

Baptist Basics



11 Mission and Evangelism

Since their beginning, Baptists have always been deeply committed to mission and evangelism. We believe that God wills the salvation of the whole world. According to the apostle Paul, God has a plan for the fullness of time and it is 'to gather up all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1:8-10). In another place he states that in Christ 'all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible' and goes on to say that through him, 'God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross' (Colossians 1:15, 19-20). As the words 'all things' occur a number of times in these verses it is difficult to get beyond them. They mean what they say: 'all things' leaves nothing out. And Christ is the means by which God intends to restore the whole world.

A universal vision

It is true to say then that a Christian vision of God's purposes is universal, it is all-embracing. God is concerned for the reconciliation of human beings to the himself (2 Corinthians 5:20). God is also concerned for the resurrection of human bodies so that at some future point we shall all be changed into the likeness of Christ's glorious body (Philippians 3:21; Romans 8:11). God is furthermore concerned for the renewal of the whole created world so that it becomes a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness is at home (Romans 8:20-21; 2 Peter 3:13). This breadth of vision expresses the extent

of God's love for the creation that has been called into being through him. This creation has lost its way. But in Jesus Christ, God has acted to restore it, to bring it back on track so that it can be reconciled to him. In the fullness of time this will all be brought to completion. At the moment, it is completed only in part (1 Corinthians 13:9-10) but one day it will be fulfilled and there will be universal and cosmic peace. This need not mean that all human beings will finally accept God's grace and mercy for themselves. There are warnings about the danger of being lost (Matthew 25:31-46). But with these sober words in our minds, there is a great and exciting hope for the world even despite all its miseries.

A universal mission



The universal vision prepares the Church for a universal mission. The word 'mission' refers to the task to which the Church is called. If God has sent Jesus, the Son of God, into the world in order that the world might know life in all its fullness (John 10:10), Jesus has sent the Church into the world in the same way that the Father has sent him (John 20:21). The terms of reference that applied to Jesus apply to us as we continue, with his strength and in his Spirit, to do the kinds of things that he did, only further afield, to the ends of the earth in fact (John 14:12; Acts 1:8). Jesus understood that because the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, he was anointed 'to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19). Christians follow in his footsteps. Christian mission is concerned about the restoration of all things to their rightful place under the Lordship of Christ and in the service of God (Acts 3:21). Christians know that only when Christ returns, will it be possible to say that, 'the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever' (Revelation 11:15). The kingdom is the gift of God and its final arrival is not yet. But in the light of the kingdom, and moving towards it with hope and anticipation, it is possible to serve its interests and its coming, to prepare the world for the coming reality. The Church acts as the agent and sign of the kingdom. It points to it and invites people to prepare for it, and in doing this, it acts on behalf of it, achieving reconciliation of people to God and a degree of transformation along the way.

The dimensions of mission

The word 'mission' is a way of referring to all the aspects of what the Church is sent to do. 'Evangelism' refers in particular to the specific activity of making people aware of Christ and the salvation that comes through him, and of inviting people to put their trust in him and be baptised. As a general term, mission has a variety of dimensions.

1) Nurturing faith and discipleship: Christian communities exist to share their faith with others and then to nurture that faith in those who respond. It does this by baptising new believers, teaching them the way of Christ and enabling them to become self-sustaining through prayer and study. People's initial interest in Christ only becomes a permanent lifestyle of discipleship when they are helped to put foundations in place and to live the life of faith in a Christian community. The very life of the church is part of the mission of the church. In the regular rhythms of prayer, worship, sacraments, fellowship and preaching there is power to heal.

2) Witnessing to Christ: Witness was the outcome of the Holy Spirit's coming to the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:8). The church witnesses to Christ, as 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' (John 14:6). It does this very largely by existing as an active, worshipping community of believers that is open to others, inviting them to share its faith. By being friendly and hospitable and by allowing people to explore Christian belief in their own time, it draws people into its life and its experience of God. In addition, by reaching out to people beyond the boundaries of the Christian community, it presents Christ to them as the Saviour of the world through whom we can be reconciled to God. It does this through the day to day witness of its members in their places of work, study and leisure and by more planned forms of contact with people in their neighbourhood.

