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

STR Interviews Dr. Michael Goheen

(pre-publication draft. For published version, go to: www.southeasterntheologicalreview.com).

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 Paidea 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 shape 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 three 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

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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.*