

Introducing Christian Mission Today

STR Interviews Dr. Michael Goheen

Introduction

It is a delight for *STR* to interview Dr. Michael W. Goheen on the publication of his recent monograph *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues* (IVP Academic, 2014). Dr. Goheen is a friend of *STR*, having been interviewed in the 2/2(2011) edition of *STR* (pp. 117-26). He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Utrecht, writing on Lesslie Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology. He has taught at a number of institutions, including Calvin Theological Seminary, Regent College, Trinity Western University, and Dordt College. Currently he splits his time between Vancouver, Canada and Phoenix, Arizona. He is Director of Theological Education and Scholar-in-Residence at the Missional Training Center in Phoenix, Arizona, and Adjunct Professor at Redeemer Seminary, Dallas. Dr. Goheen has served as a church planter and pastor to several churches and is presently a minister of preaching at New West Christian Reformed Church in the Vancouver area.

Interview with Michael Goheen

STR: *Michael, thank you for speaking with STR. Why did you write this introduction to Christian mission?*

Goheen: In 1989, while I was still a church planter and pastor, I was asked to teach an introductory university course on mission. I was not sure how to proceed. I knew that the colonial paradigm that had shaped mission for years was obsolete. But there were no models of how to structure such a course in missiology in our new setting that would bring together the various strands of missiology in a unified way. The second or third time I taught the course I was still struggling with this when I stumbled on David Bosch's *Transforming Mission* literally just days off the press. I read that book carefully two times as I prepared for the course again. We know now that this book changed the discipline of missiology. His structure and treatment of missiology helped many rethink how to approach the discipline in a new time. His book, however, is long, dense, and difficult. I have used it many times but students have

found it tough going. I was hoping someone would write something a little more manageable but it never happened. So I decided to do it. I put into print the course I had been teaching for twenty-five years. But it is not simply a shorter and more popular version. There are a number of other differences. It treats topics he did not—for example, a missiology of Western culture, a survey of the global church in mission, Pentecostal mission, urban mission, and missions. Moreover, my theological perspective is explicitly evangelical and self-consciously in the Reformed tradition.

STR: *You say you were looking for another more popular book along the lines of Bosch's Transforming Mission but did not find it. What about books like Introducing World Missions (Scott Moreau, Gary Corwin, Gary McGee) or Introduction to Global Missions (Zane Pratt and David Sills)? There do seem to be other surveys out there on world mission. How is yours different?*

Goheen: Those are very good books and there are others like them. But I wanted to cast a wider missiological lens. Similar to my structure, they divide their books into sections on Scripture, history, and mission today. Their historical section tells you how they treat mission: the operative word is *expansion*. They are concerned to deal with mission in terms of its geographical expansion. The sections on mission today deal with various issues of cross-cultural mission—calling, preparation, anthropology, living as a family in a foreign culture, strategies, and so on. They treat subjects like contextualization and world religions in that framework as well. The geographical dimension of mission is a key part of the broader mission of the church, and we need books to introduce and prepare students for their experience of cross-cultural mission.

But I wanted to cast a wider theological lens. If mission is in, to, and from all six continents, then that will impact the way missiology is structured, what topics are selected, as well as how they are treated. For example, there are a number of issues in my book you don't find in most mission textbooks: missiology of Western culture, a survey of the global church in mission, missional theology (not just theology of mission), and more. It also means I deal with some traditional subjects with-in missiology differently. I narrate the history of mission, for example, not solely in terms of expansion, but also in terms of how the church embodied and carried out its mission at various points in history both within its own culture as well as reaching beyond its borders. How did the church understand and practice mission in each era and how did it impact their

culture? So my book is a missiology that works out from the theological starting point that the church is missional by its very nature—wherever it is. It is a missiology for the church-in-mission in whatever context including the West.

STR: *The books you mention have “missions” in their title and yet you have “mission.” Is there a difference between “mission” and “missions” and, if so, why is it important?*

Goheen: It is important for me how I use the terms. However, I can't project my usage onto others. Words are tricky. People use words differently and make distinctions in various ways. Like the words “Trinity” or “providence,” the word “mission” is not found in Scripture. It comes from the Latin word *mittere* (“to send”) and was first used by the Jesuits centuries after Christ. So as one employs extra-biblical words to capture Scripture's teaching and make important distinctions, one has to be strategic. And we all do it in different ways.

