

# The **Essential Role** of the **Family**



## in World Evangelization

**ROB RIENOW**

**T**hese are exciting times for followers of Jesus Christ! The Holy Spirit is moving all over the world bringing people to repentance and faith in our risen and reigning Savior. The Spirit is working in places of abundance and in places of persecution. We rejoice when we hear the news of revivals around the world, and we pray for them to spread. But large numbers of conversions and church plants are only the beginning of the spread of the gospel in a nation. For faith to remain in a land it must be driven not only by Bible-driven churches but also through the multi-generational ministry of the Christian family.

### **Europe has Fallen**

Five hundred years ago, transformational revivals spread across Europe. Entire nations were reshaped by passionate believers who had returned to the truths of only Scripture, only grace, only faith, only Christ, and all for the glory of God. Churches were planted. Missionaries were sent out. The world has never been the same.



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But consider the spiritual state of Europe today. It is estimated that only 1-2% of the population are born again.<sup>1</sup> During my family's mission trip to France in 2008 we talked with missionaries about the spiritual condition there. They expressed great concern about the rise of Islam in the country and how radical Islamists were filling France simply by having many children and raising them to follow Allah. I asked, "Are the Christian pastors encouraging young believers to pursue godly marriage and raise their children to impact the nation for Christ?" I'll never forget what they said. "There are very few young believers here to encourage."

How could this have happened? How can an entire continent go from spiritual vitality to spiritual desolation? While many factors were involved, the final answer is simple. The believers in Europe lost the souls of their children, generation after generation. If we do not "make disciples" of our own children and grandchildren spiritual decline is inevitable.

### **North America is Falling**

The church in North America is following the same tragic path. Since 1900, the percentage of Bible believing Christians has been in decline.

Researcher Thom Rainer affirms this heartbreaking reality. He led a study to determine what percentage of Americans claimed to be Christians based upon having put their faith in Christ. In other words, what percentage of Americans identify themselves as Christians and

understand that being a Christian means putting one's faith in Christ alone for salvation? Here's what he found. Among Americans born before 1946, 65 percent identified themselves as Christians and were able to articulate the basics of the gospel. For those born between 1946 and 1964, the number dropped to 35 percent. For those born between 1965 and 1976, it fell to a scant 15 percent. Finally, among Americans born between 1974 and 1994, only 4 percent of the population identified themselves as Christians and had trusted Christ alone for salvation.<sup>2</sup>

Evangelism and discipleship are in dire crisis, and it is a generational crisis. We're losing more of our own children to the world than we are winning adult converts to faith in Christ. As a result, the percentage of Bible-believing Christians in the United States is in steady decline.

How could this be happening? This is the age of mega-churches, mega-programming, mega-budgets, mega-conferences, and mega-leadership training. We have Christian books, DVDs, and curriculum for every age group on every subject. Our outreach events, service days, retreats, and short-term mission trips are never ending. We are doing more than ever before, but are we making disciples more than ever before? I am convinced the answer is no.

When it comes to youth and children's ministry, we must acknowledge that the "new experiment" has failed. The new experiment is age-segregated, church-building based, evangelism and discipleship of children. Parents drop them off. We split them up by age in different rooms in the building and "disciple" them. In terms of Christian history, this is a brand-new idea.

Slowly but surely, we abandoned the biblical model of family discipleship and delegated the spiritual training of our children to "professionals" at church. I led this model at a large church for over a decade. One of the unintended consequences of my ministry approach which systematically separated children from their parents was that parents were free to remain spiritually passive at home. After all, they were making sure that their son or daughter was involved in a "great youth group."

Our new model is a dramatic departure from the approach of the early church and the reformation. It was common practice for church leaders in the 1600s to regularly visit the home of each family in the church to assess whether or not the parents were discipling their children through the regular practice of family worship. In 1647, believers in Scotland published the Directory for Family Worship in which they wrote:

The assembly requires and appoints ministers to make diligent search and inquiry, whether there be among

them a family or families which neglect the duty of family worship. If such a family is found, the head of the family is to be admonished privately to amend his fault; and in case of his continuing therein, he is to be gravely and sadly reproved by the session; after which reproof, if he is found still to neglect family worship, let him be, for his obstinacy in such an offense, suspended and debarred from the Lord's supper, until he amend.<sup>3</sup>

Family worship was a major issue of church discipline. Why did these churches take it so seriously? Why did they invest so much time going from home to home to encourage and ensure that family worship was taking place? Family worship was a top priority because they were passionate about the Great Commission. They knew God had spoken clearly in the Bible that parents and grandparents were to take the lead in the spiritual training of their children and grandchildren. For them, a church could not be serious about the Great Commission if it was not serious about family worship.

