

Building Great Commission Families
by
Daniel Akin, President
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wake Forest, NC

Introduction: 1) Last words are meant to be lasting words, words that make an impact. Clearly last words convey what a person thinks is of utmost importance. As the Lord Jesus prepared to ascend back to heaven following his bodily resurrection (Luke 24; Acts 1), there certainly are a number of issues He could have addressed. He chose, however, to give attention and focus to one, what we popularly call “The Great Commission.” Its best known statement is located 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 we are commanded by our Lord to make disciples of all the nations, every *ethne*, teaching them “to obey everything I have commanded.” In the process He promises us His presence, “always, to the very end of the age.”

2) I am a part of a school and convention of churches, the Southern Baptist Convention that takes very seriously the Great Commission. The school that I serve has the reputation of being a Great Commission school. Those who come on our campus will hear things like, “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 until Jesus returns in glory. When Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary was reviewed by SACS/ATS for its 10 year reaffirmation for accreditation, during the exit interview, the visiting committee said, “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.”

3) Those who are committed to the Great Commission rightly focus on the “outer edges” of lostness, what missiologist call the underserved and unreached people groups of the world. Today, according to mission agencies like “The Joshua Project” and “The International Mission Board”, there are right at:

- 7.3 billion people on planet earth among 11,489 distinct people groups.

- 6, 832 are “unreached people groups” totaling a shocking 3.78 billion persons who have either inadequate access or no access to the gospel.

Such persons will be born, live, die, and spend eternity separated from God and they never heard a clear presentation of the gospel in their lifetime. It is amazing to think that there are places in the world today where we could be dropped by helicopter or parachute, and we could walk days, weeks and

months and we would never encounter a church or meet a Christian. It is right, it is imperative, for us to focus on and give serious attention to the underserved, unreached and unengaged peoples of the world. Obedience to Christ commands it. Love for our neighbors demands it.

4) However, my purpose in this paper is to focus closer to home, much closer. My reasons for doing so are, I believe, both biblical and strategic. For mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, obeying the Great Commission should begin in the home, though it should certainly not end here. If the question is why, I believe the answer is clear and simple, it is biblical. Jesus informs us in Matthew 22:37 that the Greatest Commandment is, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. He is, of course, quoting the *Shema* found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Bracketing the *Shema* is the instruction that this commandment is to be taught to children by their parents and their grandparents. Jesus then notes that the second Great Commandment is like the first, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Levt. 19:18). “All the Law and the prophets,” He tells us, “hang on the two commandments.” Teaching our children all that he has commanded would certainly be grounded in the two great commandments. The close relationship of the Great Commission to the Great Commandments is clear. They are interconnected and must not be separated. They are mutually reinforcing. But, arguing that obedience to the Great

Commission should begin in the home is also strategic. After all, good theology and good missiology is more caught than taught, though it certainly involves both. The vital role a father and mother (grandparents included) play in conveying and modeling a missional life for their children who, by God's grace and for his glory, follow in their footsteps, cannot be too strongly emphasized. 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! When teenagers were asked to name their #1 role model, parents topped the list. In January 2015, Stageoflife.com surveyed teenagers on the topic of "unsung heroes." Parents ranked #1. In 1998, *Newsweek* magazine reported the same thing. The fact is our children do care what we think, they do listen to what we say, and they pay a whole lot of attention to what we do! So, in the context of the Great Commission, what do they hear you saying? What do they see you doing?

5) So, the question before us is clear: What do we do to embed the Great Commission into the DNA of our children that they may have a lifetime passion for that which is the passion of King Jesus? The propositions that I will put before you will be a mixture of biblical, theological and practical considerations. I have a total of 10, though my list is not intended to be exhaustive.

Principles For Building Great Commission Families

1) Be incarnational in your parenting. (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil 2:5-11)

- David Livingston said, “This generation can only reach this generation. But will we raise our children to effectively impact their generation for Jesus Christ?”
- Robert Coleman adds, “The ultimate goal of Jesus for his disciples was that his life be produced in them, and thru them into the lives of others” (*EGT*, 191).
- The incarnation was a manifestation and evidence of God’s redemptive love for His world.
- Our incarnational love for our children models God’s love and communicates our love for our children.
- Step back and ask how does my child look at life given their gender, age, friends, interest?
- To know and love them well you have to be with them, working hard to see life as they see life. Long distance parenting is a pipe dream. Too many parents have bought into the myth that this is a workable model for parenting. It is not.

- And remember: children have different levels of maintenance (high, medium, low). Are you committed to making the necessary time investment?

