

**AMERICAN BAPTIST
POLICY STATEMENT ON EVANGELISM**

DEFINITION

Evangelism is
 the joyous witness of the People of God
 to the redeeming love of God
 urging all to repent
 and to be reconciled to God and each other
 through faith in Jesus Christ
 who lived, died, and was raised from the dead,

so that
 being made new
 and empowered by the Holy Spirit
 believers are incorporated as disciples into the church
 for worship, fellowship, nurture and
 engagement in God's mission
 of evangelization and liberation within society and creation,
 signifying the Kingdom which is present and yet to come.¹

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

The biblical words of the Evangel (Good News) refer to the public announcement of significant news--the outcome of a battle (II Samuel 18:19-31), the birth of a child (Jeremiah 20:15; Luke 1:19; 2:10), the deliverance of God's people (Isaiah 40:9; 61:1), or the act of redemption in Jesus Christ (Acts 8:35).

Key phrases in the New Testament express the nature of the Good News.

1. "The Good News from God" affirms its divine origin (Romans 15:16; II Corinthians 11:7) and explains why all who announce it are heralds, messengers or ambassadors. God commissions them to deliver a message (I Corinthians 9:16; Galatians 1:6-9) and to invite people to respond (Romans 10:14-15; I Peter 4:17).
2. "The Good News of Jesus Christ" points to the centrality of Jesus who was promised by Isaiah, introduced by John, affirmed by God in baptism and victorious over temptation (Mark 1:1-13). Though Jesus gained the attention of many, through healing, teaching and preaching, only some followed. Those who rejected him put him to death. The Good News proclaimed by the early church was that God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 5:42; 11:20; Romans 1:9; I Corinthians 1:17-31; 15:24-28).

The Good News is more than biographical data about Jesus: He is the Good News! The Gospel announces that Jesus, the sinless one, suffered the penalty of sin so that through his death on the cross and resurrection a way is opened for sinners to be reconciled to God (Corinthians 5:19-21) and to receive eternal life (John 5:24). These events demonstrate God's love and power (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:5; John 4:10). Words can be only feeble attempts to describe that momentous news (II Corinthians 2:1-5).

3. "The Good News of the Kingdom" calls for a radical reordering of life lived under God's sovereign will and power and a freedom from the enslavement of self-direction and self-will. One enters

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Definition of evangelism adopted by the American Baptist Evangelism Team on February 5, 1982.

kingdom life only by a new birth through the Spirit of God (John 3:3-8). This is the life for which all are created and which will be fulfilled in the kingdom yet to come (Genesis 1:27-29; John 1:3-5; 10:10).

The Bible teaches that God has a perfect plan for creation. But Genesis 3 shows how humanity rejected God's plan through disobedience, worshipping and serving the creation rather than the Creator (Psalm 14:1; Romans 1:18-32). This rejection is what the Bible calls sin. The Bible declares that we are all under the power of sin having gone "far away from God's saving presence" (Romans 3:23 TEV; Isaiah 53:6; Psalm 14:2-3). Unrepented sin leads to spiritual death (Ephesians 2:1-3; Revelation 20:11-15). The Good News is that the power of sin is broken by Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6:23). For God's will is that no one should perish but that all may have eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ (I Timothy 2:1-6; II Peter 3:9).

God offered life to all who would love God and neighbor with their total being (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Micah 6:8). Israel was asked to choose between life and death (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). Many did not choose life (Isaiah 66:1-4; Hebrews 4:2-6). Yet God's love never wavered. In a new and decisive way God entered history in Jesus, becoming human for our sakes (John 1:14; Philipians 2:6-9).

Jesus offers abundant life to all who repent. The Spirit gives new life to all who personally receive God's forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ (Galatians 2:19-20). The Spirit also empowers those who believe to realize their true humanity, stewardship, and social relationships under God's authority and care. This new life in Christ (II Corinthians 5:17) restores what God intended in creation. Its characteristics are clearly described in the story of creation and elsewhere in the Bible.

