

A Missio Dei Reinterpretation of Matthew 28:19-20 and Its Implications for Children's Faith Formation

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Abstract

This article aims to reinterpret the Great Commission within the framework of *missio Dei*, highlighting the significance of children's faith formation as an integral aspect of the church's mission. The primary issue addressed is the tendency to interpret the Great Commission narrowly, emphasizing verbal evangelism and individual conversion while giving limited attention to long-term character and faith development, particularly within the challenges of a digital society. The theoretical approach includes holistic missiology and linguistic analysis of the Greek text of Matthew 28:19-20, focusing on the imperative "make disciples" and its contextual understanding. The research employs a qualitative method through theological-contextual analysis and a systematic literature review, including exegetical examination of biblical texts and critical reflection on contemporary church mission practices. The findings indicate that reinterpreting the Great Commission through the *missio Dei* paradigm provides a broader understanding of the role of children's faith formation within the church's mission, particularly through collaboration among families, church communities, and modern media to nurture holistic discipleship. The novelty of this research lies in its integration of the *missio Dei* paradigm with children's faith formation as a central missional focus an approach that remains underexplored in contemporary missiological studies. The conclusion emphasises the need for a paradigm shift in mission perception and practice to sustain the church's mission in the digital age.

Keywords: Great Commission, Missio Dei, Children's Faith Education, Holistic Discipleship, Missiology Theology

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Introduction

The term Great Commission is not explicitly found in the biblical text, including in Matthew 28:19-20. This term emerged from the church tradition and mission theology that developed after the New Testament period. This technical term refers to the mission mandate that Jesus gave to his disciples before his ascension to heaven (Bosch, 2011, pp. 57-58). Even this term is referred to as the technical term that refers to the mission mandate that Jesus gave to his disciples before his ascension to heaven (Hartono, 2018). According to Goheen (2014b), the traditional understanding of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 is often emphasized narrowly as a mandate for verbal evangelization activities or personal evangelism alone, without considering the larger framework of *Missio Dei* which involves the transformation of the entire life of humanity.

The narrowness in question refers to an interpretation of the Great Commission that reduces mission to evangelistic proclamation and individual conversion, while neglecting the long-term, relational, communal, and formative dimensions of discipleship. The traditional approach to the Great Commission often focuses on personal activity, ignoring the holistic context of God's mission, including the education of faith in the family and the community of children (Goheen, 2014b, pp. 223-225). This perspective corresponds with, which states that the reading of the church's mission text is often trapped in the spirit of institutional expansionism. Places mission as the participation of God's people in the project of restoring creation as a whole, including the generation of children being formed in the community of faith (Wright, 2013, pp. 527-530). The mission involves the participation of God's people in the project of restoring creation, including the formation of faith in the next generation of children within the community of faith. Such concerns are reinforced by studies showing that many churches continue to neglect the Great Commission in both evangelistic proclamation and discipleship practices (Laukapitang et al., 2025).

These criticisms indicate an imbalance in the implementation of the Great Commission in various churches today. This is also reflected in an empirical study in a national survey conducted by the Bilangan Research Centre (BRC) in 2019 of 5,984 respondents from various church denominations (Mainstream, Evangelical, and Pentecostal/Charismatic), showing that Christians understanding of the Great Commission written in Matthew 28:19-20 still varies greatly. Only 46.5% of respondents stated that they understood very well, and only 40.4% of ordinary congregations admitted that they truly understood the

meaning of Jesus' command. Meanwhile, 83.3% of pastors/shepherds stated that they understood very well, indicating a gap in understanding between leaders and congregations. The implementation of the Great Commission in the church pulpit is also still limited; only around 39.3% of respondents heard it preached in the past month. In fact, most of the congregation admitted that they did not remember the last time this theme was raised. In terms of discipleship implementation, 51.7% of respondents admitted to having/been discipled in the past 12 months, but their primary motivation was driven by the desire to obey God and grow spiritually (Irawan, 2019, pp. 2-24).

