

Goheen, Michael. *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011.

Michael Goheen is Professor of Worldview and Religious Studies at Trinity Western University, having earned his PhD from the University of Utrecht, after writing his dissertation on the missiology of Lesslie Newbigin. He and Craig Bartholomew have co-written *The Drama of Scripture* and *Living at the Crossroads*. In *A Light to the Nations*, he unpacks an ecclesiology that is less systematized than typical treatments, seeking instead to situate it within the grand narrative of Scripture. The Church's identity derives from its being a part of God's mission in the world. In short, Goheen presents a missional ecclesiology.

From the start, Goheen uniquely grounds his ecclesiology in the mission of God and the story of God; this helpfully contrasts systematic works that focus on the New Testament and issues of polity and function. Thus, he rightly situates God's people within the world, "Ecclesiology is about understanding our identity, who we are, and why God has chosen us—whose we are. If we do not develop our self-understanding in terms of the role that we have been called to play in the biblical drama, we will find ourselves shaped by the idolatrous story of the dominant culture" (5). Instead of offering a narrow definition of the church more reflective of cultural and traditional preferences, Goheen wisely suggests we follow a "interpretive clue" given in the Bible, namely, the meaning of the church is determined by the Scripture's "images and narrative" (6). Because the church is meant to be a "distinctive kind of people, a countercultural . . . community among the nations," God's people are to face "backward to creation," "forward to the consummation," and "outward to the nations" (25).

One fruit of Goheen's approach is that Israel plays a central role in his missional ecclesiology. A number of major insights emerge. First, he argues that "the central feature of

Jesus's [*sic*] kingdom mission [is] *to gather a people*" (102; emphasis his). Accordingly, the community replaces the individual as primary to God's salvation work. Second, Goheen connects the atonement with the formation of a "transformed community" (103). Third, his analysis reminds the reader the role hermeneutics plays in theology, "Our understanding of the cross is conditioned by the questions we ask"; thus, a number of biblical themes may get overlooked simply because of the limitations of one's interpretive lens (103–4). Fourth, including Israel affirms God's having a *creational* "mission," not limited to eschatological and cross cultural "missions." This point emphasizes the unity and historical rootedness of God's work in the world. Therefore, fifthly, so-called "religious" texts are "social, economic, and political" (e.g., the exodus, 34). As a result, the inclusion of Israel opens the door for a more robust doctrine of the church.

Goheen's ability to interweave diverse parts of Scripture demonstrates the importance of "story" and thus biblical theology within hermeneutical and missiological thought. The implications of one's view of Scripture as systemic,

If we believe the good news of Christ, we are committed to the biblical story as the true story of the world. This is a *normative* claim; it is public truth, the key to understanding every aspect of what God has created. The biblical story is not to be understood simply as a local tale about a certain ethnic group or religion. It begins with the creation of all things and ends with the renewal of all things. In between it offers an interpretation of the meaning of cosmic history. Moreover, it makes a *comprehensive* claim: our stories, our reality, the identity of the church—indeed all human and nonhuman reality—must find its place in this one story or nowhere. (18)

As a result, the whole of Scripture is reckoned authoritative without being absolutized. For instance, God's creation purposes are expressed differently throughout history; thus one might say that God repeatedly "contextualizes" how his mission is expressed in the world. Whether in the case of Israel's law (41) or in the Gentiles' being saved apart from that law (151), God

continues to fulfill his purpose for creating the world and so making a covenant with Abraham. By way of application, the missionary must recognize the limits of systematic theology in contextualization. Though valuable, one must not absolutize a particular metaphor, for example, to the exclusion of various other motifs.

One of the distinct advantages of Goheen's text is its ability to explain and apply the kingdom imagery prevalent throughout the Bible. Very simply, he suggests "that the kingdom is the restoration of God's rule over the whole world" (77). Immediately, eschatology is set within the context of culture and history. Churches are simultaneously called out of their local ghettos and compelled to consider how to live *in the world* rather than how to escape it. Of course, his understanding of kingdom corrects common ways of talking and dichotomizing. For example, Christians do not "advance" the kingdom so much as they "manifest" the kingdom. Furthermore, one need not choose between God's created world and heaven, for God reigns over all his creation. He (nor the church) does not wholesale reject physicality and dismiss temporal problems like disease and drought as mere peripheral concerns. Consequently, interpreters need not read tension into Jesus' own ministry. He was not concerned about eternal life (against this life). The church does not choose between the Jesus who heals and a Jesus who saves from sin. As Goheen succinctly explains, this is because, ". . . salvation in the New Testament is God's power to heal and renew all dimensions of human life: 'Salvation involves the reversal of all the evil consequences of sin, against both God and neighbor'" (78).

