



TO WHAT CHURCH DO YOU BELONG?  
Psalm 42:1-8; 1 Timothy 3:14-16

First Baptist Church, Raleigh, NC

William Powell Tuck

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Driving along the expressway, I noticed a huge billboard that read: *Attend the church of your choice.* What could be more American than that? It is almost as American as apple pie. Attend the church of your choice. America contains more varieties of religious denominations than Baskin Robbins has ice cream. You have lots of choices. Our ancestors wrote an amendment to our constitution that guaranteed that freedom: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." But as good as the phrase, "Attend the church of your choice," is something in it disturbs me. Since it bothers me, it may perturb you. Consider some of the churches available to you in America today.

**The Only Understanding of Truth Church**

Some persons belong to The Only Understanding of Truth Church. This church claims it has a special handle on truth. Nobody else has the insight into truth. Members of this church narrow all truth to their own focus. They collect religious truth in propositional form. and anyone who would be a part of *the true church* has to ascribe to their set of beliefs. They assert that not only are their beliefs inerrant and infallible, but so is their interpretation of them. They alone have the truth.

Members of this church are rigid, inflexible, unbending, and uncompromising. All other interpretations are elbowed out in the name of their truth claims. After all, if you have truth, as they claim to have it, how dare anyone differ with their view of God or how we are to live as God's children. Persons in this church show no patience with religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, or Taoism that allow tolerance for the beliefs of others. Their spirit is linked closely with the fundamentalist strains of Islam that react with vindictiveness to destroy any other religious perspective differing from their own. If you do not belong to The Church with the Only Understanding of Truth, then you are an infidel.

This church's heritage reaches back through the centuries and finds its roots in a perversion of ancient Judaism. Israel declared boldly that it was God's only true people. Some among the Jewish people nobly understood this calling in terms of

service to the world. But some misunderstood and transformed the calling into an arrogant and privileged status. The latter stressed their chosenness, emphasizing all others' lack of chosenness.

Our Lord encountered members of this church when he came to minister. The scribes and Pharisees belonged to that kind of church and held tenaciously and rigidly to their interpretation of religion. How dare Jesus challenge their interpretation of the truth! They knew they had the only correct knowledge of religious truth, and they helped crucify Jesus because he dared to challenge their understanding of life.

Saul belonged for a while to The Only Understanding of Truth Church. He persecuted the early Christian church and even held the outer garments for the men who stoned Stephen. But when claimed by Christ, Paul immediately disassociated himself from that religious church. Before long, however, he encountered another form of that same kind of church. It stated that unless Christians became Jews (were circumcised), they could not be true Christians. Paul spent his life arguing for a different and more tolerant kind of church.

Down through the centuries, The Only Understanding of Truth Church has sought to dominate and control the beliefs of others. We often think of the members of this church as bigots. Do you know the origin of that word? It comes "God!" these persons assert, "I have got all the truth, and I am going to cram it down your throat, control your thinking, and make everybody else believe just like I do."

The Inquisition sprang from those who belonged to The Only Understanding of Truth Church. When anybody dared differ with established truth, they were put to death. In 1572, Catherine de Medici executed 20,000 French Protestants because they differed with the established church of that day. The pope sent her a letter congratulating her on the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. John Wycliffe translated the Scriptures from Latin into English and so outraged the established church that it condemned him to death. While the church condemned him, because of his protection, it could not harm him. After his death, however, the pope had his bones dug up and burned and his ashes cast into a river so he would not have a place of burial.

Do not think, however, that Catholics have a monopoly on intolerance in Christian history. John Calvin, one of the foremost leaders in the Protestant Reformation, executed a Spanish physician, named Servetus, who differed with him on his interpretation of the Trinity. When the Puritans hounded Roger Williams out of Salem Colony in 1636, he promptly founded Providence, Rhode Island, where all persons might have religious freedom.

The Only Understanding of Truth Church is not confined to any one religion

or any single expression of Christianity. It cuts across all denominations. Freedom-loving Baptists, of all persons, one might think, would never be members of that church. Two of the foundational concepts in Baptists' beliefs are the priesthood of all believers and religious tolerance. But, not too many generations ago, Crawford Toy and William Whitsitt had to resign their positions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary because they were considered heretics when they employed critical tools in their understanding of the Bible.