Charles Spurgeon was deeply concerned about the changes which were occurring in Christian culture during the late 19th Century. In his article, "The Kind of Revival We Need," he wrote:

We deeply want a revival of family religion. The Christian family was the bulwark of

godliness in the days of the puritans, but in these evil times hundreds of families of so-called Christians have no family worship, no restraint upon growing sons, and no wholesome instruction or discipline. How can we hope to see the kingdom of our Lord advance when His own disciples do not teach His gospel to their own children? Oh, Christian men and women, be thorough in what you do and know and teach! Let your families be trained in the fear of God and be yourselves 'holiness unto the Lord,' so shall you stand like a rock amid the surging waves of error and ungodliness which rage around us.<sup>4</sup>

Spurgeon's message is desperately needed today! Godly men and women in growing churches receive the constant call to get involved in "ministry." Often "ministry" is synonymous with "volunteering at a church program." Spurgeon understood that "to see the kingdom of our Lord advance" ministry needed to begin at home.



Charles Spurgeon

## The Global Challenge

Many countries today are seeing an explosion of new converts and church plants. China is a great example of this. Praise God! But Satan isn't giving up. When he loses one generation to Jesus, he makes it his top priority to keep the next for himself.

The first task of discipleship with a new believer is not to encourage them to share Christ with a friend. Their first "Great Commission" is to share Christ with their spouse, parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren. For those who are parents, the souls of their children are to be their top spiritual priority. Imagine if we win all of our friends to Christ, but lose our children to the world. What happens to the church? When we die, it dies.

One of my great concerns is that in our zeal to train pastors in these new church plants we will give them the broken, age-segregated, church-building-based model of the West. The mission of making disciples has not been given to professional church leaders, but to every believer.

Satan would love to see nations like China follow the spiritual pattern of Europe and North America. If we want to see the gospel thriving in China 100 years from now, the church must follow the pattern of the early church which kept families together and equipped parents to disciple their children at home.

## Toward a Theology of Family

Here is the fundamental question:

*What is the biblical relationship between the Great Commission and the institution of the family?*

Ten years ago I would have had no idea how to answer this. When it came to the Great Commission, I thought only of the institution of the local church, and, as a result, I had an anemic view of God's redemptive strategy. God has created two essential institutions to advance His Kingdom—the local church *and* the Christian family. In the Bible, God gives each institution unique roles, responsibilities, and jurisdictions.

Throughout the Scriptures God links His plan for the world with His creation of the family. Here are just a few examples.<sup>5</sup>

## The First Commandment

God made Adam and Eve and He gave them an instruction in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the Earth and subdue it." When was the last time you heard a sermon on this text?

Right from the beginning God tells us what He wants. He desires to fill the Earth, and ultimately the New Earth, with people who will love Him, worship Him, and bring Him glory. His plan will take thousands of years to accomplish. It will be a multi-generational mission and will be powered by the blessing of marriage, having children, and generational family discipleship.



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## God's Mission for Abraham

In Genesis 18, we find a clear articulation of God's purposes for Abraham. Genesis 18:18, "Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations on earth will be blessed through him." This echoes God's desire in Genesis 12 and 15 where we discover God's plan to bless Abraham so that he would be a blessing to the nations. But what did God want Abraham to do in response to this global vision? What was Abraham's

specific calling? Genesis 18 continues with verse 19, "For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him."

God comes to Abraham with the message (I paraphrase), "I am going to fill the earth with worship, and your job is to make your family a discipleship center. Your job is to impress the hearts of your children and your household with a love for me. Blessing the world begins with leading your family."

## The Great Commandment

In Matthew 22:35-36 Jesus is confronted with a powerful question. A religious leader asks him, "What is the most important commandment in the law?" He answered by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5; "Love the Lord your

God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” According to Jesus, nothing is more important than knowing God and loving Him. But what we are supposed to *do* with this command? Where do we start? How will you obey the Great Commandment today? In the next few verses God gives a specific mission for all those who would seek to love Him.

“These commands that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children.” – Deuteronomy 6:6-7a

Here we find the first task for the faith community in response to the Great Commandment. Those who love God are called first and foremost to do all in their power to lead their children to love Him even more. At the heart of the Great Commandment is family discipleship and parents being the primary spiritual trainers of their children.

But how does this happen? How can I, as a sinful man, pass faith and a love for God to my children? There are no magic formulas, but God gives us a simple starting point in the next verse.

“Talk about these things when you sit at home” (Deuteronomy 6:7b).

Where can parents start? By talking! Specifically, God calls parents to bring the family together in the home for what Christians down through history have called “family worship.” Family worship is time where the family gathers for prayer, Scripture reading, and spiritual encouragement.

There is a lot of talk in the Western church today about the importance of discipleship small groups. You have heard the buzz lines.

“We need to do life together.”

“Discipleship happens in the context of relationships.”

“We need to return to authentic community.”

God loves discipleship small groups too. He just has another name for them. He calls them families. He wants every person to be born into the ultimate discipleship small group – a Christian family. God created the family to shape our hearts and the hearts of our children with a deep and abiding love for Christ and for His word.

### **A Vision for Generational Ministry**

In Psalm 78:1-7 we are given a picture of the powerful impact families have in the advance of the Kingdom of God.

“O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from old; what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told

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us. We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders He has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.”

