

August 27, 2023: The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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“Upon this rock I will build my church,” Jesus says today. It is a statement that is intended to solidify and clarify; but in reality, it has always left us with questions. What is a church? Who is the church? And perhaps most importantly for some, who is in charge of this church?

Let’s start with the first two questions. For many of us, if we are asked what church is, the answer would be: a building we sometimes go to on Sunday mornings. A slightly more expansive answer might be that it’s a social institution run by certain leaders that people participate in. But neither of these answers is very good. One answer I do like is provided by Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who wrote a lovely if painfully complicated chapter on the topic several years ago (*The Grammar of God*, “Trinity and Revelation”). The conclusion he comes to, after many pages and much additional nuance that I’m skipping here is this: the church is the group of people who get together to discuss and debate what it means to be the church. Now this definition excludes a lot of things that we would be more inclined to think of when we hear the word. The church is not a building, not the hierarchy, not merely a tradition or a set of practices. Instead, it is what happens when people get together to discuss what they care about and how they should go about doing it. Note that in his definition, it is not the conclusions of the discussion that define church; instead, it is merely the act of coming together of a group that calls themselves church and debates what it means to be such a thing.

This definition has a few upsides: first and foremost, it is an open definition. It is something which changes with time. This is a necessity. Many Christians have been seduced by the idea of modeling themselves after the earliest and most authentic form of church, neglecting the fact that it is impossible to recreate such circumstances. We live in a vastly different world—the dynamics of “church” are not comparable between 2 billion Christians and the first few dozen Christians of those early days. More significantly, in Williams’ telling, the pattern inaugurated by the early church is one of change and adaptation—it recognized the social issues in the world of its time as theologically significant, and thus, he writes, quote “In recognizing these problems as theological, the Church admitted that the task of relating its present social reality to the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection was basic to its self-

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understanding.” This is what the church has always done, and this is what makes the church always changing in response to the needs of the present moment. What is happening right now in the world is a theological problem, a spiritual problem, something that must be responded to. Right now we are responding to computers, capitalism, and covid, and none of those things were present for the early church.

So what the church is will always be changing, as the church is the community committed to discussing what it means to be a church. We are different from what we were in the beginning; we are different from what we were in the medieval era; we are different now than what we were in the 1950s. And in this present moment, we are challenged with waning interest and diminishing numbers—the people who are still committed to asking the question of what the church should be are growing fewer. Which makes it all the more urgent to ask the question of what it means to be church—what does it mean to be a community of people who care about being together.

The second implication of Williams’ definition is taken from the context of his discussion of church, namely the idea of revelation. This is another idea which is frequently misunderstood, as if the Bible is the only source of revelation and God doesn’t reveal anything new to us, or as if there are certain people responsible for revelation and the rest of us are merely responsible for following along. Instead, in Williams’ telling, the church as a whole is the vehicle for revelation, and the way it is accomplished is through dialogue, through the process of people coming together to ask what church is. And the way this revelation is manifest to us is not through the verbal answers we arrive at, but the actual results of the community—the actual people who are involved in these questions and the activities we do together: this is the church, and the new revelation is what God calls us to do in this ever-changing church.

Finally, I should address my last question—who is in charge of the church? When Jesus says, “On this rock I will build my church,” it does not mean that Peter is in charge. He is the first stone, but not the last by any measure. He was simply the first one to come together with other disciples and ask the



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question, what is church, and it is through his first questions that the church begins. But the only way the church continues to exist is through all of us subsequent rocks coming together and asking this question anew. It does not matter if there is some inviolable hierarchy or perfect tradition if no one wants to come together and talk about what it means to be a church. So who is in charge? We all are. We all make the church with our presence, with our questions, with our actions. This has always been the case and always will be.

So I'd like to leave us here: we are in the midst of interesting times, unfortunately. This means we are especially challenged to respond to these times theologically in a way that effectively responds to the nonsensical. Peter was the first rock. All of us are the subsequent rocks on which the church is being built, and there is much more building to be done. What do we want to be?