boat?

Are you being equipped at your boathouse for sailing ... or are you equipping your leaders for their sailing? Are you being equipped for life in the boathouse or for a life of sailing?

Are you so boathouse centric that you are missing the boat?

Will you arrive in Heaven after lifelong church attendance having never obeyed the "*not forsaking our own assembling together*" exhortation of Hebrews 10:25?

Are you trying to sail unassembled from the other parts? Are you alone and disconnected from the other parts of the church ... floating along with the current?

When are you going to get in the multi-level chain of 2 Timothy 2:2 and be a disciple and a disciplemaker in a community of disciples?

Glossary of terms in this analogy:

The *boathouse* in this analogy represents the administrative, organizational, and physical structure of a building or campus used by the church in a particular geographic location.

The *boat* (although inanimate) represents the church as a living organism ... as the Body of Christ.

The *parts of the boat* represent individual believers.

The *Captain of the boat* is Jesus. In this analogy, He is the captain *and* the crew. There is no other crew in this analogy. The people of the church are *not* the crew ... they are the parts of the boat.

The *leaders of the boathouse* are not the captain or the crew of the boat. They are part of the boat.

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