

Baptists: Applying the Gospel

Baptists declare that Christians have a responsibility both to share the gospel and to apply it to all of life. The Baptist evangelist Billy Graham has written, “We as Christians have two responsibilities. One, to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ as the only answer to man’s deepest needs. Two, to apply as best we can the principles of Christianity to the social conditions around us.”

“Certainly we as Christian citizens have no right to be content with our social order until the principles of Christ are applied to all men.”

Billy Graham
World Aflame, p. 187

The application of the principles of Christianity to social conditions calls for both ministry and social action. These two are interrelated yet different. **Ministry** involves efforts to heal the hurts of people—spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional.

Social action involves efforts to change the circumstances which cause the hurts. Ministry is corrective in its focus. Social action is preventive. For example, feeding people who are starving is a form of ministry. Working to eliminate the cause of the hunger is a type of social action.

Bases for Applying the Gospel

Baptists’ efforts to right the wrongs in our world are based solidly on bedrock Baptist beliefs such as the Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Bible.

The Lordship of Christ calls for efforts to bring about a social order characterized by love and justice. Jesus is Lord of all (John 1:3; Philippians 2:9-11). He indicated that we should not only profess that he is Lord (John 13:13) but also act in accord with that Lordship (Luke 6:46). The Lord of all creation desires that **we do as he teaches and follow his example (Matthew 7:21-27).**

Jesus declared that the Great Commandment is to love God and others: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37-40 NIV). This word from the Lord provides a guideline both for living the Christian life and for applying the gospel to all of life.

Jesus publicly announced his ministry in terms that indicated his concern for all aspects of life. To a gathering in the synagogue in Nazareth he read from Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19 NIV). Then Jesus amazed the gathering by declaring, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21 NIV).



Jesus set an example of sacrificial service for the benefit of others and commanded his disciples to take up their cross and follow him: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24 NIV).

Jesus addressed specific issues related to institutions of society, such as family and government (Matthew 19:3-12; 22:15-22). He called on persons to live according to God’s standards.

The Bible sets forth God’s standards for all aspects of human life—for individuals, families, churches, economies, and governments—and calls for people to strive to meet those standards.

The Old Testament records God’s will for the institutions of society. The prophets condemned greed and injustice because they violated God’s will. The prophets revealed God’s great displeasure with those who corrupted society, oppressed the poor, waged unjust war, and ignored the plight of the powerless. They called for efforts to root out wrong and establish right (Jeremiah 5:25-29; Hosea 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8). They set a model for the “prophethood of the believer” that parallels the New Testament emphasis on the “priesthood of all believers.”

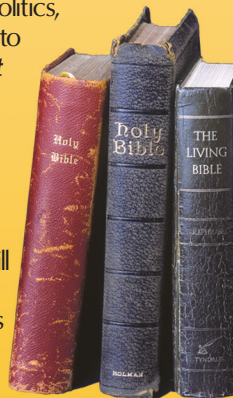
The New Testament records that the Christians in the earliest churches stressed God’s will for a just, humane, and moral social order. In a world where government officials often were corrupt, church leaders set forth God’s standard for officials to function for the good of citizens (Romans 13:1-7). At a time when many people, such as women and slaves, were treated as inferior, Christian leaders declared the equality of everyone in Christ (Galatians 3:28). The usual pattern of society to cater to the wealthy and ignore the poor was condemned by church leaders (James 2:1-9).

Methods of Applying the Gospel

Baptists have used a number of methods in applying the gospel to all of life. Some of these are designed to strengthen the basic institutions of the social order, such as family life, business, and government. Others address wrongs in society, such as injustice, corruption, and immorality.

Baptist individuals strengthen the social order by living in accord with the teachings of the Bible in daily life—in family, work, politics, church, and recreation—and by engaging in efforts to correct harmful conditions in these areas. **Baptist churches, associations of churches, networks, and conventions** through various organized efforts strive to develop a more just and humane social order.

