

A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story

STR Interviews Dr. Michael Goheen

Introduction

STR had the privilege of talking with Dr. Michael Goheen on the publication of his monograph on the missional church and the biblical story. He is the Geneva Professor of Worldview and Religious Studies at Trinity Western University (USA), Teaching Fellow in Mission and World Christianity at Regent College (Canada), Fellow in Mission and Worldview Studies at The Paideia Centre for Public Theology (Canada). Despite these significant academic achievements, Mike cannot be accused of living in an ivory tower apart from the gritty realities of the church on the ground! He has served in ministry throughout his life and presently is a minister of preaching at New Westminster Christian Reformed Church in Burnaby, British Columbia.

Mike's work is characterized by a distinctive integration of *topoi*: biblical studies, worldview, mission and theology. His previous publications deal with precisely these topics from particular angles. In his co-authored volume (with Dr. Craig Bartholomew) *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Your Place in the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, 2005), Mike traced the contours of the biblical story articulating the central themes of the kingdom of God and covenant. The goal of the redemptive-history presented in the Bible is the actual coming of the kingdom of God which is consummated in new creation. The insights from *Drama* are brought to bear on the topic of worldview in his co-authored volume (again with Dr. Craig Bartholomew) *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Baker Academic, 2008). In this volume he articulates a biblical worldview that is grounded in the biblical story and one that confronts the counterfeit worldviews of the day. Expanding from this same worldview emphasis, Goheen co-edited a volume with Erin Glanville entitled *The Gospel and Globalization: Exploring the Religious Roots of a Globalized World* (Regent College, 2009). The volume articulates how Christians within the context of a Christian worldview might provide a faithful and constructive response to the powerful cultural force of globalization.

Each of the previous volumes helps to set the context for *A Light to the Nations*. All have in common a deep rootage in the biblical story. Each volume observes and evaluates reality through this biblical witness. Each volume professes that God's ways with creation find their climax in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The church is then related to God and world in Christ, and they find their purpose and direction in and through God's previous activity of redemption. Because they are rooted in this drama of the Bible, the topics of worldview and mission become points of emphasis in the integrated arguments of Goheen's volumes. Further, the Bible, worldview, and mission become avenues that articulate the substance of theology—God, world, and the structure and direction of reality. The reader will note that a number of these themes will emerge in the interview below.

Interview with Michael Goheen

STR: *Why did you write this book?*

Goheen: I have had an interest in missional ecclesiology for some time. I grew up in the Baptist church where evangelism was extremely important. As I was shaped more by the reformational tradition [i.e., Calvinistic Reformed tradition stemming through Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Albert Wolters and Gordon Spykman] I began to see the breadth of the gospel and recognized that mission was broader but still inclusive of evangelism.

I became a church planter and pastor in my early years and struggled with my ecclesiology and its relation to mission and evangelism. The two traditions at work in my denomination at the time were a confessionalist tradition that held rigidly to the Westminster Confession of Faith and a church growth tradition shaped by social science. The first was biblical, rooted in rigorous theology, but culturally irrelevant. The second was quite relevant but quite shallow scripturally and theologically.

I found a way beyond these two that was both faithful to the gospel and culturally relevant in the work of Lesslie Newbigin. I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. I originally contracted with Baker to give an overview of missional ecclesiology that would deal with biblical, historical, and theological foundations, the internal life of the church, the church's mission in the world, and its relation to culture. However, some pastor friends who were reading and helping me with the book challenged me to do a whole book on biblical and exegetical work for missional church because there was so little of it in the missional church movement. I took their advice.

I wanted to challenge the church in at least two ways. First, we need to develop a missional self-identity in the West. That is our role in the biblical story. We exist for the sake of the world to witness to the coming kingdom in life, word, and deed. Second, we need to develop a missional encounter with culture. We have been domesticated and compromised by the idols of Western culture because of the myths of a Christian culture and of a neutral secular or pluralistic culture. I was hoping to provide some biblical insight to bolster these two needs.

STR: *In your book, you spend a great deal of time on the Old Testament. In fact, you devote two major chapters to this portion of Scripture. Why is the Old Testament important in generating a missional ecclesiology?*

Goheen: If we start our ecclesiology in the gospels or epistles we have missed the greater part of the biblical story. Perhaps a few observations can clarify why this is so problematic. Central to Jesus' mission was to be the eschatological shepherd who would gather the lost sheep of Israel. His mission was to gather and renew God's people to fulfill the calling they had abandoned. Who were those people? What was their mission? That can only be answered by going to the Old Testament. Another observation is that the majority of images used of the church in the New Testament come from the Old Testament people of God. To understand those images one must do the exegetical work in the Old Testament. So, in a nutshell, the New Testament people of God pick up the calling of Israel in a new redemptive era.

