

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 17, 1967 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Many people think they are Christians, speak of themselves as Christians, and are recognized by others as being Christians, yet in the real sense they are not Christians. They wear the name of Christ, but they do not live like Christ.

It is comparatively easy to understand the words and the ideas of Christianity, and to give one's affirmation to these words and ideas. It is comparatively easy to do the correct things in an outward way, yet not enter into a right relationship with Christ. While he was here on the earth, Christ referred to the relationship between himself and his disciples as that of the vine and the branches. In John 15:5, we read, "I am the vine, and ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit; for apart from me ye can do nothing." In his conversation with Nicodemus Christ also referred to this relationship as that of being "born anew." (John 3:3).

The apostle Paul referred to the matter of coming to Christ for salvation as being "in Christ" and also that one who does this is a "new creature." (II Cor. 5:17). Unless, then, the one who comes to Christ for salvation enters into a very special relationship with his Lord, he is not really a Christian. It is easy "to become a Christian," as men so freely use the term, but it is often a mechanical and largely meaningless experience. It is sometimes prompted not by a deep dedication to Christ, but by a desire to please one's parents, or one's husband or wife, or simply because others are doing so.

### Widespread Weaknesses

In much of the preaching that has been and is being done among us there is too exclusive an emphasis upon the initial steps in becoming a Christian. Sometimes the evening services in a gospel meeting have been devoted exclusively to presenting the conversion stories of the book of Acts, night after night. Do not misunderstand me. I believe there have been solid reasons for the very strong emphasis upon first principles. The fact that many of the religious world have neglected this body of Christian teaching so badly has caused us to emphasize it more than we ordinarily would have done. Seeing their neglect, and the consequent misguidance of many people in regard to the vital matter of becoming a Christian, we have emphasized the importance of faith, repentance, confession and baptism to a large degree. This is good--unless it means that we have neglected other aspects of salvation. Sometimes we have grossly neglected God's part in our salvation. We have forgotten to preach God's initial love for us and his grace toward us, in our emphasis upon what man must do in order to be saved. This is a regrettable neglect.

Also, we have neglected to emphasize what man must do after he becomes a Christian, through the remainder of his life. There has been an inadequate emphasis on the kind and quality of life that a Christian must live. In this connection let us read two familiar passages of scripture. First, notice Eph. 2:8-10, "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." Oftentimes men stop reading at this point, emphasizing only the grace of God. However, the apostle continued, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them."

The second passage is found in James and reads, "What doth it profit, my brethren, if a man say he hath faith, but have not works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked and in lack of daily food, and one of you say unto them, Go in peace, be ye warmed and filled; and yet ye give them not the things needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead in itself ... Thou believest that God is one; thou doest well: the demons also believe, and shudder. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith apart from works is barren? ... For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, even so faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:14-17, 19-20, 26).

### Understanding Before Decision

We believe that there must be a certain understanding of the whole picture of Christianity before one decides to become a Christian. Yet, at this point we face a dilemma. How much understanding is necessary? One horn of the dilemma is represented by the earnest Christian who is seeking to lead a lost person to Christ. He is so concerned about the precarious position of this lost soul, that he naturally and almost subconsciously tries to remove as many hindrances and barriers as possible in order to make it as easy as possible. Sometimes in large evangelistic meetings and even in individual personal work exhortation to act has dominated the scene to the point that inadequate instruction was overlooked. Bringing a person to baptism has loomed so large that sometimes people have been brought who were not ready to come.

The other horn of the dilemma is represented by those who insist on thorough and sometimes long-extended periods of instruction. In the second and third centuries "catechumenal schools" actually required that prospects for Christianity spend from two to three years in instruction before they were permitted to be baptized. In mission fields today workers report that they do not extend an open

invitation at the end of a sermon, for fear there will be responses by those who are not yet adequately taught. One worker in Japan reported that shortly after the collapse of Japan in World War II, along with the announcement by the Emperor to his people that he was not divine and should not therefore be worshipped, a visit was made to a tuberculosis sanitarium. This missionary reported that he believed 600 of the patients would have responded for baptism immediately. He realized correctly that they knew nothing of Christianity and that their response would simply have been a result of emotional shock. They needed teaching, obviously.

Just as we have minimum age laws for marriage, because we realize that children of six or seven or even ten or twelve cannot understand the responsibilities of marriage or what is involved in marriage, so in the matter of becoming a Christian one must wait until he reaches a certain degree of understanding and maturity before his response is meaningful. This is the reason, of course, why we reject infant baptism. But still the question comes--how long must a person wait? How much instruction must be given before one is baptized?

#### Christ Set the Pattern

In this matter, as in everything else relating to Christianity, Christ sets us a pattern. In John 6:14-15, after the great miracle of feeding the five thousand, we read, "When therefore the people saw the sign which he did, they said, This is of a truth the prophet that cometh into the world. Jesus therefore perceiving that they were about to come and take him by force, to make him king, withdrew again into the mountain himself alone." The people were so impressed by his miracle working powers that they wanted to make him their king, but Jesus realized that their willingness to follow him was of shallow motivation. They simply wanted the loaves and the fishes.