Now today, several generations later, members of The Only Understanding of Truth Church have paraded across the Baptist denominational landscape once again. Lifting up their banners of truth and engaging in theological witch hunts, they seek to remove professors from colleges and seminaries that differ with those who claim to have the only correct understanding of truth. We have witnessed the havoc they have wrought in the SBC and now are witnessing their disestablishment of the North Carolina State Baptist Convention. Members of this distorted church unfortunately see truth as finished. God has spoken; but God doesn't continue to speak. According to their view, God simply cannot be at work within the church bringing individuals new and fresh visions of divine will and ways. Truth for them is finished and regulated.

When I was a pastor in Virginia, I came in from lunch one day and saw two ministers engaged in conversation with my secretary. It was obvious that they were preachers. They were dressed in the uniforms that quickly convey that message, and they spoke with stained-glass voices. I spoke to them as I came in the door, and started to move on past them since I did not recognize them. Suddenly, I realized that they were theologically attacking my secretary. They were seeking to convert her. You need to know that she was a fine Episcopalian. She had been a secretary at the church for years, and I had never tried to proselytize her into the Baptist fold. She attended her own church and worshiped faithfully. So I turned to them and said: "Pardon me, but I don't believe I like the way you are talking to my secretary." They then turned to me and began to attack me. "Do you believe such and such?" I had an appointment in a few minutes, and I said: "Friend, I would love to have time to debate with you about this theological issue, but I do not. I know 'whom I have believed,' and I am very happy in my faith, and I hope you are in yours. God bless you. I have to go and do some other work."

Several weeks later one of our church members told me that she went to another city to attend a funeral service. The ministers, in that funeral service of all places, stood before the grieving family and declared: "You wouldn't believe what a preacher up in Harrisonburg told me that he doesn't believe." Then he began to list a long series of things that he said I did not believe. Well, it so happened that I did believe those things he said I denied. But the worst part is that he had never

discussed any of those beliefs with me to know whether I believed them or not. If you refused to dialogue with him about his beliefs, he assumed you did not believe as you should. He already had the right belief, and any who did not agree was a heretic. We have too many of these theological witch hunters in Baptist life today who belong to The Only Understanding of Truth Church. They exclude rather than include sisters and brothers of the faith.

In his novel *Julian*, Gore Vidal depicts a scene in the fourth century where the Roman emperor Julian replaced Christianity as the official religion and restored the pagan gods. He considered Christianity dangerous and immoral. One of his aides asked him if he was going to outlaw Christianity as Christianity outlawed the worship of the pagan gods and persecute the Christians as the Christians had persecuted those who worshiped the pagan gods? “No, leave them alone,” Julian said in effect. “I think sooner or later the Christians will kill off each other.”

What an indictment on the church! We will kill each other off! Did you read the quip by Henlee Barnette? “Have you noticed that when a minister begins to play God, he winds up acting like the devil?” When anybody thinks they have the only truth about God, they are dangerous. Unfortunately, too many people belong to this church.

### **The Warm Feeling, Friendly, Everybody-Always-Happy, Noncontroversial, Easygoing, Crowd-Pleasing, Entertaining Church**

Others hold membership in another church. They belong to The Warm Feeling, Friendly, Everybody-Always-Happy, Noncontroversial, Easygoing, Crowd-Pleasing, Entertaining Church. Its membership is widespread. People join this church basically to get their own individual needs satisfied. It offers them exactly what they want. Whatever they want, the church is obligated to provide it. This church offers programs for every age—children, teenagers, singles, young adults, and older adults. Whatever people desire, it is satisfied by this church. I recently saw a sign which typifies this church: “Come as you are and relax with us.” Did Jesus call us to come and relax?

This church never engages in anything controversial. It doesn’t want anything to create disturbances or disharmony. Everything is done to make people feel good and be happy. Nothing controversial is ever allowed or mentioned. The pulpit of this church spews simple sermons for satisfied minds. Preached here are pleasing, peaceful platitudes for pious, placid persons. Disturbances, moral or otherwise, are not tolerated.

Worship services are planned primarily for their entertainment value. The more the spectators feel they have been entertained, the more they think they have

worshiped. When they leave this church, they want to feel warm and cozy inside. The worship of Almighty God becomes the theological equivalent of a Lawrence Welk *Variety Hour* or *American Idol*, with the humor and theological depth of *Hee Haw* or *Saturday Night Live* and the excitement of a NCAA basketball championship. This church focuses primarily on entertaining us and making us feel satisfied.