STR: *In Chapter 5 ("The Death and Resurrection of Jesus and the Church's Missional Identity"), you draw together the relationship between cosmic and individual facets of the gospel and Christ's death/resurrection. Why is this important for the church?*

Goheen: The Bible tells the story of universal history. It begins with creation and ends with new creation. Jesus is creator, lord of history, savior, and judge. Too often we reduce the gospel to Jesus as savior or worse Jesus as our individual savior or even worse Jesus as savior of our souls. We individualize the gospel and use the Bible as a personal theology or ethical book. But it is not that kind of book. It tells the true story of the whole world. It is in this story that we must find our place. So I believe that the most faithful way of dealing with Scripture is cosmic, communal, and individual. By that I mean the biblical story tells a story of cosmic renewal. Within that story there is a community that participates in that renewal. Each individual as part of that community must appropriate the gospel for themselves. I believe G. C. Berkouwer is right when he says that Western (especially North American) Christians don't deny the cosmic and communal but simply neglect it. He calls this "soteriological self-centeredness." We put the individual in the center and everything else revolves around him or her. We need a Copernican revolution where Christ and his cosmic salvation is put back at the center and our lives revolve around and are incorporated into that.

STR: *In the same chapter, you perceptively draw out missional implications that arise from the cross. Your insights here speak against an either/or dichotomization between particular models of the atonement, whether Christus Victor or penal-substitutionary. In your view, why is it important to allow both models to have a full voice for understanding and embodying the Church's mission?*

Goheen: First off, we need all the biblical images to understand what was accomplished at the cross. There are numerous images in Scripture, and to reduce

the breadth of what God accomplished to just one of those—whether it be Christus Victor or penal-substitutionary—is to look at a diamond through only one of its facets. But also a focus on the penal-substitutionary atonement (which I want to insist is biblical!) exclusively misses the fact that the cross also is a power to transform our lives. We too easily focus on the cross as that place where we find forgiveness and are justified. That is true but it is also the power of God unto salvation. The cross dealt with both the guilt and power of sin. Other images open this up more fully. Also the exclusive use of one image can again individualize the atonement. Substitutionary atonement can be reduced to Jesus dying for my sin—and miss the sin of the world! Archetypal images are not so easily individualized. Jesus' death is the end of the old age and his resurrection the inauguration of the new. This brings a cosmic and communal dimension to the cross. So in summary many images will keep us from individualizing the atonement and from reducing what it accomplished.

STR: *How would you define “the gospel?” If we take, say, 1 Cor 15:3–5 as our departure point as a “bullet-point summary” of the gospel, how does that verse draw us back into the biblical story as you have drawn it out in your book?*

Goheen: The gospel needs to be defined narratively I believe. A quick perusal of the gospel shows us that in 1 Corinthians 15 it focuses on his death and resurrection. In Mark 1 it is on the kingdom. In Galatians 3 it is pointing back to Genesis 12. So the good news is that God is restoring the creation and human life to its original *shalom*. This is promised and developed in the Old Testament. Its arrival is announced by Jesus at the outset of his ministry. It is accomplished in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Further there are many benefits that come from Christ's work that are good news—forgiveness, justification, adoption, sanctification, hope, love, peace with God, and so on. So I don't think we should try to capture the good news in a formula or a few bullet points. Rather the unfolding of the story of the Bible helps us see the breadth of this good news as well as its concentration in the work of Jesus.

STR: *Why do you speak of the church as being missional in word and in deed? Is not evangelism primarily a verbal proclamation of “good news of Jesus” as described in the New Testament? Is evangelism as “verbal proclamation” not enough?*

Goheen: Once I was speaking to an assembly of high school students. I announced that I was the greatest trumpet player in the world. I then took a trumpet and blew two or three of the worst sounding notes you have ever heard. I then pointed out that words are empty if not validated by our lives. Evangelism is the announcement of the good news that in Christ salvation has come into the world. But people have the right to say “where?” If we cannot point to a living community and lives that show that God's power has indeed invaded history, then our words are empty. Our words interpret our deeds and lives, and our lives and deeds authenticate our words. Surely one sees this in the ministry of Jesus where his life, words and deeds revealed the kingdom. Nietzsche

once said: “They would have to sing better songs for me to learn to have faith in their Redeemer: and his disciples would have to look more redeemed!” That doesn’t mean that our words will completely lack power if our lives and deeds betray the gospel. The gospel does have its own power. But it will mean that it will weaken our witness and we will be judged for that. A quick look at Acts 4.32–34 is helpful. In v. 33 we see that the apostles powerfully testified to the resurrection of Jesus. That verse is sandwiched between a statement that tells us that the church embodied that gospel—was one in heart and mind, generous with their possessions, pursued mercy and justice. The verbal witness was powerful because of the demonstration of the power of the resurrection in the community.

