

## **The Role of the Family in God's Plan for the World**

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In Matthew 28, Jesus gave a Great Commission to his followers, "Make disciples." I have little doubt that you would say that you desire to be a Great Commission Christian, and that your dream is to be a part of a Great Commission church. We desperately want to see people repent, believe in Christ, grow in Him, and engage in Kingdom ministry. But how are we doing? Are we seeing the gospel of Jesus Christ advance in our communities and in our nation?

Thom Rainer's research<sup>1</sup> reveals a disturbing answer. He surveyed Americans to determine what percentage of the population considered themselves to be Christians based on having put their faith in Christ. He found that from those born before 1946, 65% of the US population identified themselves as Christians because of their decision to trust Christ as Lord and Savior. For those born between 1946 and 1964 the number dropped to 35%, then for those born from 1965 to 1976 it fell still further to 15%. In shocking conclusion, among those born between 1977 and 1994 only 4% identified themselves as having put their faith and trust in Christ.

The additional statistics from George Barna ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)) are bleak in regards to the spiritual lives of the next generation. But statistics don't tell the whole story. Imagine gathering together the teenagers who have grown up in your church. If you were to look into their hearts and souls, what do you think you would find? What percentage of those young people, who have been a part of your faith community for many years, would be passionate about their love for the Lord, committed to His Word, and eager to live for Him? As I have asked youth pastors around the country to wrestle with that question, the best answer I have ever received is 50%. The vast majority are seeing spiritual health in a minority of students who have grown up in their church. Remember, we are not talking about the non-Christian teens who are visiting the youth group on a particular night, but rather those who have received the benefit of years of our best Christian education.

Evangelism and discipleship are in crisis in the United States – and it is a generational crisis. While we are doing more than ever to equip adults to share Christ with their friends at work and in the neighborhood, we are losing the souls of millions of our own children.

We hear Christians crying out against the decline of faith and morality in our culture. The diagnosis for this is not complicated. For the past 100 years, we have been losing more of our own children to the world than we have been winning adult converts to faith in Christ. We only need to look across the ocean at Europe to see the end result of this trend. These were the greatest Christian lands on planet Earth a few hundred years ago! Now, out of 821 million people in Europe, only 2% know Jesus ([www.gemission.org](http://www.gemission.org)). How

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<sup>1</sup> Thom Rainer, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary School of Evangelism., <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=6704>

could this have happened? Simple. Generation after generation failed to win the souls of their children. Christianity literally died off.

Our natural instinct at this point is to look at the church and try and figure out a new program to solve the problem. But this crisis is not first and foremost a crisis of the Christian church, but rather of the Christian family. In the late 1800s, there was a clear understanding that the call to disciple children and teenagers was the responsibility of parents and grandparents, and it was a role that could not be delegated to anyone else. However, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians began to reflect the secular culture and adopted the model of delegation parenting. Do you want your kids to learn to play the piano? Get them a tutor. Do you want them to learn basketball? Get them a coach. Do you want them to learn about Jesus? Get them a youth pastor. Your job is simply to drive the minivan and drop them off at all the institutions that will train your children.

In the summer of 2004, this crisis became personal for me. I had been a full time youth pastor for 11 years. My heart and soul was with the ministry and the students that I was trying to reach. I was writing curriculum, leading small groups, teaching, and developing long-range “missional” plans. Thankfully, God broke through and broke my heart. While I was giving everything to families at church, I had absolutely no plan to evangelize and disciple my own children. Sure, I spent time with my kids and tried to be a nice guy, but in my heart and mind, Jesus’ command to “make disciples” didn’t apply to them. When God showed me this, my heart was broken in a deeper way than ever before and I asked God to help me embrace my primary Great Commission in the world; the discipleship of my own children.

Personal repentance quickly spread to pastoral repentance. I had been ignorantly leading an unbiblical youth ministry. One of my favorite sayings was, “I have an unchanging message in a constantly changing package.” In other words, the message of the Gospel is unchanging, but the methods I use to reach teenagers will be constantly adapting to meet the changing youth culture. Big problem! The Bible is not silent on the method. God doesn’t say, “Here is the message of the Gospel, get it to the next generation however you want.” Through the Scriptures, God gives His ordained method for “making disciples” of the next generation; and we have ignored it to the peril of our children’s souls.