This condition shows that the pattern of discipleship in many churches is still oriented towards personal formation and internal spirituality, rather than on sending and witnessing faith in the community. Theologically, this phenomenon reveals a lack of integration between theological understanding and missionary praxis in the body of Christ, where the Great Commission is often understood only as a verbal evangelism task, rather than as the congregation's participation in *missio Dei*, God's work of saving and renewing the world. As a result, churches tend to form a faithful community but are not actively involved in the missionary call, and this pattern has direct implications for children's faith education, as the younger generation imitates a model of faith that is more focused on self-development than on involvement in service and witness (Manyaka-Boshielo, 2018). Therefore, this finding demands a reinterpretation and reorientation of church practice so that the Great Commission is not merely taught, but is lived out contextually through faith education that fosters mission awareness from an early age, so that the church truly becomes a community that lives in God's mission. The most common challenges in discipleship are time constraints and lack of motivation from those being discipled, while common reasons why many Christians do not disciple are that they feel they are not yet capable or think that the task is only for pastors. This finding shows that the calling of the Great Commission has not been evenly understood and carried out by the entire body of Christ, especially at the congregation level (Irawan, 2019, pp. 2-24).

On the other hand, in theological studies, attention to children in the mission of the church is still very limited. In the history of Christian theology, children are often seen as spiritually "not yet full" and therefore rarely considered theological subjects or direct recipients of the call to discipleship (White, 2008, pp. 353-357). The Bible gives a special place to children as part of the covenant people and active participants in the relationship with God (Deut.

6:6-7; Ps. 8:2; Joel 2:16; Matt. 19:14; Acts 2:38-39). Unfortunately, the traditional understanding of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 is often emphasized narrowly as a mandate to carry out evangelism, namely the effort to bring people to the point of believing in Christ through the proclamation of the Gospel and conversion (Bosch, 2011, pp. 402-405). This approach, according to Duffield (2017), although important, often leads to a reduction in the meaning of Jesus' mission to only the initial aspects of the journey of faith. As a result, the long-term dimension of faith formation, especially in children's education, is less seriously considered in the church's mission. Despite extensive scholarship on Matthew 28:19-20, very few studies have examined the Great Commission through the lens of *missio Dei* in relation to children's faith formation. This article seeks to address this gap.

In fact, Jesus in the Great Commission not only commands to "go and baptize," but also to teach and do all that He has commanded the disciples. This is a call to a comprehensive discipleship process, not just conversion. This means that the mission of God (*missio Dei*) as mandated by Christ, includes a process of teaching, character formation, and ongoing faith education, starting even from childhood (Akin et al., 2020, pp. 74-77). In the context of the current church, especially in the digital era and a rapidly changing society, children's faith education is often neglected or carried out minimally. A reality strongly supported by Barna's (2022, pp. 22-23) research showing that 56% of children's ministry leaders agree that children's ministry is often forgotten by their church, despite its recognized strategic importance. Furthermore, only a small portion of strategic planning and discipleship frameworks is dedicated to children's spiritual formation, indicating a structural lack of prioritization. As a result, it becomes evident that the church's inability to live out the Great Commission holistically has contributed to the failure to equip children with a solid foundation of faith. Therefore, childhood is a crucial phase in the formation of spiritual identity that will influence their loyalty to the Christian faith amidst the challenges of the times.

A reinterpretation of the Great Commission in the light of *missio Dei* requires more than a theological restatement of mission theory; it demands a reframing of how the church envisions participation in God's redemptive work as encompassing the totality of human formation, including children (Wright, 2013, pp. 62-67). The *missio Dei* is not merely centrifugal, sending the church into the world, but also centripetal, nurturing and forming the inner life of the faith

community so that the witness of the Gospel is embodied across generations (Bosch, 2011). In this sense, children's faith education becomes the locus where the outward and inward dimensions of God's mission intersect. An exegetical reading of Matthew 28:19-20 in its Greek context reveals that the imperative *matheteusate* ("make disciples") includes the holistic process of teaching, forming, and cultivating life in Christ's ongoing pedagogical movement rather than a momentary evangelistic act (Moltmann, 2018, pp. 55-57). Thus, the command to "teach them to observe all that I have commanded you" (*didaskontes autous tereîn*) situates faith formation within the very grammar of mission itself (Keener, 2014, pp. 718-720). Theologically, this reflects the dynamic of the Triune God who not only sends but also sustains and educates His people into communion with Himself.