STR: *In Chapter 6 (“The Missional Church in the New Testament Story”), you give a broad definition of “witness” drawn from Acts 1:7–8. Your definition includes testifying to Christ with the whole of life. Why do you do this? Is it in any way wrong to speak of “witnessing” as a verbal presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ?*

Goheen: With Darrell Guder I like to say we *live* the witness, *say* the witness, and *do* the witness. That is, we announced that God’s comprehensive salvation has come in Jesus Christ. Our lives embody that salvation and testify to its power. Our deeds are signs that also point to the coming of salvation. All three must be working together for a powerful witness to the good news.

STR: *Sometimes the gospel has been watered down to an empty social “gospel” that evacuates the message of the death and resurrection of Christ to simply “good works.” Can you speak to this in the 20th century? Do you see that this a temptation of the church today?*

Goheen: Unfortunately in the early 20th century a split between word and deed resulted from a reaction among revivalists and fundamentalists (as they called themselves later) to the social “gospel.” The social “gospel” movement was rightly concerned for politics, society, culture, and so forth. However, it was captured by the naturalism of the Enlightenment worldview and was heretical. It lost the heart of the gospel. That is why I have put gospel in quotes. Sadly this played itself out in our historical development. In our reaction to this we stressed the importance of verbally proclaiming the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is understandable but unfortunate. I believe for a number of reasons that today we are moving beyond this dichotomy. Part of it is the rich work done by many on the ministry of Jesus. Also the third world church has challenged us to rethink our views of mission. Yet old traditions die hard, and I suspect we will continue to struggle with this unbiblical dichotomy for a while yet.

STR: *As we see it, one of the important facets of your work is a strong emphasis upon linking mission and salvation history. Why is this the case?*

Goheen: The church’s mission must begin with God’s mission. A good way of defining mission is that our mission is faithful only as we participate in God’s

mission. God's mission is to restore the creation and the life of humanity from sin. The Bible tells that historical narrative. God sets out on the long road of redemption to restore the world and his people as his kingdom. Central to God's mission is to choose a people that will bear the promise of his renewal in their lives. The fundamental identity of the church and the nature of its mission must be found in terms of this role given to it in the mission of God. So mission and ecclesiology can only be understood narratively, as we trace our role in the story.

STR: *Mike, clearly you have a pastor's heart and have served as pastor as well as a professor. If you are teaching mission in the local church, then how do you do it? And where do you begin?*

Goheen: I begin with the role and identity of God's people in the biblical story. Often we start with a certain definition of mission and then go to the Scripture to find proof-texts that fit that view of mission. We need to treat the whole of Scripture and the whole literary structures of various books and not just proof-texts like the Great Commission. For example, when we put Matthew 28.16–20 in the context of the whole biblical story and as the climactic statement of the book of Mathew there is so much more there than we have seen in the past. So I begin with the biblical story. But within that telling of the story, at least for a congregation, I would constantly draw out the numerous implications of the text for our mission today. This is tricky. Those interested in mission are often impatient and want to see the implications of the Bible for mission today quickly while biblical scholars are often so immersed in the original context and so aware of the hermeneutical difficulties of bridging the horizons that they never speak to the present. It is a sad state. So we need to be very careful as we struggle to merge the horizon of Scripture with our own, but it must be done. The Bible provides the light for our mission. So for a congregation I would reflect at various points on the significance of what is happening in the biblical story for our mission today.

STR: *In your book, you draw a distinction between "mission" and "missions." What is that distinction and why is it important?*

Goheen: The distinction between "mission" and "missions" is one I take from Lesslie Newbigin. "Mission" is the calling of God's people in the world to witness to the salvation accomplished in Christ in the whole of their lives. It involves every part of their life and is in life, word, and deed. However, "missions" (with an "s") is the task of establishing a witness to the gospel in places where there is none or where it is very weak. It will usually be cross-cultural. The problem is that our older colonial views of mission have caused us to see everything that is overseas as mission. The problem with this is (as an *Urbana* video has pointed out) that we are spending well over 90% of our cross-cultural resources in places where the church is strong. That means a small amount is devoted to taking the gospel to places where it has never been

heard. Bryant Myer calls this “the scandal of a disproportionate allocation of mission resources.” Newbigin saw this already in the 1960s and, when he was editor of the *International Review of Missions*, refused to remove the “s” from missions even under great pressure to do so. He wanted to protect the specific task of taking the good news to people and places where there was no witness.

In the 19th century “missions” would have been from the West to the non-West because the church was strong in the West and almost non-existent in the non-West. However, that is not the case today. “Missions” cannot be defined geographically like this. So in the 19th century mission was reduced to “missions.” Sadly today much missional church literature in reaction has forgotten “missions.” “Missions” is both a necessary task of the missional church and the ultimate horizon of the church’s mission. So its eclipse is serious.