What is that method? How has God ordained that the Great Commission be advanced to the next generation? First, parents are to take the primary responsibility for the evangelism and spiritual formation of their children. Second, children and teens are to be welcomed and included into the full faith community. For a decade I did a great job winning the hearts of teens to the youth group. I didn’t understand that my biblical calling as a youth pastor was to turn the hearts of students to their parents and help students connect in fellowship with the entire church family. Imagine what could happen in our children’s and youth ministries if Christian parents took the lead in the discipleship of their own children, enabling the church to put its resources toward reaching kids from non-Christian homes!

The fundamental question that this chapter seeks to answer is this, “What is the role of the family in the Great Commission?” Five years ago I would have had no idea how to answer that question. When it came to the Great Commission, I thought only of the institution of the church, and, as a result, I had an anemic view of God’s redemptive strategy.

I would like to propose three theological foundations for consideration.

*Foundation #1: God created families to be discipleship centers.*

There is a lot of talk in the evangelical 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.” I believe that God loves discipleship small groups! 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. It is the most powerful “group” where life-change happens. Are you looking for authentic community? Are you looking for people to be real and genuine? Go home. I am sure you will find “reality” there. God created the family to shape the heart of every member of the family with a deep and abiding love for Christ and for His word.

*Foundation #2: The biblical purpose of parenting and grand-parenting is to impress the hearts of children with a love for God.*

Many parents have wondered, “God, why did you give me these children?” It is vital that we understand the answer to the question. God gives children to human mothers and fathers with the calling on those parents to do all in their power to impress the hearts of their children with a love for God, equip them to make a difference in the world for Christ, and guide them safely home to their Father in Heaven.

*Foundation #3: God has designed the family as an essential engine of world evangelization through the power of multi-generational faithfulness*

God’s desire is to fill the Earth, and ultimately the New Earth, with worshippers of Christ. The Bible teaches that a primary means of accomplishing this is by those who love Him raising their children to love Him, who in turn would raise their children to love Him. God created the family, under the equipping and accountability of the local church, to advance the gospel and the Great Commission. The Bible paints a picture of larger generation after larger generation going forth to fill the Earth with worship and being a blessing to all nations.

These three principles run throughout the Bible and up until about 100 years ago were preached and taught regularly as a “theology of family.” We don’t even use that phrase anymore. It would be impossible for us in a short chapter to examine the Scriptures comprehensively on this issue. Instead, I invite you to join me for a “power walk” through God’s word – from Creation to Eternity. We are going to discover what God has to teach us about His plan for the world and His purpose for the family.

*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.” I find it curious that we rarely hear about this first instruction. When was the last time we heard a sermon on this text? Right from the time God made humankind, He told us what He wanted. He told Adam and Eve that He wanted the Earth filled with His people, filled with worship, and that this mission involved families passing on the faith.

### *The Earth is Filled with Evil*

Adam and Eve indeed have children, grandchildren, and beyond. But through their rebellion, and the rebellion of their offspring, the earth is filled with evil rather than worship. Genesis 6:5, “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the Earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” God’s sovereign plan for this moment in history was to begin again, with a righteous family. He chose Noah, his wife, his sons, and their wives to repopulate the earth.

### *God Repeats His Call to Noah’s Family*

Noah’s family exit the ark and God says in Genesis 9:1, “Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth.” Sound familiar? God repeats the instruction that He gave to Adam and Eve. God’s plan has always been the same from the beginning. He wants the world filled with worship! He wants godly generation after godly generation to go forth to fill the earth. At this point, one might say, “well I think the earth is full enough!” Articles and books on the overpopulation problem fill our secular culture. But consider this. The entire population of the earth could fit into the state of Texas, with each person having more than one thousand square feet of space all to themselves! Certainly, there are places in the world where there is a struggle distributing resources to those who live there, but it is not a global population problem. In fact, what the world needs more than anything to combat issues of poverty is *more* people who love Jesus more than *anything*.

### *Multi-generational Covenants*

Normally, when we think of the covenants in Scripture we think of individual people: God’s covenant with Abraham; God’s covenant with Moses; God’s covenant with David. Yet, God describes these covenants as explicitly multi-generational. Genesis 9:9, “I now establish my covenant with you [Noah] *and* with your descendents after you.” Genesis 17:7, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you [Abraham] *and* your descendents after you for the generations to come, to be your God *and* the God of your descendents after you.”<sup>2</sup> In these instances, God is not making covenants with individual men; He is making covenants with multiple generations!

