

Sermon follow-up
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This week, I sought to lay out a basic aspect of Christian child-rearing. Too often, we have disconnected parenting from the broader mission of the church. But in God's Word, parenting and mission go hand in hand (Gen. 18:19). Raising faithful kids is one way to further God's kingdom purposes in the world. But we're also to raise kids who have a *missional consciousness* – kids who are learning to view the world with eyes of mercy and compassion, kids who have hearts ready to serve, kids who are more committed to the kingdom than to being cool or popular, kids who know that hospitality and care for the poor are Christian obligations.

In the weeks to come, I will deal with some additional aspects of parenting. But I wanted to start with the need to train our children to be missional and merciful because it should be something everyone can agree on. Does anyone want to argue *against* the proposition that we should be training our children to pray for the peace and blessing of those around them, or that we should teach them to be intentional in finding ways to serve others in Christ's name? There are a lot of things families can disagree over with a measure of legitimacy (and, thus those things ought not to be a reason for breaking fellowship). There are things over which parents and children will inevitably disagree, such as what music and movies are acceptable. Those kinds of discussions can be hard, complicated, and fuzzy-edged. But I started with the need to be missional because it's something every family, as well as both parents and children, should be able to agree on. No one can read even a few pages of the Bible and come away thinking it's ok to be calloused towards the poor or indifferent to the lonely.

It is crucial to keep in mind the breadth of the Christian mission. Mission is not something added to an otherwise non-missional lifestyle. Mission is not just a matter of traveling to a far away place to preach the gospel to lost people. Rather, mission is a distinctive way of doing *everything*. Mission means we live as God's sent people. It means we live in such a way that we further his goal or project of bringing every facet of creation and culture to its glorious maturity. Missional parenting does *not* mean raising our kids so they become missionaries in the narrow sense of that word. N. T. Wright captures the breadth of Christian mission and shows how it is a way of integrating all that God has called us to:

To hope for a better future in this world – for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed, for the slaves, the refugees, the hungry and homeless, for the abused, the paranoid, the downtrodden and despairing, and in fact for the whole wide, wonderful, wounded world – is not something *else*, something extra, something tacked on to the gospel as an afterthought...

Jesus himself got a hearing from his contemporaries because of what he was *doing*. They saw him saving people from sickness and death, and they heard him talking about a salvation, the message for which they had longed, that would go beyond the immediate into the ultimate future. But the two were not unrelated...

It is no good falling back into the tired old split-level world where some people believe in evangelism in terms of saving souls for a timeless eternity and other people believe in mission in terms of working for justice, peace, and hope in the present world...

Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world – all of this will find its way through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.

In other words, all these things fall within the scope of our mission. Wright continues:

There is ultimately no justification for a private piety that doesn't work out in actual mission, just as there is no justification for people who use their activism in the social, cultural, or political sphere as a screen to prevent them from facing the same challenges within their own lives – the challenge, that is, of God's kingdom, of Jesus's lordship, and of the Spirit's empowering. If the gospel isn't transforming you, how do you know that it will transform anything else?

That is exactly right. The gospel transforms a people so that that body of people can transform the world. Parenting is a key cog in this unfolding process. For years, I have been suggesting that the American church's public influence declined for two reasons: [1] she abandoned cities/urban centers, which are always the heart of cultural activity and change (e.g., 'white flight'); and [2] she failed to raise up faithful children, but instead lost massive numbers of children to the world, largely because she has refused to believe God's trans-generational promises. These two are deeply intertwined as Genesis 18:19 shows. Only a church that raises up faithful generations can successfully reach and transform the world with the gospel. Again, mission and covenant parenting are not in tension. They are complementary.

To complete the sermon follow-up this week, I am pasting in a section from a revised version of my book *Paedofaith*. Unfortunately, this section did not make it into the first edition, but if and when there is a second edition, it should be there. It can serve as a handy summary of the issues I was driving at in the sermon.

Raising Missional Kids

Finally, we must consider how inclusion of our children in the life of the covenant community from their earliest days relates to the mission of the church. If our children are believers from their youth, then they are part of the people of God who have been sent on a mission in the world (Mt. 28:18-20; Jn. 20:21). We must inculcate in our children a deep consciousness of mission from the beginning. We have previously established that our children are not “targets” of missionary work, since they already belong to God; thus, it should be obvious our children are called to be agents of missionary work in the world. They are to be “kingdom kids,” living for the sake of the kingdom, according to the norms of the kingdom, to the glory of the King, in all of life.

