

Goheen, Michael. “A Light to the Nations”. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

Reviewed by Paul Akin, PhD Candidate,
Paul serves as Pastor of Missions, The Church at Brook Hills, Birmingham, AL

Michael Goheen currently serves as Professor of Missiology as Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He has authored and co-authored several books on missiology, theology, ecclesiology, and worldview. *A Light to the Nations* is an attempt to integrate a theology of mission with a biblical ecclesiology. In this book, Goheen skillfully constructs a missional ecclesiology. However, this work differs from others in the same category based on his “sustained biblical-theological and exegetical work (ix).” With the storyline of Scripture as his guide, Goheen traces the missional thrust inherent in God’s people from the formation of Israel to contemporary local churches. His targeted audience is theological students and church leaders, but the book is both accessible and applicable to lay leaders in the church.

Goheen begins the book by framing the discussion around the identity and role of the church. He argues that the identity and role of the church are wrapped up in the narrative of Scripture. He writes, “The church finds its identity by playing a role in some story—but whose story will shape it (6)?” Goheen goes on to set the stage for the rest of the book by arguing “If the church is to recover its God-given identity and role in the world, it needs to be intentional about recovering the biblical story and its images (6).” The inherent missional identity of God’s people is the core of the argument throughout the book. He argues that the biblical narrative presents a missional ecclesiology that local churches need to recapture today. This foundational chapter serves as a launching point for Goheen to then trace the storyline of Scripture with special attention given to God forming a distinct people for himself who are to live in contrast to the surrounding culture and how these truths apply primarily to the Western church in the 21st century.

After the opening chapter, Goheen organizes the remainder of the book around four key players: Israel, Jesus, the New Testament Church, and the church today. In part one, Goheen directs his attention to Israel. It is through the formation and missional role of Israel that he grounds his missional ecclesiology (Chapters 2–3). He argues, “To rightly understand the church, one must begin in the Old Testament, not only because the most ‘characteristic [New Testament] names for believers in Christ’ were the ‘ancient titles of Israel,’ but also because the missional nature of the church is rooted in the calling of Israel (23).” Rooted in the promise to Abram (Gen 12:1–3), Goheen argues that the people of Israel were to be a “contrast people” in the world and set apart to accomplish the purposes of God.

In part two, Goheen shifts his attention from Israel to Jesus (Chapters 4–5). In these chapters, he emphasizes the coming of the kingdom in the person and work of Christ. He writes, “And God does act: he brings the kingdom to Israel in the person of Jesus. With the coming of Jesus, the promised gathering of God’s eschatological people begins (76).” Goheen goes on to highlight the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ as the pinnacle of human history. He argues, “The events of the death and resurrection of Jesus are the central and climatic moment in this story. At the cross the old age dominated by sin, satanic power, and evil is decisively vanquished. At the resurrection, the age to come—characterized by shalom, justice, and salvation and destined to fill the whole earth—commences (119).” The coming of the kingdom foretold by the prophets is realized in the person and work of Jesus.

Part three examines the missional nature of the New Testament church (Chapters 6–7). Just as Israel was set apart by God to be a contrast community among the nations, the New Testament church also was to live as an attractive contrast community in all nations. Goheen writes concerning the connection between Israel and the Church, “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).” Following the death and resurrection of Christ, the people of God are indwelt by the Spirit of God at Pentecost and empowered to live out their mission among the nations. This all begins in Jerusalem, but quickly spreads to the surrounding communities with an eschatological view to all nations. God’s primary instrument to accomplish the Great Commission is the local church. This missional objective was given to Israel, realized in Christ, and will be accomplished through the local church.

The final player in Goheen’s story of redemption is the contemporary Church. The churches of today fall in a long line that began with the formation and blessing of Israel, the coming of the Messiah, and the testimony and witness of the early church. Goheen concludes the book by proposing seven characteristics of a contrast community in 21st century Western culture. He argues that local churches today can function as a contrast community if they are characterized by justice, generosity, selfless giving, humble and bold witness, hope, joy and thanksgiving, and as a people that experience God’s presence (209–210). Goheen writes, “This list suggests what it might mean today to be a ‘come and join us’ people, inviting others to unite with us as we embody and journey toward God’s shalom at the climax of history. It also points to what it might mean to be a ‘so that’ people, blessed so that we in turn might be a blessing to the world (226).” Goheen contends that just as Israel was intended to be “a light for the nations (Isa 49:6)” the New Testament church and local churches today are also tasked with the same mission.