STR: *Mike, thanks for giving of your time to talk with us about your very important work. We pray that it would continue to serve to lift high the Name of Jesus.*

A Review Essay of Michael Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*

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Introduction

Historically, evangelical ecclesiologies have focused on the church's organization, ordinances, and ministries. These realities, however, cannot properly be understood except in tandem with a serious exploration of the church's core identity and self-understanding. *A Light to the Nations* provides just such an exposition of the church's identity, arguing that the church is missional to its very core. The author, Michael W. Goheen, writes primarily for theological students and pastors, but succeeds in producing a book also accessible to thoughtful laypeople. This essay will argue that the book is a significant contribution in the disciplines of ecclesiology and theology of mission and, in spite of several minor points of critique, is strongly recommended. In addition to *A Light to the Nations*, he is the author or editor of five books which span the disciplines of theology, missiology, worldview, and intellectual history.¹

Summary

A Light to the Nations is structured by the progressive unfolding of the biblical storyline. Goheen makes his argument in seven movements, which correspond to the first seven chapters of the book. In the first chapter, the author provides a summary statement of the significance of ecclesiology in relation to the concept

1. Michael W. Goheen, *As the Father Has Sent Me, I am Sending You*: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's *Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum Publishing House, 2000); Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); Margaret O'Gara and Michael W. Goheen, eds., *That the World May Believe: Essays on Mission and Unity in Honour of George Vandervelde* (Lanham, MA: University Press of America, 2006); Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Erin Glanville and Michael W. Goheen, eds., *The Gospel and Globalization: Exploring the Religious Roots of a Globalized World* (Berkeley, CA: Regent, 2009).

of mission. At the beginning of the biblical narrative, God responds to human sin by promising to redeem his image-bearers and restore his good creation. In keeping his promise, he chose a community who would proclaim and embody his redemption and restoration in the midst of human history. This community is a glimpse of what God had originally intended in creation and a foretaste of what he would provide in the future. God chose Israel to be that community, and continually renewed them as they failed in their task. Through the prophets, he promised Israel that one day he would give them a new heart, forgive their sin, and shape them into a new community. In accord with this promise, God claimed a decisive victory over Satan and sin through the crucifixion and resurrection and sent his newly gathered “Israel” to the ends of the earth as a tangible sign of his inbreaking kingdom. In other words, God’s church is missional at its very core.

For many Christians, “mission” refers primarily to the church’s geographic expansion and human activities to forward that expansion. Goheen, however, argues that mission is more comprehensive than geographic expansion and is located primarily in God’s actions and only secondarily in human activities. The mission of God is to redeem his image-bearers and restore his good creation. The mission of God’s people is two-fold: toward God, we live for his glory, and toward the nations, we mediate his blessings. International “missions” is a subset of God’s mission and the church’s mission, whereby God’s church proclaims and embodies his gospel among the nations, and usually does so by crossing geographical and cultural boundaries.

In the second chapter, the author writes about God’s formation of Israel as a missional people. Before one can understand the New Testament church, one must understand the Old Testament people of God. In Old Testament terms, mission did not consist of intentional activities to proclaim God’s Word across geographical boundaries. Instead, it consisted of Israel’s calling to confront the idolatry of the nations by embodying God’s design for human life and universal history, so that the nations might come to know and love the true and living God. Goheen focuses on Genesis 12:1–3 and Exodus 19:3–6 to make his case. From the first passage, the author points out that God elected Abraham for the sake of mission, to make Abraham a great nation through whom God would bless all nations. From the second passage, Goheen argues that God gave the law as a way of encapsulating his intention for Israel to live their lives comprehensively under God’s authority, embodying his original creational intentions, providing a foretaste of his future restoration, and setting forth a contrast with the nations’ idolatry.

In the third chapter, the author shows how Israel’s missional calling remained during her time as a loose confederation of tribes, as a kingdom, and as an exiled and scattered people. During these successive eras, Israel repeatedly failed in her calling, and the prophets continually pointed to a time when Israel would be gathered with the nations, serving God. The fourth chapter points to the in-breaking of that very kingdom through the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus announced that the kingdom had already arrived and described the kingdom as his powerful presence and his eschatological salvation. Through his miracles, Jesus provided signs of the

kingdom, reversing the horrific consequences of evil. In his teaching, Jesus called Israel to repentance so that they might be a light to the nations as God originally intended. In his instructions to his disciples, he challenged them to participate consciously and consistently in the inbreaking of his kingdom.

