Review

Goheen, Michael W. *The Core of the Christian Faith: Living the Gospel for the Sake of the World*. Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2025. 239 pages ISBN 9781540964793.

By Reuben Bredenhof, PhD

When I was attending university around twenty-five years ago in Hamilton, Ontario, I signed up for a micro-course on the topic of mission in the Bible. For several weeks, about twenty of us gathered every Wednesday night at a local church to have our minds blown and hearts stirred by the grand narrative of Scripture: the story of God restoring his world through Jesus the Christ. I remember scribbling notes as fast as my pen would allow, trying to capture on paper even a little of the breadth of knowledge and the fiery enthusiasm of our instructor.

Our teacher was a man whose name I was going to hear more often in the subsequent years of my seminary training and ministry, Dr. Michael W. Goheen. At the time, he was a professor at Redeemer University, where for several years he taught courses in worldview, missions, and biblical theology. The course was a highly compressed version of material that he was lecturing on and writing about in those days, and it was material that Dr. Goheen has continued to develop and share over the last few decades through his teaching and writing.

Mike Goheen is presently a professor of missional theology at Calvin Theological Seminary and at the Missional Training Center in Phoenix, Arizona. His latest book, *The Core of the Christian Faith: Living the Gospel for the Sake of the World*, reprises familiar themes from his other writings and presentations. It is written at a popular level and illustrated with many helpful diagrams; Goheen describes it as a concentrated summary of what he believes "to be the very core of the Christian faith that has the power, by the Spirit, to form and shape God's people for their vocation" (xi). Through this book, his desire is to equip church leaders to disciple their congregations in the meaning of Scripture's grand story, so that they can live faithfully for the sake of the unbelieving world. At the heart of Scripture's story, says Goheen, is a missional dynamic that has the power to motivate and shape God's people.

Goheen unfolds this dynamic across four sections of the book, giving attention to these components: "the gospel of the kingdom, the Bible as the true story of the world, the church as the new humanity for the sake of the world, and the missionary encounter of God's people with their culture" (9).

In the first several chapters, Goheen shows that all of Scripture tells the single story of God's purpose in this world. This material is a delightful tour through redemptive history, as Goheen argues compellingly for Scripture's unity around the telling of one coherent story. The story is this: God's purpose is to bring healing, reconciliation, and unity to his entire creation in and through Christ. His grand purpose from Genesis to Revelation is to rid the whole creation of evil and to create for himself a people who are redeemed from every tribe and nation. In the biblical context, salvation is a holistic reality, because sin's malignant effects are embodied in every aspect of human life, including this world's cultural, political, economical, and social structures. It is now the church's privilege and calling to share in this cosmic restorative mission of God in the world.

As indicated by the book's subtitle, the focus of the church's mission centres on living the gospel, or the believers' role and presence in the world. Goheen sees an instructive parallel to how God intended Old Testament Israel to be a rallying point for blessing the nations, "a display-people demonstrating to the world what true humanity looks like." (120) He underlines the well-known *missio Dei* contention that "mission" is not primarily either speaking, doing, or even going—although it includes all three. Rather, mission is essentially a matter of *being*; mission is what the church is. Especially through the distinctive character of the church's life, she will embody for the world what it means for humans to know and fear God.

At places, the reader sees Goheen trying to strike a balance of being, doing, and speaking, and wonders whether he is treading carefully in response to past criticisms of *missio Dei* theology. For instance, he mentions that "while some traditions have introduced a Jesus stripped of the kingdom, others have focused on the kingdom such that it eclipses the person of Jesus." (49) He is lamenting how an emphasis on God's kingdom may well inspire a crusade of social development without anchoring these activities in the person and work of Jesus and the personal nature of the gospel—all doing and no speaking, perhaps. At the same time, he notes that other church traditions sometimes abstract Jesus from the radical nature of his teachings... and overstress the need for a personal relationship with him—all being and little doing. Indubitably, deed and word ought to be inseparable partners in the church's mission of advancing God's purpose: how will people know Jesus and do his good will in this world without receiving instruction? And how will believers demonstrate that they know and love Jesus unless by doing his will?

