

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."

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 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 taught that the Great Commandment is to love God and others; this provides a guideline both for living the Christian life and for applying the gospel to all of life (Matthew 22:36-40). Jesus announced his ministry in terms that indicated his concern for all aspects of life (Luke 4:18-19). The teachings of the Lord address specific issues related to institutions of society, such as family and government (Matthew 19:3-12; 22:15-22). **Jesus set an example** of sacrificial service and commanded his disciples to take up the cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24).

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" as well as the "priesthood of the believer."

"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 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 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 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 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, pornography, poverty, hunger and racism. 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 violations 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. Such doubt can hinder the application of the gospel to all of life.

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 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

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 hope that the world can be a better place, because they believe that it is the teaching of Christ, and because it is the nature of Christ in them to do so (Galatians 2:20).

For further information on Baptists and applying the gospel, see www.baptistdistinctives.org.

"... And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Micah 6:8 (NIV)



Wanting to share information about Baptist distinctives, Noble Hurley, shortly before his death in 2004, established the Jane and Noble Hurley Baptist Identity Fund for the purpose of publishing this series and asked William M. Pinson Jr. and Doris A. Tinker to prepare the articles, who enlisted H. Leon McBeth, William L. Pitts Jr. and James H. Semple to serve as resource people. ©

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