I make two distinctions early in the book that are foundational for my understanding of mission. Both distinctions come from Lesslie Newbigin who, on the one hand, appreciated the wider view of mission that was developing in the 20th century that viewed all of life as mission. But at the same time, he wanted to protect intentional evangelism and cross-cultural missions as essential tasks within that wider mission.

The first distinction is between missional *dimension* and missional *intention*. Every part of the Christian life has a dimension of mission; that is, the whole of our lives—individual and communal, private and public—witness to the transforming power of the gospel. However, not everything we do has the intention of reaching out with the gospel and inviting unbelievers to embrace it in faith. So my marriage, for example, may have a missional dimension but, unlike evangelism, say, it doesn't have a missional intention.

The second is between mission and missions. Mission is as broad as life. The church has been sent by Jesus to make known the good news across the whole spectrum of its life (John 20:21). As part of that mission the church is called to establish a witness in places and to peoples where there is none. Since the horizon of mission is the ends of the earth, the church everywhere must raise their eyes to see where there is no witnessing community to make known the good news, and establish a witness there. Newbigin called that missions.

Missions is not simply cross-cultural work. It strategically targets places and people groups in the world who have never heard the good news, and establishing a witness in their midst

with the goal of bringing into existence a Christian church. So, for example, I may be a professor of theology training pastors in Kenya. But I am not doing missions but, as Newbigin called it, cross-cultural partnership. This is an important part of the church's mission. However, it is not missions just because it takes place beyond our borders. Missions is defined by the task of making known the good news in places and to peoples that have never heard.

This is not a mere haggling over letters and terms. Bryant Myer speaks of the disproportionate allocation of missionary resources and says we are spending over 90% of our money and even more of our personnel resources on cross-cultural partnership rather than missions. Urbana too has called attention to this problem. I once had an Indonesian theologian speak to my mission class. He argued, quite passionately in fact, that because the church in the West was still defining mission in terms of anything that happened overseas—very much in line with a colonial paradigm—we were not making headway on the missionary task of taking the gospel to parts of the world that had never heard it. I am convinced he is right. Recently I asked a leader in a denominational mission organization how many missionaries were actually engaged in missions and how many in cross-cultural partnership. He admitted that he was not sure if *any* were engaged in missions!

So the majority of my book is dealing with mission—the calling of the church in every place to make known the good news. But in the last chapter I deal with missions as an essential aspect of the mission of the church. In that chapter I ask questions like: Where are the places where there is no Christian witness? What are the problems hindering a fresh missions initiative? And what kind of structures and partnership are needed to do the job?

STR: *Who are the people that influence you in this book?*

Goheen: The two missiologists that have shaped the deepest theological structures and core convictions for my thinking on mission are J.H. Bavinck and Harvie Conn. If I can use an architectural metaphor, they established the foundation for my thinking in missiology. Theologically I fall most in line with the neocalvinist tradition as represented by Bavinck and Conn. After that, the three most influential figures on this book would be Lesslie Newbigin, Hendrik Kraemer, and David Bosch, in that order. I believe it is safe to say that these are three of the most important mission thinkers of the 20th century. I have attempted to read all their written work. I did my

PhD work on Newbiggin's missionary ecclesiology and worked on his thought and life for a decade. Kraemer was one of the most influential figures in Newbiggin's life, and so my dissertation launched me into Kraemer's work. I spent a fair bit of time assembling and reading Bosch's body of work as I taught mission courses. Although there are differences, I believe there is a lot of overlap in emphasis between these five writers: the importance of starting with God's mission as narrated in Scripture, a fully missional understanding of the church, a broad view of mission rooted in a gospel of the kingdom, the already-not yet period of the kingdom as a time of mission, a rich understanding of the relationship between gospel, culture, and church, a profound theology of religions, and more.

STR: *You have mentioned in your book and in this interview several times a "colonialist paradigm" for Christian mission. What do you mean by this? Do you think that the church is (still) participating in this paradigm?*

Goheen: Yes, the church's mission over the past few centuries has been shaped by colonialism. That is, mission moved along the tracks established by the colonization of much of the non-Western world by Western countries. And so mission moved from the West to the non-West, from wealthy countries to poor ones, from what was perceived to be a superior culture to inferior ones, and so on. For example, Dutch missions moved from the Netherlands to Indonesia, the British missions to India, since Indonesia was a Dutch colony and India a British one.

