

**Dr. R. G. Puckett**  
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**[www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org](http://www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org)**

**“The Living of These Days”**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**

I am very grateful for the privilege of being in your worship service today because this congregation has been special to me for 27 years:

First, because this church has been good for my daughter, Janet, and her family. It has been a healthy environment for the family to grow and develop spiritually. It was here, through the kindness and thoughtfulness of your pastor, that I baptized Jordan and Hamlin, my first two grandchildren. It was a moment to be treasured forever.

Secondly, I have known all your pastors for these 27 years. Julian Cave and I were in the same class at Southern Seminary. When I came to be editor of the *Biblical Recorder* in 1982, his invitation to this pulpit was one of the first I received. That year he was serving as chairman of the program committee for the annual meeting of the Baptist State Convention and he graciously gave me an assignment for one of the major messages in November in Fayetteville.

Tom Graves' father was at Southern Seminary when I was a student there, and later Tom and I were colleagues for a few years when we both taught at Southeastern Baptist Seminary in Wake Forest. Since that time, we have maintained the friendship.

Richard Kremer was like a pastor to Robbie and me. You would have no way of knowing it, but during the annual meetings of the Baptist State Convention, when the *Biblical Recorder* and its editor would be under attack from the fundamentalists, Dr. Kremer would come to sit with Robbie during the painful moments. We will never forget his sensitive and caring spirit. Richard is a rare combination of brilliant intellect and compassionate pastoral care!

Thus, I do not feel much like a visitor here today, but rather it is like coming home to a place that I have always respected, appreciated and benefitted from knowing and experiencing.

My text for my message today is taken from the questions and proclamation of Jesus, and the title is taken directly from the autobiography of Harry Emerson Fosdick.

Please follow with me as we read Matthew 16:13-20.

Harry Emerson Fosdick started out as a Baptist, and later became a popular preacher for the Presbyterians in New York City where between 1,500 and 2,000 persons would come to hear his sermons each week

As he saw the threat of fundamentalism, he preached a sermon in June 1922 titled “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” In it, he raised questions about three basic Christian tenets of faith cherished by the fundamentalists: The Virgin Birth of Christ; the inerrancy of the Scriptures and the bodily return of Christ.

His orthodoxy was immediately challenged by Presbyterian authorities and a process was put in motion to remove him. He resigned before he could be fired.

He returned to the Baptist pastorate, where he met John D. Rockefeller and soon the Riverside Church was born. Fosdick wrote his famous hymn—*God of Grace and God of Glory*—for the dedication of the Riverside Church facility in 1931.

Does that all sound familiar?

Bill Leonard, dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest University, has been saying for about 15 years now that the religious landscape of America is changing so radically that by 2010, we will hardly recognize where we are.

The year 2010 is just six months away, and Bill's prophecy is becoming readily apparent:

--The Roman Catholics have faced all sorts of scandals, economic meltdowns, a shortage of priests and nuns, to say nothing of quibbling over doctrine.

--The Episcopalians are splintering, not just over whether practicing homosexuals may serve as bishops, but over Scripture, its interpretation and application. Some Episcopalians sound like Fundamentalist Baptists when they talk about inerrancy. The word "Anglican" has a fresh force about it!

--The Presbyterians have been struggling for years and despite one large church in America, there are many lesser groups. Perhaps John Calvin anticipated this!

--The Methodists are gradually losing numbers and impact, with only a few exceptions.

--And the Baptists—what can you say about them? Probably everything! There are so many kinds of Baptists that you must always use at least one adjective to define what type Baptist you are describing. The Southern Baptists have been in conflict for more than 30 years and the victors in the struggle were insistent that when they confirmed an inerrant Bible, no women preachers (and probably deacons as well), that the "Conservative Resurgence" would result in tremendous growth as they won the world to Jesus.

Well, it did not happen, and just last month in Louisville, Kentucky, the SBC faced up to reality that it wasn't baptizing more persons, but fewer, and membership was shrinking. One analyst from Nashville said that if the pattern is not reversed, by 2050, there won't be 16 million Southern Baptists, but probably about 8 million—half of the present number. For a community of faith that once had its primary foundations rooted in budgets, baptisms and building, that is devastating news!

Denominationalism is fading, labels like Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc., don't mean as much to the next generation as they did the last one.

And here you are at St. John's, looking for a new pastor for the first time in more than 17 years, in the midst of this turbulent, chaotic world that not only cannot find itself, it can't even name itself!

In the words of Harry Emerson Fosdick, the challenge of the times is "The Living of These Days."