Goheen also helpfully conceptualizes the shape of the church as an ellipse, with two focal points: the gathered life of the church, where God's people meet to celebrate and nurture the new life that they have in Christ by the Spirit, and the scattered life,

"where we witness to God's saving power in life, word, and deed onward to the ends of the earth." (147) Missional theology is sometimes critiqued for its underemphasis on the life of the local church, for its disparagement of ecclesiastical "maintenance" work because of the church's preoccupation with expansion. Here too, it may be that Goheen is trying to counter critique by positing his two elliptical points: "If we should lose the vital inner life of the church, we cut ourselves off from the very springs that nurture resurrection life for witness. But if we should lose a vigorous witness in the world, we risk turning the church into an introverted, self-absorbed community that has forgotten its true calling." (147) This is wisdom that reveals the need for an ongoing commitment to teaching and discipling so that the church is not only internally lively but also missionally oriented—indeed, the former quality is critical to the latter.

The final section of the book relates to how the church can engage the surrounding culture with biblical truth. Goheen asks this important question: "How can Christians live as a distinctive people, in enclaves of the new creation, outposts of the kingdom, as a counter-cultural alternative to the idolatrous dominant culture, while still living within that culture?" (175) In answer to that question, some Christians advocate assimilation, others advise withdrawal. Goheen says that our approach should be that of missionary encounter, bringing—and of course *living*—the gospel in the context of the culture where God has placed us.

In a much earlier chapter (ch. 5), Goheen outlined various reductions of this gospel; for instance, that it only pertains to individual salvation, or to the atonement, or to a right relationship with God. As he explains "missionary encounter," Goheen offers a surprising paraphrase of Romans 1:16, "The gospel is the power of God to renew and heal all aspects of our culture." (177) While few would dispute the transformative power of the gospel on an individual and even cultural level, one wonders if Goheen is not overly optimistic about the ability of "all aspects of our culture" to be transformed through a missionary encounter, given the profundity of sin's effects in this world. It is also striking that the text he paraphrases, Romans 1:16-17, expresses the importance of understanding salvation in a personal way, one that pertains to the ("Jew and Gentile") individual's righteous standing before God only by faith in Jesus Christ. It is those who have believed in Christ's gospel by the power of his Spirit who will live distinctively in this world. Good things like cultural transformation are fruits of a deeper root: the gospel's transformation of the sinner's heart. This transformation underlines the preeminent importance of verbally announcing the gospel in the church's missionary encounter with culture: not only doing, or living, but speaking.

As he seeks to equip churches for their missionary encounter with the world, Goheen offers a high-level survey of contemporary ideologies, such as postmodernity and consumerism. After more than a dozen chapters that are rich with biblical theology, these chapters are markedly more philosophical or historical in tone, with relatively brief reflections on how the Christian church might engage with each of these rival narratives. It is helpful material insofar as suggesting points of contact with, for instance, the postmodernist's search for identity, and pointing to the answer that the church may provide about what it is to be truly human. Nevertheless, the philosophical emphasis in the closing five chapters may give a reader pause over the book's title, whether it is not somewhat misnamed, more "cultural apologetics" than "core of the Christian faith."

As a book written at a popular level, this volume cannot lay out fulsome strategies for missionary engagement; its stated purpose is to form and motivate believers with the power of Scripture's story of redemption. In this it certainly succeeds.

In this volume, the voice of Mike Goheen that I heard a few decades ago clearly resonates. He writes with an engaging warmth and with a genuine passion to see restoration in this broken world, seeking to help believers integrate our life and witness around the centrality of the gospel of Christ.

For eighteen years Reuben Bredenhof served as a pastor to congregations in Canada and Australia. He completed a PhD at St. Mary's University, Twickenham, exploring the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16:19-31, published in the LNTS series (Bloomsbury, 2019). He is now the Professor of Ministry and Mission at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton. He has written several books, including *The Ministry of Small Things* (P&R, 2026), *Thank God* (RHB, 2023), and *Weak Pastor, Strong Christ* (RHB, 2021).

Author Copyright.

Reuben Bredenhof, review of *The Core of Christian Faith: Living the Gospel for the Sake of the World,* Michael W. Goheen, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research, www.nimer.ca n Research, www.nimer.ca (November 19, 2024).