3) Responding to human need: Jesus both preached and acted to help people in need. In particular, he healed the sick, fed the hungry and set people free from evil influences. In these ways he took people who were excluded from their communities and enabled them to be included. Through these actions he revealed the love and mercy of God and showed that God cares. It was said of Jesus that 'he went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him' (Acts 10:38). Christians are told to 'do to others as you would have them do to you' (Matthew 5:12) and

to 'let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven' (Matthew 5:16). Doing good is one of the ways of bearing witness. It should include the daily, ordinary acts of kindness by which Christians show their concern for their neighbours and for strangers, and also active programmes of social action designed to alleviate human poverty and suffering. These things are worth doing because they are in themselves good, and the good is always worthwhile. In other words, they should never be just for the sake of making converts, even if converts are in fact made.

4) Struggling to transform society: There are many forms of human suffering where it is not enough to meet immediate needs with caring compassion. This would be to deal with the symptoms of a problem without getting down to its root causes. In these situations, something needs to be done economically or politically to bring about a change from which all will benefit. This proves true about providing clean water, abolishing slavery, working for fair trade or combating the sex trade. This list could be added to endlessly. Changing these unjust practices or structures is always a struggle, both because it means overcoming inertia and because there are strong forces that have a vested interest in keeping things as they are. This is the point at which social action becomes political action and where, well thought through and accurate forms of advocacy aimed at change become necessary.

5) Caring for creation: As the whole world belongs to God, and as God's ultimate purpose of salvation embraces all of creation and not human beings alone, mission must also include a proper concern for the natural and human environments.¹ After all, if the planet is polluted or damaged, the implications of that for all life are incalculable, as in the case of global warming. The world does not revolve around human beings but around the God by whom, and for him it was made (Romans 11:36). Christian mission should therefore include a concern for the natural world and for animal welfare, in so far as these can be seen to depend upon human behaviour (Jonah 4:9-11). It should also be concerned about the potential of human nature that can dignify or degrade.

6) Engaging with other world views: Bearing witness often takes the form of proclaiming the faith to others. On other occasions it happens in the form of conversation or dialogue. This is the case when Christians engage with other religious or ideological traditions. The aim here is to increase mutual understanding, to lessen tension or hostility between different groups and to seek for areas of common ground. The extent to which this can be found

will vary from case to case. However, by bearing witness to Christ in a way that respects other people's convictions and values human relationships, the likelihood is increased that others will learn something from Christ and be influenced by him.

Motives for mission

What motivates Christian mission and evangelism?

- *Love for God.* Those who love God should want him to receive the worship and honour that are God's due. It is right and good that people should call God to mind and acknowledge his divine claim on their lives. Those who love Christ and believe him to be Lord, want him to be known to the ends of the earth and for this reason, bear witness to him in all places.



- *Love for people.* Jesus came to bring fullness of life and so, love for other people means Christians want them to enter into this also. This is especially so, as so many lives are distorted and dehumanised by guilt, shame, meaninglessness and addictions. Because people are lost, and because Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Luke 10:18), the good news of Christ is communicated. Christians also do not take lightly, Jesus' warnings about being eternally lost (25:45-46). Love for people means inviting them to be reconciled to God. Christian social action and the struggle for justice stem from compassion and the belief that God has something better for people.
- *Love for the church.* Since the church is God's project, its growth and well-being are also part of Christian motivation. The church is placed in the world for the world's good, and to be a sign and agent of the coming kingdom of God. When the church thrives the world can benefit.

- *Love for creation.* Christians believe that the creation will come to its fulfilment in the coming of God's kingdom. They also believe that God is at the centre of all things and the world can reach its potential only when it lives in communion with God. Without God, it is out of balance and subjected to futility (Romans 8:18-21). They therefore seek to think about the world and its needs, culture, economics, politics and scientific development from a Christian perspective and to bring these reflections to bear upon the cultural and natural environment in which they live.



- *Love for truth.* Christians believe that Jesus Christ spoke and lived the truth about God, humanity and creation. They therefore care about the truth, about honesty and fidelity, and about helping people to live without delusions. In their mission, they seek to be true to God and believe that the truth sets people free (John 8:32). In mission and evangelism, they see themselves living and speaking truthfully.

Mission as God's mission

Although the church is engaged in mission, it needs to be understood that mission is first and foremost the work of God. To be engaged in mission is to be co-workers with God, through Christ, in the relentless but patient activity, of drawing all things to that point when all things are at peace so that 'God may be all in all' (1 Corinthians 15:28).

¹ For more information see Baptist Basics: Stewardship

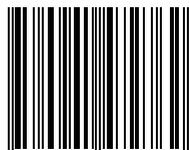
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