2) Love well your mate. (Eph. 5:25; Titus 2:4)

- In a letter to his wife Ann, 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?” (*EGT*, 92)
- Great partners almost always make great parents.
- #1 need in the life of children related to love is security.
- Children should learn about God’s love for the nations by the way they see their parents love one another.
- Remember this powerful biblical image: the redeemed from the nations constitute the bride of Christ, the bride that the Bridegroom loves and gave his blood to redeem.

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” (quoted in *The Mission-Minded Child* by Ann Dunagan, preface). Apparently Hudson Taylor’s parents took the time, early in his life, to instill such devotion in

Hudson. At the tender age of 5, Hudson declared, “When I am a man, I mean to be a missionary to China” (Ibid). And, we all know the rest of the story!

- Deuteronomy 6:7-9: “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. So, what’s the problem?
- “Focus on the Family” survey/Associated News Service (August 2003). 5 year olds spend 25-35 minutes a week with dad. They spend 20-25 hours a week with a T.V. or another “technological babysitter.”
- Article “What’s a Dad Worth?” (*Readers Digest*, June 1995). In a survey of 4 & 5 year olds who were asked, “If you had to choose to give away either your daddy or your T.V. which would you choose to give away? 33% said I would rather give away my T.V.!
- What did one man say to his parents in reflecting upon his childhood years?

- You didn't take care of me you sent me to daycare.
- You didn't feed me you sent me to McDonalds.
- 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. Love is a beautiful 4-letter word.

Sometimes it is best spelled TIME!

- Fathers, what kind of projection of the perfectly heavenly Father are you giving to your children in terms of the time you invest in them?

4) Learn to listen to your children (James 1:19)

- James 1:19, "let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." Do you know your children's heart? Do you know what concerns them? Interests them? Matters to them? Ann Dunagan rightly notes, "Often an adult may ask a child, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" But as mission-minded parents and teachers, our typical question could have the potential of directing a child toward total obedience to God and complete surrender to His purposes. We should say, "Oh, I wonder what exciting plans God has prepared for your life?"

When you grow up, will you do whatever God wants you to do?" (p. 1).

Hearing your children's heart on this level may happen in regular, normal and casual conversations, but there should be nothing casual about your listening! You need to zoom in:

- Eye to eye, ear to ear, heart to heart!
- Locking in, in this kind of way, says to your children I think what you think is important. I am here not to talk, I am here just to listen.

5) Read missionary biographies to your children (Hebrews 11)

- There is power and inspiration in story. One of my son's named his son Judson, after Adoniram Judson. Another named his son Micah Elliot, honoring missionary Jim Elliot.
- There are wonderful and worthy role models for cultivating a missional life by biography. Missionary heroes should be a regular staple of the spiritual diet of your children.
- The "Children's Corner" website has brief vignettes of Christian missionary biographies. The stories of Jim Elliot, Amy Carmichael, Eric Liddell, Adoniram Judson, David Livingstone, Hudson Taylor, Nate Saint, William Carey and more are all available on a child's level.
(Check out the series, "Heroes for Young Readers", Christian Heroes:

Then and Now Series; Men and Women of Faith Series; Hero Tales multi-volume).

6) Expose your children to missionaries and their lives by having them in your home, sharing a meal with them, listening to their stories.

- It is difficult to overstate the impact of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot on modern missions. Elisabeth was the child of missionary parents. Jim too noted the impact of his parents, his father in particular, in his spiritual formation. He also noted their home was often visited by missionaries (*Ten Who Changed the World*, 72). John Stam, another missionary martyr in China, had parents who ran “Star of Hope Mission” in Paterson, NJ. Betty Stam, also martyred, was born into a missionary family. Her other 4 siblings also became missionaries. In fact Betty once wrote, “All five of us children expected... to return to China as missionaries. Our parents never urged it, but it seemed the natural and right thing to do” (*Ten*, 143). Their story could be multiplied a thousand times over. Our lives are impacted and shaped by the people we meet.

They are molded by the people we get to know and grow to admire.

7) Go on mission trips and take your children with you modeling obedience to the Great Commission.

- Begin with short term and easier access trips.

- Move to mid-term and tougher conditions.
- Most career missionaries first caught the missionary bug on a short-term trip. What does it look like for a child to be infected by the mission's germ?

