

RAISING KIDS

with a Heart for Mission

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First published in Great Britain in 2020

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-913278-68-7

Designed and typeset by Pete Barnsley (CreativeHoot.com)

Printed in Denmark by Nørhaven

10Publishing, a division of 10ofthose.com
Unit C, Tomlinson Road, Leyland, PR25 2DY, England

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Website: www.10ofthose.com

1 3 5 7 10 8 6 4 2

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RAISING KIDS WITH A HEART FOR MISSION

Last words are meant to be lasting words; words that convey what a person thinks are of utmost importance. As the Lord Jesus prepared to ascend back to heaven following His bodily resurrection (Lk. 24:44–53; Acts 1:4–11), there certainly are many issues He could have addressed. He chose, however, to give the Great Commission. Its best-known statement appears in Matthew 28:18–20. We find the Lukan version in both Luke 24:46–48 and Acts 1:8. The longer ending to Mark also contains it (16:15). And, there is a brief Johannine statement in John 20:21. In the Matthean account, the Lord commands us to make disciples of all the nations (every *ethne*), teaching them ‘to observe all that I have

commanded you.’ In the process, He promises us His presence. He promises to be with us ‘always, to the end of the age.’¹

I am a part of a school and convention of churches, the Southern Baptist Convention, that takes the Great Commission very seriously. The school that I serve, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, has a reputation of being a Great Commission school. Those who visit our campus will hear statements like this one: ‘Every classroom a Great Commission classroom, every teacher a Great Commission teacher, every student a Great Commission student, every graduate a Great Commission graduate who will go out and build and be a part of Great Commission churches and ministries until Jesus returns in glory.’ When Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary was reviewed several years ago by its accrediting agencies, the visiting committee said during the exit interview, ‘Well, we have a number of recommendations to make, but one thing is crystal clear on this campus: from top to bottom, everyone knows your mission—You are a Great Commission Seminary.’

Those who are committed to the Great Commission rightly focus on what missiologists call ‘the outer edges of lostness’, which are the underserved, unreached, and unengaged people groups of the world. Today, in 2020, mission agencies like the Joshua Project estimate that there are approximately 7.6 billion people on planet earth across over 17,000 people groups.² Over 7,000 of these people groups are unreached people groups, which means there are over three billion people who have either inadequate access or no access to the gospel. Such persons will be born, live, die, and spend eternity separated from God, having never heard a clear presentation of the gospel in their lifetime. It is hard to believe that there are places in the world today where we could be dropped by helicopter, parachute down, land, and walk days, weeks, or months without ever encountering a church or a Christian. It is right, and it is imperative for us to focus on the underserved, unreached, and unengaged peoples of the world. Obedience to Christ commands it. Love for our neighbors demands it.

My purpose in this book is to focus closer to home, much closer. Obeying the Great Commission should begin *in the home*, though it should certainly not end there. The reasons are both biblical and strategic. Jesus said that the Greatest Commandment is ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ (Mt. 22:37). Jesus is quoting the *Shema* found in Deuteronomy 6:4–5. Bracketing the *Shema* are the instructions that this commandment is to be taught to children by their parents and their grandparents (Deut. 6:2, 7–9). Jesus then says that the second Great Commandment is like the first, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (cf. Lev. 19:18). ‘All the Law and the prophets,’ He tells us, depend on these two commandments. Teaching our children all that He has commanded would certainly be grounded in the two great commandments. As we love our God and our neighbor rightly, we go and make disciples. And, as we make disciples, we teach them to love God and neighbor. There is a close relationship between the Great Commission and the Great Commandments.³ They are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Arguing that obedience to the Great Commission should begin in the home is also strategic. Good theology and good missiology are more caught than taught, though both are involved. There is a vital role for fathers and mothers (and grandparents) to play in conveying and modeling a missional life for their children who, by God’s grace and for His glory, follow in their footsteps. I cannot emphasize this point too strongly. It is crucial and, in many instances, decisive. Most children look up to, admire, and follow in their parent’s footsteps. What you love, they will love. What you value they will value. What you have a passion for, they will have a passion for. After all, you are their heroes! In January 2015, Stage of Life surveyed teenagers on the topic of ‘unsung heroes’. When they asked teenagers to name their number one role model, parents came out on top.⁴ Barna Group, a research organization that regularly reports on matters of faith, found similar results. Their survey discovered that teenagers chose family members as the people they admire the most as a role model.⁵ Our children *do* care what we think, they *do* listen to what we say, and they pay

attention to what we *do*! So, in the context of the Great Commission, what do they hear you say? What do they see you do?