Therefore, a reinterpretation of the Great Commission is needed in the light of God's comprehensive mission, namely integrating children's faith education as an inseparable part of the church's mission. God's mission does not only move outward, but also inward: building a growing faith community, equipping generations, and ensuring the ongoing inheritance of faith. Children's education, in this case, is not a complementary task, but rather a core part of the church's participation in God's work of salvation in the world. Through this article, the author wants to show that a narrow understanding of the Great Commission has hampered the effectiveness of the church's mission in reaching and forming future generations. On the contrary, by placing children's faith education within the framework of *missio Dei*, the church can carry out God's mission in a more contextual, relevant, and sustainable way during the digital and pluralistic world that we are currently facing. Considering these concerns, this study aims to reinterpret the Great Commission within the framework of *missio Dei* to show that children's faith education is not a peripheral activity but a central dimension of the church's mission in the digital age. By reframing the Great Commission through a holistic theological and missional lens, the study seeks to illuminate how the formation of children's faith is deeply rooted in the very identity and vocation of the church. Accordingly, this research is guided by a central question: how does reinterpreting the Great Commission through the *missio Dei* paradigm reveal that children's faith education is an essential expression of the church's mission in the digital age?

Method

This article uses a qualitative approach with theological-contextual analysis methods and systematic literature studies, to reinterpret the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20) within the framework of children's faith education (Boaheng, 2024). This method was chosen because it allows integration between exegetical studies of biblical texts, analysis of mission theology, and contextual reflection on the challenges of the digital age. The literature based theological inquiry is utilized to identify the conceptual foundations and gaps in previous scholarship, ensuring that the reinterpretation stands on a solid academic basis and remains contextually relevant. This approach is in line with the practical theology model that combines theological reflection and contextual understanding to produce a transformation of church practice (Osmer, 2008, pp. 4–10).

The first step is carried out by an exegetical analysis of the text of Matthew 28:19–20, highlighting in particular the linguistic structure of the Greek, where the main verb μαθητεύσατε (make disciples) is central to the mandate, while other words such as “go,” “baptize,” and “teach” serve to support the mandate (France, 2007a, pp. 1112–1115). Contextual analysis is also employed to examine current ecclesial dynamics and digital-cultural challenges, allowing the findings to be practically applied within contemporary children's ministry. In addition, the editorial context of Matthew's Gospel as a document addressed to the early Jewish-Christian community is also analyzed in order to understand the historical and communitarian dimensions of the discipleship in question (Keener, 2014, pp. 718–721). The second step involves a critique of the traditional understanding that reduces the Great Commission to mere verbal evangelism. In this case, Bosch's (2011) analysis is used, emphasizing the need for a paradigm shift in mission from a cognitive-conversion approach to participation in the *missio Dei* as a whole. On the other hand, Bird (2013, pp. 872–875) criticizes evangelical reductionism that fails to see discipleship as a process of deep and continuous faith formation. The third step is the integration of children's faith education theory, especially through the Christian constructivism approach. Westerhoff (2012, pp. 34–38), within the framework of Vygotsky's influence, emphasizes that children's faith formation occurs through involvement in the practice of faith with the community, not just cognitive teaching. The community functions as a spiritual scaffolding in shaping children's faith experiences. This principle is combined with Moltmann's (2018, pp. 64–68) *missio Dei* theology, which views children's faith education as part of participation in God's saving work in the world. The fourth step is carried out with

a contextual case study, namely an analysis of actual models of children's faith education that adopt a missiological approach, such as the use of digital media (animated Bible videos, interactive applications) in teaching, and the application of a family-based discipleship model that involves parents as primary partners in disciplining children (Jones, 2011; Keeley, 2019). The final step is a theological-practical evaluation of the challenges of implementing this model amidst the reality of the current church, such as resistance to paradigm changes from the traditional church, and the influence of cultural and religious pluralism on faith teaching methods (Foster, 2014; H. Smith, 2009).

Thus, the method applied is multi-layered, starting with the exegesis of the biblical text, followed by critical theological reflection on the understanding of the mission, the integration of theories of children's faith education, and contextual analysis of practices that develop in the digital era. This approach facilitates the relationship between texts, theological dynamics, and the reality of church practice, thus producing an understanding that is both relevant and applied.

Results and Discussion

Narrative Grammatical Analysis: Matthew 28:19-20

In Matthew 28:19-20, the Greek text provides rich insights into the structure and intent of Jesus' command, often referred to as the Great Commission. The key sentence in this passage is:

πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετείλαμην ὑμῖν. (Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach them to be obedient to all that I have commanded you (NET)).

The focus of this passage is on the verb μαθητεύσατε (*matheteusate*), which is the second person plural active aorist imperative. It is the only imperative in the sentence and thus serves as the primary command, namely, "make disciples of all nations" (Mathias, 2018, p. 21). The aorist tense here implies a single, complete action, indicating that discipleship is a comprehensive and immediate mission. Because it is active, the subjects (the disciples) are the primary agents in carrying out this action, not passive recipients.

