

# Baptist Basics



# 12 Lifestyle

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The goal of the Christian life is to become like Christ (Romans 8:29). The Holy Spirit is given to enable us progressively to undergo this transformation (2 Corinthians 3: 12-18). To become Christians is to deny ourselves, take up a cross and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). It is a demanding way of life in which we can no longer do just as we please but have committed ourselves, by our own decision, to living lives pleasing to God (1 John 3:22). Believers' baptism<sup>1</sup> dramatically portrays this radical change by symbolising death to the old life and the beginning of the new. It is like stripping off the old self and putting on a new one (Colossians 3:9-11). We have been crucified with Christ, but strangely we still live, although now this new life is lived with Christ in us (Galatians 2:20). Being a Christian then means living a new life with a new lifestyle.

## A contrast society

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In fact, we are called to be what God's people have always been called to be. From the beginning of God's purpose for Israel, they were called to be different from the nations that surrounded them. They were to be 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:6). All the laws that God gave to Israel were given so that they would nurture a distinctive way of life that would then act as an example for other nations. This way of life would be lived out of gratitude to God for having brought them out of slavery in Egypt. The laws given to them were very advanced for their day, requiring them to respect the land on which they lived and where they were God's stewards (Leviticus

25:23), to show compassion and consideration to the poor, the aged, the disabled and the stranger (Leviticus 19:9-10, 14, 32-34; Deuteronomy 5:11) and to deal with people justly and righteously. The Israelites may not have succeeded in doing all this, but God's intention was plain: to have a society of believing people whose lives were so significantly different from the values and practices of the surrounding nations that they could be like a light to those nations. It was to achieve this that Jesus came and taught his disciples. It is for this purpose that the church has been called out of nowhere to become a people of light (1 Peter 2:9-10).

## Living in community

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One of the first things a Christian has to learn is to live within, and respect the Christian community. Although Baptists have placed an important emphasis on freedom of conscience and the right of personal judgement, they have understood this as something fostered by Christian communities. In other words, it should not be understood as isolated individualism, the insistence on doing our own thing and going our own way, but as a freedom fostered in mutual fellowship. Because the community helps us grow in wisdom and maturity, we can be trusted to become discerning and responsible in making decisions. Christian congregations enable us to resist the pressure to conform that is so much an expectation of modern society. They live by a different story, which they remember and reflect upon each time they meet, the story of the self-giving Christ whom they are called to imitate (1 Peter 2:18-25). Congregations should therefore be understood as communities of resistance that offer an alternative to the ways of the world, subvert them by living out a different set of values, and equip their members to make a difference wherever they are. This can only work, however, if each Christian takes seriously the commitments involved in church membership and sees their church as something to refer to for teaching, guidance and support. Equally, local churches have to match up to their responsibilities in providing pastoral and moral support and being faithful to the way and teaching of Jesus.

## The way of Christ

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What does it mean to walk in the way of Christ and what does a Christian lifestyle look like?

First of all, it means *taking God seriously*. Jesus taught that the most important of all commandments is the command to love God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment.' (Matthew 22:34). This could hardly have been put more strongly. The primary goal of the Christian is to grow in love for God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This love should embrace every part of the person - heart, soul, mind and strength. When this happens the reality is that every other part of a Christian lifestyle will follow on since those who love God live out the Christian way from the heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34). To love God means taking him seriously and giving time to a growing relationship with God the Father, through Christ the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is fostered through prayer and bible study as well as through worship in the Christian community. Each Christian needs to find the best ways of making time for these activities, and there is a huge range of material available to help them.

Secondly, the way of Christ means *taking the Christian community seriously*. The church is given that we might find faith through it and having done, so that we might be supported in continuing in the faith with its help. Especially important in this, is the regular rhythm of common worship and within that, the celebration of the sacraments. Christians should regularly participate in the Lord's Supper and they should open themselves to hearing the scriptures read and interpreted. The discipline of worship means that we are able to refocus our lives on God, confessing sins that we may have committed and renewing the inward intention of living a godly life. We can do this in community as a reminder that we are not on our own, but are surrounded by a great company of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1-2). Fellowship with other Christians is a great stimulus to faith, as we realise that we are part of a greater enterprise, and as we are encouraged by other people's faith to hold fast to God.

Thirdly, the way of Christ means *taking Christian integrity seriously*. This has to do with whether the words we speak are matched by the lives we live. Faith without works, according to James, is not living faith (James 2:14-26). We are known, according to Jesus, by the fruit that we bear (Matthew 7:16-20). Questions are appropriate therefore about the extent to which we are living the transformed life. It is notable that when Paul contrasts the 'desires of the flesh' with the 'fruits of the Spirit' he becomes very specific (Galatians 5:16-26). It helps us to break free of our sins when we become specific about naming them. Likewise it helps to foster the virtues if we reflect upon

what they might look like in our own behaviour. The fact that Christians are put right with God through faith and not by works (Romans 5:1-5) does not in any way mean that they are unconcerned to work out their faith in their transformed lives (Philippians 2:12-13). Quite the reverse. They are concerned to embrace whatever is true, honourable, worthy and excellent (Philippians 4:8-9).