Today rightfully there has been a strong reaction against colonialism. And so, more liberal churches have abandoned mission because for them mission and colonialism are synonymous. There is embarrassment and guilt that makes them want to distance themselves from cross-cultural mission work. Unfortunately, in the evangelical tradition we have sometimes been less critical and are still more indebted to the colonialist paradigm than we realize.

The reason for the discrepancy between these two responses is that colonial mission combined both biblical and unbiblical elements. For example, the biblical impulse to take the good news to places where it has never been heard was right. The majority of the Christian church was in the West in the 19th century. Many of the motivations that went along with that were biblical as well: a desire to obey the Great Commission, a love for Christ and for people who were lost, a recognition of the universal truth of the gospel, and so on. However, this biblical impulse was also corrupted by many

factors associated with colonialism that were deeply problematic: a sense of the superiority of Western culture and the inferiority of non-Western cultures, complicity in political and economic dimensions of colonialism, and so on. What is needed is a careful assessment that struggles with both the unfaithfulness and the faithfulness of this era.

As for today, however one judges this period of mission history, the colonialist paradigm is not adequate. The church in the non-Western world has exploded and makes up the majority of the church. The church in the Western world is shrinking and has capitulated to secularistic humanism. It is rather clear we can no longer think of mission as flowing from the West to the non-West. So what is needed is a fresh understanding of mission that sees mission as making known the gospel in life, word, and deed—in, to, and from every continent. Global partnership and the worldwide church-in-mission provide the new context in which we need to understand and practice mission.

STR: *What are some other areas of the church's life that need rethinking in the light of this shifting paradigm of understanding mission?*

Goheen: One of the tasks that missiology can do is remind both the local congregation and the seminary of the centrality of mission. The way Harvie Conn puts it is that mission interrupts at every point in the process with the words “among the nations.” There are many areas in which missiology can interrupt the life of the congregation and the seminary with a reminder of its missional calling, but I’ll mention three.

The first is in the internal life of the institutional church. For too many years the church has understood the means of grace, for example—preaching, Lord’s Supper, prayer, fellowship, worship, and so on—solely as channels of salvation for members of the church alone. The benefits that Christ has accomplished in his death and resurrection are distributed to God’s people for their benefit through these means. While that is true, it is only a half-truth, and a half-truth that distorts. Karl Barth famously warns of “sacred egocentricity.” That is, we see the benefits of Christ only as salvation to be enjoyed by God’s people. Barth asks how can it be that a people who follow the One whose whole life was about total self-giving can exist only as selfish benefactors of Christ’s work. We need to rethink each of the means of grace from the standpoint of nourishing a people for mission. What I mean by nourishing *for mission* is not that that it equips people to do evangelism; I hope it does that. But I mean something more than that. We

need to ask how can the means of grace equip us to receive the benefits of Christ as stewards called to make them known to others. N.T. Wright suggests that a church that understands the covenant simply in terms of benefits is like a mailman who believes all the letters in his bag are just for him! Rethinking the means of grace does not mean eclipsing the dimension of nourishing the church for its salvation. It asks how the means of grace can also equip a people who understand they exist for the sake of the world.

Another aspect of the internal life of the church has to do with structures. This is an unfinished agenda. Many of our congregational, denominational, and ecumenical structures hinder us from being faithful in our missional calling. What kinds of structures do we need that would enable us to be missional.

Mission can also challenge the seminary in terms of its theology and theological education. Three or four decades ago Bosch, Conn, Newbigin and many others point out that the divisions of our theological disciplines, the method and content of theology, and the way we do theological education developed at a time when the church had forgotten its missionary calling. As the church in the Third World exploded in the middle of the 20th century many of these mission leaders rejected western theological education because they believed that it was shaped by the Enlightenment. They probed what theology and theological education might look like if mission was central to all disciplines and to the enterprise as a whole. Much of their insight has gone unheeded. Today with institutions for theological education in trouble, perhaps it is again time to recover their insights. If the mission of God and the missional nature of the church are central to the Bible how would that reshape theology and theological education? In the second chapter of my book I take a first step by sketching what a missional theology might look like.

