

**“Who Runs the Church”<sup>1</sup>**  
**Luke 24:44-53, Ephesians 1:15-23, Acts 1:1-11**  
**Seventh Sunday of Easter**  
**May 4, 2008**

*“God put this power at work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places... And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” Ephesians 1:20, 22-23*

Who runs the church?

Coming on the heels of that ten-day, quadrennial gathering of United Methodists, that might seem like a rather obvious question. According to our Book of Discipline, the General Conference runs The United Methodist Church. It is the only body that can officially speak for our denomination. The 992 delegates, who just concluded their meeting in Fort Worth, had the task of setting the theological, missional, and financial agenda of the church for the next four years. The General Conference, in turn, gives authority to the various Annual Conferences spread throughout our nation and around our world, as well as the nearly 41,000+ United Methodist local churches scattered all over the globe to do the work of Jesus Christ. Speaking of the local church, according to our Book of Discipline it is the Charge Conference that is its official governing body. It has the task of electing officers, appointing boards and committees, approving budgets, and recommending candidates for ministry. The Church Council then has the day-to-day responsibility of making disciples, reaching out to its community, and making sure there is enough macaroni and cheese at the monthly potluck dinners.

And then, of course, in a very unofficial capacity, there are the various patriarchs and matriarchs in many congregations from whom clergy and laity alike must get the nod before anything of substance proceeds. I believe I told you about Mr. Cooper. He was the patriarch of one of the very first churches I served. A tall broad shouldered Texas cotton farmer, the service only started when he said it started. He was not only the lay leader, but the Sunday School Superintendent and the choir director as well. He also signed my

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge Dr. John Jewell for many of the ideas and thoughts found in this sermon.

paycheck. I had absolutely no power or authority in that church whatsoever. After all, I was just a wet-behind-the-ears seminary student. Some of the members of other churches in which I have been pastor will probably say that I have not advanced much since then. They may very well be correct. Ruth Guynes, Janie Catherine Hurdle, and Tommy Sanders have all served in that very unofficial capacity of church patriarch or matriarch at one time or another in the history of the various United Methodist congregations that I have served. And most of the time both those congregations and their pastors are better for it.

Who runs the church?

That is a question we have probably all asked ourselves at one time or another. The answers that I have given are all correct—at least in the practical sense. Anyone who has been around the church for any amount of time knows that every church has to deal with that question. Regina told me it was okay for me to say that. But on this day when we remember the Ascension, I believe that I need to pose that question to all of you one more time: Who runs the church? Who is in charge? When all is said and done, after the all work of the various conferences, congregations, committees, patriarchs, matriarchs, pastors, church secretaries, and other very committed volunteers is done, who is really in the driver's seat of the church? If your answer is anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ, then you are way off base.

The church calendar reminds us that this past Thursday was Ascension Day, that day the scriptures say that the risen Jesus said his final goodbyes to his disciples before being taken out of their sight. I am sure that, just like me, you stopped whatever you were doing to sing Ascension hymns like “Crown Him with Many Crowns” and to exchange Ascension greetings and Ascension presents with your loved ones. Uh-huh. Ascension Day is probably one of the most overlooked of the Christian holy days. For most of us, the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter comes and goes without much notice. And yet it very well may be one of the most important. Without Ascension Day, without our affirmation that Jesus has “ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,”

without our acknowledgement of who it truly is that runs the church, then something very big is missing in our lives as Christians. John Jewell of Vanderbilt Divinity School put it like this: “When Christ does not reign in the particulars of a church’s life, the affirmation that Christ is head of the Church will be inauthentic. The world will hear the church’s talk about Christ, the love of Christ and the reign of Christ, but the glaring evidence will be that Christ is absent from who we are in reality.”<sup>2</sup>

Who runs the church?

Perhaps you remember the words I read to you earlier. “*And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church...*” There are some who say that those last few verses of the passage you heard from the letter to the Ephesians are the beginnings of an ancient creed. When you reflect on its words and listen to its cadence that makes a lot of sense. They are words loaded with meaning. They are also words pregnant with purpose. Although we acknowledge that Christ is now seated at the right hand of God, that does not mean we believe that he is some distant potentate ruling his people on earth. The church is not some social organization, not a group of people simply gathered together to share stories, go to meetings, and attempt the same things that Rotary Club or Kiwanis can do. The church is Christ’s body, and as any course in physiology and anatomy will tell you, the body takes its orders from the head. The church is Christ’ body, his physical presence on earth. And as his physical presence, as those who acknowledge Christ as the one in charge, the church is called to do for others what Christ would do if he were here in the flesh: teaching, healing, forgiving, accepting, living, loving, and dying for the world. Do you remember that old poem that so vividly describes the relationship between the head and the body of Christ?