How do we go about this? To begin with, we have to come to understand and practice the church’s mission for ourselves. We have to *be* the kind of people we want our children to *become*. If we want our children to be missional, we must be missional. We must orient our lives towards the fulfillment of God’s mission for the church; as we do so, our children inevitably come to share in the same orientation.

For too long we have thought of “mission” strictly in terms of “missions” – something done in far away places on map, by religious professionals, supported by people back home. That kind of “sending” and “supporting” certainly has its place. But the mission entrusted to the church is much broader than channeling provision to preachers in distant, dark, impoverished lands.

The church also always has a mission to her own local “parish” (to use the traditional term), to those who live, work, and play in her midst. The church is intrinsically and constitutionally *a missional community*. Mission is not just one aspect of her life; it is the very heartbeat of her identity. Mission is not just a way of doing *some* things, but a holistic way of doing *everything*. This is necessarily so, because the church’s existence arises out of the mission of God, as he sends his Son and Spirit into the world to form the church. Thus, the church does not merely *have* a mission; she *is* a mission – namely, the spearhead of God’s mission to the world in this period of history. As Lesslie Newbigin is fond of saying, the church is sign, instrument, and foretaste of the divine kingdom. The church is both God’s *agent* of implementing Christ’s achievement in the world (as N. T. Wright puts it), as well as the *present form* that Christ’s new creation takes in the world, in anticipation of the final renewal of all things. The church both points to the future new creation and embodies that future in the present.

In order to be a missional community, we must eschew a common false dichotomy in Christian circles. The widespread thought is that a church can *either* excel in ministry to families, but at the risk of becoming “ingrown” and overly

narrow; *or*, a church can strive to be “missional,” reaching the lost through ministries of word and deed, but then running the hazard of allowing her own members – including her children – to go malnourished. How do we deal with these two poles of church life? Should we gravitate towards family or mission, insiders or outsiders? Should a church be inward focused, centered on strengthening the faith of her own families, or outward focused, centered on taking the gospel to the lost? Should a church build up her own internal community, or reach the community outside her walls? Should a church emphasize discipleship or evangelism? Should a church emphasize qualitative or quantitative growth, maturity or numbers?

Thankfully, we do not have to choose between these alternatives. Scripture calls us to *both* mission *and* maturity. Scripture shows that the best way for a church to be missional is to grow her members to maturity because mature people know how to attract others to the gospel in winsome and effective ways; likewise, Scripture shows that the best way for a church to attain maturity is by practicing an outward oriented form of sacrificial love and mission because the path to maturity is the hard road of humble service in word and deed.

This is certainly the case when it comes to raising our children. As we have already seen, Christian child-rearing means pouring ourselves into our children, loving them sacrificially, and giving them deeply of our time and energy. We should be living sacrifices in the home. Parenting can never be a half-hearted endeavor. But as parents pour themselves into their children, they must also be opening up their family life to invite others in. Children benefit tremendously from being a part of a household where openness to outsiders is a way of life, where hospitality is the norm rather than the rarity. Children can learn to thrive under the care of parents who are always looking for ways to expand their range of service in the kingdom. Children are not being neglected when their parents are such servants; they are being trained for a life of ministry.

Jesus draws together the inward and outward aspects of ministry in John 13:34-35. On the one hand, we are to love the family of Christ (including our children, as members of that family). But, on the other hand, as we do so, our mutual love creates a strong gravitational pull that the outsider cannot resist. Our love for one another is like a fountain that continually overflows; indeed, the church cannot contain our love and so it spills over into the world.

John 13:35 implies something very interesting. How does our love for another in the church reveal to the world that we are Christ’s disciples? Certainly, the quality of our love is vital. We love one another as Christ loves us. We forgive and forbear. We look for needs (like dirty feet; cf. Jn. 13:1-17) and seek to meet those needs in humility. But if we do all these things in the privacy of our own homes and churches, the world will never take note of them because the world will never see them. If our mutual love is to catch the world’s eye and draw them to Christ, we must invite them into our families and communities so that they can see this kind of love on display first hand. We must love one another in the presence of the world.

