

What kind of Church IS this?

Mark 13: 1- 11

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I bring greetings from Williamsburg, where I recently spent a day and a half in conferences with Anthony B. Robinson, the author of a book called, **Transforming Congregational Culture**. I thank you for giving me the opportunity to go to Williamsburg to learn some more on this on-going task called ministry. Today I would like to use our lectionary passage from Mark, to lend scriptural support to some of the ideas I took away from that conference. If I do what I intend to do here today, I will be teaching more than uncovering God's word as relayed in scripture—that is, preaching. So, if you were expecting a sermon, I will apologize even before I begin. I am sorry that you may come away feeling that you didn't get preached to. I think, though, that a lot of what Tony had to say, is worth sharing with you—and I want to share it before I forget it and while I am still impassioned with the truths which have been imparted to me.

I would like to start our discussion by asking some very basic questions: Why are we here? Why bother to have a church at all? There are many ways we could answer that question, of course, and many of our answers would be scripturally sound. For instance: The purpose of the church is teach people to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves or the purpose of the church is to share the good news of the gospel, as we heard in today's scripture—these are two purposes of the church that come immediately to mind. I might be putting words in Tony's mouth but I think that he would say that both those answers are right. I think he would also say, though, that there is one overarching purpose that combines both these ideas and others as well. That overarching purpose of the church—that is church with a capital "C" is "to transform people into disciples of Christ." We might expand on that to say that the church is about the business of transforming people who embrace a secular world view, which is grace-less, and people who worship idols (like money, or power) into a people whose lives are centered around Christ and the Christian story of God's grace for humanity.

To understand the rest of what Tony had to say, this is important for us to keep in mind. The church's purpose is to transform people into disciples of Christ.

Now let us move on and talk about church typologies. If I were to present this to you as Tony did to me, I would actually draw you a chart. Since I don't have a chart up here, you'll just have to imagine for yourself that I have drawn a big square on newsprint and I have divided that square into four quadrants. Each quadrant is dedicated to a certain church

typology. In one corner you have Company Church typology, in the opposite corner you have the Charismatic Leader Church typology, down from that you have the Club Church typology and last, you have the Incarnational Church Typology. Now already, just by telling you these typologies, you can guess from the words I used, where churches should be headed—and just to take any mystery out of this, I'll even tell you up front—we want to be in the Incarnational Church quadrant. Incarnational has to do with incarnating or putting flesh and bones to the spirit of Christ. Again, being Christ's disciples, living as Christ lived. But we're not going to start by talking about the Incarnational church community. We are going to start with the Company Church, move through Charismatic leader, and Club typologies and then end with the Incarnational Church typology. These are exaggerations I am presenting here. Probably no church exactly fits one typology, but probably too, most churches lean toward one more than the others. You can decide for yourselves which typology most fits Cove.

First, the Company Church. Some words and phrases used to describe the Company church are “Goal directed,” “Measures its ministry,” “Programatic” and “institutional.”

The primary goal or purpose of company churches is to mold its members into good Christians who will support the church, because the institution—the building, the programs, the budget, are of primary importance. Members and future members are only valuable to the extent that they help maintain the things that I just mentioned. I was wracking my brain for an example to share with you, and I actually have one. A friend of mine who was a very active member of a Lutheran church in McLean. She was going through a rough time. As she told me, “Both my in-laws were in the hospital and they were expected to die. I was either on the phone with doctors, or making hospital visits at every turn. AND I was trying to run a household besides.” Betty had two small children at the time. Betty continued, “In the midst of all of that the Director of our Vacation Bible School phoned me and asked if she might count on me to teach. When I told her the sad truth about my family, she quickly terminated the conversation . I was not able to help, so she didn't want to waste anymore time talking with me.”

Life problems, like sickness or the death of a loved one, do not fit well into this type church's life, unless it can become part of a program which will help maintain the institution. There may be a transformation of sorts going on—but it is basically the transformation of the institution—toward bigger buildings or expanded programs. It does not have much at all to do with transforming people into disciples.

In our scripture passage for today, Jesus talks about how “not one stone will be left here upon another. All will be thrown down.” Jesus is talking about the eventual destruction of the temple—which in fact, did happen, some 35 years after Jesus’ death. I would suggest that the destruction of the temple was part of God’s plan. It was God’s way of reminding the Jews that the institutions humans create are not for all time. They are meant to be transitory. Otherwise, we end up worshiping our institutions and not God.

Another type church on our four part quadrant is the Charismatic leader church typology. These are your Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggard type churches. The words and phrases that are associated with this typology are “vision oriented,” leaders, hierarchy, sheep and shepherd. These churches may boom in membership for awhile but many of them die straight away when their charismatic church leader retires or as happened with Ted Haggard’s church, when it is discovered that the leader has a very serious public relations problem. People may be transformed into disciples in the Charismatic Leader Church, but those disciples are not necessarily of Jesus Christ. In our scripture passage, Jesus cautions his disciples about following false leaders. He says, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he.’”

