

Michael W. Goheen, *Light to the Nations, A: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. 256 pp. USD \$15.63.

In this enlightening new book, Goheen contends that the church needs a practical vision for mission, but there has not been enough discussion regarding the biblical theological concept of mission as the foundation for being missional. *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* is Goheen's effort to fill this gap.

"Mission", as Goheen defines it, "is the role and identity of the church in the context of the biblical story" (p. 4). Thus, being missional is not about "describing the 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" (p. 4). To put another way, "Mission is what God is doing for the sake of the world: it is God's long-term plan to renew creation. The people of God are missional in that they are taken up into this work for the sake of the world" (p. 25). So, since much of the discussion on the missional church has been dominated by the pragmatic implications of the mission of the church, there has been more discussion on its activity rather than its identity and essence. Goheen believes we need to get back to the mission of the church as found in the biblical story (or biblical theology) and then move forward from there lest we continue to lose our way.

A Light to the Nations can be summed up in three main stages that present the biblical development of the people of God as missional people: (1) OT Israel as the beginning of the people of God, (2) the coming of Jesus to restore the people of God and (3) the NT church as the reconstituted people of God.

In the search for the uncovering of the mission of the church as found in its biblical theological context, Goheen begins in the Old Testament. For Goheen, the OT is the only proper place to begin for because the place of the church in the mission of God is the same as and a continuation of that of the children of Israel but with added implications of Christ's resurrection. This is a necessary corrective to much of the missional church discussion. Following Gerhard Lohfink's comments Goheen states:

The church was not founded or established for the first time in 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 other nations – because the church is Israel’s heir (p. 21).

Take a moment to soak that statement in – the church is Israel’s heir. For Goheen, there is only one people of God and therefore one mission of God for His people. This mission begins in the OT with Israel and continues with the church as the reconstituted people of God.

The mission of God begins with Abraham in Genesis 12: 1-3. Here, there are two aspects that help to define the mission of the church. First, Abraham is chosen to receive the blessings of God. Second, as recipients of God’s blessings God’s people are to in turn mediate those blessings to the world. From Genesis 12 we move to Exodus 1-18 where we see God releasing Israel from their captivity in order “to fulfill its Abrahamic role and identity” (p. 34). Once Israel is delivered from captivity they are given the covenant at Sinai which functions to show that they are bound to God and not Pharaoh. At Sinai God tells Israel how they are to live in order to receive God’s blessings and how they are to mediate those blessings to the nations (p. 37). Exodus 32-34 describes how God will dwell with Israel which is important for Israel to be able to carry out their two sided purpose.

Flowing from Sinai to Israel’s missional living is the threefold role and identity of Israel. First, Israel was to be a people in the center of the nations. Surely this was their position when they entered the Promised Land in Joshua. Israel was to visibly live out their identity before the nation’s such that they would desire to come and see and join. They are not to be passive observers but active engagers “with the pagan cultures of the surrounding nations, by which it is to confront idolatry with the claims of the living God” (p. 53). Second, Israel was to function as a priestly kingdom. The life surrounding the priesthood was to nourish Israel amidst their missional encounter with the pagan nations. The temple plays a huge role in this purpose. The prophets are seen as Israel’s ‘covenant enforcers’ keeping Israel on track (p. 59). Third, the story of Israel in the OT closes with them as a dispersed people whose God is faithful to his covenant promises to return and restore them (Isaiah 60; Ezekiel 36:24-27).

Goheen does not mince words when it comes to his assessment of the significance of Jesus’ coming, “With the coming of Jesus, the promised gathering of God’s eschatological people begins” (p. 76). Following the gospel of Mark, Goheen defines the kingdom of God as “the restoration of God’s rule over the whole world” (p. 77).

Though God rules on His own, His people are to proclaim this rulership to all the world as they carry out their missional identity.