To explain how this command is carried out, the text uses three participles: πορευθέντες (*poreuthentes*, "to go"), βαπτίζοντες (*baptizontes*, "to baptize"), and

διδάσκοντες (*didaskontes*, “to teach”). All three are in the masculine plural nominative case, conforming to the hidden subject of the main imperative. Interestingly, πορευθέντες is an aorist passive participle, often translated as “go,” but in the Greek structure it functions as a chronological or conditional introduction: “after you have gone” or “on your way” (Mathias, 2018, pp. 22–23). Wallace notes that the aorist participle can be circumstantial or temporal, rather than the main imperative. This shows that “go” is not an independent command, but a condition or setting for the main action of “making disciples”. Meanwhile, βαπτίζοντες and διδάσκοντες are active present participles, indicating ongoing action. Baptism is not just an initiation ritual, but part of an ongoing process of discipleship, while teaching (διδάσκοντες) emphasizes that discipleship involves an ongoing and progressive teaching process (Kereen, 2009). This is in line with the end of the text which emphasizes the importance of obedience, namely with the phrase τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετείλαμην ὑμῖν (“obey all that I have commanded you”). The word τηρεῖν is an active present infinitive, which grammatically indicates an ongoing process; obedience is not a momentary event, but rather part of the lifestyle of a true disciple (S. E. Porter, 2006).

This grammatical structure shows that the Great Commission is not simply a call to “go and evangelize,” but rather a structured command to form disciples through an active, ongoing, and comprehensive process: beginning with presence (going), initiation (baptism), and formation (teaching). In the context of disciplining children, this provides a theological basis for including children in the target of discipleship from the beginning, since the phrase πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (“all nations”) includes every member of the community, without discrimination of age, emphasizing the ethnic and age inclusivity of this command (Wilkins, 2009).

Thus, a grammatical analysis of Matthew 28:19-20 shows that Jesus’ command to “make disciples” is both broad and deep. This action is not a momentary task, but rather a continuous process, beginning with the departure in everyday life, followed by baptism as a sign of acceptance into the community of faith, and continuing with teaching that encourages full obedience to Christ. The structure of the Greek sentence with one main imperative and three supporting participles makes it clear that discipleship is a holistic calling. In the contemporary context, including in children's ministry, this text provides a strong foundation that discipleship is not only for adults, but also for children as an integral part of all peoples who are called to know, follow, and obey Christ for life.

Exegetical Analysis of Matthew 28:19–20

Matthew 28:19–20, widely known as the Great Commission, is the climax of Matthew’s Gospel narrative and affirms Jesus’ universal missionary mandate. Grammatically in the Greek text, the keyword μαθητεύσατε (*matheteusate*, “make disciples”) occupies the active aorist-imperative position, making it central to the syntactic structure of the verse. This verb does not simply command a one-time action, but encompasses a continuing and holistic process, from introduction to Christ to maturity in the faith. This suggests that discipleship is not merely a cognitive or moral process, but rather a comprehensive transformation that encompasses all aspects of the believer’s life in relationship to Jesus as Teacher and Lord. In the context of Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, the theme of discipleship has been present since the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (cf. Matt. 4:19), and now, in the closing part of the Gospel, the mandate is given to the disciples to be passed on globally to all nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) (France, 2007b, pp. 1114–1116).

The three participles that accompany the main words πορευθέντες (*poreuthentes*, “go”), βαπτίζοντες (*baptizontes*, “baptize”), and διδάσκοντες (*didaskontes*, “teach”), are not merely additional actions but describe the primary means of making disciples. The first participle, πορευθέντες, literally means “having gone” or “on the way,” but in the context of the primary imperative, it is often translated functionally as an imperative as well (“go”), emphasizing the outward movement of the faith community into the world (Kereen, 2009). This reflects the dynamic character of the Christian mission, which is not waiting but actively reaching out. The second participle, βαπτίζοντες, indicates the sacramental dimension of initiation into the community of God, through baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit,” a trinitarian formula that implies the unity and equality of the three divine persons in the work of salvation (Allison, 2014). The third participle, διδάσκοντες, refers to the pedagogical dimension of discipleship, not just transferring knowledge, but educating in obedience to all the teachings of Christ, which reflects the practice of life transformed by the Gospel (Darmawan, 2019).