The fifth chapter centers on Jesus' death and resurrection. Goheen rightly observes that evangelicals have often left the resurrection's significance unexplored, treating it merely as an apologetic device. Instead, Goheen urges us to understand the cosmic and communal significance of the cross and resurrection. The resurrection is the beginning of the age to come whereby God restores Israel, gathers in the Gentiles, and promises the restoration of the entire created order. The resurrection signals that God is sending eschatological Israel, the church, to accomplish his mission as they are empowered by his Spirit. The sixth chapter focuses on the early church's mission. Just as Israel was called to live as a contrast community among the nations, so the early church is called to be a contrast community among the nations even to the ends of the earth. Unlike Israel, however, Christ commanded the early church to take the gospel not only to Jerusalem, but also to the ends of the earth.² Furthermore, the early church is empowered by the Holy Spirit as a post-resurrection witness to Jesus Christ.

The seventh chapter sets forth several New Testament images of the church—people of God, new creation, body of Christ, temple of the Spirit, and diaspora. Goheen argues that these images are missional, stimulating and motivating us to missionality in a way that mere prose and rational argumentation cannot. The eighth chapter summarizes the main threads of Goheen's argument thus far in the book, challenging the reader to participate in God's mission by continuing the mission given to Israel, Jesus, and the early church. The ninth chapter closes out the book by giving a picture of what a missional church might look like today, suggesting that such a church whose worship nurtures missional identity, is empowered by gospel preaching, and is devoted to communal prayer. Further, it strives to live as a contrast community, understands its cultural context, seeks a missionary encounter in its callings in the world, practices organic evangelism, and is deeply involved in the needs of its neighborhood and world. Finally, it is involved in cross-cultural missions, equipped with well-trained leaders, parents, and small groups, and committed to expressing the unity of the body of Christ.

Critical Interaction

A Light to the Nations is a significant contribution to the disciplines of missiology and ecclesiology. *First and foremost, Goheen provides an exposition of the church's mission and the missional church in light of the entire biblical testimony.* Goheen structures the book and unfolds his argument by tracing the biblical storyline from

2. As Goheen points out, "Jerusalem" should not be Westernized or individualized; Jerusalem is charged with theological and eschatological significance, signifying God's promise to restore Israel first and only then to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

creation and the fall to redemption and new creation. The narrative as a whole, rather than some particular verse or passage within the narrative, drives his understanding of the missional church.³ Instead of cherry picking the Great Commission passages as his only biblical building blocks (and focusing exclusively on international missions), he focuses on the whole sweep of the narrative in order to make sense of God's mission, Israel's mission, the church's mission, and international or cross-cultural missions. On the whole, he renders these concepts in a biblically faithful and meaningful manner.

For Goheen, mission is four-fold. *God's mission* is to redeem his image-bearers and to restore his good creation from the ravages of sin (19, 191). In the Genesis account, we learn that God created man and woman in his image and likeness and placed them in the Garden in a state of shalom (universal flourishing). Man and woman sinned against God, however, breaking with his creational design and disrupting his intended shalom. In the aftermath of their sin, God ultimately responded by choosing Israel. *Israel's mission* was to be a contrast community, bearing witness to the true and living God in contradistinction to pagan idolatry (25). Israel continually forsook her calling to be a light to the nations, choosing instead to look for her own salvation and for the condemnation of the nations. Upon this backdrop, Jesus announced that the kingdom had arrived and called Israel once again to be a contrast community. During this time, God was breaking off some branches (those Jews who did not believe) and grafting in some branches (Gentiles who do believe). Thus grafted, *the church's mission* is to be a contrast community, bringing glory to God and drawing the nations to him in worship as they proclaim the gospel in word and deed (122, 191). In so doing, the church will be led to participate in *cross-cultural* or *international missions*, as it takes the gospel to those who have never heard (148–51). Through these four interrelated concepts, Goheen is able to hold together the broad range of biblical testimony concerning the missional nature of God's church.

Second, Goheen provides a persuasive biblical theological argument that the church's mission is comprehensive—it is sent into the world to glorify God and bear witness to the nations, and to do so in every dimension of human life and culture. This comprehensive view of the church's mission is anchored in creational realities, illustrated by Old Testament law, and brought to fruition in a new heavens and earth replete with creational and cultural realities. God's creational design was for man and woman to live a life characterized by *shalom*, practicing loving dominion in the context of their flourishing relationships with God, each other, and the

3. Late 20th century missiology often has been crafted with little or no attention to biblical theology. Manifold missiological texts rely primarily or exclusively on pragmatic considerations, sociology, anthropology, business marketing, and other disciplines. Goheen's is one of an increasing number of proposals that seeks to position mission in light of the overarching biblical narrative. See Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006); and Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

created order. God's designs for man's well-being were comprehensive in nature; they covered all of created reality. After the fall, however, shalom was broken and God's creational intentions were distorted in an equally comprehensive manner. Although God's creation was still structurally good, humanity's sin directed it toward idolatrous ends.⁴