A third area that comes to mind is evangelism. Perhaps it is particularly appropriate for me to mention this in a journal with roots in the Southern Baptist denomination. This has certainly been one of your strong points and emphases through the years. I wholeheartedly endorse that. Of course, evangelism has never been eclipsed. But times are changing and we need to ask some hard questions about evangelism in our growing neopagan context. Has it been too individualistic? And why has the biblical category of the kingdom of God—so central to the “evangelism” of Jesus—disappeared from evangelism? Why have we simply emphasized the future bene-

fits of the gospel without including the demands as Jesus did? Has this kind of evangelism weakened our discipleship from the outset? Has our evangelism been too programmatic or methodological? Have we separated evangelism from everyday life including our life in the public square? I believe a broader view of mission and a fresh understanding of our new missionary situation will call us to rethink how we practice evangelism.

STR: *You speak about mission to western culture in the volume. In your view, what momentous challenges face the Western Church that need to be addressed?*

Goheen: Lesslie Newbigin suggested that a missiology of western culture had to be a priority on the agenda of missiology. Many have concurred, but interestingly, few have attempted to articulate the contours of such a missiology. David Bosch wrote a little tract, published posthumously, that described those contours. He noted that this should have been part of his bigger book, but that the realization of the importance of the issue came too late to be included.

There were two reasons that this was urgent according to Newbigin. First, because the church in the West had confined mission to other parts of the world, he believed there was a need to wrestle with the same issues in our own context. In fact, he believed that the church in the West was the most syncretistic church in the world! Second, western culture is becoming a global culture being spread around the world in the processes of globalization through business, economics, education, technology, media, popular culture, and so on. Therefore, there is a need to analyze western culture from the standpoint of mission and foster a missionary encounter with this culture.

In my book I speak of three important tasks in this regard. The first is concerned with our understanding the gospel itself: the gospel has been adapted to western culture in such a way that it scarcely presents a radical call to conversion. We have individualized and privatized the gospel; we need to recover it as public truth. We have propositionalized and fragmented the gospel; we need to recover it as the true story of the world. We have often made the gospel a message about otherworldly salvation; we need to recover it as an announcement about God restoring creation and human life now and in the future.

The second task is concerned with the church: we need to recover our missional identity as a people who exist for the

sake of the world. Our Christendom past has caused us to be preoccupied with the inner life of the church and our own salvation. We need to be reoriented toward the world.

The third task is concerned with culture: we have been deceived by the myth of a Christian culture or the myth of a secular or pluralistic culture that is supposedly religiously neutral. These myths have hindered us from analyzing our culture properly. We are the only culture in history and in the world today—very odd indeed!—that doesn't realize that the worldview shaping our culture is religious and in conflict with the gospel. We need a deeper understanding of the religious nature of humanism—how it is in conflict with the gospel, and how the gospel says both *yes* and *no* to it. It is the *no*, the countercultural aspect of an encounter with our culture that needs to be recovered.

STR: *You address mission in majority world contexts as well. Your global survey was very helpful in this regard. In light of your analysis, how must the Church witness in majority world contexts?*

Goheen: I don't think there is just one way to witness to the gospel in the majority world contexts. It will differ from place to place. A look at the major struggles in various macrocultural settings is a helpful way to illustrate the differences. The African church has lived much of its life in the shadow of an outright racist rejection of its traditional culture by the West including, sadly, Christian missionaries. What about that traditional culture is good? This question is complicated by the powerful cultures both of the West entering Africa in globalization and of Islam descending from North Africa. The Asian church faces different issues. It lives as a minority religion in the midst of very powerful religions. These religions do not see themselves as occupying a private, spiritual realm as we in the West misunderstand religion. They believe these religions are culturally formative worldviews. How can the church live in the midst of this kind of religious pluralism? The Latin American church lives in a setting where over three-quarters of the population live in poverty as a result of unjust global and domestic structures as well as corrupt local powers. What does the gospel say to situations of economic, political, and social injustice? Of course, there are many differences within the various areas of these macrocultural contexts, and there are other contexts not mentioned. This is rather an illustration of how witness in various settings will differ. It is important to know well and understand deeply the context in which we are set.

I end the survey of the global church in mission by observing that there are common issues the church faces in every part of the world—how to relate evangelism to social issues, relating the gospel to its cultural setting, religious pluralism, the impact of western culture, religious pluralism, and urban mission. But even here there are major differences from place to place. One can only understand and practice mission faithfully as one attends to their particular place and the challenges it raises.