In a *New Yorker* cartoon, a church is depicted with its front doors open and the congregation exiting after the worship hour. Everybody is fighting and arguing with each other. One woman is pictured hitting the minister over the head with her umbrella. A man and woman are passing by and observing this conflict. She says to him, “Goodness, I wonder what word of comfort for a troubled world the minister shared today.”

Sometimes the word of God is not “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.” The word of God may need to cut into our lives with sharpness, addressing us with a “Thus saith the Lord.” God’s word may come to us in crass, rustic language, declaring us sinners in need of radical repentance. What entertainment do you see in the crucifixion of Jesus? And where is the warmth in Jesus’ radical call to discipleship with the attendant command to go into the world and lay down your life for the cause of love?

Christ’s teachings contain a sharp flint side. Christian discipleship has a sandpaper edge to it. The words of Jesus are often pointed, not always focusing on what people want but on what they need. Rather than constantly comforting his hearers, Jesus often challenged the comfortable. The prophetic words of Christ summon us to walk the more difficult way and not be content with the comforts of life.

The grace of Christ, as Bonhoeffer reminded us in word and life, is never cheap. The church of Jesus Christ aims not merely to make us feel good or tranquil or to provide us a peaceful escape from the world. The danger of a church obsessed with crowd-pleasing, entertaining, or peace-of-mind theology is that it may become a church of our own creation and not the church for which Christ died. The membership of this church is large and growing today.

### **The Traditional, Established, Routine, Well-Regulated, Standard, Status Quo Church of the Satisfied God**

Others in America want to be members of The Traditional, Established, Routine, Well-Regulated, Standard, Status Quo Church of the Satisfied God. This church is steeped in tradition. Everything it does reaches back to ancient times. It carefully seeks to carry forward its traditions from generation to generation. There is, of course, nothing wrong with traditions, rightly used.

But in this church where change is the enemy, routine slowly becomes rut. The sameness of worship practices becomes so familiar that variety is unheard of. Set in its way, this traditional church never expects anything different to happen. God has spoken in the past, but does not continue to speak today. In this church people want nothing disturbed, nothing touched, nothing changed. They have their routine. They walk in it and do not want someone fiddling with their establishment. “Don’t fix it when it ain’t broke,” they say. Traditions become unchangeable laws of God.

In California, there is a store called the Surprise Shop. Go into that shop, and you discover all kinds of novel items. People are happily surprised with the many and varied possibilities for purchasing. Shouldn’t the church be like the Surprise Shop, open to the Holy Spirit who is breathing its new life into the church? God’s church can never be totally routine, if God is constantly breaking in to surprise it with new possibilities.

Several years ago I heard Krister Stendahl, the former dean at Harvard Divinity School, speak at a church conference. He said that the contemporary church probably has all of the same problems and difficulties of the early Corinthian church except one. The church at Corinth did not suffer from the sin of dullness! Sometimes the church, regulated by its traditions, becomes deadly dull. The danger here is apathy! The danger here is a cavalier approach to eternal matters! The danger here is indifference to God’s will!

A problem arose in a church in Scotland because noted poet Robert Burns lay buried in the church cemetery. Everybody in that community wanted to be buried in that cemetery with Robert Burns. Seeking to deal with the problem, the church posted a sign on the cemetery fence: “This cemetery is reserved for the dead now living in this parish.”

Too often the traditional church is composed of the dead now living in it. They have no sense of aliveness to the spirit of God that is trying to break in with the freshness of God’s presence and give the church new directions, new hopes, and new ways of being church. The traditional church is dead to God’s spirit and very content with where it is. It is self-satisfied. It has already towed the correct line, so why disturb anything.

A wonderful story comes out of the freezing Arctic. Once the weather was so cold there that the flames on the candles froze! The explorers reached over, broke off the frozen flame of the candles, and turned them into charms. The flaming power of God, which has ignited the church in the past, has often been turned into ornaments and charms today. Many now wear a cross around their necks. The great symbols of the church have been turned into ornaments. The flaming power of Christ is not present in this kind of church. A contented church loses its power, ceases to be salt,

light, and leaven in the world for Christ. The church can never be contented with where it is. God forever nudges it forward into what it can be as it is remade in God's image.