*Christ has no hands but our hands, to do his work today.*

*He has no feet but our feet, to lead men in his way.*

*He has no lips but our lips, to tell men how he died;*

*He has no self but ourselves, to bring men to his side.*

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<sup>2</sup> John Jewell, [www.lectionarysermons.com](http://www.lectionarysermons.com)

Who runs the church?

Today we acknowledge that the one and only one who runs the church is Jesus Christ. Our celebration of the Ascension not only reminds us of who is in charge, but also tells us of the church's entire reason for being. Someone much smarter than I once wrote: our "statements about the resurrection and [ascension] of Jesus express the truth about Jesus now. They are the premise of the church's worship and practice. If these statements are false, everything else the church does 'in the name of Jesus' is an empty shell, for 'Jesus' can only refer to a dead man of the distant past, and not a powerful Lord in the present whose presence defines our present. When the church gathers 'in the name of Jesus,' it gathers in the name of nothing if Jesus is not Lord. When the church prays and hears and prophesies 'in the name of Jesus,' it engages in self-deception and delusion if Jesus does not now act in the world with the very purpose of the creator."<sup>3</sup>

Who runs the church?

Jesus Christ is the one who runs the church—the scriptures, the creeds, and so many of our hymns proclaim that it is so. Yet we all know that there have been far too many times when Christians, when the people of the church, have tried to usurp his power. And when that happens, you and I also know that more often than not that someone is going to end up getting hurt. Most of us know of those times when Christians have attempted to usurp Christ's authority and tried to run the church as they saw fit. Whether it be with those who marched in the Crusades or those who gossiped in the kitchen, whether it be that pastor who ran roughshod over her members or those members who ran roughshod over their pastor, or even whether it be those in the hundreds upon hundreds of denominations in our world, all claiming to have the one and only true interpretation of the gospel, we all know of times when those in the church have acted less than Christian. Most of us can name someone who has been burned by their experience in the church and most of us can name a church that is better known for its

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<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, The Creed, Doubleday, New York, 2003, p. 191-192

fighting than its friendliness. And if you did some digging, I would imagine that you would find that in the vast majority of those cases someone other than Christ was heading up that church.

I think it is interesting to remember that this passage from the letter to the Ephesians starts out like this: *“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.”* Immediately before we read Paul’s words that Christ is the head of the church we read that faith in Jesus and love for fellow members of the church go hand-in-hand. Paul believed that mutual love in the church is the mark of an authentic Christian faith. As a matter of fact, one commentator wrote that Paul believed that his “preaching would not be successful if his churches did not become known to others as places of faith and mutual love.”<sup>4</sup> Using the language of his day, William Barclay wrote, “The true Christian loves Christ and his fellow men. More than that, he knows that he cannot show his love for Christ in any other way than by showing his love for his fellow men. However orthodox a church is, however pure its theology, and however noble its worship and liturgy, it is not a true church in the true sense of the term unless it is characterized by love for its fellow men.”<sup>5</sup> And as Barclay went on to acknowledge, no church can practice that kind of mutual love unless it first recognizes Christ as its head. Does The United Methodist Church recognize Christ as its head? Does the Nebraska Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church do the same? And what about the congregation known as Elkhorn Hills United Methodist Church? Does it recognize Jesus Christ as the head of the Church? The world waits for our answer.

Who runs the church?

As we come forward today to share in The Lord’s Supper, I would invite you to reflect upon that question. I would also like you to reflect upon the fact that Christ cannot be the head of the Church until Christ is first the head of your life. Whether you read the

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<sup>4</sup> PHEME PERKINS, The Letter to the Ephesians, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. XI, Abingdon, Nashville, 2000, p. 381

<sup>5</sup> WILLIAM BARCLAY, The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians, The Daily Study Bible, Revised Edition, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 89

account of the Ascension in the gospel of Luke or in the book of Acts, the fact that Jesus was lifted up out of their sight caused each of them to draw closer to one another than they ever had before. And when the Day of Pentecost came just ten days later, that day that we will observe next Sunday, that bond they had between them, along with the filling of the Holy Spirit of God, caused them to go out and turn the world upside down. And we can do the very same if we simply begin to acknowledge that it is Jesus Christ who runs this church!