On the following day Christ talked with these same people, revealing some of the deeper aspects of discipleship, and developing for them some of the spiritual concepts that are involved in Christianity. As a result, many of them slipped away and turned back to their previous paths, "Upon this many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him. Jesus said therefore unto the twelve, Would ye also go away? Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we have believed and know that thou art the Holy One of God." (John 6:66-69).

Another example of Christ's unwillingness to accept people too quickly is found in Luke 18:18-23 in the story of the rich young ruler. The young man said to Jesus, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" When Jesus told him to keep the commandments the young man responded, "All these have I observed from my youth up." At this point most of us would have been ready and even eager to accept the young man as a disciple. He had lived a clean life from his youth. He had come seeking to know what to do to inherit eternal life. Then, besides, he was a young man of wealth and influence. Think how much these could mean in the kingdom. Yet, Jesus did not accept him. Jesus said, "One thing thou lackest yet; sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me." Jesus wants no divided loyalties. Jesus insists that those who come to him must be willing to put aside everything else and to make him first in their lives.

In Luke 14:25-33, we find Christ's instruction upon counting the cost. No man builds a building without counting the cost. No king goes into a battle without analyzing the strength of his enemy and assaying the possibilities of his own victory. In Luke 9:23-24, Christ speaks to the point directly, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it."

#### Requirements of Faith

Findlay B. Edge, in his book, *A Quest for Vitality in Religion*, on pages 165-167, points out that an authentic or saving faith requires, "(1) A response that involves the totality of one's being. (2) A response in which one surrenders his life to the sovereignty of God. (3) A response in which the individual gives himself to be an instrument of God's redemptive purpose." Each of these points is worthy of careful thought.

In developing the third emphasis, that a man must be willing to become an instrument of God's redemptive purpose when he becomes a disciple, Mr. Edge used this illustration: Two men were talking with each other and one said, "There is something important going on down at Fourth and Broadway. Come and share it with me." The second man knowing that there was a fine restaurant at that location and thinking of a fine meal of banquet immediately accepted the invitation. However, to his surprise, when the two men arrived at Fourth and Broadway the first man pointed out "an army recruiting booth" and suggested that they both enlist in their nation's defense. The first man had accepted an invitation to a banquet and was not at all interested in enlisting in the army. The point, of course, is this: Sometimes people accept Christ in order to provide for themselves safety at the time of the judgment, and an enjoyment of heaven eternally, while they do not at all have in mind the idea of a lifetime of service in their Lord's army.

In this connection it is interesting to remember a paragraph from Elton Trueblood, in his *The Company of the Committed*, pp. 30-31, in which he points out the parallel between the Christian and the soldier: "One of the most surprising facts about the early church was its fundamental similarity to a military band ... the notion of enlisting church members as recruits sounds very strange to modern ears. This reaction tells us something significant about the church of the twentieth century; it tells us how far we have drifted."

#### An Act or A Process?

Is Salvation an act or a process? Many people have the idea that salvation is a great dynamic event that occurs at some point in a person's life, after which he is saved forever. It is something of a free passage into heaven. In this connection a little story concerning a denominational Sunday school class stands out in my memory. One small boy asked, "Was Hitler a Christian?" The teacher after a few moments of thought replied, "He certainly didn't act like one. We can only hope he trusted Jesus when he was a little boy." This answer shows a complete failure to understand that salvation is much more than a one-time mental affirmation of faith in Jesus. Salvation does have a beginning when one obeys his Lord's commands, but that is certainly not the whole story.

The New Testament speaks of salvation as past event, continuing experience, and future expectation. Notice each of these. (1) Past event: In Eph. 2:8 we read, "For by grace have ye been saved ..." The perfect paraprastic is used, which signifies completed action in the past. I Tim. 1:9 uses the expression, "... God, who saved us." This is the same emphasis. (2) Continuing experience: I Cor. 1:18 reads, "For the word of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved (literally, being saved) it is the power of God." Acts 2:47 has the same construction, "And the Lord added to them day by day those who were (being) saved." (3) Future expectation: Romans 13:11 mentions this, "Now is salvation nearer to us than when we first believed." Taking all of these passages together, along with many others like them, we realize that salvation has a definite beginning at the time that we obey the Lord's initial commands, that it is a continuing experience throughout our entire lives, and that ultimately we find its fulfillment as we enter into heaven.

### Conclusion

Sometimes the question is asked, "Can a person have a saved soul and a lost life?" The answer is no. There must be a continuing right relationship with God. The pattern of one's life indicates the quality of one's relationship with God. Unless the life is Christian there can be no hope of eternal salvation.

In extending the invitation we earnestly hope that all who are not yet Christians will respond. This message has been presented in order to emphasize that this response must not be lightly considered or of shallow significance. It must be based upon a real commitment to Christ and a willingness to serve in his Cause.