There are many strengths worthy of highlight in *A Light to the Nations*, but I will limit my list to four. First, Goheen succeeds in presenting the reader with a carefully thought out and

biblically faithful missional ecclesiology. His central argument that the church is to be a light to the nations flows out of the unfolding narrative of the Bible. He roots his missional ecclesiology in the Old Testament with the formation of Israel and their mission to the nations. He then proceeds to trace how that missional imperative is realized in Christ and passed on to the early church and the contemporary church today. Goheen's text stands out among other missional ecclesiology texts because of his robust Old Testament foundation. The trend in many contemporary missional ecclesiology books is to emphasize cultural engagement by appealing to New Testament examples. Goheen derives his argument from Old Testament Israel and that starting point enhances his argument later in the book when he addresses the missional nature of the New Testament church. The basis for how the Church is to function in the world is the biblical text and Goheen demonstrates that conviction throughout the book.

Second, Goheen promotes a holistic understanding of the gospel. There is a trend in evangelicalism today to emphasize the substitutionary atonement component of the gospel, but to often to the neglect of a holistic understanding of the gospel. On the other hand, there is a trend among younger evangelicals to emphasize social justice, often to the neglect of verbal proclamation. I believe Goheen strikes a healthy balance between these two positions. He writes, "A scandalous dualism between word and deed profoundly weakened the witness of the church in the twentieth century . . . deeds of mercy and justice that are divorced from those words are betrayal, and gospel words void of deeds are false (215)." Goheen exhorts the Church to emulate the example of Christ who demonstrated the gospel by loving people in both word and deed. Verbal proclamation must be central, but a visible demonstration of the gospel should also accompany good news.

Third, Goheen is calling the contemporary church to actively engage culture with the gospel. This text serves as a call to action. If the people of God truly believe the Bible then they will live differently in their community. God's mission is not a mission of retreat or seclusion, but engagement. Goheen contends, "Living as a contrast community will mean a missionary encounter with our culture (211)." The tendency of many believers within the church is to become inner focused and isolated from the "outside" world. This book is a wake up call and reminder to churches that their mission is to be a light for the gospel in their neighborhoods, communities, and to the ends of the earth. Local churches need to equip their people to be students of culture, but also to be able to understand and interpret their culture in light of the grand narrative of Scripture.

With all of its strengths, *A Light to the Nations* is not without some limitations. I will briefly mention two shortcomings of this book. First, perhaps this is intentional, but for an ecclesiology text, this book contributes little to the issues of church polity or church planting. Now, to be fair, this is not a conventional ecclesiology text, but to neglect mentioning issues of baptism, Lord's Supper, polity, house church, mega church, multisite church, and the primacy of church planting leaves the reader wanting more. It seems from his interpretation of the continuity of Scripture that exists between Israel and the Church that Goheen would likely resonate more with a Presbyterian understanding of church polity, though he does not make explicit mention of his particular perspective. More specific treatment of some of these ecclesiological issues would have benefited the book.

Second, throughout the book, there is some mention of cross-cultural ministry, but a stronger treatment of this issue would improve the book. Goheen states throughout that the church is to serve as a light to the nations. One of the most critical challenges to this pursuit is

the challenge of cross-cultural ministry. The process of taking the gospel and living it out in another cultural context is a significant obstacle to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Churches desiring to influence the nations with the gospel need to train their people to understand the challenge but necessity of cross-cultural ministry, particularly in places where Christ has not yet been named. Cross-cultural training often includes language learning, contextualization, and equipping families to live out the gospel in other contexts around the world. Goheen alludes to some of these things, but does not provide much guidance for churches that are trying to lead their people in this endeavor.

In conclusion, Goheen accomplishes his stated purpose. He provides evangelicals with a thoughtful and biblically faithful missional ecclesiology. Throughout the book, Goheen is reminding contemporary churches of their calling to be a light to the nations. It is his conviction that this has always been the calling of the people of God since the formation of Israel to local churches today. God desires those who follow him to be a witness to all peoples. This is the heart of the Great Commission. However, the benefit of this text is that Goheen does not begin with Jesus' commission from a mountaintop in Galilee. Unlike most missional ecclesiology texts, Goheen tells the back-story to the Great Commission and bridges God's promises to Abram with God's calling on local congregations today. Though the book suffers some from a more theoretical approach, the chapters are stimulating reads and beneficial for theological students and local church leaders. After reading this book, one cannot help but hope for a companion volume in the future. Goheen provides great biblical and theological insight throughout the book, but a sequel volume with more practical insight for local church leaders would be a welcome addition.