

## BECOMING A MEMBER OF THE HILLSBORO CHURCH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 14, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

A number of years ago a rather unusual man sat for several Sundays in the audience where I was preaching. I later learned that he had not entered a church building for a period of twenty-seven years. This covered a rather significant span in his life and began when, as a young man, he left home to join the Navy. There followed a number of rough, worldly years during which time he had little concern for spiritual things, or even for God himself. At the end of this span of years he came again to church at the suggestion of his wife. After several Sundays suddenly he was stricken with a severe heart attack. In the hospital he told me that on those Sundays he had wanted to become a Christian, but had not known exactly what he was expected to do. We prayed that his life might be spared and that he might have other opportunities to obey his Lord. These prayers were granted and a few weeks later he was permitted to go home from the hospital and still a little later was able to be baptized into Christ.

This incident has made a deep impression upon me. I have resolved not to let several Sundays in succession pass without giving very definite guidance as to what the Lord expects man to do in becoming a Christian. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to include in every sermon the meaningful details of becoming a Christian, it is imperative that we give this instruction regularly and often. Both our children and those who may visit among us can profit by this kind of instruction. It is in this vein that an invitation is offered at the end of each sermon to those out of Christ to become Christians. For the same reasons, I also want to spend this period of study reviewing with you the simple facts of God's teaching upon how to become a Christian.

In order to make our study as meaningful as possible I wish to make it specific. Let us face the question, "What must one do in order to become a member of the Hillsboro church?" Membership in the Hillsboro church requires nothing more than the scriptures require of one in becoming a Christian. Membership in the Hillsboro church requires nothing less than the scriptures require of one in becoming a Christian. Membership in the Hillsboro church requires nothing different from what the scriptures require of one in becoming a Christian. Our earnest endeavor is to speak where the scriptures speak and to be silent where they are silent. This means that we must teach the same things that were taught 1900 years ago concerning becoming a Christian, and nothing more. It is our earnest endeavor to have a "Thus saith the Lord" for everything that we do in faith and practice. The Bible is our blueprint, our creed and our guide. This means that when one in our midst has satisfied the Lord's requirements, he is a Christian and without further action is considered a member of this congregation,

### Two Parts in Salvation

There are two essential parts in man's salvation: God's part and man's part. God's part is the bigger and more significant part. It is often characterized by the word grace, suggesting God's great love for man and the unmerited favor that God bestows upon man. The apostle Paul referred to grace in his letter to the Ephesians, as follows, "For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory." (Eph. 2:8-9). Titus 2:11 adds, "For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men." This statement makes very clear the fact that grace came through Jesus Christ, for it is stated in the past tense. Together these passages plainly declare that salvation is a gift from God and that this gift was made available to all men alike through the coming of Christ. A statement from the Lord himself, found in Luke 17:10, also shows that man does not earn salvation, "Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do." Salvation is for all, but not all will be saved. Salvation is in Christ, but not all accept Christ.

Man's part is by far the lesser part, though it is also necessary for Salvation. Man's part might be characterized by the single word obedience. While here on earth Christ plainly indicated that not all would be saved, even though all were invited. At the end of his matchless Sermon on the Mount he said, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven ... Everyone therefore that heareth these words of mine and doeth them, shall be likened unto a wise man, who built his house upon the rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. And everyone that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall thereof." (Matt. 7:21,24-27). Even though by far the most significant part in man's salvation is God's free gift, his own acceptance of this gift is vitally significant. Man must obey the Lord's commandments in order to receive the gift of God's grace.

### What Man Must Do

The scriptures are very plain in showing what man must do in order to be saved. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the story of Christ's life and works. The primary purpose is to cause those who read to believe in Jesus of Nazareth as the divine Son of God. Immediately following the four gospel narratives, the book of Acts tells man what he must do in order to be saved.

To the great assembled multitude on Pentecost Sunday the apostle Peter addressed a magnificent sermon concerning Christ. As he reached the climax of this sermon he said, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their hearts and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ... And with many other words he testified, and exhorted them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation. They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:36-38,4.1).

A second account of conversion is found in Acts 8:26-40, where we read the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian nobleman. As the evangelist Philip rode along in the chariot beside the Ethiopian, the scriptures picture the scene as it unfolded in these words, "And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this scripture, preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on the way, they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch said, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still; and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:35-39).

Still another example of conversion is that of the Philippian jailor of whom we read in Acts 16. After he had been roused from his sleep at midnight, the scripture says, "And he called for lights and sprang in, and, trembling for fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shall be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his immediately. And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly with all his house, having believed in God." (Acts 16:29-34).