In light of the biblical and strategic evidence urging us to raise our children to obey the Great Commission, a vital question for us to ask is this: What do we do to embed the Great Commission into the DNA of our children so that they may have a lifetime passion for that which is the passion of King Jesus? I suggest a mixture of biblical, theological, and practical considerations. I suggest ten principles for building Great Commission families—though I do not intend my list to be exhaustive.

PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING GREAT COMMISSION FAMILIES

1. Be Incarnational in Your Parenting (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:5–11)

God entered our world in His Son through the incarnation (Jn. 1:14; Phil. 2:6–8) and showed us His love for us. He revealed to us His heart, letting us know what is important to Him. His incarnation made two things clear. First, lost people matter to God. The Father sent Jesus on a seek and save rescue mission for the lost (Mk. 10:45; Lk. 19:10). Because lost people matter to God, lost people should matter to us. Second, Jesus came not only to save us from our sins, but He also came to make us His disciples

(Mk. 8:34–38) and to conform us to His image (Rom. 8:28–30). These truths are massively important when it comes to raising children with a missionary heart. Ann Dunagan quotes the famous missionary David Livingston who said, ‘This generation can only reach this generation.’ She then asks, ‘But will we raise our children to effectively impact *their* generation for Jesus Christ?’⁶ Robert Coleman adds, ‘The ultimate goal of Jesus for His disciples was that *His life be produced in them, and through them into the lives of others*’ (emphasis original).⁷ For parents, a primary starting point for reproducing the life of Christ is with their children.

The incarnation was a manifestation and evidence of God’s redemptive love for His world. He came into our world, got down on our level, and revealed to us the grace and love of a heavenly Father. Our incarnational love for our children models God’s love and communicates our love for them. It puts action to our words. So, step back and ask, ‘How does my child look at life? Given their gender, age, maturity, personality, friends, interests, how does my child view life right now? How has God wired them and put

them together?’ Seek to gain their perspective about what is happening in their lives. To know and love them well, you need to be with them and work hard to see life as they see it at each stage along their journey. Long-distance parenting is a pipe dream. Too many parents have bought into the myth that this approach is a workable model for parenting. It is not. Taking time to enter their world—in ways that are natural and meaningful to them—communicates that you care. It also allows you to influence their lives in significant and meaningful ways.

Remember—children have varying levels of maintenance (high, medium, low). Some children require more time, attention, and care than other children. Are you committed to making the necessary time investment to influence their lives and give them a heart for missions?

2. Love Your Mate Well (Eph. 5:25; Tit. 2:4)

In a letter to his wife Ann, missionary Adoniram Judson wrote, ‘If such exquisite delights as we have enjoyed... with one another, are allowed to sinful creatures on earth, what must the joys of heaven be?’⁸ Great partners almost always make

great parents. Why? Because the primary need, related to love, in the life of children is security. Nothing brings security into the life of children like seeing dad and mom love one another. And, children should learn about God's love for the nations by the way their parents love one another. They should see modeled before their eyes the love of Christ for His bride, a bride made up of people from all the nations. This display of love can be especially powerful when they see your shared love for the nations. Love your mate well by doing missions together. Pray together for the nations. Go on mission trips together. Let your children see in tangible ways that your love for each other compels you to love the nations because your hearts are knit as one.

Recall this powerful biblical image again—the redeemed from the nations constitute the bride of Christ, the bride that the bridegroom loves and gave His blood to redeem. Are you modeling this Christ-like love to your children? Would they have a clear picture of how God loves the nations by the way you love your spouse?

