

Let the Nations Be Glad

by John Piper—A review of the third edition

I agreed to review this book because some twenty years ago I read the first 1993 edition which was presented to me at Reformed Theological Seminary as one of, if not *the* best modern book on the subject of missions. In my opinion, this edition continues to warrant this glowing recommendation. I will give a brief synopsis of the contents, a few specific applications that may be pertinent for our church, and my personal reflections.

First some general observations: This is one of the earliest of Pastor Piper's many books. It introduces several of the well known catch phrases that have defined his ministry. Examples are, "Missions exists because worship doesn't;" "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him;" and after the Westminster Shorter Catechism question one, "The chief end of *God* is to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever!" Most of the book is quite accessible with short sections following clear titles which reflect their main point, but Piper does include some extended biblical exegesis in a couple of chapters. All his points are supported with careful references to Scripture, which are voluminous throughout. Piper's main influence is the writings of Jonathan Edwards, especially his *The End For Which God Created The World*, which Piper quotes in its entirety in his later book, *God's Passion for His Glory*. *Let the Nations Be Glad* has some 280 pages organized into several sections.

Following a brief Preface and Acknowledgements is a new Introduction to the third edition entitled *New Realities in World Christianity and Twelve Appeals to Prosperity Preachers*. Here Piper discusses the shift in God's providence away from the West and toward what has become known as "the global south," including the Middle East, Africa, South America, and China. In reflecting on the theology that the West has exported to these regions, he presents twelve challenges to preachers of what has been called "the prosperity gospel," showing in an irenic style how it differs from Scripture.

The main content of the book consists of seven chapters under three headings which emphasize the sovereignty of God in missions.

Part 1—Making God Supreme in Missions: The Purpose, the Power, and the Price

Chapter 1, *The Supremacy of God in Missions through Worship*, sets forth Piper’s premise that the worship of God is both the goal and the fuel for missions. Missions are temporary for this age, worship is forever. He introduces the concept of God’s passion for himself—a thread which runs throughout the book—and God’s expressed desire to be glorified for his own mercy and grace.

Chapter 2, *The supremacy of God in Missions through Prayer*, emphasizes that missions is analogous to war in which prayer is a weapon. He calls prayer “a war-time walkie-talkie” not a “domestic intercom.” Yet he is quick to point out that prayer is not the supreme weapon, but is a means of empowering the word of God which is central to all outreach.

Chapter 3, *The Supremacy of God in Missions through Suffering*, expounds Jesus’ command to “take up your cross” and many similar Scriptures to prove that God intends to use the sufferings of his messengers to promote the gospel in the world. He gives six reasons why this is so. A main point is that the worth of something (or *someone* in this case) is measured by what we are willing to pay to have it (or in this case, *him*.)

Part 2—Making God Supreme in Missions: The Necessity and Nature of the Task

Chapter 4, *The Supremacy of Christ as the Conscious Focus of All Saving Faith*, asks three questions: 1) Will anyone experience eternal conscious torment and God’s wrath? 2) Is the work of Christ necessary for eternal salvation? and 3) Is it necessary for people to hear of Christ to be saved? All these he answers in the affirmative with sound exegesis of Scripture over against the arguments and supposed biblical proofs used by those writers who disagree.

Chapter 5, *The Supremacy of Christ among “All the Nations,”* attempts to narrow down the definition of that last phrase as used in the Great Commission of Matthew 28. He addresses, again with rigorous Scriptural exegesis, what such a “nation” is, and concludes that Jesus means a people group of intermediate size. At issue is the question of whether God intends his missionaries to focus on saving the maximum number of people possible within a people group, or, as the apostles Paul and John saw their ministries, to focus instead on reaching more of such groups. He presents four reasons why the latter is more glorifying to God.

Part 3—Making God Supreme in Missions: The Practical Outworking of Compassion and Worship

Chapter 6 bears the rather unwieldy title *A Passion for God's Supremacy and Compassion for Man's Soul: Jonathan Edwards on the Unity of Motives for World Missions*. Here Piper acknowledges Edward's deep influence on his life and ministry. Piper's sometimes controversial statement "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him," is straight out of Edwards. His main subject is to investigate the supposed tension between doing missions primarily for the sake of God's glory vs. doing them mainly for the goal of saving men's souls. He argues that rightly understood, these two goals are in essence the same.

Chapter 7, *The Inner Simplicity and Outer Freedom of Worldwide Worship*, addresses the shift from O.T. worship with its "come and see" emphasis on the details and location of external corporate worship, to the N.T. "go and tell" perspective which says almost nothing about external forms, but emphasizes worship from the heart "in Spirit and in truth," regardless of physical location. This provides for great freedom among and between people groups for differing forms of corporate worship. Piper gives several ways as to how this diversity brings increased glory to God.

Piper's final chapter, titled simply *Conclusions*, summarizes and brings together his main points from the preceding chapters in a clear and powerful way. A supplementary essay, *The Supremacy of God in Going and Sending*, by Piper's colleague Tom Steller, elucidates the difference between a church's "having" missionaries they support vs. intentionally "sending" them. There are three useful indices to all this material by Subject, Person referenced, and Scripture passage.

Some applications which I thought might be worth considering in our church

- 1) Piper makes the point that there is a direct relationship between a church's explicit zeal and passion for the glory of God as expressed in their corporate worship, and their missionary involvement. I think this applies to our evangelism outreach as well—even though, as Piper notes, evangelism is not the same as missions. In typical style, he writes, "The zeal of the church for the glory of her King will not rise until pastors and mission leaders and seminary teachers make much more of the King. When the glory of God himself saturates our preaching and teaching and conversations and writings, and when he predominates above our talk of methods and strategies and psychological buzzwords and cultural trends, then the people might begin to feel that he is the central reality of their lives and that the spread of his glory is more important than all their possessions and all their plans."

2) On the topic of coming to church with the attitude of *giving* rather than *getting*, Piper, perhaps surprisingly, comes down in favor of the latter. People should come to church to get as much of God as they can! The more satisfied and thus joyful we are in him, the more his name is glorified and lifted up. This has significant implications as to how we view and structure our ministries.

3) Piper makes a point that Scripturally there is no such thing as “retirement” as we think of it in our culture today. Rather, this is a time of life when we have increased time (and often resources) to be missionaries of the Gospel in new ways. I find this personally convicting and perhaps applicable to other older members of our congregation.

4) Lastly, there is great encouragement here for churches to be intentional in their missionary outreach. If Piper’s exegesis is correct concerning God’s intent, then we should be strategically sending at least some missionaries to unreached people groups and providing a substantial portion of their support.

Personal reflections

To me, this book was and is like a breath of fresh air in the midst of the many books on missions that deal primarily with methods, psychology, contextualization and cultural sensitivity rather than why and where missionaries should go, whom they should target, and what message should they should take with them—all according to God’s agenda which is not necessarily ours. This book also bears reading, not only for its specific content, but as an example of how to diligently look to Scripture and bring it to bear on contemporary church issues of all kinds.

Whether or not you find his conclusions compelling (as I do,) the overriding tone of Piper’s writings in general is one of heartfelt passion for God’s glory and commitment to be guided by his word. I find his style inspiring, challenging and refreshing, and suspect that you may also.

If you read only one book on missions and outreach in general, I recommend this one.

Jim Bailey

Westminster Presbyterian Church

May 25, 2017