The editorial context of the Gospel of Matthew shows that this text is primarily directed to the Jewish Christian community after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. In a condition of collective trauma, the religious identity of this community was shaken. Thus, the Great Commission is present not only as a mission instruction but as an affirmation of their new identity as a community

formed by and for Christ (Carter, 2000). The phrase διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετείλαμην ὑμῖν (teaching them to obey all things I have commanded you) emphasizes that discipleship does not stop at doctrinal learning or liturgical participation alone, but leads to the formation of character and a lifestyle that is faithful to Jesus' commandments (S. L. Porter, 2019). This shows the importance of obedience as an ethical aspect of true discipleship, where inner transformation must bear fruit in real lives that reflect the Kingdom of God (Luz, 2005).

Thus, the Great Commission is not simply a command to spread the faith widely, but a profound mandate to form a community of disciples who live in the teaching of Christ, united by the sacraments, and marked by practical obedience to His will. This is contextually relevant in the life of the church today which faces the challenges of spiritual fragmentation and individualism. The church is called to build a comprehensive faith formation starting from the proclamation of the Gospel, followed by integration into the community through baptism, and grown through teaching that forms the character of Christ in believers, including children.

Criticism of the Traditional Understanding of the Great Commission

The traditional understanding of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 tends to experience a narrowing of meaning, which is often referred to as evangelical reductionism. The term evangelical reductionism criticizes the tendency of some Christians to interpret the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) narrowly, namely only as a mandate to convey the Gospel verbally or win souls in the sense of quick conversion. This perspective tends to emphasize the role of evangelism as an activity that focuses on individual decisions to believe in Christ without considering the ongoing process of spiritual formation. In this paradigm, mission success is often measured by the number of people who are "saved" or formally accept Jesus, not by the quality of discipleship that occurs afterward. Bosch (2011) calls this tendency a form of theological simplification of the complexity of the Christian mission which involves all aspects of human life and society.

The consequence of this reductionism is the neglect of an important dimension of the Great Commission, namely "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). This phrase implies that discipleship is not just an initial decision to believe but includes a long process of faith education that forms the character and lifestyle of Christ's disciples. Bird (2013, pp. 769-

772) criticized that when evangelism is separated from discipleship, the church produces “half-baked believers” who are not formed in the teachings of Christ as a whole. This causes the church's mission to become shallow and lose its transformative dimensions in personal, social, and structural life. Evangelization reductionism also has serious impacts on children's and youth ministry in the context of the church. The focus that is too narrow on verbal evangelism often makes the church ignore the importance of long-term faith education for children, which requires a pedagogical, contextual, and relational approach. Children are not only objects of the mission to be “saved,” but subjects to be invited to grow in faith through community experiences, consistent teaching, and the example of adults. When this faith formation is neglected, the younger generation is at great risk of losing a solid theological and moral foundation, even if they once “received Christ” in evangelization events.

In this paradigm, the main emphasis is on verbal evangelism activities, namely conveying the gospel message explicitly and inviting people to repent and believe in Christ. This approach is rooted in the revivalist tradition of the 19th and early 20th centuries, where the main focus was on instant individual conversion and counting the number of “souls saved” as an indicator of the success of the church’s mission (Green, 2004). The Christian mission cannot be separated from social transformation and ongoing spiritual formation, which means that discipleship must encompass all dimensions of human life, not just the private spiritual dimension (Bosch, 2011; Goheen, 2014a). This reductionist tendency also has a direct impact on the lack of attention to children’s faith education. In many churches, attention to children’s ministry is often technical and functional, rather than theological and strategic. Children are considered the “future of the church,” but are rarely placed as the subject of mission today (Wahyuni & Kadang, 2019). Children's faith education must be seen as an integral part of discipleship because childhood is the most receptive period for the formation of values, beliefs, and spiritual orientation (Anthony & Benson, 2011, pp. 294–298). When the Great Commission is understood narrowly as a task of evangelizing adults, the long-term dimension of faith education, especially for the younger generation, is neglected. Children are not just passive recipients, but active participants in the community of faith who should be accompanied in their spiritual growth.

In addition, there is a significant gap between theory and practice in the implementation of the Great Commission in many churches. Doctrinally, many

denominations acknowledge that discipleship is an important part of church life. However, reality shows that this understanding has not been translated effectively into pastoral practices and service programs. A survey conducted by the Barna Research Centre revealed that only 40.4% of congregations could identify the contents of the Great Commission in its entirety, including elements of teaching and obedience to Christ's commands (Irawan, 2019, p. 4). This indicates the church's failure to internalize and socialize Jesus' commands in their entirety. Churches often place more emphasis on external activities such as mass evangelism, but ignore internal processes such as character building, in-depth Bible study, and spiritual discipline as part of discipleship.

