

A Light to the Nations

The Missional Church and the Biblical Story

by Michael W. Goheen (Baker Books: 2011)

A Book Review by Jack De Vries

For the past decade or more the buzz in many churches has been the discussion of the missional church. In fact, my library is rapidly expanding with book titles which include the word: missional.

Guder's seminal work entitled *Missional Church* in 1998 kick started the discussion among churches and their leaders. Since then people like Roxburgh, Van Gelder, Stetzer, McNeal, just to name a few, have added to the missional conversation by publishing multiple volumes and articles.

You might wonder is there really is a need for another book on the missional church? Well, along comes Michael W. Goheen with his latest book, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*. Goheen was my daughter Jodie's pastor when she attended McMaster University – this alone intrigued me enough to read this book. And I was not disappointed. In fact, this is one of the best books I have ever read on the subject of the missional church. What I really like about this book is how Goheen connects the missional church to the Biblical story. In fact, Goheen did exactly what he set out to do. As he writes in the preface to this book: "A plethora of books of missional ecclesiology has appeared in the last

couple of decades. These books vary in quality, but even in the best there is little sustained biblical-theological and exegetical work. Moreover, to the degree that the authors make forays into Scripture, the Old Testament has been conspicuously neglected. I have written this book to fill this gap." (ix)

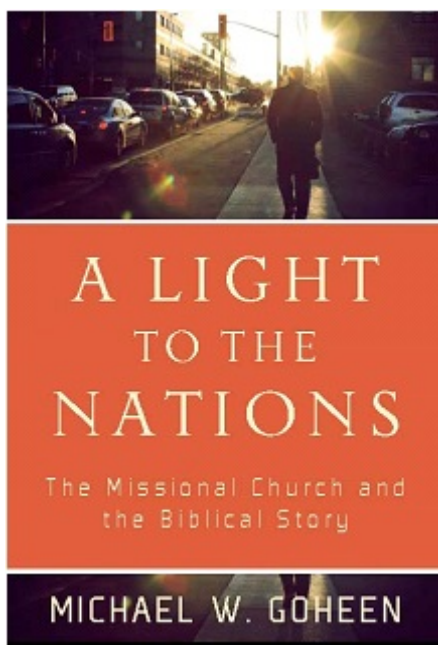
Not only is another gap filled in my library; Goheen has plugged a gap in the missional conversation. *A Light to the Nations* is a thorough overview of the Biblical story and deeply roots the whole missional discussion in the witness of Scripture.

The Church's Essence

Mission has to do with the role and identity of the church, according to Goheen. He writes: "At its best, 'missional' describes not a specific *activity* of the church but the very *essence and identity* of the church as it takes

up its role in God's story in the context of its culture and participates in God's mission to the world. This book is an attempt to describe 'mission' as the role and identity of the church in the context of the biblical story." (4) "The word 'mission' reminds the church of who we are, of why we are here, and to whom we belong." (5)

Now many of these propositions are not new. Others have said this, and a number of books have been written making the case that



missions is about the very *essence* of the church. What Goheen does is root the mission of the church in the biblical story – and not just the story of the early church in the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles. He grounds the missional church in the biblical story as it begins in Genesis and continues on through the first century church.

In the second to last chapter in the book Goheen provides a very helpful summary of the missional church. He sums up the conclusions about the missional church in light of the biblical story in this way: “To describe the church as ‘missional’ today means (1) that it participates in God’s mission; (2) that it continues the mission of Old Testament Israel; (3) that it continues the kingdom mission of Jesus; and (4) that it continues the witness of the early church.” (191) This eighth chapter alone is worth the price of the book; Goheen gives an excellent summary of what is meant by the missional church. Even though this chapter gives this precise and concise summary – one needs to read the entire book. The previous seven chapters give the background and support for the conclusions about the missional church. This eighth chapter has few Biblical references and no footnotes. But the chapters leading up to this one is full of Biblical and theological references, and they are raft with footnotes.

Old Testament Beginnings

The journey through the biblical story to come to an understanding of the missional church begins in the Old Testament. “The church was not founded or established for the first time with Jesus and the Spirit; ecclesiology does not truly begin with the New Testament. Rather, the church is a covenant community that has been gathered and restored to its original calling. A proper understanding of the church begins with Israel

– its role and identity, its relation to the other nations – because the church is Israel’s heir.” (21) This is where Goheen begins his discussion of the missional church – the Old Testament, the book of Genesis. God’s chosen people, the Israelites, “do not exist for themselves. Rather, they exist for the sake of God’s glory and his mission, and for the sake of others toward whom God’s mission is

directed. They are indeed ‘chosen by God’ to play a prescribed role in God’s mission to restore the creation and to glorify himself a channel whereby ... salvation might flow to all peoples, to the praise of his glory.” (26)

For two chapters Goheen lays down the Biblical record to demonstrate how throughout the Old Testament we see the mission

of God lived out through the people of God, Israel. Abraham was blessed to be a blessing. “God employs particular means to reach a universal goal.” (28) “Abraham’s particular election is the instrument for the universal purpose of God with the whole world.... God’s people are a *so that people*: they are chosen *so that* they might know God’s salvation and then invite all nations into it.” (31) This election is not restricted to Abraham. Quoting Paul Williamson, “...the goal of the Sinaitic covenant is the establishment of a special nation through whom Yahweh can make himself known to all the families of the earth.” (38)

A Contrast Community

A recurring image or theme throughout *A Light to the Nations* is the idea of “a contrast people.” As Goheen writes, “The stipulations of the covenant follow Israel’s missional call (Exod. 20-23). The torah, or instruction, that God gives the people of Israel is to help them live out their calling as a holy nation, a contrast people in the midst of the nations.” (40) “Israel’s life of obedience is to be lived as

