

# TenthNew Members

## Church Membership

### Joining the Presbyterian Church

*By Rev. B. Hoyt Evans*

In his book, the Creed of Presbyterianism, Dr. Egbert W. Smith writes of the Presbyterian church: “Her door of entrance is as wide as the gates of heaven.” In a large sense, this statement is very true. The requirements for membership in the Presbyterian church are basic and biblical.

Actually, people may become members of the Presbyterian church in three different ways:

- (1) They may be received by the session (the elders) of a particular Presbyterian church on the basis of their transfer by letter from another evangelical church. (An evangelical church is one that requires a profession of faith in the historic Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for membership.) Members who are received from other churches are not baptized and are not required to make another public profession of faith.
- (2) They may unite with a Presbyterian church by making a restatement or reaffirmation of their faith before the session. Sometimes for reasons of time or circumstance, it is impossible for a person to secure a certificate of membership in order that he may move his membership to a Presbyterian church. Some evangelical churches will not grant certificates of transfer allowing their members to unite with churches of other denominations. In such situations, the person who desires to join the Presbyterian church is asked to re-affirm his faith before the session by answering the same questions asked of those who unite with the church on profession of faith. Such persons, however, are not re-baptized or required to make another profession of faith.
- (3) A new Christian, or a child of the Covenant, unites with a Presbyterian church by making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Those who become members of the church in this way appear before the session and answer satisfactorily five fundamental questions prescribed by the Book of Church Order. If they give evidence of sincerity and earnestness in their faith in Christ, the session votes to admit them to the ordinances of the church and to church membership. They ordinarily then appear before the congregation to repeat their public profession of faith in Christ, usually by answering again the five questions from the Book of Church Order. At that time they also receive Christian baptism, if they have not already been baptized in infancy.

In whichever of these three ways a person becomes a member of a Presbyterian church, it is assumed that he understands and gives agreement to the five questions in the Book of Church Order. These are the basic vows of church membership, describing what Presbyterians believe to be necessary in order for a person to be a Christian. The questions do not constitute an examination of intelligence or learning; they are a description of Christian experience as the Presbyterian church understands it.

#### Sin and Its Consequences

The first questions asked of those who seek to become members of a Presbyterian church is: “Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, and without hope save in his sovereign mercy?” This question points to the fact of sin and what sin does in the lives of people. For a person to become a member of the church, he should know what sin is, that he himself is a sinner, and that sin leads to spiritual death. No one who thinks himself “good” is approaching religious experience prepared to understand or accept Jesus Christ as Savior in full, Christian sense.

What is sin? It is “self” going against the will and the way of God. God made known His will and His way in His Commandments. When we violate the laws of God we are guilty of sin. “Whosoever committed sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4).

There are two ways of breaking the law: (1) by failing to do what the law requires, and (2) by doing what the law forbids. A man who fails to pay his taxes breaks the law by failing to do what it requires. A man who drives fifty miles an hour in a thirty-mile speed zone breaks the law by doing what it forbids. Men violate God's law in the same ways. Paul wrote, "For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7:19).

Whosoever else may be harmed by it, sin is basically an offense against God. When David had committed a grievous evil against Uriah and his wife, Bathsheba, he prayed to God, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Psalm 51:4). Sin is so offensive to God that He cannot look on it: "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:13).

Who does sin affect? It touches and damages the life of every person. All who ever lived have sinned except one, and that is Christ himself. The Bible states very clearly that all are sinners and that all have sinned. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8; see also Ecclesiastes 7:20 and Romans 3:23). Not only does the Bible tell us we are sinners, but when we are honest with ourselves, our consciences tell us the same thing.

Where does sin lead? It always leads to death. Death came to our first parents, because of their sin. All of their descendants have been sinners and have deserved death because of their sins. "Wherefore as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. . ." (Romans 5:12; see also Romans 6:23 and Ezekiel 18:4). Spiritual death means being separated from God forever (Isaiah 59:2).

In our own strength there is nothing we can do to overcome the evil effects of sin in our lives. We know what we ought to do, but we find ourselves unable to do it. Paul said, "For I know that in me [that is in my flesh] dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Romans 7:18).

If there is any help for us as sinners, it must come from someone else. Other people cannot help, because they are sinners too. Our help comes only from the Lord. There is nothing we can do about sin, but he has already done all that is necessary. We deserve death, but God takes away our sin and gives us eternal life in its place. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

#### Who Jesus Is and What He Does

The second question asked of those who would join a Presbyterian church is: "Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, and do you receive and rest upon him alone for your salvation as he is offered in the gospel?" In order for a person to say "yes" to this question, he must know who Jesus is and what he does.

When the Bible refers to Jesus as the Son of God, it clearly means that he is equal with God. . . that he *is* God. He said, "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Again he said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). The Bible ascribes to the Lord Jesus qualities, honors, and works that can belong to God alone. The clear estimate of the Scriptures is that Jesus Christ is God.