### *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 that God wanted 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

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<sup>2</sup> Italics mine

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." Did you catch that! 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."

### *Family and the Ten Commandments*

In Exodus 20 we find the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments are vertical in that they have to do with our relationship with God. The last six commandments are horizontal as they focus us on human relationships. The fifth commandment, therefore, is the first commandment for human/horizontal relationships. God wrote this command before He wrote, "do not murder," and "do not commit adultery." The fifth commandment is found in Exodus 20:12, "Honor your father and your mother."

Paul says, in Ephesians 6, that the fifth commandment is the first commandment with a promise. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." This promise has always bothered me a little bit. This is God's word. A promise is a promise. So this means that if a person honors their father and their mother, that they are going to live a long life. So, if a person dies young, does that mean they didn't honor their parents? I am not comfortable with that. Can I really stand up in a pulpit and tell the young people there that if they honor their parents, God promises they will live a long time? Here is how I solved the problem. When I have preached on this passage over the years, I did what I could to generalize it and take the edge off. I would say something like, "If you honor your parents, God will bless you." Sounds good. You can't argue with that, right?

Unfortunately, I was reducing a promise from God into some sort of general truth or proverb. The key in approaching this passage is to understand that the Ten Commandments were not written with an individual mindset, but with a communal mindset.<sup>3</sup> These are commands for the faith community, not just individual followers of God. So the promise is *not* that individuals who honor their parents are guaranteed long life on earth. Rather, if parents will follow God, and if children will honor their parents, and receive their spiritual heritage... God promises that the people of God (the church, from a New Testament perspective) will live long in the land!

This is a lock-tight promise from the Creator Himself. It has been rightly said that Christianity is always one generation away from extinction. Do you want to see the church of Jesus Christ grow and fill the earth with worshippers of God? It starts with parents loving and following God, and children honoring their parents by following in their footsteps of faith.

### *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?" In other words, if Jesus had to boil down the Scriptures into one command, what would it be? He answered by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5; "Love the Lord your God with all your

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<sup>3</sup> Voddie Baucham, Family Driven Faith, Crossway Publishers, 2006

heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This is the purpose of life! Nothing is more important than knowing God and loving Him. So what we are supposed to do with this command? Where do we start? How will you obey the Great Commandment today? God provides His people with the first action point in the next few verses in Deuteronomy 6: “These commands that I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home...”

Here we find the first task for the faith community in response to the Great Commandment! Where does God want us to start loving Him? By impressing the hearts of our children with a love for God. Our top “Great Commission” responsibilities are the souls of the children entrusted to our care. Here we find the purpose of parenting and grandparenting – to impress the hearts of our children with a love for God. At the heart of the Great Commandment is family discipleship, parents being the primary spiritual trainers of their children.

Yet how can this possibly happen? How can I, as a sinful man with character problems, pass faith and a love for God to my children? What is the magical, mysterious formula? God gives us a plain and simple starting point. “Talk about these things when you sit at home.” Radical! Where do parents need to start? By talking! Specifically, God calls parents to bring the family together in the home for what Christian history has called “family worship.” Family worship is time where the family gathers for prayer, Scripture reading, and spiritual nurture.

A few years ago I had to face the reality that my schedule did not allow for regular family worship in my home. This plain instruction from God convicted me deeply that the schedule I had chosen was causing me to sin, and was preventing me from practicing the very first specific thing God had called me to in response to the greatest of all His commandments.<sup>4</sup>

### *Take To Heart the Word of God*

Moses continually called Israelite parents to pass their faith to their children and grandchildren. At the conclusion of Moses’ grand message to the people in Deuteronomy 32:45-46 he pleads with them, “Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law.” Why is it so critical for us to follow God with our hearts? If we don’t, we can’t lead our children in faith. Knowing and loving God is not a “personal thing.” It is a “multi-generational thing.” God has not shown his grace simply for my conversion and salvation, but for the conversion and salvation of hundreds, if not thousands, of my descendants.