STR: *One of the significant features of your work (as it has been for years) is rich biblical and theological grounding for Christian mission. Why is this so important for you?*

Goheen: The quick answer is that is important because the Bible is the Word of God. Our mission is only authentic and faithful to the degree it is aligned with the Scriptures. But our new setting calls for a fresh approach to Scripture. One of the things that has unwittingly happened in the past is that we have used the Bible selectively to authenticate what we already knew mission to be beforehand. We knew mission was cross-cultural activity and so we found verses in Scripture that fit that paradigm. It is a blessing that we are now struggling in a new global situation that won't allow us to simply repeat the biblical foundations of previous generations. We are required to return to Scripture and ask: what does the Bible say?

A number of things are becoming clear in this process. First, mission is not simply one task of the church that can be appended to the rest of the church's ministry. The mission of God is the central motif of Scripture. The mission of the church as it participates in God's mission is central to its very being and identity. It defines the role the church is called to play in the biblical story. Second, we cannot simply treat various texts in isolation from the whole story of God's mission. Rather the Bible tells one unfolding story of redemption, and we must ask how the overarching theme of mission impacts every text. And finally, we have to take seriously the literary structures of entire books. For example, the Great Commission is the climactic moment in the whole book of Matthew. When one understands the structure and narrative of Matthew's gospel, those last five verses taken on a much deeper significance. A missional hermeneutic that probes some of these questions is developing among biblical scholars, and this is exciting.

If our understanding and practice of mission is to be authentic, we must return to the Scriptures and allow them to

speak to us and shape our mission today. But we also need fresh theological reflection in the area of a theology of mission as well as a missional theology. In terms of a theology of mission I believe distinctions like mission of God and mission of the church, missional intention and missional dimension, mission and missions can be helpful toward rethinking a theology of mission for the global church today. In terms of a missional theology, we need to ask how the centrality of mission in Scripture shapes the whole spectrum of the theological disciplines—biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, so-called ‘practical’ theology, and so on. Only then will we be able to train pastors with the missional consciousness they need to be faithful to Scripture.

STR: *In the Church today, we often hear of relating the gospel to the whole of life. But this could be understood in a variety of ways. In your view, how do you relate the gospel to the whole of life? Is this the same thing as “mission”?*

Goheen: The gospel that Jesus first preached was a gospel of the kingdom (Mark 1:15). That is, it was an announcement that in Jesus and by the Spirit, God was coming back in power to defeat all powers that had corrupted creation and to restore the entirety of human life and the whole creation to again live under the rule of God. The gospel of the kingdom is about “creation healed” as Hans Küng puts it. So the gospel is, by its very nature, “related to the whole of life” in the sense that it is a message about the restoration of all of human life to God’s original creation design and purpose.

Mission is about embodying, demonstrating, and announcing that gospel in the midst of the world. It is a matter of making known in life, deed, and word the good news that God is renewing all things—including the whole of human life. If the gospel is about being restored to being fully human as God intended it to be, then mission is about the vocation of the church to show to the world what that looks like across the whole spectrum of human life—personally, socially, culturally, economically, politically, educationally, aesthetically, and so on.

Large questions remain about what that looks like. David Bosch has identified five different approaches to relating the gospel to public life—Constantinian, pietist, Anabaptist, liberationist, and reformational. He dismisses the first two as unbiblical since they narrow the gospel to an otherworldly or “churchly” message. He sees the other three as both offering insight and harboring dangers. As I have mentioned I am lo-

cated in the reformational tradition but I believe it is important to know the dangers as well as the benefits of that tradition. I have learned a great deal from the critiques of the other traditions.

Perhaps it is important to observe that the mission of the church in the public life of culture will vary according to different kinds of cultural settings. The Bible already shows us this. In Romans and 1 Peter it appears to encourage the church to be involved in the various spheres of public life in a context where there is a degree of freedom. In Revelation the same comprehensive mission calls the church to resistance and suffering in a totalitarian setting. Sometimes the church will have social and cultural power, and they are called to use it in a non-coercive way. At other times, a suffering witness is all that the church may have to witness to the Lordship of Christ. Today in the West, the biggest danger may be to resist the privatization of our faith that reduces the gospel to individual, “spiritual”, and ecclesial matters. This is precisely the danger the early church resisted when it proclaimed that “Jesus is Lord” (*kurios*) and when it referred to itself as a “public assembly” (*ecclesia*) rather than a religious body (*thiasos, heranos*).