Mission is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Mission exists because worship doesn't. Worship ... is the fuel and the goal of missions.
- John Piper

a missionary encounter with the pagan religious spirit of Canaanite culture.”(41)

As we move into the biblical story in the New Testament “mission, properly understood, is the role of God’s chosen to live as a contrast people and thus to draw the surrounding nations into covenant with God. Thus mission begins not in Acts but way back at the beginning of the biblical story.” (122) “For Luke mission in Jerusalem is not about going but about being. Israel must be restored to its role of being an attractive contrast community. It is this missional calling of Israel that defines the church from its inception.” (130)

Goheen goes on to conclude that for the missional people of God today we are also “called to be a contrast people and an alternative community.” (194) We “continue the mission of Jesus as a contrast community. The kingdom of God is God’s power to restore human life to what God intended it to be. Thus the life of God’s people embodies God’s original intention for humanity in creation.” (195)

Jesus and the Kingdom

The cross and the resurrection, according to Goheen, are critical to our understanding of the missional church. He contends that “the full significance *to the church* of the death and resurrection of Jesus has too often in the last two centuries been left unexplored.” (101) Too often the significance of the cross beyond the life of the individual believer is obscured. “For example, an evangelistic presentation might move from the importance of a personal relationship with God, to the individual’s sin and guilt that blocks such a relationship, to the solution for that sin – which is the cross of Christ.” (102) Goheen goes on to point out that such a presentation

“... sets the cross firmly in the context of individual salvation, implying that the church is merely a community of individuals who have appropriated the work of Christ. This view of the church could make us vulnerable to the consumer trap Instead, the church needs to see the cross take its rightful place in the story of Jesus’ earthly ministry, his announcement of the kingdom, and – most

important for our purpose – the central feature of Jesus’ kingdom mission: *to gather a people.*” (103) “... a fundamental mark of Jesus’ kingdom mission is to gather and restore Israel so it might carry out its God-given role. The crucifixion, rightly understood, is the culmination of Christ’s gathering work, the event that launches Jesus’s gathered community into mission.” (103) “The cross releases the power necessary to

transform [God’s newly gathered people] into a people who can live as a light to the world.” (110)

The resurrection of Jesus also needs to be understood in its significance to the church. The starting point for understanding the resurrection, according to Goheen, is to see what it signifies in the context of the biblical story: “the resurrection marks the restoration of God’s people to new life as part of a new creation. For the early church, the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of this new creation.” (112) “At the resurrection, the age to come – characterized by *shalom*, justice, and salvation and destined to fill the whole earth – commences. The people of God begin to share in these events *for the sake of the world.*” (119) “It is the dawning of a new world order. We belong to that new creation not as discrete individuals but as members of a new humanity that inhabits the new order.... The church, as it embodies the life of the new creation, is an attractive light to the nations.” (166)

**The Church is
a living
demonstration of
the power of,
and of faith in,
the resurrection,
or it is not the
Church of God.
-Markus Barth**

Some might critique *A Light to the Nations* as being overly academic. And this critique has some warrant. This book is not your typical bedside reading, but then it was not written with that intent. Goheen admits right up front that his “primary audience is theological students, as well as pastors and leaders in the church. ... It is scriptural and narrative theological work struggling with our biblical identity and role in the original historical context. It is not a technical book but will demand more than a reader seeking fast answers may be willing to invest.” (ix) But as a pastor and leader in the church – this is exactly what I appreciated with this book. Goheen made me think hard, and deep, and long about the biblical story. And it is well worth the investment.

What Might It Look Like Today

Yet if you are keenly interested on what the missional church might look like today – fast forward to the final chapter of *A Light to the Nations*. Here Goheen gives (in Dave Letterman fashion, as he admits) his top ten list – a list that has grown to thirteen ways the church might live as a faithful missional community today. Simply giving this list does not do the list justice; you need to pick up a copy of *A Light to the Nations* and read the full content. But without commentary, here is Goheen’s top thirteen list:

1. A Church with Worship That Nurtures Our Missional Identity
2. A Church Empowered by the Preaching of the Gospel
3. A Church Devoted to Communal Prayer
4. A Church Striving to Live as a Contrast Community
5. A Church That Understands Its Cultural Context
6. A Church Trained for a Missionary Encounter in Its Callings in the World
7. A Church Trained to Evangelism in an Organic Way
8. A Church Deeply Involved in the Needs of Its Neighborhood and World
9. A Church Committed to Missions
10. A Church with Well-Trained Leaders
11. A Church with Parents Trained to Take Up the Task of Nurturing Children in Faith
12. A Church with Small Groups That Nurture for Mission in the World
13. A Church That Seeks and Expresses the Unity of the Body of Christ

If you had to purchase just one book to help you understand the missional church, then *A Light to the Nations* is my first recommendation. Darrell L. Guder, in his review of this book, describes it as “a book that stands out from the crowd.” Or as another reviewer put it, this book “puts the meat on the bones of some weak theology of mission that too many have today.” Goheen’s understanding of the missional church is deeply rooted in Scripture, and he makes no apology for that. A gap has been filled in my library on the missional church. I will let Goheen have the last word: “The Bible provides the grand story that encompasses all nations and all peoples for all of earth’s history. The church’s missional identity is founded in the role that God assigns his people in this story.... The ‘people of God’ are chosen by him for the sake of the world.... He charges them to live for his glory and to participate in his redemptive work.... to mediate his blessings to the nations.” (191)



About the Author:

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