Next we have the Club Church Typology. To explain this type church, Tony told us a true story. It was about a church for which he served as consultant. The church had lost members over the years until just a handful of dedicated members was left. Besides hiring him to coach its members into how to become more stable, the denomination to which that church belonged, was also helping to support the church financially. Tony said he came to worship with that church one Sunday morning. He tried the front door, but it was locked. He walked around to the back of the church and entered by the back door. The few members inside were busy getting ready for worship. Tony said, “Hey, someone should unlock the front door.” To which, one of the members replied. “Oh, we don’t need to unlock it. All of us know to use the back door!”

Words associated with the club church are: congenial community, traditional; inward focused. In this type church there is not much transforming people into disciples of Jesus Christ going on. This type church prizes comfort, when true discipleship is anything BUT comfortable. As we read in our scripture passage, true discipleship means being beaten and being hated even for Christ’s name and it means proclaiming the good news of God’s grace to the nations. We’re talking about evangelism and it is definitely outside our comfort zones.

The last. typeology is the Incarnational Church. This church, as you have guessed by now, is everything that the other churches are not—Incarnational Churches are NOT centered on the institution, the

charismatic leader, or member comfort. Put positively, the incarnational church is Christ centered, permission giving, open, nurturing and always evolving as its members continue to grow ever deeper in the faith. That's the church we want to become. You won't be surprised if I tell you that no church ever arrives at being fully incarnational. Still all churches can make positive moves in that direction.

So, all of this begs the question: How do we move from Company church, Charismatic Leader church or Club Church toward Incarnational Church? According to Tony Robinson, one very important piece to moving from one church typology to incarnational church typology is to create a vision or mission statement. Actually, Tony calls it a **purpose** statement. Remember, earlier we talked about the overall purpose of the Church with a capital C. And that purpose is to make disciples of Christ. But each church, with a little c, also has a distinct purpose in the community in which it finds itself. The church with a little c, if it is intentional about incarnating Christ, will spend time crafting a simple one or two line phrase that encapsulates what the particular church is about. Does the church intend to concentrate on hospitality—which is certainly one of many traits associated with discipleship; or does the church intend to concentrate on social justice, which is also a trait associated with discipleship? Maybe the church wants to concentrate on both hospitality and social justice. Maybe it wants to concentrate on something else entirely.

As you may know, our Visioning Task Force, which is comprised of five of our Session members, John Evans, Marilee Lindbeck, Janet Moore Coll, Susan Hitchcock and me, has been in the process of composing a purpose statement. The draft of that statement is here for you today. We will be handing these out after church during the Fellowship Hour. We are calling it a Mission Statement rather than a purpose statement because the Visioning Task Force felt that mission is more in line with what a church is called to do. After all, we are called to do mission.

In the weeks ahead, please read and reread what the Task Force is proposing for Cove's mission statement. Pray about it. Decide if your personal mission and Cove Church's mission are in alignment. Give us feedback. Remember, this is not a statement of WHO we are, although certainly we talked about that when we crafted this statement. By that, I mean that we did not feel that we needed to define church. We also did not want to describe Cove Church. Our mission statement is not about identity so much as it is about what we feel called to be and do as Christ's disciples.

Cove's mission statement is NOT a logo. Certainly we intend to use it on letterhead, fliers, bulletins and in the newsletter; but the reason for the mission statement is so that we can be intentional about our ministry.

We will be putting it on our fliers and bulletins and such so that we can remember it, and keep it always before us. In the months and years ahead, the Session and all of us here today, hopefully, will use the mission statement as an important tool for planning our life together.

For example, it is part of Cove's long range goal to paint this sanctuary. How can we do that in a way that is in keeping with a non-company, institutional church typology? Can the painting of Cove Church in some sense be transformational for our members—bringing us closer to what Jesus had in mind when he talked about discipleship? Can we raise money for our painting project in such a way that we are also bringing the good news of God's grace to the greater Covesville and even Charlottesville Communities?

Our scripture passage for today ends with a statement about salvation: "The one who endures to the end will be saved." I don't know about the part, "enduring to the end," that's apocalyptic language for sure and I don't think Cove Church is ready to address end times. The Visioning Task Force anyway is focused on exciting new beginnings. I do think we can embrace the part about being saved. Our transformation into disciples of Christ is EXACTLY what it means to be saved.

May we be continue to be transformed into disciples of Christ in our personal lives and in our life together in Church Community—with Christ always at our center. Amen