3. Spend Time with Your Children (Deut. 6:7–9)

In addressing the importance of childhood, the parents of Hudson Taylor said, 'At no [other] time is there greater capacity for devotion or more pure, uncalculating ambition in the service of God than in early childhood ...'⁹ Hudson Taylor's parents took the time, early in his life, to instill such devotion in him. At the tender age of five, Taylor declared, 'When I am a man, I mean to be a missionary to China.'¹⁰ Taylor and many other missionaries like him have become heroes of the faith because of God's work in them at a young age!¹¹

Deuteronomy 6:7–9 says,

You shall teach them [God's commandments, ordinances, and statutes] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

The fulfillment of this parental charge requires an investment of time in the lives of our children. But there is a problem. Time in front of screens is competing with quality time between parents and their children. Back in the mid-1990s, *Reader's Digest* referenced a study where four and five-year-olds were asked if they would rather give up their daddy or their television. Shockingly, one third said they would rather give away their daddy than their television!¹² The Nielsen Company reported in October 2009 that television consumption was at an eight-year high, reporting that kids aged between two and five were spending 'more than 32 hours a week on average in front of a TV screen.'¹³ In a similar vein, BBC News reported in 2015, that children aged five to sixteen 'spend an average of six and a half hours a day in front of a screen.'¹⁴ Screens have become technological babysitters, and the trend of children spending high amounts of time in front of a screen is likely to continue. Parents must take up their responsibility to invest in the lives of their children. And, as parents, we must set a good example, being aware of our own

screen time and our inclination to pay more attention to the television or our phones than our children. We cannot let screens distract us from what matters most.

One man, reflecting upon his childhood years, once said to his parents,

You didn't take care of me you sent me to daycare. You didn't feed me you sent me to McDonald's. You didn't study with me you bought me a computer. You didn't talk to me you bought me a stereo. You didn't look at me you bought me a T.V. You didn't play with me you bought me toys. Now that I'm grown and you are old why should I come and see you? I don't even know who you are.¹⁵

As parents, we must work hard to prioritize our schedule to be at important events in the lives of our children. We should go to baseball games, basketball games, football games, track meets, soccer matches, and any other sporting activities your children participate in. We need to attend their concerts, plays, and school events and put these events on the calendar as soon as

possible. Be faithful not to let anything replace them. When our twins, Nathan and Jonathan, were seniors in high school, they, along with their two other brothers, played in more than 70 basketball games that season. We saw almost all of them, and our boys have told us more than once how much it meant to them. Parents face many demands on their time and for their attention. The decision to protect time with our children is often difficult because of the demands of life. Let me encourage you never to let the good things of life cost you the best thing—your children. You will not regret it.

In our contemporary, western, technological, highly-competitive culture, I am convinced that one of our most valuable commodities is time. All of us can find ways to make more money, but none of us can make more time. Each one of us is just as rich as Warren Buffett, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, and Bill Gates when it comes to time. We each get 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Once we spend it in one place, we cannot spend it elsewhere. So, spend it wisely, and spend much of it on your children and grandchildren. Love is a beautiful four-letter word. Sometimes, however,

it is best spelled T-I-M-E. Fathers, what kind of projection of the perfect heavenly Father are you giving to your children in terms of the time you invest in them? Mothers, does the time you invest in your children reflect the good character of God? This valuable gift is so fleeting. It passes us by before we realize it is gone. Use it wisely.

4. Learn to Listen to Your Children (Jas. 1:19)

We must understand the power of both the ear and the tongue. With the ear and, especially, the tongue, we can build up or tear down. We can communicate love or contempt. Words are powerful weapons. They can bless or curse. Parents will often say things to their children that they would never say to a stranger. We all fail in this area, and it is something at which we must constantly work. To be a good parent is to work well with words. You will have plenty of practice using your words to influence your children for good or ill. When it comes to those over whom you have the greatest influence—your children—use that practice to communicate love and affection.