The Lord Jesus is also human. The Bible represents him as a human being who was born of a woman, who lived a truly human life, and who died a real death. The Scriptures leave no doubt as to the reality of his humanity. As to his nature, our Lord is both God and Man.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (see Luke 19:10 and Mark 10:45). He could save others because he had no sin of his own for which to answer (see 1 Peter 2:22). He died in the place of sinners to answer for their sins (Romans 5:6,8). He, the Son of God, took the punishment of those who were guilty in order that the guilty might share the reward of the innocent (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Lord Jesus died our death that we might live his life.

When we say the Jesus Christ saves people, we mean that he delivers them from the death and punishment they were to receive because of their sin. Instead of death and punishment, he gives them life and joy. There is a great difference between being saved and being lost (see John 3:36). Those who are saved by Christ have the hope of the resurrection and the hope of heaven (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17 and John 14:2,3). Those who have not found him have not this hope.

When mealtime comes around, a healthy boy will know that he is hungry. He also knows that his mother loves him, and that she has prepared food for him and the rest of the family. He believes these things, but his belief must go one step more before his hunger can be satisfied and his body can be nourished. He must actually sit down and eat. Believing in Christ for salvation is very much like this. The sinner may believe that he is a lost sinner and that Christ can save him, but before he can be saved, he must accept Christ's salvation (see Romans 10:9 and John 1:12).

It is so easy to be lost. All that is necessary is to neglect or refuse to accept Christ as Savior (see John 3:18). It is also easy to enter the door leading to salvation. All one must do is to receive deliberately God's free gift of life (See Ephesians 2:8-9).

We remember always one important fact which must never be overlooked: *There is only one way to be saved*, for there is none other Name given us but that of the Lord Jesus (see Acts 4:12 and John 14:6).

#### How a Christian Should Live

The third question asked by those who unite with a Presbyterian church is this: "Do you now resolve and promise, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will live as a follower of Christ?" This question indicates that being a Christian makes a difference in the way a person lives. Before a person can faithfully make the promise that the question requires, he must know what the Christian life is and how he can go about living it.

The book of 1 John calls on Christians to "walk in the light" and "walk in love." Walking in the light means knowing and following the will of God as it is revealed in the Bible (see Psalm 119:111,130). Walking in love means living a life of love toward God and others. Jesus said that love of God and love of our neighbors is the fulfillment of the law (Matthew 22:36-40).

Now this is not to suggest that we are saved because of the way we live! We are saved by believing in what Christ did for our salvation and receiving Him (Ephesians 2:8-9). But we certainly will live in a different and better way because we are saved. . .because we are Christians.

A Christian is a changed person, and he ought to live a changed life (2 Corinthians 5:17). The same Christ who saves from sin will, by his Spirit, help believers live the kind of lives they ought to live: "As ye therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him" (Colossians 2:6). We receive Christ by faith. We must live the Christian life in the same way—faith. This was Paul's secret of Christian living: "I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me" (Philippians 4:13).

#### The Church and Its Work

The fourth question asked prospective Presbyterian church members is: "Do you promise to support the church in its worship and work to the best of your ability?" Before anyone can honestly and intelligently say "yes" to this question, he must know something about the church and its work.

The Bible describes the church as "the body of Christ." Christ is the Head of the body, and those who believe in him as Lord and Savior are the members of the body. The work of the church is to worship God, to teach and preach the Bible, and to provide fellowship for its members. The church does its work through its teachers, preachers and missionaries; through its services and sacraments; through its organizations and activities; through its schools and colleges; through its boards and agencies; and through its literature.

How can an individual church member support the worship and work of the whole church? One of the most important ways is by attending its services faithfully (Hebrews 10:25). He can share in the work of the church by doing willingly whatever he is asked to do (Colossians 3:23). Church members support the work of the church by their gifts. We believe that every Christian ought to tithe—to give a tenth of his income to the work of the Lord (Malachi 3:10). But the most important way a church can support his church is to pray for it. This is something which every member can do (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

The fifth question persons are asked when they become members of a Presbyterian church is this: "Do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of the church, and promise to study its purity and peace?" In order to answer this question honestly, a person must know several things about the government of the church.

Christ is the Head of the church. Members of the church look to him alone as the supreme authority. The task of the church, then, is to teach, explain, and enforce the law of Christ as we find it in the Scriptures.

The Presbyterian church has a constitution—a statement of what we believe the Bible teaches. This constitution has two main parts. The first part is doctrinal—the teaching of the Bible about what we are to believe and how we are to live. This doctrinal part, sometimes called the Confession of Faith, is actually divided into three parts: the Confession of Faith proper, the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism.

But the constitution also has a section on government, expressing what we believe the Bible teaches about how the church should be governed. The division of this Book of Church Order are: the Form of Government, Rules of Discipline, and the Directory of Worship.

What does it mean when the Presbyterian church member promises to submit to the government and discipline of the church and to study its purity and peace? It means that he should know and obey the constitution of the church, and that he should honor the officers of the church as they teach and enforce the constitution.

Into this fellowship, perhaps the Lord Jesus has called you who read these pages. If so, may he, the great and only Head of the Church lead you into ever fuller experiences of his grace and ever increasing usefulness in his kingdom, and to him be the glory.

*The Rev. Dr. Evans, at the time of his death in 1977, was executive secretary of the Asheville Presbytery, PCUS.*