1. Our humanity is a gift from God in which we are to rejoice (Genesis 2:7; Psalm 95:6-7; 100:3).
2. Our stewardship of all creation is a responsibility delegated by God in which we are to be faithful (Genesis 2:8-17; Psalm 8:5-6; Luke 12:16-21; Ephesians 4:28).
3. Our social relationship is a pattern of equality established by God in which we are to reflect God's love and justice (Genesis 2:18-24; Micah 6:8; Matthew 15:34-40; Luke 4:18-19; Galatians 3:28).
4. Our Spiritual nature fits us for communion with God in which we come to know the true meaning of our humanity, our stewardship, our social relations, and our eternal hope (Genesis 1:26-27; 3:8; John 15:4-5; Romans 5:1-2; Revelation 21:1-7).

Just as Jesus is the heart of the Gospel's message, so he is the example for those who share the message. His one desire was to do God's will and accomplish God's work (Luke 2:49; 22:42; John 4:34; 17:1-5; 19:30). Becoming like a servant he was faithful even to the point of death that our redemption might be secured (Philipians 2:5-11).

In the power of the Spirit, Jesus brought the kingdom to those broken. Besides restoring health, Jesus called people to repent and have faith in God so that they could know wholeness of life. Jesus urged those anxious about life, food or clothing to put the kingdom first (Matthew 6:31-34).

Jesus stood against those who used creation's resources for selfish advantage and stood with the deprived and oppressed. He called people to change "systems" that degrade humanity and misuse creation and to share in the life and mission of God's kingdom. The Good News he proclaimed was that God forgives all who repent, gives an inheritance that endures (Matthew 6:19-21;

Luke 18:28-30), and an abundant life that does not consist of possessions (Luke 12:15).

Jesus commanded all to love even their enemies and urged all who are alienated to be reconciled (Matthew 5:10-12, 21-25, 38-48). He crossed cultural barriers (John 4) and provided the example for the church to bridge all racial and cultural differences in sharing the Good News (Acts 8:4-13, 26-40; 10:9-16; etc.).

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

American Baptists have affirmed the biblical hope of a renewed creation made possible by God's redemptive activity in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:19-21). As American Baptists, we are persuaded that new life begins when an individual, through a personal act of faith, appropriates God's forgiveness through the power of the Spirit (II Corinthians 5:17-21).

Motivated by this conviction American Baptists have evangelized throughout our entire history. Faithful to our calling we have urged people to receive God's gift of forgiveness through faith in Jesus Christ. Convinced that newness in Christ affects the totality of life, we have sought the mind of Christ in many difficult and unpopular circumstances and courageously expressed those convictions. Persuaded that conversion is not just a private affair between the individual and God, American Baptists have formed congregations for worship, education, care, service and evangelism. We also have promoted reconciliation within and ministry through the Body of Christ worldwide. When confronted by changing situations for mission and evangelization, we have struggled to express in relevant ways the nature of God's redemptive work. At times changes in methods and emphasis have divided us. But as a pilgrim people, we have recognized that growth often comes through change. As a cross-bearing people, we have tried to penetrate every area of personal and public life with the Good News for the whole person and for the whole of creation.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Continuing such deeds of faithfulness is called for in the Statement of Purpose and the Act of Incorporation of the American Baptist Churches in the USA. We continue to face a world which is increasingly marked by frustration, power struggles, weakness, fear, alienation, distrust, uncertainty, injustice and unprecedented moral choices.

Today there is an urgent need for us as American Baptists to announce the Good News that as people repent, there is forgiveness, reconciliation and incorporation into the Body of Christ. This announcement should not be confused with promises of personal security, social status and material success. There is a pressing need and unlimited opportunity for us today to be evangelists who lift up Christ crucified, risen, reigning and coming as the one source of abundant and eternal life (I Corinthians 1:17-31).

CONCLUSION

Because God calls us to enter into the life of the kingdom through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and to reflect God's power and presence in all of life, we affirm the definition of evangelism as stated above and call for a vigorous denominational program of evangelization with a variety of approaches.

THEREFORE, we dedicate ourselves

1. to call people to Christ through bold and faithful proclamation of the Gospel in ways understandable to every person;

2. to call people to Christ through our continual growth in the spiritual disciplines and in fellowship;
3. to call people to Christ through our witness as creatures, stewards, and social beings to the reality of God's rule over us by being a transforming influence in every sphere of life in which we are daily involved; and
4. to call people to Christ through unity among American Baptists and with all Christians as a living proclamation that there is reconciliation in Christ as Savior and Lord.

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