### *The Tragic Era of the Judges*

If only the Israelites had done what Moses had said! The people of God entered into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. A few decades later, Joshua’s generation died. In Judges 2:10-11 God tells us what happened next. “After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what He had done for Israel. 11 Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the baals.” How could this have happened? Apparently,

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<sup>4</sup> The Visionary Parenting DVD series ([www.visionaryparenting.com](http://www.visionaryparenting.com)) is a great resource for equipping parents how to begin the practice of family worship and pass faith to their children.

Joshua's generation did not pass their faith to their children. They failed so miserably at this assignment from God, that their children didn't even know the great things that God had done in setting the people free from Egypt. The Israelites then enter one of the most difficult and unstable periods in their history.

### *The Generational Impact of Idolatry*

God repeatedly warns His people against the sin of idolatry. But what's the big deal? Why was God so passionate about this? Consider 2 Kings 17:38-41, "Do not forget the covenant I have made with you, and do not worship other gods. 39 Rather, worship the LORD your God; it is he who will deliver you from the hand of all your enemies." 40 They would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices. 41 Even while these people were worshipping the LORD, they were serving their idols. To this day, their children and grandchildren continue to do as their fathers did."

What was so bad about the people worshipping idols? Idolatry robbed faith from their children and grandchildren. The sin did not only destroy them, but it spread to their children and grandchildren.

### *A Vision of Multi-Generational Impact*

In Psalm 78 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. 2 I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from old; 3 what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us. 4 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. 5 He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, 6 so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. 7 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.

### *Divorce and Making Disciples*

The Old Testament ends with the book of Malachi. In chapter 2 we find a commonly quoted phrase, "God hates divorce." Sadly, this is the only portion of the text Christians usually quote. They fail to understand that it is the last portion of the paragraph. Earlier in the text God explains *why* divorce is so serious. I can speak to this from personal experience. Unbiblical divorce has ravaged my family. My parents divorced when I was in high school. Between my parents and siblings there are 12 marriages and 8 divorces. Consider with me why God takes the issue of marital oneness so seriously.

Malachi 2:13, "You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. 14 You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your

marriage covenant.<sup>15</sup> Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one?"

We must understand why it is so important to God that husband and wife be one in Christ and in their spirits! Why are healthy Christian marriages so important to God? Verse 15 continues, "Because [God] was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. 16 "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel."

Why do we need marriage and remarriage ministries in the church? Because Christian oneness between husband and wife are vital to pass the faith to children! And all of us who have worked with kids and teens know that Satan seeks to use divorce to rob faith from them, and frequently he succeeds. We need more attention on marriage and family ministries! Why? Not to help people get along better to have happy lives, but because God has created the institution of the family to pass faith to the next generation so that the Gospel would spread to every corner of the earth.

#### *The Final Words of the Old Testament*

God concludes His revelation in the Old Testament with Malachi 4:4-6, "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. <sup>5</sup> See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."

It is not exactly a happy Disney ending. God gives His people a glimpse into his ongoing plan to bring salvation to the world. In no uncertain terms, God explains that His plan to fill the earth with worshippers of Christ is built on the discipling power of the family, particularly the relationships between fathers and their children. It is no coincidence that many Christian men are AWOL in their homes when it comes to spiritual leadership. Satan knows exactly how to keep children and teens from coming to Christ – take out the fathers. If he can keep well-meaning Christian men passive and quiet at home – he has won a dramatic victory. The Scriptures lay out a series of principles which teach that as the man goes, so goes the marriage. As the marriage goes, so goes the family. As the family goes, so goes the local church. As the local church goes, so goes the nation and the Great Commission.

#### *The First Words of the New Testament*

The Old Testament ends with a vision of fathers turning their hearts to their children, and the New Testament begins exactly the same way. The dawn of the New Testament era begins when the angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah to tell him of the mission of his son, who was yet to be born. We know him as John the Baptist. In Luke 1:16 the angel tells him, "Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God." Here we find the macro mission that God had for John. He was going to prepare the hearts of the people for Messiah. But what was his strategy? How would John seek to do that? The next verses tell us. Luke 1:17, "And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah (referring back to Malachi 4), *to turn the hearts of the fathers*

*to their children*<sup>5</sup> and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Central to John’s mission to prepare the hearts of people for Messiah, was to turn the hearts of fathers to their children! Why? Because when fathers turn their hearts to their children, the hearts of children are softened to receive the love of God. Do you want to see the hearts of children and teens in your church prepared for Messiah? Then do all in your power to turn the hearts of their fathers to their children. The hearts of fathers and making disciples of the next generation are inseparable.