STR: *You have a keen sense of the history of Christian mission and missiology. Why is history important?*

Goheen: In his massive book on the history of secularization of the West, Charles Taylor says that it is indispensable to tell a story in order to understand our culture. That it is the only way we can understand who we are and where we’re at today. The reason is that our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misunderstand the present if we neglect the past. So narrating the story is not an optional extra but the only way to understand our present. I believe that is right, not just if we are to understand our current cultural situation, but if we are to understand our missional calling as a church. We have to comprehend how we have understood and practiced mission in the intervening centuries between the New Testament and today if we are going to be faithful in the present.

STR: *You devote an entire chapter to the topic of urban mission, labeling it the “new frontier.” But surely the Church has impacted urban areas since its inception! What is distinctive about the need of urban mission today?*

Goheen: Indeed, the church has been part of the city and witnessing to Christ since its inception. But I believe there are a number of reasons that urban mission is urgent today. First, the sheer growth of cities in the past 100 years has been dramatic. 14% of the world’s population lived in cities at the be-

ginning of the 20th century and it is expected that by 2050 that will rise to 80%. As Tim Keller put it, in cities “you have more ‘image of God’ per square inch than anywhere else in the world.” Second, cities are centers of cultural power and influence. They are the nerve centers that disproportionately impact the rest of the country as well as the world. You find political power, institutions of higher education, business and finance, venues for leisure and entertainment, media centers and more in the city. Impact the city and you’ll impact the world. The third reason is the remarkable poverty and socioeconomic need that is found in cities. Today the poor are primarily found in the cities. Over a billion people live in absolute poverty and over 75% of that number live in urban slums without water, sanitation or basic services. Those numbers are expected to climb in the future. A fourth reason is that cities in every part of the world are the place where western culture is making deep inroads into public life through the processes of globalization. This is the place of a missionary encounter with the powerful global culture. The final reason we need to highlight urban mission is the decreasing presence of Christians in the city. In 1900 70% of the population in the city was Christian yet today it is about 40%. So while the urban context has never been absent in church history there is need today to highlight this context.

STR: *You have planted churches and worked with church planters and pastors on a regular basis. In your estimation, what do urban church planters and pastors need most to equip them for mission?*

Goheen: This book offers insight into the mission of the church in light of Scripture. Certainly they need insight into these issues and should be struggling with all of these areas. And so all need a good education and sound training. But there is something far more fundamental that church planters need. Without diminishing the importance of insight in all these areas I would want to highlight and prioritize three things. First of all, pastors and church planters need a deep and rich prayer life. The kingdom comes as the Spirit works in response to prayer. We western people too easily capitulate to what one author calls a managerial missiology or ecclesiology. We plan and strategize before we pray. The power of the gospel and the life of the Spirit come—to use John Calvin’s metaphor—as we dig up their benefits through the shovel of prayer. Second, a confidence in the power and truth of the gospel that comes from a life rooted in it. The kingdom comes into the world through the seed of the gospel. Before we can proclaim it and

make it known our own individual and corporate lives must be deeply rooted in it. Only through prayer and an ongoing encounter with God in the Scriptures will we be prepared for our missional calling. But this must be communal—and this is the third point. Mission has not been given to individuals alone but to a community. Mission will mean living out the “one-anothers” of the New Testament, an important aspect of biblical ecclesiology. Prayer and the Word of God in community: this is how we are rooted in Jesus the Christ. The line from the old hymn *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty* has so often come to my mind when I think of the difficulties facing the church in mission: “Ponder anew what the Almighty can do if with his love he befriends you.”

STR: *The word “contextualization” and “missions” often go together, but sometimes in contentious ways. How do you think your book helps Christians with contextualization?*

Goheen: Contextualization is a difficult, and as you mention, controversial issue. But it is essential to the gospel. It is clear that it is not a matter of whether we will contextualize the gospel; it is only a matter of whether we will do it faithfully or unfaithfully. The gospel by its very nature demands contextualization as it will always take cultural shape. Therefore reflection on what that means will be essential if the church is not to be accommodated to the idolatrous forces of its culture.