John Claypool said that some people regard the church in our time like a grandfather clock. It stands proudly in the entrance hallway. It is a treasured family heirloom. It is an immediate topic of conversation. But no one would depend on it for the correct time of day! If that is an accurate assessment of the church in our time, we have some major problems.

Back in the mid-1960s, Harvey Cox, a professor at Harvard University Divinity School for about 30 years, wrote a book titled *The Secular City*. His book was an insightful analysis of the rising tide of secularism and what it meant to be the church in today's world.

More than 40 years later, the book is as relevant for the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in the most turbulent decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In his excellent and accurate analysis of the world in our time, Cox comes to the conclusion that if the church is to be the church, it must proclaim the Gospel, minister to the masses and fellowship the body of Christ.

In the language of the New Testament, these three key concepts are *keerugma*, *diakonia* and *koinonia*—proclamation, ministry and fellowship.

There is no shortage of religion in our time but there is a noticeable absence of authentic Christianity. It is no longer a matter of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish communities of faith. We live in an increasing pluralization of our culture. For example, in my town of Raleigh there are approximately 2,000 Muslims who meet each Friday night near the campus of North Carolina State University.

What the secular world needs to hear, and what a “multi-religions world” needs to hear is the clear message of a church that is on mission for Jesus Christ.

We need to proclaim the pure Gospel without hesitation and apology. God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself. We don’t need a health-wealth theology. We need to proclaim the profound, simple truth that God transformed Himself into a category that we can comprehend. His name was Jesus, the Christ.

Has the church in our time lost its vision and its sense of purpose? The comment has been made that it is hard to distinguish whether the church is a haven for the sheep or a playground for the goats!

We are in an era where “feel good” worship is exalted; entertainment seems to be the driving motive more than genuine worship, involvement with the cause, and a confrontation of the issues.

Jesus said that he came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. The word that Jesus used to describe his mission is the word from which we Baptists get “deacon.” Our model is to be like Jesus. We need to be committed to every segment of society. It is not just a matter of ministering to the “street people,” but also to those who work on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor of a high-rise office building in downtown Charlotte. We must touch the lives of the down and outers, the up and outers, the establishment, the alienated, the insiders and the disenfranchised.

William Barclay, the noted Presbyterian scholar who was a preacher, a teacher and a prolific writer, says that our concept of “fellowship” is too narrowly defined. It means much more than coffee and dessert with friends on Sunday evening, or coffee with a buddy on a Monday morning break. It is more than church suppers and pot-luck dinners.

Barclay says that *koinonia* really means partnership! We are in it together! When you are up, I’m up. When you are down, I’m down. When you win, I win. When you lose, I lose. When you falter, I falter. When you achieve, I achieve.

We are in it together!

Just this week, I finished reading the excellent little book about the life and ministry of James M. Dunn, former executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington, and in recent years on the faculty of the divinity school at Wake Forest University.

Dunn says: “The Christian commitment is not academic, theoretical or speculative, (rather it is) a deeply rooted commitment (that) relies on an experiential relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.”

In general terms, our primary commitments are too much to ourselves. The “me generation” that emerged in the 1980s has touched all of us in many ways. This must change if the church is to be the church in today’s world.

Tom Long tells a story that illustrates perfectly what commitment means. Dr. Long is the premier professor of preaching for the Presbyterians. He taught at Princeton for many years and then moved to the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta.

A father had a daughter who was “the apple of his eye,” as the saying goes. From the time she was born, he cared for her in every way—bathed her when she was small, supported her in school at every concert, sporting event and activity. They were inseparable!

The extended family had a tradition of an annual reunion. It was a big occasion. There was plenty of food. A musical group was always hired. And they always played “The Beer Barrel Polka” so that everyone could dance to it.

The father would go looking for his daughter and say, “I believe this is our dance.”

As the years passed, the daughter changed in her disposition and attitude. She became surly, hostile and critical. Nothing ever seemed to satisfy her.

When she was dating in her teen years, the father would always wait up for her. Her anger would flare and she would demand, “Why are you still up?” And he always answered in a gentle voice, “I was waiting for you.”

The daughter went off to college. Later, she got married and established her family in another city. She began to regret her conduct and decided she would put in a surprise appearance at the large family reunion.

When the band started playing “The Beer Barrel Polka,” she went looking for her father and said, “I believe this is our dance.” To which he replied, “I was waiting for you!”

Sometimes commitment means waiting!

*(Note: The copy for this message has been constructed by Dr. Puckett from memory and the notes he prepared for its delivery to the St. John’s congregation. He has never preached from a manuscript throughout his ministry and to fulfill the requests for copies of his message, he has prepared this manuscript. Word-choice and phrasing may differ slightly in the printed version from the spoken version, but the essence of the message is the same.)*