Fourthly, the way of Christ means *taking Christian mission seriously*. Jesus has sent his disciples out into the world with an overriding purpose, which is to serve the coming of God's kingdom. His promise is that when we strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, everything else we need will be provided along the way (Matthew 6:33). This can be done when we bear our witness to Christ faithfully and order our lives so that they reflect the priority of the divine kingdom. Serving the kingdom means seeking to relate all aspects of life to God's ultimate purpose of transforming heaven and earth into the kingdom of the Messiah and doing all that we can to add to the Spirit's work of bringing creation to that final point of salvation.

## Contemporary challenges

In the light of the way of Christ to which we are called, are there any contemporary challenges that should be identified? The following are suggestions.

- *The challenge of simplicity.* Our economic culture is based on a continual sense of dissatisfaction with what we have and the drive to acquire more. This runs directly counter to Jesus' teaching that life does not consist in the abundance of our possessions (Luke 12:15). There is little evidence that once we have enough, having more than enough increases our quotient of happiness. Adopting a more simple lifestyle means that we do not claim for ourselves more than a fair share of the world's resources. It helps to keep us free of greed.
- *The challenge of faithfulness:* It should be the Christian's intention to be faithful to Christ and to the teaching of the New Testament. This means that we see ourselves seeking to follow Christ, to act like Christ, and to be living in all things, in a way that is consistent with Jesus himself (1 Peter 2:18-25). Part of this is also being faithful to the teachings of and about Christ that is given in the New Testament and staying clear of anything that strays away from this.

- *The challenge of generosity.* The world's resources are extremely unequally apportioned and those living in the Northern and Western hemispheres have disproportionately more than others. There is a Christian principle at stake here: 'it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance' (2 Corinthians 8:13-14). Sharing resources more fairly is a vast global and economic issue that needs working on. But each person is able to, adopt a more generous lifestyle by setting aside some of their resources for the help of others. Agencies exist to enable this to happen.



- *The challenge of justice.* Christians who believe in a just and merciful God, the God of holy love, should be concerned for any situation that denies to human beings respect or just and fair treatment. This applies within their own societies and in other places. Baptists in particular believe in a free church and a free society<sup>2</sup>, so will feel particular concern for those who are persecuted for their faith or discriminated against because of it. They will argue that it is fundamental to a Christian way of thinking that people's dignity and liberty should be upheld, and will want to put whatever weight they have behind those who argue this cause.
- *The challenge of peace.* Jesus came as one who made peace between humankind and God (Acts 10:36). When he was opposed, he refused to take up the sword or to give legitimacy to violent action in his name (Matthew 26:51-52). He is known as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Christians are told to seek peace and pursue it (1 Peter 3:11) and Jesus pronounced peacemakers to be blessed (Matthew 5:9). He radically extended love of neighbour to include love of enemy (Matthew 5:43-44). This makes a sturdy agenda for peace which Christians cannot overlook. As well as pointing to a peaceful individual lifestyle that seeks to defuse or mediate in conflict situations, this agenda encourages Christians to work for arms

reduction and for the resolution of national conflicts through negotiation.

- *The challenge of civility.* Civility is the ability to represent one's views in the public realm with respect, integrity and courtesy. It particularly involves avoiding distorting people's arguments or demonising them because of their opinions. Religion is often and sadly associated with bigotry and inflammatory language. When representing Christian perspectives publicly it is important to do so intelligently, incisively and yet attractively and respectfully. Civility is a way of fulfilling the command of Jesus, 'In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this sums up the law and the prophets' (Matthew 7:12).
- *The challenge of citizenship.* When the Jews were in captivity in Babylon, Jeremiah wrote to them, 'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare' (Jeremiah 29:7). These words hold good for those who see themselves both as citizens of the kingdom of heaven and of the earthly city. It is a command to pray and seek the welfare of whichever society we belong to. As we prove ourselves to be exemplary citizens, so Christians commend the way of Christ to their community and fellow-citizens.
- *The challenge of compassion:* There can be no doubt that Jesus, reflecting the Father from whom he came, was deeply compassionate towards people, especially those who were afflicted or vulnerable (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 20:34). He was known as 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34). Uniquely in his day he insisted that his followers should not only love their neighbours as themselves, but even their very enemies (Matthew 5:34). Jesus both taught this and lived it out (Luke 23:34). We are to do the same, in the strength that God supplies (Romans 12:14-21).

A transformed life is the outcome of sincere devotion to God. By presenting ourselves as living sacrifices to God we can respond to the invitation of the apostle Paul, 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, so that you may discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:1-3).

<sup>1</sup> For more information see Baptist Basics: Believers' Baptism

<sup>2</sup> For more information see Baptist Basics: Radical Dissent

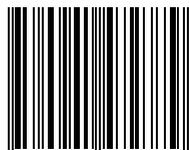
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