

**An American Baptist Perspective on Evangelism
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American Baptists and Evangelism

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 live, 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

American Baptists affirm the biblical hope of a renewed creation made possible by God's redemptive activity in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Col. 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 (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

Motivated by this persuasion, American Baptists have been evangelistic in our endeavors 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 affect the totality of life, we have sought the mind of Christ in many difficult and unpopular circumstances and courageously expressed those convictions.

American Baptists take earnestly Jesus' mandate in Matthew 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." We have responded positively and affirmatively to the declaration and invitation and so in this sense we are a Great Commission People. Christ sent, we went, and God gave the increase!

American Baptists have been known to be leaders in missions, taking the good news of the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world. Ever since Adoniram Judson, missionary to Burma, laid the foundation for what would become the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society in 1814, later known as International Ministries, American Baptists have been heavily involved in overseas mission and evangelistic ministry.

Globally, our International Ministries relates to more than 500 educational institutions, and 125 hospitals and medical facilities. Missionaries work in partnerships with some 15,000 trained national workers who serve about 22,000 congregations and nearly 3,000,000 baptized members.

¹ The official American Baptist definition of Evangelism, adopted by the General Board, June 1984.

American Baptists have also responded to Jesus' mandate and invitation in this country, the United States of America, the third-largest mission field in the world. In 1832 John Mason Peck affirmed that we were a Great Commission people when he and Jonathan Going founded the American Baptist Home Mission Society, now called National Ministries, to bear witness where spiritual hunger and human suffering were found. Christ sent, we went, and God gave the increase.

American Baptists have always been about evangelism and in that sense are evangelical and have always identified ourselves as thus. We have led hundreds of thousand of people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, planted hundreds of new churches and missional communities and launched thousands of social initiatives pointing to the "Good News of the Kingdom" as a radical reordering of life lived under God's sovereign will and power.

In 1984, American Baptists committed themselves to an emphasis called "Alive in Mission," a new church planting initiative. According to Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins, Executive Director of National Ministries, "Jesus sent, we went and, lo and behold, by the end of 1994, five hundred new churches had been started within ten years!"

Most recently, in 2000, American Baptists launched NEW LIFE 2010, a faith commitment to plant 1,010 new churches and reach 1,000,010 new disciples by the year 2010. NEW LIFE 2010 is about a Church that realizes it is vitalized to fulfill its vocation – to expect great things from God and to attempt great things for God!² Since the inception of NEW LIFE 2010, American Baptist have baptized close to 400,000 new believers. We have also started more than 250 new churches, in addition, to more than 800 initiatives in congregational transformation.

Evangelism and Social Action: How is Jesus' Proclamation Our Proclamation?

Just as American Baptists are a Great Commission People, we are also a Great Criteria People. 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 have promoted reconciliation within and ministry through the Body of Christ worldwide. We have done this by engaging with other Churches ecumenically as well as welcoming the stranger in our midst and striving to overcome racial and economic barriers at the personal and institutional level.

The Great Criteria is how we treat the most vulnerable people in our society, who Jesus calls the "least of these," in Matthew 25:45. Therefore, we take seriously the passage in Luke 4:18, "to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free." American Baptists have been unapologetically evangelical and unreservedly concerned for people groups that are marginalized and oppressed. We have been the Great Criteria People as evidenced in our history:

² This phrase is a famous saying of William Carey, a Baptist missionary to India, during a meeting in Northampton, England in 1792.

- In 1845 American Baptists refused missionary appointment of slave owners;
- 1849 – American Baptists stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Chinese immigrants in California during the anti-Chinese movement;
- 1865 – American Baptists established the first of 27 schools for the education of freed people;
- 1877 – American Baptists focused on women with the establishment of Women’s societies in Chicago and Boston;
- 1880 – American Baptists started Bacone College for Native American education and theological training;
- 1942 – American Baptists shared ministry among Japanese-Americans in internment camps and spoke out against the United States government policy;
- 1963 – American Baptist supported Martin Luther King Jr., and the march in Washington D.C. and formed an “Associated Relationship” with the Progressive National Baptist Convention to engage jointly in areas of mutual concerns;³
- 1998 – American Baptists celebrated 50 years of refugee resettlement, with more than 92,600 families resettled by American Baptist congregations through Church World Service;
- 2000 – American Baptist International Ministries launched its “Go Global” campaign to deepen its ministry with and to children, youth and women. This focused ministry among the poor and marginalized, led to serving people in prostitution and addressing the global problem of the trafficking of women and children;
- 2006 – American Baptist National Ministries (Home Missions) launched the “Children in Poverty Campaign.”

Our focus on holistic evangelism over the last one hundred fifty years has impacted our communion/denomination in such a way that we have become a house of prayer for all nations. We have gone from being a majority “Anglo” church family to a multicultural family without any ethnic majority. We have congregations that are Euro-American, African-American, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and many immigrant congregations that speak over 25 different languages. Many of our congregations are multi-cultural and multilingual be they rural, city or suburban churches. Jesus sent, we went, and God gave the increase!

American Baptists emphasis on relational evangelism – to bring people to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that leads to a radical reordering of lives, has led to the formation of radical disciples. Radical discipleship has been the mark of many of our leaders, both clergy and lay, in the mission field abroad and at home, in far flung corners of the world and in the street corners of the inner-city. American Baptists are radical disciples who seek to faithfully live out the Great Commission and the Great Criteria and in so doing make Jesus’ proclamation in Luke 4:18 our proclamation.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., belonged to the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. (PNBC). Under the chairmanship of Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor, then President of PNBC, representatives of ABCUSA and PNBC met in 1968 to explore ways by which the two bodies might work cooperatively together in areas of mutual concern. This “associated relationship” was ratified in May, 1970 by ABCUSA and in September 1970 by PNBC during their respective convention meetings that year.