In *The Mission-Minded Child*, Ann Dunagan says it like this:

- A mission-minded child...dreams of fulfilling God's destiny.
- A mission-minded child...may want to become a missionary-or a teacher or a doctor or a newspaper reporter or a state governor or a pastor or a businessperson or an airplane pilot or an author or a florist or a mother-as long as it's what God wants!
- A mission-minded child...prays for that next-door neighbor.
- A mission-minded child...is not a picky eater!
- A mission-minded child...takes home a photo magnet from the visiting missionary family and puts it on the kitchen refrigerator.
- A mission-minded child...spends a summer night sleeping outside on the trampoline, gazes up at a sky filled with twinkling stars, and realizes God's plan is infinitely bigger than his or her own backyard.
- A mission-minded child...imagines rollerblading on the Great Wall of China!

- A mission-minded child...recognizes the names of David Livingstone, Amy Carmichael, Hudson Taylor, and Loren Cunningham.
- A mission-minded child...knows how to use chopsticks.
- A mission-minded child...puts extra money in the monthly missions offering and feels extra good inside.
- A mission-minded child...thinks it could be fun to sleep in a mud hut in Africa!
- A mission-minded child...reads all the way through the Bible by the age of ten (or eleven or twelve) – and is excited to start again!
- A mission-minded child...stares at the photos in the new geography textbook or magazine and imagines climbing to the top of that Egyptian pyramid, snorkeling in those tropical-blue waters, and giving a new outfit to that poor boy with the ripped-up shirt.
- A mission-minded child...befriends the new kid at school.
- A mission-minded child...thinks beyond the “box” of what’s merely expected and hopes to do something big, or something little, for God.
- A mission-minded child...wants to obey (even when no one is looking).
- A mission-minded child...loves Jesus!

8) Teach your children what the Bible says about missions

- Teach them the beautiful and grand redemptive storyline of the Bible
[Creation → Fall → Redemption → New Creation]
Who am I? → What went wrong? → How did God fix it and what is my role in this drama? → Where am I going?
- Teach them the missionary components of the gospel
 - Jesus (Mark 10:45; Luke 19:10; Matt. 28:18-20)
 - Paul (Romans 15:14-24)
- Teach them who the greatest missionary is (Jesus) and who the greatest Christian missionary is (Paul)!
- Good theology will be missionary theology!

9) Pray for the nations and missionaries by name

- A.B. Simpson, “Prayer is the mighty engine that is to move the missionary work (*EGT*, 215).
- A.T. Pierson, “Every step in the progress of missions is directly traceable to prayer (*EGT*, 219).
- Leonard Ravenhill, “Prayer is not preparation for the battle; it is the battle! (*EGT*, 230).
- Pray systematically for the world (Operation World; Joshua Project).
- Adopt an unreached people group.

- Adopt a nation where the gospel is desperately needed.
- Adopt specific missionaries to pray for and serve!

10) Model missional living as a life priority before your children

- David Shibley, Founder of Global Advance, well says, “God is not calling us to win the world and, in the process, lose our families. But I have known those who so enshrined family life and were so protective of “quality time” that the children never saw in their parents the kind of consuming love that made their parent’s faith attractive to them. Some have lost their children, not because they weren’t at their soccer games or didn’t take family vacations, but because they never transmitted a loyalty to Jesus that went deep enough to interrupt personal preferences.” (*EGT*, 91).
- Are you a member of a Great Commission church?
- How often do you do national and international missions?
- Do you pray that your children and grandchildren would become overseas missionaries?
- Do you personally give annually to missions? Sacrificially?
- Do you have a missions savings account set up for your children and grandchildren?

- Do you have a Great Commission ministry in your will and estate planning so that you will continue to play a vital role in reaching the nations after you are dead and gone?

Conclusion

The great missionary to the Lisu people group of China, James Frasier, was moved to go to the nations after reading a small booklet entitled *Do Not Say*. It inspired him to forego a promising career as an engineer and concert pianist, and to give his life to see an unreached and unengaged people group hear the name of Jesus. What were the words that changed the course of his and the Lisu people forever? They are simple and clear: “A command has been given: “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.” It has not been obeyed. More than half the people in the world have never yet heard the gospel. What are we to say to this? Surely it concerns us Christians very seriously. For we are the people who are responsible...if our master returned today to find millions of people un-evangelized, and looked as of course He would look, to us for an explanation, I cannot imagine what explanation we should have to give...of one thing I am certain – that most of the excuses we are accustomed to make with such good conscience now, we should be wholly ashamed of them (*Mountain Rain*, 4). The Great Commission is not an option to consider. It is a command to

obey. Let our obedience begin but not end with those closest and dearest to us.

Let it begin in our homes.