A careful examination of these three conversion stories indicates that in every case the gospel of Christ was preached first. As a result of this message the subject believed in Christ as the Son of God. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to be well-pleasing unto him; for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after him." Repentance followed faith. Jesus said, "Except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish." (Luke 13:3). Jesus also taught that man should confess his faith before his fellowmen, "Everyone therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:32-33). The final condition of pardon is baptism. Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5)

The simple facts are that man must obey God's commandments in order to receive the gift of salvation and that when he does God adds him to the church. Since all are sinners (Romans 3:10, 23), it is imperative that each of us, when he is old enough to understand what it means to believe in Christ as the Son of God and to commit his life to the Lord, obey these commandments. In so doing he meets the simple conditions of receiving God's gift of salvation.

#### Coming From Another Congregation

There are also members of the Hillsboro church who have become Christians at some other place and have later moved to this congregation. Sometimes the expression "place membership," or "transfer membership," or "identify oneself with the church," or some similar expression is used to convey this idea. A Christian's responsibility includes that of being an active member of a local congregation. To drift, unknown, from one congregation to another means that one fails to shoulder his responsibility to the Lord. In addition, every Christian needs to be a member of a local congregation in order to be under the direction of qualified elders. In Hebrews 13:17, we read, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls." Each Christian needs the supervision, encouragement, and teaching provided by a consecrated eldership. In order to have these benefits, he needs to be a part of a congregation.

It is for these reasons that the elders of this congregation encourage all those who may be living in our area and presently worshipping with us to indicate formally their desire of being members at this place. In order that all may see and know those who come in this manner, it is our custom for them to come forward at the end of a regular service and make known their wishes. It might further be added that a man's membership is wherever he is. It is utterly impossible to live in one community and to think of oneself as retaining membership in a congregation somewhere else. We are members of the church wherever we are.

At this point it might be well to suggest the ideal procedure in becoming a member of a different congregation, after already having become a Christian. The very best approach is to bring a letter of introduction from the elders of the congregation from which one comes. This has scriptural precedent, for we read in Acts 18:27, concerning Apollos, "And when he was minded to pass over into Achaia, the brethren encouraged him, and wrote to the disciples to receive him: and when he was come, he helped them much that had believed through grace."

In Romans 16:1-2, we read such a letter of commendation, "I commend unto you Pheobe our sister, who is a servant of the church that is at Cencrea, that ye receive her in the Lord, worthily of the saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever manner she may have need of you." When the elders of a congregation receive a letter of recommendation from another congregation they know with certainty immediately that the transferring member is faithful and dependable. They can immediately put him to work in the Lord's Cause.

While this is true in regard to those who come here, it is also equally true for you who may have occasion to move to other localities. Ours is an amazing age in which a great many people move a great many times during a lifetime. I am sure that many of us will from time to time have occasion to move. When such time comes, and we regret to think of it coming for any family among us, let me suggest that you request from our elders a letter of introduction to the next congregation. Moving time is a time of upheaval. This sometimes results in feelings of instability and uncertainty for children, and a letter from the Hillsboro elders to the next congregation and its elders will help to give stability to the whole family, and will help to keep secure the ties with the church wherever we go.

On some occasions the one who wishes to become a member of a congregation may already be known by certain ones in the congregation and those who know him can recommend him. Something similar seems to have occurred in Acts 9:26-29, where Barnabas commended Saul of Tarsus to the Jerusalem church, at a time when they were fearful of accepting him.

Quite often Christians come simply on their own profession of membership, bringing neither letter of a recommendation from someone in the congregation. While in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred this presents no problem, there are occasional problems. In some few cases wayward Christians present themselves for membership when actually they have been out of duty and need to rededicate their lives to the Lord. In some instances false teachers, or those who have caused division and strife in other congregations, have presented themselves for membership. In still other cases marriage problems or other problems are present in the lives of those desiring membership.

As a result of the few such cases, conscientious elders must inevitably place all newcomers who do not bring a recommendation from the previous congregation under observation for a period of time. This would hardly be called a period of investigation or a period of probation, but it is a time when the elders and others must get to know the new members before they can extend to them the full fellowship and responsibilities of the congregation. Elders must know the condition of the members of the congregation in order to "watch in behalf of their souls." For the individual Christian's sake and for the sake of the congregation, elders must exert some care in welcoming new members into their fellowship.

#### Conclusion

Finally, on behalf of the elders of the Hillsboro church and on behalf of all of us I want to assure all those of you who may be living in our area, but who are not yet identified as members of this congregation, that we warmly seek your participation with us in the Lord's work. The message of this hour is not to be understood as discouraging the coming of any, but rather encouraging the coming of all in a manner that will be most productive of good for the individual who comes and for the congregation as well. We seek and encourage your identification with us and your assuming of the full responsibilities of membership at this place.

In an even stronger way we wish to encourage those of you who are not yet Christians to yield your lives to the Lord and to be saved. The Lord needs you in his work, just as you need him in your own soul's salvation. The invitation is urgent and time is swiftly passing away. May we invite you to respond to the Lord's invitation as together we sing the announced song.