An important corollary is that the Church must reconsider traditional ways of understanding the message she preaches. Goheen aptly summarizes,

The gospel is not a message that can be slotted into some small, private religious, ethical, or theological realm of life. It is not about a future, otherworldly salvation. Preaching a gospel that diminishes the person of Jesus Christ or the all-embracing claims of the gospel of the kingdom will cut the root that nourishes a

missionary encounter between the comprehensive claims of the gospel and the dominant cultural story. (206)

*A Light to the Nations* contributes to contemporary debates about the meaning of gospel.

However, his approach begins with God's mission and ecclesiology, leading to his conclusion about the meaning of the gospel. Therefore, this particular methodology reinforced the "wide lens" gospel of others like Scot McKnight (*The King Jesus Gospel*) and Christopher Wright (*The Mission of the Church*). In addition, Goheen corrects any false division between cross and kingdom. Indirectly, he strengthens his argument when referencing Genesis 18:19, "God had made it clear to Abraham centuries earlier that the promise to him would be fulfilled only as he walked in the way of the Lord, in righteousness and justice" (42). The Genesis text itself makes clear that God's election of Abraham was *so that* Abraham's children would walk in justice and righteousness. Given the central role of Abraham in New Testament discussions of the gospel (i.e. Romans, Galatians), one naturally concludes that the gospel who believes specifically aims at a certain result *in this world*, namely that God's glory would be evidenced in the lives of those who live according to His creation purposes.

An evident strength of Goheen's book is its explanatory power. For instance, he is able to articulate a plausible solution to the question of Israel's priority in Jesus' mission (and in a sense Paul's; cf. Rom 1:16). In the twelve disciples, Jesus reconstituted Israel. Goheen comments, "First, the promise of salvation must be offered to the people of Israel. They must first be restored to their role in God's story, and then the gentiles can join them. This restoration is precisely what Jesus had accomplished in his earthly ministry" (110). In this way, Goheen gives proper emphasis to the New Covenant, for "God's people are no longer defined by geography or ethnicity but are called out from all nations to live as a light in the midst of all nations" (197).

Therefore, Goheen's arguments pose a serious challenge to some versions of dispensationalism, which sharply divide God's plan for Israel from his plan for the Gentile Church.

The book's broad scope brings with it certain limitations. Though a text on ecclesiology, he does not greatly delve into more conventional topics like baptism and polity. As a Presbyterian, Goheen not doubt avoids offending baptistic and congregational-minded readers, who might otherwise be distracted from his central thesis. However, one cannot help but wonder how these matters cohere with his suggested reading of the biblical text. If for example there is a fundamental unity between Israel and Gentiles as God's people is found in God's mission, does this at all affect the significance of contextualized images like circumcision, baptism, and church leadership? Also, Goheen offers a helpful correction to the tendency of some who might reduce the church's mission to proclaiming the gospel; however, the result is that he does not emphasize or elaborate on the importance of evangelism relative to judgment, the forgiveness of sin, and "eternal life." Similarly, it would have been welcome to see more extensive discussion on the topic of "missions" as traditionally defined, wherein Christians cross cultures for the sake of furthering the gospel to those who have not heard this message. "Missions" is only briefly defended (218–19). According to his line of thinking, what does faith, conversion, and preaching look like? In other words, in Goheen's paradigm, what are some implications for the strategy and practice of cross-cultural missions?

Goheen's last major section offers the reader a general list of practical suggestions for local churches. He makes a clear connection between the theology that precedes and the practice that should follow. On the other hand, the reader is left wondering how to practically be, for instance, "a community of justice in a world of economic and ecological injustice" (209). He himself poses a number of questions that neither he nor most Christian seem able to answer with

any clarity. He ponders, “How does the businessperson live faithfully in a world driven by the profit motive? How does someone in social work function within an environment built on a deeply humanistic understanding of the person? How does a scholar be faithful in a university that is shaped by scientific or relativistic beliefs?” (214). It would be unfair to expect him to give comprehensive solutions in brief form. Nevertheless, those who read his book must take up where Goheen leaves off, not being content with a mere correction in vision.

Where Goheen stops, he at least equips readers for further reflection. Consistent with his broader theology, he emphasizes family and small groups as critical contexts for working out a truly missional ecclesiology (221–24). In other words, these problems will only be solved in the midst of a community that actively engages the suffering and difficulties that spring up when one is faithful to God. Yet, this is not to dismiss the important role of leadership (220–21). In order to fulfill the vision cast in *A Light to the Nations*, church leaders need more than specialized academic training. The elder must exemplify the reality of God’s kingdom in every aspect of his life, lest the congregation default to a privatized version of religious faith. In other words, Goheen’s ecclesiology does not allow people to subscribe to it in theory. By emphasizing the narrative nature of theology and mission, that God aims to transform a people in history, Goheen does not allow Christians to remain content with ecclesiological abstraction. Therefore, *A Light to the Nations* reorients the way people should discuss the church and mission(s). It is this short of holistic theology that grounds holistic practice.