

# Cross-shaped Mission

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Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who died in 1998, was widely known and loved as a missionary leader and statesman. In recent years his writings have become somewhat germinal to a fresh flush of contextualised missionary thinking around the world. In foreseeing some of the challenges ahead for the church, Newbigin put his finger on two imperatives I believe we should reaffirm as Tasmanian Baptists today.

## 1. The cross of Jesus Christ is central to Christian proclamation.

I had a memorable personal reminder of this on a visit to Parliament House, Canberra, a few years ago. I was part of a small group of state Baptist leaders meeting federal politicians.

Former deputy prime-minister John Anderson left a lasting impression as a committed Christian in politics. He shared something of his faith journey with us, including significant personal challenges in which he had experienced the grace of God. Then, looking us in the eye, he said “Gentlemen, whatever you do, preach the cross”.

This focus is also typical of the Apostle Paul.

*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Gal. 6:14)*

*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. (Col. 1:20)*

*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ....I resolved to know nothing while I was with you, except Christ and him crucified. (1 Cor. 1:18 & 2:2)*

The Cross stands at the centre of the gospel story. It represents that moment in history when, in Jesus, God intervened decisively to save a wayward world. Because God’s compassion extends to the whole of creation, no part of human existence is beyond the scope of His salvation.

Yet Christian history is filled with examples of ways the gospel of the cross has been denied or diluted to fit what Newbigin terms “the prevailing plausibility structure”. Some deny the historicity of the cross and resurrection. For others, the message of the cross is spiritualized and no longer earthy. The Ku Klux Klan perverts it into a symbol of racist violence. The cross can be trivialised as a jewellery trinket. Too seldom is it given its biblical focus as pivotal to God’s global saving purposes.

If the church is to have a valid witness today, we will have to reclaim ‘the total fact of Christ’, as Newbigin put it, not a truncated version cut to fit today’s mindset or sanitised to suit modern sensibilities. We preach Christ crucified, raised and returning, or we’re not preaching a biblical gospel at all! Our whole life and mission needs to be shaped by this pivotal biblical narrative.

## 2. The Church must reclaim its missionary purpose in Western culture.

In theory we believe the church was instituted by Christ to be a sign of God’s reign and the means of witnessing to that reign throughout the world. One Biblical scholar says that the church exists

by mission as a fire exists by burning. Any church that refuses to accept its primary missionary purpose is deformed and redundant.

Yet, Bishop Newbigin pointed to the faulty and fatal separation between church and mission that had marked contemporary Christian thinking for too long. He lamented the way mission was so often treated as secondary, sometimes projected “over there” to some distant location, or even largely forgotten as increasingly comfortable western churches built up their own bigger, better, brighter programmes and focussed predominantly on their own needs.

Now it's high time to reclaim the church for its primary missionary purpose, especially within our contemporary Western culture. In recent years, through regional gatherings, workshops and assembly decisions we have sought to highlight the missionary task before us as Tasmanian Baptists, “partners in Christian mission”. But how deeply have we owned this? And to what extent are we allowing this gospel imperative seriously to reshape the way we operate?

We have to learn to view our current culture from a missionary perspective: its controlling myths and plausibility structure, its patterns, values and language. Then, in precisely the style of those missionaries we send to other cultures, we must find the most effective ways of living the good news of Jesus within our society. This is our divine calling and commission.

We need to repent of failure in this regard. We need to pray for fresh vision and empowerment by the Spirit for the essential missionary task. We need to cry out for a touch of God's compassion and passion for our lost and needy world.

At whatever cost, and with whatever change is necessary, as a family of churches we must help each other learn to become a vibrant missionary movement. If we can begin to grasp this challenge, I believe that within his kingdom purposes, God will give us a future.

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