### *Jesus Nurtured Faith in Children*

Jesus went against the popular and religious culture of his day and prioritized children. In Mark 10:13-16 we find a well known story. “People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>15</sup> I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” <sup>16</sup> And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them.”

Notice Jesus’ emotions here. He was furious that the disciples were keeping children from him. This is not meek and mild Jesus as he is depicted in the pictures hanging on the walls of your Sunday school room. It is also of the utmost importance to point out that Jesus was not married, nor was He a parent. Some people might read this chapter and say, “So, Rob, only married people and parents are a part of God’s plan for world evangelization?” No way! The ministry of reaching the next generation is one in which God calls every believer to engage. Are you single? Then take a look at the example of the ultimate single minister – Jesus. He is the perfect example of what a single person ought to do for the Lord, and he stuck out like a sore thumb by prioritizing the nurture of faith in children.

### *Jesus Threatened Those Who Robbed Faith from Children*

In Matthew 18:5-6 Jesus says, “And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. <sup>6</sup> But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” Jesus turns up the volume in verse 10. “See to it that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in Heaven.” These are fighting words! Jesus is warning anyone who would hurt a child to think again. God is ready, willing, and able to dispatch his warrior angels against you. Jesus perfectly reflects God’s heart and priority for the next generation to have faith.

### *The Great Commission and the First Commandment*

Jesus’ great call to his followers is found in Matthew 28:19-20, “<sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son

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<sup>5</sup> Italics mine.

and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Remember that God has always wanted the same thing from the beginning. He wants this earth and the New Earth, filled with worshippers! With this in mind, we can see the first commandment from Genesis 1:28 echoed here in the Great Commission.

Genesis 1	Matthew 28
Be Fruitful and Multiply	Make Disciples
Fill the earth	Of all nations
Subdue it	Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you

I grew up hearing sermons about the Great Commission. The passage would be explained and then the preacher would challenge me to think about 1) my non-Christian neighbor, and 2) the Africans. Peer-to-peer evangelism and world missions. These were the two application points from the Great Commission. But our adult friends and those on the other side of the world are not the first ones we are called to evangelize and disciple! All of Scripture up until this point makes it clear, that the call to make disciples, to win people to Christ, and help them grow in faith, begins with the souls of our children and grandchildren.

*The Church Launched with 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. <sup>39</sup> 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. Unfortunately, in many quarters of the modern church, the sermon each Sunday is fairly predictable. The two messages that are heard over and over again are, "Get right with God" and "Go make a difference." In one form or another, that is what we hear, week after week after week. It is not that those messages are wrong, but rather that they are incomplete, and because they are incomplete they lack power. God's plea to you through the Bible is that you would respond to His grace and "Get right with God, get right with your spouse, get right with your children, get right with your church – and *together* with your family and your church go make a difference!" 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. 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 full-time 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.

### *Our Children are the Future of the Church*

It seems cliché to say that our children are our future. We would do well to take it seriously. Paul relates this to the mission of the people of God in Romans 9:29, “It is as Isaiah said previously: Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.” The collective people of God (the church), without a generation of faithful sons and daughters, die in the land. They are laid waste. It happened in the Scriptures, and it happens today.

### *The Call to Fathers*

God gives plain and simple instructions for 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 kids. The words that fathers and husbands speak in the home about spiritual things have tremendous power!

Our churches desperately need to increase our priority on men’s ministries. God has established the church and the family to accomplish the Great Commission, and He has called me to love, serve, and lead at church and at home.

### *Family Discipleship, Pastors, and Elders*

A prerequisite for spiritual leadership within the 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.

1 Timothy 3:4-5, “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. <sup>5</sup> (If anyone does not know how to lead his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)” When this text refers to “leading his own family” it is not referring to paying the bills and mowing the lawn. The entire 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 yet 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.” I don’t know about you, but I have heard very 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.

### *No Greater Joy*

In 3 John 4 the apostle writes, “I have no greater joy than to know that my children are walking in the truth.” Here John was speaking of his “spiritual children” – those outside his immediate family that he had led to Christ. But is this not also true for parents? There is no greater joy than to know that our children are walking with the Lord. And the opposite is true as well; there is no greater sorrow for a godly man or godly woman than when their children are far from the Lord.