God called Israel to be a distinctive people who lived a compelling lifestyle in front of the nations, bearing witness to God's glory and embodying his original intentions for human life. Toward that end, he gave Israel the law which showed them how to live their lives comprehensively under his glory, including such diverse areas as family relationships, religious worship, economic dealings, non-human creation care, and commercial ethics (39). In other words, no single aspect of life was exempt from being brought under YHWH's lordship: "This is why the law's instructions to Israel cover the whole scope of human life. The people of Israel now serve a new covenant Lord, the God of creation. They owe him their undivided loyalty and must consecrate their social, economic, familial, and political structures—indeed, the whole of their personal, social, and cultural lives—to him" (40). Likewise, today's missional church must make comprehensive assessments of its social and cultural context, discerning the underlying idolatrous beliefs and speaking the gospel prophetically at those points of idolatry (211–23). Further, God calls his people to proclaim and embody the gospel in their workplaces and communities (213–15). In so doing, we are a foretaste of the new heavens and earth, where Christ will be Lord indeed of all dimensions of redeemed society and culture. Our comprehensive missional calling, therefore, is rooted in the Bible's creational, redemptive, and eschatological teachings.

Goheen's argument for the comprehensive nature of the church's mission provides a necessary corrective to an unbiblical theological paradigm that has flourished among evangelicals and has undergirded various misguided missiologies. This paradigm views the fall as having corrupted God's good creation in its very being. Material (and therefore cultural) realities are inherently bad, while immaterial "spiritual" realities alone are good. As a result, the church views its calling as limited primarily or exclusively to matters of spiritual formation (e.g., devotions, church attendance, interpersonal witnessing encounters) rather than being extended to the public and material aspects of life. But this conception mis-draws the line. There should be no line drawn between "good" and "bad" elements of God's creation, because all of God's creation is good. Rather, the line is drawn between our proper and improper direction within God's good creation. As Wolters points out, God's creation remains *structurally* good, although since the fall it is *directionally* corrupt. Structure refers to the order of creation, while direction refers to the order of sin and redemption: "Anything in creation can be directed

4. Goheen provides a more extensive treatment of God's creational design and sin's misdirection of it in *Living at the Crossroads*, 31–50. For further reading that is confluent with Goheen's interpretation, see Albert M. Wolters' classic treatment of the subject in *Creation Regained* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

either toward or away from God," he writes. "This double direction applies not only to individual human beings but also to such cultural phenomena as technology, art, and scholarship, to such societal institutions as labor unions, schools, and corporations, and to such human functions as emotionality, sexuality, and rationality."⁵ This directional reality distinguishes between the good and the bad, rather than some distinction between material and immaterial aspects of creation. God's creation (structurally) is good but (directionally) is corrupted by our idolatry.

This mis-drawn line between the material and the immaterial leads to an ugly divorce between the private and public aspects of human life, and has done inestimable harm to the church's witness. God never intended any one realm of our lives to be hermetically sealed off from the rest. As Abraham Kuyper wrote in *Pro Rege*, "The Son [of God] is not to be excluded from anything. You cannot point to any natural realm or star or comet or even descend into the depth of the earth, but it is related to Christ, not in some unimportant tangential way, but directly."⁶ The whole of human life and culture is the realm of Christ's lordship. His sovereignty extends not only to the goings-on within the four walls of a congregational gathering but also to the broader affairs of society and culture. His church therefore must live missionally not only as the church gathered, but also as the church scattered. We must take a missional posture as we find ourselves involved in the arts (music, literature, cinema, architecture, etc.), the sciences (biology, physics, sociology, etc.), the public square (journalism, politics, economics, etc.), and the academy (schools, universities, seminaries, etc.). We must recognize God's calling on our lives not only as it relates to our personal spiritual development or our involvement in the gathering of our local church, but also as it relates to our workplaces and communities. The church's missional calling extends to the whole realm of Christ's lordship.⁷

Third, Goheen provides a compelling exposition of the unity and coherence of the mission of God's people by properly relating the Old Testament and New Testament testimonies. He does so, first of all, by showing their unity without blurring their respective uniqueness. On the one hand, the church's mission is fundamentally at one with Israel's mission in that both were sent by God to be contrast communities, bearing witness to the true and living God in contradistinction to pagan idolatry. Concerning Israel's mission he writes, "To be a distinctive people displaying an attractive

5. Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 59.