Baptists believe that authentic evangelism coupled with discipleship will bring about positive social change. Social action in itself is not evangelism, and evangelism on its own is not social action. However, evangelism that results



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Micah 6

in conversion can create in people a desire to help improve the conditions in the lives of others. True evangelism coupled with discipleship results in changed lives, and these changed lives help to change the world.

Baptists preach, teach, and write to set forth the standards of the Bible for the social order, to challenge practices that are wrong, and to encourage individuals and organizations to be involved in positive social action. Baptist preachers have proclaimed the Bible's teachings about changing the conditions in the world. Baptist authors have written volumes about the need to apply the gospel to all of life.

Baptists have utilized **boycotts and public demonstrations** to bring about social change. They **seek elected office** as well as **encourage people to vote** in elections. They **lobby** government officials to deal constructively with problems that plague society, such as pollution, hunger, pornography, racism, and poverty. They **join with other denominations to form organizations** to deal with specific social problems, such as child abuse, neglect of the sanctity of life, drunkenness, and violation of religious freedom.

At times, Baptists have engaged in **armed conflict** to bring about a more just society, such as during the American Revolution. Usually, **Baptist efforts have been peaceful**, such as the acts of civil disobedience during the struggles for religious freedom and the campaigns for racial justice.

Challenges to Applying the Gospel

Efforts to apply the gospel to the social order meet many challenges. When individuals, churches, and other Baptist organizations endeavor to follow the command of Jesus to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-14), they often meet rejection and hostility. **Applying the gospel often calls for unusual courage.**

Applying the gospel is also difficult because quite often there is **lack of agreement** as to which problems should be confronted. Further disagreement may erupt over the methods to use in dealing with a particular problem.

Some people **question the validity** of efforts to correct ills in society. They doubt if it is possible to significantly change the institutions of society, such as governments and economic systems. Such doubt can hinder the application of the gospel to all of life. Most Baptists recognize that a perfect world is not attainable in this life, given the sinful conditions of human beings, but a better one is possible.

Apathy and indifference play a huge role in thwarting effective efforts to apply the gospel. Unfortunately, many people choose to leave to others the difficult task of bringing about justice and righteousness in the world.

Baptists strive to overcome these challenges in various ways. They urge people to seek guidance and empowerment



**What does
God require of
us? Justly
love mercy
and humbly
obey God."**

from the Holy Spirit concerning what social problems to tackle and what methods to use. They encourage churches to teach what the Bible says about applying the gospel. They form denominational organizations to deal with social problems. They cooperate with people from other denominations in attacking evils in society.

Conclusion

Admittedly Baptists have not done all that they could to right the wrongs of the social order. In some instances they have contributed to harmful conditions such as slavery.

However, Baptist individuals, churches, and other organizations strive to apply the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to all of life. Baptists are active in evangelism and ministry, but they also are involved in specific actions to bring about a more just and humane social order. They pay the price to do this because they believe that it is the teaching of Christ to try to make the world better and because it is the nature of Christ in them to do so (Galatians 2:20).

For further information, see www.baptistdistinctives.org

The basic material in this leaflet originally appeared in a series of articles in the *Baptist Standard* in 2005. Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund to provide for publishing the series. He asked William M. Pinson, Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles. The financial assistance of The Prichard Family Foundation and Vester T. Hughes, Jr. enabled this series of nineteen leaflets to be produced based on the articles. Skyler G. Tinker designed and formatted the leaflets for publication. Each leaflet is for both individual and group study.

The topics in this series: (1) Baptists: Who? Where? What? Why? (2) What Makes a Baptist a Baptist? (3) The Lordship of Christ; (4) The Bible as Authority for Faith and Practice; (5) Soul Competency; (6) Salvation Only by Grace Through Faith; (7) The Priesthood of All Believers; (8) Believer's Baptism; (9) A Regenerate Church Membership; (10) Congregational Church Governance; (11) Church Autonomy; (12) Baptist Church Life: Organization, Worship, Officers, Ordinances; (13) Voluntary Cooperation; (14) Evangelism; (15) Missions; (16) Ministry; (17) Christian Education; (18) The Application of the Gospel; (19) Religious Freedom.

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