The western church has not always understood this. This misunderstanding comes from a view of truth as timeless ideas. It has also come from a long history of the gospel being limited to a western form. However, the advent of missions to other parts of the world has challenged all of that. Trying to communicate and embody the gospel in other parts of the world began to shatter this misunderstanding. So contextualization was associated with missions and the process of trying to insert the gospel, so to speak, in new cultural contexts. However, the growth of the church in the non-Western world has made it clear that contextualization is not just a pedagogical strategy for communicating the gospel in new cultural settings. It is constitutive of the very gospel itself. The good news will always take cultural form.

Sometimes the word “contextualization” is heard as making the gospel familiar and relevant only. And indeed that is important. The gospel must be heard and seen as good news in each cultural setting. Some feel the need then to add words like “prophetic” to say that the gospel not only affirms culture and speaks a relevant word to it, but also, it judges the idolatry

of culture. There are various models of contextualization but the best ones in my judgment, represented by Bavinck, Conn, Newbigin, and Kraemer, for example, use the word contextualization both to affirm the creational good of every culture as well as to challenge the idolatrous spirits at work in every culture. The gospel speaks both a “yes” and a “no.” This is the pattern already within the New Testament, for example, when the gospel of John or the letters of Paul speak good news into the pagan Roman setting. The crossing of cultural boundaries from the Jewish to the Greco-Roman world affords us biblical insight into how contextualization took place very early in the history of the church. Indeed Dean Flemming shows in his excellent book *Contextualization in the New Testament* that this is the pattern of the entire New Testament.

So I think my book may help readers see that contextualization is not just about relevance but also has a countercultural thrust. Introducing readers to the robust model of Bavinck, Kraemer, and Newbigin should challenge the simplistic notion that contextualization relativizes truth. It should also provide deep insight into what faithful contextualization looks like.

STR: *In your view, what do you hope your volume offers so that the Church might serve our Lord better?*

Goheen: I hope for many things. First, I would hope that this book will help the reader reflect again on the nature and content of the gospel. If the church is not grounded in the gospel, it cannot make it known. As I suggested earlier, our lack of a critical consciousness of western culture has led us down the path of a reductionist gospel, and this has crippled our mission. Second, I would hope that reading this book will challenge the church in the West to understand its missional nature. Mission is not just one task given to us but it defines our identity. What does this look like in our western setting? Third, I would hope that each chapter and section would provide insight into the various aspects of the church’s mission that would enable us all to be more faithful. Certainly topics like the calling of laity in the public life of culture, relating the gospel to culture, living in the midst of religious pluralism, understanding our urban future, locating and strategizing to make the gospel known to the lost—all these and many more are essential to our calling. One day we will stand before Christ to give an account of how faithful we have been. I pray that this book may raise the consciousness of Christians to

various aspects of the task and provide insight that may help them to be more faithful in it.

STR: *You have worked faithfully for years planting and pastoring churches alongside of your academic responsibilities. This book develops out of those years of ecclesial and academic service. What fruit have you seen emerge from the approach to Christian mission offered in this volume?*

Goheen: This is a missiology that, indeed, has come out of two contexts—teaching missiology and worldview within an academic setting, and struggling with these issues in the context of the local congregation. By way of example, I can point to two places where these have met. The first was a pastoral calling I was involved with in the first decade of the 21st century. I had just finished my PhD dissertation on Newbigin. I was invited to become a preaching pastor at an inner city church that had shrunk to a small number of mainly older folks. Since I had a university post I was given permission to invite one of my former students to become the senior pastor. One of the reasons I decided to accept this invitation was that I was curious if and how the things I had studied in missiology and missional ecclesiology for over a decade might have traction in the local congregation. Together, we self-consciously worked out many of the things that I have written about in this book. To make a long story short, we saw that church renewed, grow significantly, and plant another church.

A second situation is one I am working in today in Phoenix. Not many years ago I received a call from some pastors who were interested in the kind of missiology I was working on and how it would translate into their local congregations and context. I began to work with some of those leaders and am now in the process of training pastors and struggling with what theological education looks like if it takes mission seriously. We have seen some very exciting things take place in that setting. Perhaps most noteworthy is a program of discipleship, now involving twenty or thirty churches training 150-200 folk each year for their callings in the public square.

STR: *Mike, thanks for giving of your time to talk with us about your important volume. We pray that it would continue to serve to lift high the Name of Jesus.*