### **The Visionary, Pioneering Church of the Living God**

Another church, thank God, exists in our land today. It is The Visionary, Pioneering Church of the Living God. This church hears an echo about its mission from the ancient psalmist who cried: "I thirst for the living God." Some scholars believe that the writer of Psalm 42 was a woman. She used the image of a female deer to begin her story. A deer is searching and groping for water. She arrives at a water hole but cannot find water. The waterhole is completely barren, so the deer leaves without satisfying her thirst. A great thirst in this woman's life had not been fulfilled. Maybe taken captive and carried into exile in Egypt, she longed to return and worship with the throngs of Israelites going up to the Jerusalem Temple to worship God. A thirst within her very being was not satisfied in that strange land, and she cried out: "I thirst for the living God."

The cry, "I thirst," is the cry of every man and woman. There is an unconscious longing within each of us. Who among us does not thirst for the presence of God? We long for the divine, knowing that the eternal alone can satisfy our real thirst. We turn to the living God, because we realize that the fountain of life is not within us. We come to the source of life. No one is totally independent and has the self-reliance to meet every situation alone. Jesus Christ is the one who said, "If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink." Jesus said to the woman at the well, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10). Christ offers us the water of life that can satisfy our deepest needs. The anguished cry of every person, "I thirst for the living God," is supplied by the living God, not by material things. This longing is quenched, not by a God restricted by the past, but a God actively working in our lives.

The apostle Paul wrote that the church is a household—a family. A community of faith where brothers and sisters support and sustain one another, the church is the household of God. The church is an assembly—*ekklesia*—the people of the living God, whether only two, three, or hundreds, gathered together to receive strength from God and one another in worship together. The Pioneering Church is a church that is the pillar and buttress of truth. It will not be frightened by truth no matter where it is encountered. It remembers that its Lord said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free (John 8:31). It is not frightened by truth from science, technology, or any other arena, because Jesus Christ has made it truly free. It will follow the path of truth wherever it leads. The church will support the truth

even if every one else seeks to destroy it.

A pioneering church is always dreaming, always seeking new visions, aware that God goes before it. God constantly goes before us, leading us into deeper truths, deeper ministries, and more profound ways of being Church. John Killinger noted in his book *The Second Coming of the Church* that the church of the future may have new forms, shapes, and modes of ministry that we would not even recognize today. It may not appear to be the same institution. Killinger challenges the church to be open to God who declares that there are no limits to its possibilities. As a congregation, you are looking soon for the coming of a new pastor. No one knows what new ideas, interpretations, or perspectives he or she might bring to enable this church to follow its calling to be Christ's church in this community at this particular time.

At times, I have to confess, I become very discouraged as a pastor. Too many of us identify with the false churches and not the Church of the Living God. But on a depressing winter day, I used to look out my study window in Louisville, Kentucky and saw a large oak tree that was bare of its leaves, void of life at all. If I looked at it closely, I could see on each limb tiny, dormant buds waiting to bring life back to the tree. That tree is a living parable. God's church, filled with dormant buds, waits for the springtime of God's breath to breathe new life into it.

Don't surrender your life to The Only Understanding of Truth Church, because Jesus Christ is always breaking through our old wineskins to bring new insights and truth. It cannot contain or hold back the Living God. Don't settle for religion that is primarily entertainment, but be open to a deep, awesome worship of the Eternal God. Don't settle for the traditional, apathetic church when Christ wants to lead you into a living relationship with the God who is alive and at work in the church.

"Attend the church of your choice." Which do you choose? I hope it will be The Church of the Living God.

(This sermon has been revised slightly from the one I had published in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Church*, edited by Walter B. Shurden, Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. 1996).

## PASTORAL PRAYER

O God of every time and place, we thank You for the assurance that You are with us at this particular time in this particular place. Some of us come this morning with our lives filled with joy and enthusiasm for living. We are excited about our jobs, our family life is good and our whole life seems to swell with a sense of radiance. We thank You for the good rain that nourished our land.

Others come this morning, dear Lord, for whom life is difficult and their burdens are heavy. Many have experienced grief, loss or difficulties in life. Some have experienced loneliness, depression, anxiety, fear or physical problems. So this morning we pray that Your Spirit will nourish them and sustain them.

We pray that whatever our needs are this day we shall bring them to You with the assurance that You hear us and that You sustain us. As we come to church this morning, give us the assurance that You are the living Lord who can minister to whatever our needs are and that You are the Lord who cleanses us from all our sins, forgives us for our wrongdoings and guides us into the tomorrows.

We thank You for the Christ who by his life and teachings and death demonstrated to us the power of service and sacrifice. Enable us, O Father, to follow his example as we seek to live and serve You in this world. We pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.