

LET THE NATIONS BE GLAD

A Book Report

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John Piper's book *Let the Nations Be Glad* is essentially the Christian Hedonist guide to missions. Missions is all about the glory of God and the pleasure of man. This book report will seek to summarize Piper's argument, namely that missions is a servant to impassioned worship of God, and to examine its correctness and development, including the many sub-points and applications. To do this, however, first Piper himself demands some attention.

John Piper is a prolific writer, the founder of evangelical ministry *Desiring God*, and former pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He holds a B.A. from Wheaton College, a Master of Divinity from Fuller Theological Seminary, and a Doctor in Theology from the University of Munich. His unique theme, as noted above, has been for many years Christian Hedonism, his view that life is about pursuing God and His glory as man's chief pleasure. This has been slightly controversial, mostly for nominal reasons, and he has defended his position in a number of works such as the original *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. He has attained a large following of evangelicals, particularly Reformed Baptists.

In his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*, Piper applies his Christian Hedonism to missions by means of a simple claim: "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man."¹ The book reads somewhat like a sermon series on the topic, with each chapter providing a different explanation or application of his thesis, each somewhat independent while nonetheless working toward a single picture of missions as the means to worship, the true goal in which men enjoy God.

In part one, Piper explains the basic tenets of his missiological proposal. The first chapter is largely concerned with his initial claim: missions is for the sake of worship. Missions is not first

¹ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010) Kindle ebook, chapter 1.

about helping people, spiritually or socially; nor would the Church be correct to see missions as its true purpose. Missions has a particular place, and that place is the glorification of God unto worship among all nations. In chapter two, he expands this insight into the realm of prayer. He argues that “prayer is primarily a wartime walkie-talkie” by which the people of God may accomplish their missionary task, which is really a war for the worship of God. Prayer is the line by which Christians may acquire aid and supplies, and must never become a domestic intercom. Chapter three proceeds to show the means of this warfare as suffering. Because God and His glory are of ultimate worth, the joy and call of the Christian are to give his life away, even literally, to see that worth better and see it enjoyed by others.

With these basics covered, Piper moves on in part two to a more polemical mode. In chapter four, he defends the absolute necessity of conscious faith in the name of Christ for the salvation of every individual as a means of safeguarding the motivation for missions and the glory of God in His Son. He uses “the supremacy of Christ as the conscious focus of all saving faith” and some biblical studies to argue against universalism, annihilationism, pluralism, and inclusivism. Then, in chapter five, he turns to the question of whether missions ought to concern itself with maximizing the number of saved people without a focus on diversity or attempt to reach all people groups, regardless of how many from each are saved. He answers with extensive word studies and ultimately argues that God is more glorified by the diversity of people who love His worth than by simply increasing numbers.

Finally, in part three Piper tries to apply these insights in two more ways. Chapter six argues that compassion for the lost is still part of missions and in no way conflicts with the glory of God as the primary goal. This chapter amounts to a short case for Christian Hedonism. Then chapter seven argues that mission work should not worry much about the form which worship

takes among the evangelized, since the New Testament reveals God to care almost exclusively about an inner, subjective worship experience rather than anything outward and tangible.

So, does all of this succeed? Does Piper convince that missions is subordinate to joyful worship, and indeed is but a means to that end? This reviewer finds the case quite plausible. The point of missions as the means by which God is known and loved among all nations seems almost obvious when set out in those terms. The New Testament seems to take it for granted that there is more to the Christian life than mission, something even prior to mission, and Piper correctly identifies it with simply knowing and worshipping God. Piper's case on this point is solid, though a few disagreements deserve note.

Firstly, Piper does not convince that God's self-glorification is truly the one and singular end of all which He does. Piper imports this thesis mostly from Jonathan Edwards, and while it superficially has some biblical support, it strikes as rather reductionist. The ends of God need not be collapsed into one, for although God is simple, His simplicity does not fall into any one category available to human reason. Moreover, Piper's conception seems devastating to the concept of love. While he proves effortlessly that God's self-glorification does not have to contradict a benevolent posture toward man, he does not address the more fundamental question of what love is, and whether it is logically or Scripturally possible to speak of "love" when the object is a means to an end. His biblical case as well seems to neglect the redemptive-historical dimensions of God's purpose to use Israel's story to make His name known among all nations. To summarize this objection, a highly skilled doctor who loves poor and dying people may well seek to advertise his abilities and kindness all over the land, but this would not necessarily be seeking glory for his own sake but as a means to loving those who need him. Even though Piper allows for benevolence and self-glorification to correspond, he orders self-glorification as the ultimate and

the end, which seems biblically toxic to the very notion of love. This reviewer would be more inclined, if any such an assertion was necessary or possible, to place gratuitous love at the center of God's purposes.

A few other issues are also apparent. Piper's less prominent but still repeatedly visible antagonism to annihilationism seems bizarre and completely pointless whether the doctrine is true or false. He also seems to overstate the stakes in the case against inclusivism, and he does not well enough distinguish between the various forms it takes. He would have done well to note that doctrines along the same lines were extremely common even in the earlier days of the Church in its rapid expansion and missionary zeal. On the other hand, the out-of-hand rejection of pluralism seems entirely justified. This reviewer is also unconvinced that the vast word studies about *ethnos* and the like were strictly necessary, though the conclusions are agreeable.

One final contention is the seventh chapter in its entirety. Trying to focus on worship as an inner, subjective, spiritual experience seems biblically unjustified. In the New Testament, to be sure, the ceremonies and structures of the old order were dismantled in favor of something which penetrates much deeper into human existence, and the forms of worship in this age do not receive much explicit regulation, but it does not follow from this that the inner experience is all that really matters. This seems to be a rather Gnostic conception of worship in which the inner, spiritual man is sharply divisible from the outward, bodily man, and only the former counts for anything. In reality, however, body determines spirit, and spirit determines body. The outward forms are not extraneous but instead set the very nature and conditions of the inward experience. This is why Christ has instituted sacraments, why in the Old Testament God ordained an elaborate liturgical and cultic system, and why, most importantly, the Word became *flesh*. Piper's argument seems like that of a young man who, upon realizing that there is more than one legitimate way to structure

a government, concludes that structure itself must be unnecessary and crusades again all organized governance.

In the end, however, these flaws do not discredit John Piper's larger project and thesis in *Let the Nations Be Glad*. The main focus, that life and mission are all about loving and glorifying God, is incontrovertible, and none of the criticisms above nullify this. Other agreements have also been passed over in the interest of space (such as the deep appreciation for Piper's theology of prayer). Those who are interested in glorifying God, in advancing His mission, and seeing His grace known and loved among all nations would do well to read this book.

Bibliography

Piper, John. *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010. Kindle ebook.