Our lives should constantly be open to the “invasion” of outsiders. We should be relationally oriented, always looking for new folks to be friends who do not know

Christ. We must live out God's reckless mission of love in the world, showing forth the promiscuous mercy and radical generosity of the gospel.

There is a fine balance here. On the one hand, our children need to know that we love them enough to do anything for them. They need to know they are valued and treasured. At the same time, we cannot program to think that they are at the center of the universe. We must train them to think in terms of service towards others. We must give them a surplus of love that will flow over into their relationships outside the home. We must show them that the kingdom is bigger than their particular family or church, and that kingdom priorities take precedence over family comforts and agendas. We must include them in our lives of mission. We must make them a part of the mission as well.

What does it mean to be missional? The work of scholars such as Newbigin, Wright, Rodney Clapp, Mark Gornik, David Bosch, and others can shed light on this question – more than I can do so here. But we can sketch out a thumbnail outline as a starting point. The scholars referred to immediately above have dealt extensively with mission as an aspect of ecclesiology, but only rarely have any scholars given thought to the role of the Christian family or Christian children in mission.

First, to be missional is to be committed to the gospel as both way of salvation and way of life. Missional living takes its shape and motivation from the gospel. To be a missional Christian, family, or church means that the gospel story is the determining story. The gospel story of Christ crucified and risen is not only the hope of salvation, it is pattern of life. The structure of the gospel – the rich becoming poor for the sake of the impoverished, the powerful using his strength on behalf of the weak – becomes the mold into which our lives are poured. We learn to see every blessing from God not only as a cause for gratitude, but a new opportunity for service. The gospel shaped life is also a life characterized by mercy because we know that everything we have is a gift. It is a life marked by deep generosity because God has been so kind to us. Our ultimate concern is to see others come to share in the gospel's blessings as well; we long to see others restored to the *shalom* God intended for them from the beginning.

The gospel story gives rise to mission in all kinds of obvious ways. In the gospel, God gathers us to himself in Christ; but he does so in order that we might be sent out to serve others in Christ's name and as his representatives. The gospel colors and flavors and textures our mission in every way. God forgives us so that we might be empowered to exercise forgiveness to others. God blesses us in order to make us a blessing to the world. Receiving grace obligates us to live as instruments of grace.

We need to teach our children that they have been swept up into the story of the gospel as well. This story is their story, and they must live accordingly. They will write the next chapter of kingdom history with their lives; they are moving onto center stage. By immersing them in the gospel story, we prepare them to follow the script and take their cues from the narrative of God's action in Christ so that they can thrive in the spotlight of the kingdom.

A missional Christian is also someone who is committed to the church. A commitment to Christ is inseparable from commitment to the community, and

our primary community is the church. Being missional means understanding the breadth of God's church. We must train our children not only to view God as their Father and the church as their Mother; we must train them to understand that the church is much bigger than their local body or particular denomination. The church is their "first family."

Finally, being missional means being committed to the world – specifically to playing a role in God's program of cosmic redemption. Being missional means seeing work, family life, leisure, hobbies, ministries, and social, cultural, and civic involvement as a way of serving God and doing God's work. To be sure, the church and worship have centrality. But being missional means living an integrated life, in which every facet of life is viewed through the lens of God's kingdom purposes. Being missional doesn't necessarily change what we do, but it does change the way we do it.

Far too many Christian parents are protective and isolationist with their children. They demand that their children pledge loyalty to them almost exclusively. They are suspicious of anyone else who might teach or influence their children. They build hedges around their children's lives. Some of this is good and natural, especially with very young children. The instinct to protect the vulnerable is God given. But our calling is to train our children as warriors, sent out to make war with the enemy. Recalling our discussion of Psalm 127, arrows are not supposed to be kept in the quiver; they are meant to be fired out onto the field of battle. Parents must understand that God has chosen them in order that they might raise up missional children who embody God's ways of righteousness and justice, for in this way God's covenant promise given to Abraham to bless the nations comes to fulfillment (Gen. 18:19). We must strive to balance the inward facing nurture of our children with outward facing ministry to the world.