While many believe Israel rejected the offer of the kingdom, Goheen contends that many within Israel do respond to the invitation of faith and begin to form the true eschatological Israel, the true kingdom, with a task of being a light to the nations (pp. 84-85).

Though there are no doubt many Jews who will reject the offer of the kingdom and the call to restoration, there is a remnant that accepts and thus becomes the beginning of the eschatological fulfillment of the people of God – the light to the nations.

It is Jesus' work on the cross and resurrection that become the defining works of Jesus that enable Him to restore Israel and give them the power to carry out their missional task. It is through the cross that Jesus takes on the punishment of Israel's sin, thus freeing them from it. "The death of Jesus creates a restored community, reinstated in its vocation as a channel of salvation to the nations. The cross is an event that creates a redeemed and transformed people" (p. 107). As for the resurrection it "marks the restoration of God's people to new life as part of a new creation" (p. 112). Of this new creation Jesus is the "first fruits," the "first born" and the "beginning." At the close of the Gospels, we see Jesus giving restored Israel (the church) its new identity through the great Commission (Matthew. 28:19-20). The church is to take the gospel to all the nations. The church is the new Israel and thus the light to the nations as Israel was in the OT.

The question for many is how do the NT writers perceive and describe the church as the reconstituted people of God – the restored Israel? For Goheen, the clearest NT example of how the church (reconstituted Israel) continues the mission of God is to read the book of Acts. Beginning with Pentecost (Acts 2) and running through the end of the book we see God's people spreading the gospel to the nations while God builds His church and kingdom through this activity. The geographical structure of Acts is huge for Goheen. "The story line of Acts is about the geographical spread of the Word" (p. 129). Jerusalem has great redemptive-historical and eschatological significance (p. 129 & 131). "God has chosen Israel to be a blessing to all nations, and the centrifugal movement in Acts marks the beginning of the process by which that blessing is to be fulfilled" (p. 131). What Goheen believes is clear from the book of Acts is that God restored many Jews and that He brought many Gentiles into the church.

So how what evidence is there that the NT writers saw the church and themselves as the reconstituted people of God? Take Peter

for example. In 1 Peter 2:9-10, Peter uses no less than 5 explicit word/phrases to describe the church that are used in the OT to describe Israel. Peter uses “a chosen race,” “a royal priesthood,” “a holy nation,” and “a people for his own possession” all to describe the church. Not only is the language telling but the historical context of I Peter. I Peter is written to dispersed believers. In the OT Israel was dispersed because of unbelief and disobedience. Now, reconstituted Israel is once again dispersed but not because of unbelief. Their dispersion is caused because of their belief and by command (Matt. 28:19-20). I Peter exemplifies for us “how the church can live faithfully in a non-Christian environment” (p. 182). Goheen contends that the imagery and word usage here in I Peter is just a small example of the many examples in the NT where the authors saw the church as the continuation and expansion of Israel.

A presentation of a biblical theology of mission would be incomplete without some suggestion for what this might look like today. Goheen offers thirteen suggestions. Some of the most notable are the need for the church to reach out to the world with its message. This follows along the lines of the people of God being the mediators of God’s blessings to the world – namely, salvation. Along the same lines we need preaching that is more missional minded. While the ministry of the Word through preaching is primarily for believers, we need to make sure our preaching proclaims the biblical story of redemption. Perhaps the most relevant of Goheen’s suggestions is the need for the church to live out as a community within its community. This is how the NT church lived mission and this is how the church today and in the future needs to live out its mission.

The thirteen suggestions about what a missional church might look like today are as listed: 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. (Pages 202-225)

A Light to the Nations is a great corrective to much of the missional talk of the day. It puts the meat on the bones of any weak theology of mission. The greatest strength of the book is its truly biblical theology approach as it begins with the concept as originated with Israel and Abraham. For those who see more discontinuity within Scripture in regards to Israel and the church this book will be a much needed dose of corrective medicine. This a book of solid biblical theology of missions.

Teresa Chai, Ph.D