### *A Picture of Heaven*

For those who are parents, the call from God to impress the hearts of their children with a love for God is the first action step of the Christian life. But the assignment is not a permanent one. Consider this picture of Heaven from Isaiah 54:11-13, “O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. <sup>12</sup> I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. <sup>13</sup> All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace.”

The day is coming when the LORD Himself will receive the souls of our children, and personally and directly shepherd them into all Eternity. As a father, there is nothing I want more than to arrive safely home to my Father in Heaven, with all my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and beyond.

### **The Reformation and the Family**

Earlier in the chapter, I suggested that unity between the Great Commission and the family used to be taught regularly as a “theology of family.” If this chapter were written 150 years ago, you would likely be bored to tears because of how frequently these things were taught. Volumes of books and sermons were produced during the centuries of the Reformation on the role of the family and the Great Commission. I encourage you to do an internet search for terms such as “family theology and the reformation” or “family worship and the reformation.” You will be amazed at what has been lost...and what needs to be reclaimed. Here are just a few highlights.

John Knox, in 1557, wrote in *The Daily Exercise of God's Most Holy and Sacred Word*, “You must make your children partakers in reading Scripture, exhorting, and in making common prayers, which I would in every house was done once a day, at least.” Knox called parents to begin their Christian ministry, by seeking to make disciples of their own children – and family worship in the home was the starting point.

In Scotland, in 1640, the church published *The Director for Family Worship*. In it 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.” Family worship was a major issue for church discipline. How far we have come! In our research at Visionary Parenting conferences we

have found that roughly 15% of adult Christians today grew up in homes that practiced family worship, and fewer than 15% of adult Christians practice it themselves. Why would the church make this a church discipline matter? Because they were serious about the Great Commission. They understood that the Great Commission began with the souls of the little ones entrusted to their care, and that responsibility fell on parents. They were convicted by the Bible that the family was God's primary engine of world evangelization through the power of multi-generational faithfulness. They believed ministry to kids and teens was to be driven by the church, but centered in the home.

Jonathan Edwards frequently taught on the biblical doctrines of family life. In 1751, in his *Farewell Sermon* he said, "We have had great disputes [about] how the church ought to be regulated; and indeed the subject of these disputes was of great importance: but the due regulation of your families is of no less, and, in some respects, of much greater importance. Every Christian family ought to be as it were a little church, consecrated to Christ, and wholly influenced and governed by his rules. And family education and order are some of the chief means of grace. If these fail, all other means are likely to prove ineffectual. If these are duly maintained, all the means of grace will be likely to prosper and be successful."

Edwards knew what continues to be plain today. When a young person grows up in a godly home, the chances are very high that he or she will grow up to love God and arrive safely home in Heaven. When a young person is raised in a home apart from Christ, or a hypocritical "Christian" home, the chances are slim that he or she will come to Christ and live for Him.

Matthew Henry, in 1704, delivered his *Sermon Concerning Family Religion*. He said, "The pious and zealous endeavors of ministers for the reformation of manners, and the suppression of vice and profaneness, are the joy and encouragement of all good people in the land, and a happy indication, that God hath yet mercy in store for us. Now I know not anything that will contribute more to the furtherance of this good work than the bringing of family religion into practice and reputation. Here the reformation must begin. Other methods may check the disease we complain of, but this, if it might universally obtain, would cure it."

Henry powerfully preached the connection between the global impact of Christians and family discipleship. He echoed the Scriptures we have looked at earlier as he explained that spiritually vital families contribute more than anything to the furthering the good work of the Gospel

Charles Spurgeon, in the late 1800s, began to see the decline of the practice of family worship and family discipleship. 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.”

Spurgeon’s message is desperately needed today! What hope does a local church have if it launches a new outreach program to invite new people to the church, if parents and grandparents won’t give the best of their heart and soul to make disciples of their own children?

## **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.

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, even if they are scattered around the country - our parents, siblings, spouses, and children. 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 church.

In the coming chapters, you will be inspired with strategies and practical things that you can do in your home and in your church to help impress the hearts of the next generation with a love for Jesus Christ.