What a marvelous vision! I want to be a father like this. I want to tell my children all about praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, so that they would tell their children who are not even born yet. At the heart of the advance of the gospel is the call to parents to impress the hearts of their children with a love for God and for His Word.

### **The Church Launched with a Multi-Generational Vision**

The disciples understood that the first action step of the gospel was to impress the hearts of children with a love for God. In Acts 2, God launches His church, and Peter preaches a magnificent evangelistic sermon. He ends it this way in Acts 2:38-39, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

You, your kids, and the world! This is the three-fold move of the gospel which we find cover-to-cover in the Scriptures. We have functionally cut out the top priority of the Christian life, which is to serve, minister to, and make disciples of our own children and family members. As a result, we have many well-intentioned Christian men and women who give their heart and soul to helping lead the programs at church and in the community, and never sit down to read the Scriptures at home with their own children.

I know this sort of Christian very well. It used to be me. I gave my heart and soul to my pastoral ministry at church, and my wife and children got the scraps. I was living an unbiblical, hollow Christian life, while at the same time receiving accolades for my public ministry. I have spoken with many pastors and missionaries over the years who had “discipled” hundreds of people, but they lost the

souls of their own children. Some were even told, “Trust your children to the Lord! You need to focus on your ministry.” Nowhere in Scripture does God command parents to abdicate the spiritual training to others so that they can “focus on ministry.” Instead, God calls His people to begin their Kingdom ministry at home.

### The Call to Fathers

God gives His call to fathers in Ephesians 6:4, “Fathers do not exasperate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” God says that fathers are not to arouse deep anger in their hearts of their children, and He gives them a remedy so that it will not happen. Bring your children up in the training and instruction of the Lord. Training refers to spiritual exercise—the spiritual practices of the Christian faith. Fathers are to pray *with*, serve *with*, and worship *with* their kids. Instruction refers to the words that dads speak to their children. The words that fathers and husbands speak in the home about spiritual things have tremendous power!

Are you eager to see men rise up to lead your church with humility, godliness, and sound doctrine? Are you eager to see men rise up to impact their community and world for Christ? Then call them, train them, equip them, and hold them accountable to private prayer and Scripture study and to the leadership of family worship in their homes. If we want to maximize a man’s impact on the world, we must first maximize his impact at home.

### Family Discipleship, Pastors, and Elders

A prerequisite for spiritual leadership within the local church is effective spiritual leadership in the home. In the early church, if a man was a father and desired to be a pastor/elder, he needed to demonstrate that he was shepherding his children, before he was allowed to shepherd the greater body.

“He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to lead his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)”  
– Timothy 3:4-5

When this text refers to “lead[ing] his own family,” it is not referring to paying the bills and mowing the lawn. The context here is one of spiritual leadership. In other words, if a man has not already taken the lead to encourage faith in the hearts of his wife and children, he is not

qualified for the office of pastor/elder in the church.

God reiterates this principle even more strongly in Titus 1:6 where we find additional qualifications for men who would seek the office of pastor/elder.

“An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe, and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.”

In my experience I have heard little teaching on this phrase, “a man whose children believe.” Some interpret this to refer only to children at home, so that if a man has adult children who are not following the Lord that would

not disqualify him. Regardless of one’s interpretation, this is powerful text that we must take seriously. Why would God say that a man can’t serve as pastor/elder if his children are not believers? I believe it is because if a man has a son or daughter who is not converted,

he has all he can do to dedicate himself to prayer and ministry to that son or daughter! His Great Commission calling as a man begins with the souls of the children entrusted to his care.

### Conclusion

Is it any wonder that the enemy targets the relationships within the family with such ferocity? It should come as no surprise, since the Scriptures teach that the spiritual life of the family is directly tied to the Great Commission and filling the earth with worshippers of Christ. 

1. If we are passionate about seeing the advance of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ, let us begin by turning our hearts toward home. Let us ask God to help us begin our ministry in this world by “making disciples” of our family members. Let us passionately and biblically defend God’s plan, structure, and purposes for the institution of the family, as well as the institution of the local church. For those of us in church leadership, let us follow the example of the early church which kept families together for worship and accelerated evangelism and discipleship in and through families. May God be glorified in our churches and in our homes, so that He might be worshipped around the world in every tribe and tongue for generations to come! Greater Europe Mission research - <http://www.gemission.org/Why/statistics.asp>
2. Polly House, “Survey Notes Heightened Challenge of Reaching Children for Christ,” Baptist Press, October 20, 2000, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?>
3. [http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_standards/index.html?mainframe=/documents/wcf\\_standards/p417-direct\\_fam\\_worship.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_standards/index.html?mainframe=/documents/wcf_standards/p417-direct_fam_worship.html)
4. <http://www.spurgeon.org/revival.htm>
5. For a more detailed exploration of the biblical connection between the Great Commission and the family visit the church leaders page at [www.VisionaryFam.com](http://www.VisionaryFam.com)

FOR THOSE OF US IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP, LET US FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE EARLY CHURCH WHICH KEPT FAMILIES TOGETHER FOR WORSHIP AND ACCELERATED EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLESHIP IN AND THROUGH FAMILIES