6. From an excerpt translated by Jan Boer, *You Can Do Greater Things than Christ* (Nigeria: Jos, 1991).

7. Elsewhere, Goheen and Craig Bartholomew provide a brief treatment of public life in light of the church's mission. Goheen and Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, 146–73. For further reading in the same vein of thought, see Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) and Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). Mouw's book is a general treatment of culture and common grace which urges the church to seek the common good, while Plantinga's book is a more specific appeal to Christian college students, encouraging them to live out their calling in their college studies and their future occupations.

lifestyle to God's glory before the surrounding nations, Israel was obliged to face in three directions at once: to look *backward to creation*, embodying God's original design and intention for human life; *forward to the consummation*, bearing in its life God's promise of the goal of universal history, a restored humanity on a new earth; and *outward to the nations*, confronting the idolatry of the nations for whose sake it had been chosen. All of this was for the sake of the world, that the nations might come to praise and know the true and living God" (25). Likewise, concerning the church he writes, "Only when the church is a faithful embodiment of the kingdom as part of the surrounding culture yet over against its idolatry will its life and words bear compelling and appealing testimony to the good news that in Jesus Christ a new world has come and is coming" (5). Therefore, both Israel and the church were to be witnesses to God's reign by looking backward to God's creational design, forward to his promised new creation, and outward to the nations.

On the other hand, the church's mission differs from Israel's in that the church is a post-resurrection community, indwelt by the Spirit, and sent to live in the midst of the cultures of the world. Significantly, Goheen demonstrates that the church's mission is centrifugal while Israel's was centripetal, without either minimizing or inflating Israel's relation to the nations. By demonstrating the comprehensive nature of Israel's mission and by arguing her comprehensive calling is for the sake of the nations, Goheen avoids minimizing it.⁸ By avoiding the temptation to present Israel's missional calling as a centripetal one, he avoids inflating it beyond the biblical witness.⁹ Israel clearly was called to bear witness to the nations, but her calling was not located in some purported command to take God's word across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Fourth, Goheen provides a helpful treatment of faithful witness in cultural context. As this essay mentioned above, Goheen argues that the Torah was given to Israel to guide them in living their corporate life comprehensively under YHWH's authority. They were to embody God's intentions for his good creation, to be a foretaste of his future restoration, and to be a contrast community whose corporate life stood out in compelling contrast to other nations' pagan idolatry. As such, "the Torah given to Israel is, on the one hand, *universal*, in that it manifests God's creational design and intent for all human life. But on the other hand it is also *particular*, in that it is an example of a specific social and cultural contextualization of that order at a certain time in a certain place and culture" (40). The Torah itself is a contextualization of God's universal intentions for mankind. Further, Israel's missional calling remained during successive eras in her history (51–66). As a tribal

8. Even J. H. Bavinck's exemplary introduction to missions minimizes Old Testament Israel's calling to be a light to the nations. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 11–24.

9. Walter Kaiser's work on mission in the Old Testament has benefited both Old Testament studies and missiology. See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). However, when he argues that Old Testament Israel's mission was centrifugal, he goes beyond the biblical witness. Christopher Wright critiques Kaiser on this point in *The Mission of God*, 502–4.

confederation, Israel was called to be a holy people in the center of the nations. As a monarchy, she was called to be a priestly kingdom in the midst of the nations. As a diaspora, she was called to be a holy people scattered among the nations.¹⁰ As Goheen points out, Israel was constantly tempted either to assimilate with pagan culture or to withdraw from it (60–66). But Israel's calling was to create a third path between assimilation and withdrawal—a path of faithful contextualization. This same calling to faithful contextualization was also given to the church who now must bear witness among the many nations and cultures of the world (153), performing the hard work of cultural exegesis so that it may appropriately live out its calling as a contrast community (208–13).

This process of contextualization, as the Goheen describes it throughout the book, is best described as *dialogical* contextualization (although he does not use this term). In a process of dialogical contextualization, believers continually bring their questions and categories into conversation with Christian Scripture.¹¹ Although Christian Scripture speaks in some manner to any question raised in a particular cultural context, and although Scripture also can be preached to people whose basic ideological categories have been bequeathed to them in a pagan cultural context, the Scriptures always challenge the received questions and categories. In other words, culture is warped because it is underlain by idolatry. Therefore, Scripture speaks to a society and its culture but also changes the terms of the encounter by providing that culture with a newer and better set of questions, and a newer and better set of categories.

This is Goheen's point when he continually speaks of the church as a contrast community who questions the received categories and ultimate questions of any particular cultural context. Although he makes the point in a general manner throughout the book, he sharpens the point when he applies it specifically to the West. In the final chapter of the book, Goheen notes ways in which God's Word calls the Western church to go against the flow of Western culture. He argues that the church should be a community of justice in a world of injustice, generosity in the midst of consumerism, selfless giving in a world of entitlement, humble/bold witness in a world of relativism, hope in a world of disillusionment, joy in a world of hedonism, and spiritual vitality in a world of secularism. The author's perspective is a necessary corrective to Christian churches and missionaries who think of contextualization in ways that are markedly assimilationist or separatist, or who think

10. Goheen's exposition of how Israel's missional calling remained throughout successive changes in their social, cultural, and political contexts is suggestive for how the Western church must reposition and renew her missional calling in light of her increasingly post-Christian context.

11. David Clark, Robert Schreiter, and William Dyrness have suggested a dialogical pattern, or contextual spiral, in which there is an ongoing interaction between the biblical text and contemporary culture. See David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 99–132; William A. Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 28–34; and Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 6–12.

of contextualization as something exclusive to international missions. Contextualization is part and parcel of gospel witness. God's people cannot *not* contextualize; they are always contextualizing, but are doing so either faithfully or unfaithfully.

These four points by no means exhaust the positive features and contributions of *A Light to the Nations*. A more comprehensive list would include Goheen's treatment of covenant and kingdom, the church's suffering in relation to its spiritual power, the importance of prayer, and the missional significance of parenting. The strengths of this book far outweigh the weaknesses, both in gravitas and in number. *Yet, one aspect of Goheen's argument that could be strengthened is the "end of the story."* He does a fine job, throughout most of the book, of emphasizing the ways in which eschatology bears directly upon mission. For example, the second and third chapters note God's eschatological promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3, the eschatological implications of the law in Exodus 19:3–6, and Israel's intertestamental hope that God would again act in power by his Messiah and his Spirit in order to rebuild the temple, cleanse the land, and rule his universal kingdom. Further, the fourth through seventh chapters speak to the inbreaking kingdom of God in its communal and cosmic significance, the early church's call to point forward to the consummation of history, and the ways in which both Jesus' and Paul's understanding of the gospel is eschatological.

However, one missing element in the author's otherwise robustly eschatological approach is the final biblical picture of the missional church in her international splendor, worshipping before a risen Lord. This picture, particularly as given in the fifth and seventh chapters of Revelation, would provide an elegant finishing touch for many of the themes woven throughout *A Light to the Nations*. In Revelation 5, we see that God's people are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (5:9b) from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (5:9c), are worshipping Christ as universal Lord (5:8–14), and have participated in this victory by means of their prayers (5:8).¹² Furthermore, another missing element is a sufficient picture of the missional church in her final environment, the new heavens and earth.¹³ Again, as portrayed in Revelation 21 and 22, this picture ties together the deftly woven creational and cultural strands of Goheen's biblical theology. In these chapters, we see that God will indeed restore his good creation, upon which his missional church will dwell in his glory without pain or tears. Taken together, these two glimpses of the final state would make for a strong concluding chapter to the biblical theological portion of the book, or at least a concluding section of a chapter. The author has written elsewhere on these themes;¹⁴ one hopes that he will include such a section in the second edition of the book.

12. Considering its role in the culmination of God's work among the nations, the fifth chapter of Revelation is surprisingly omitted or underrepresented in theologies of mission. An exemplary but brief treatment can be found in Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission, Volume Two: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 1517–21.

13. One of the few treatments of this passage in relation to missional theology is Howard Pekkett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 261–76.

14. See Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*, 207–13.

*Another aspect of Goheen's argument that could be strengthened is his treatment of a cluster of themes—human sin and guilt, God's wrath and condemnation, the proclamation of Christ's atonement for the forgiveness of sin, and the eternal state of those who are finally unrepentant. Although Goheen does mention sin's guilty stain (104), God's wrath in response to sin (107), humanity's need for forgiveness (87, 92), the atonement's provision for our guilt (102–5), the need for evangelists to cross cultural boundaries (131) to proclaim the gospel to those who have never heard and so forth, the overall impression gained is that this strand of the biblical testimony is underrepresented. Goheen is concerned to push back against ecclesiologies that portray the church as merely an aggregate of justified individuals and seeks to portray a fuller biblical picture of a church as a *people* called out by God for kingdom purposes. His concern is properly placed, but in the end one is left wanting more emphasis on verbal proclamation of the gospel (Rom 10:14–17) for the forgiveness of sins, and the sending of missionaries across social, cultural, and geographical boundaries for the sake of guilty sinners. An expansion of this cluster of themes will complement Goheen's own emphasis on the church's communal witness—it is a community of forgiven people whose communal life rightly images God to the world.*

Conclusion

A Light to the Nations is an elegant and powerful missional ecclesiology, which would serve well as reading for several types of audiences. First, it would make an illuminating companion text in a systematic theology course. While many systematic ecclesiology texts focus on the tasks of the church, this book focuses on the missional nature of the church. Second, it would serve well as a text in a course on Christian mission. While many mission texts focus exclusively on international missions, or on pragmatics, or on the social sciences, this text provides a unified and coherent biblical theology to undergird the church on her mission. The most practical thing in the world (for a mission class) is a biblical theology of mission that provides the starting point, the trajectory, and the parameters for the tasks of mission. Third, the book stands on its own feet as a contribution to the field of biblical theology, furthering the author's contributions in previous books such as *The Drama of Scripture*. Finally, the book makes a stimulating discussion piece for pastors, elders, and thoughtful laypeople who are thinking through the church's missional calling. This book is strongly recommended.