The implications of these criticisms are very important, especially in the context of today's church which is facing the challenges of secularization, identity fragmentation, and a crisis of spirituality among the younger generation. Discipleship can no longer be understood as an optional program but as the core of church life itself. Evangelism should be seen as an entry point into the discipleship journey, not an end. The church needs to review its ministry strategy, especially in developing a contextual faith education curriculum for children, preparing competent spiritual companions, and building a church culture that supports spiritual growth across generations. In this way, the Great Commission is not only understood theoretically but is truly lived out as a process of forming a community of disciples who live in teaching, obedience, and witnessing to Christ amid the world.

Children's Faith Education as an Integral Part of Missio Dei

The Christian constructivism approach and scaffolding theory developed by Westerhoff (2012) offer a profound theological and pedagogical framework for understanding children's faith formation. Christian constructivism views children not as empty vessels for dogma, but as individuals who actively build an understanding of faith (Guthrie, 2019). This process occurs through experiences, relationships, and reflections within a faith community. This is where Westerhoff's scaffolding theory becomes relevant. According to him, children's faith grows through stages supported by social structures that provide spiritual "scaffolding," such as family, church, and Christian community (Westerhoff, 2012, pp. 84–88).

The community functions as a place for children to experience and internalize faith values through liturgy, biblical narratives, and intergenerational

relationships that exemplify faith (Allen, 2008). John Calvin, one of the great reformers, also provided an important foundation in theological thinking on children's faith education. In the Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin emphasized the importance of spiritual education from childhood as part of God's common grace that leads humans to the knowledge of the truth (Siska & Intan, 2022). He saw children as part of God's covenant, so they deserve to receive spiritual instruction and be guided in the community of God's people from an early age. Calvin (2018) believed that the human heart from childhood needs to be formed and directed to the truth of God's word, not only individually but in attachment to the body of Christ, namely the Church. This reinforces the idea that the formation of faith cannot be separated from the context of the community that forms, educates, and leads children to Christ.

In the light of *Missio Dei*, children's faith education is not just an internal church program, but an active participation in God's mission in the world (Barfield, 2019). Faith is not only taught but is captured in the context of living together, which means that when the church forms children in the faith, it is carrying out the divine mission of passing on the Gospel to the next generation (Westerhoff, 2012, p. 129). Children are not only objects of the mission but active subjects who also participate in the mission through their life testimony in the community. Research shows that interpersonal interactions in a supportive Christian community play a major role in shaping children's spiritual identity in a sustainable manner (Ratcliff, 2019). Therefore, children's faith education is a vital dimension of *Missio Dei*, which requires the church to build authentic, relational, and transformative communities, where faith learning occurs organically and missionarily.

Moltmann's (2018, pp. 67-69) theological mission view emphasizes that *Missio Dei* is comprehensive, not limited to evangelism or church service activities alone, but encompasses the whole of creation and all dimensions of human life. Within this framework, children's faith education is not a secondary task or an internal program of the church alone, but rather a form of real participation in God's holistic work of salvation. For Moltmann, salvation is not only about individual liberation from sin, but God's involvement in renewing the world as a whole spiritually, socially, ecologically, and historically (Dabney, 2000). Therefore, when the church fosters children's faith, it involves a new generation in the dynamics of world renewal that God himself initiates and moves in human history through the Holy Spirit and the community of His people (Moltmann, 2018, pp.

88–91). Children's faith education, in this context, is not merely a function of the church's internal education, but rather part of God's eschatological movement towards the restoration of all things, a mission work that embraces the future and forms children as agents of hope and transformation (Root, 2010).

Faith education in the light of Moltmann's theology also involves an eschatological dimension, where children are not only prepared to “enter heaven”, but are formed to become agents of hope in a world that is being renewed. Moltmann (2009) views children as an integral part of the eschatological community, namely the people of God who are walking towards the fullness of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, educating children in faith means inviting them to live in hope, social involvement, and responsibility towards the world, as part of the people of God who are called to reflect love, justice, and renewal during a reality that is often broken. Thus, children's faith education does not only aim to convey religious knowledge or values but also to form them as active participants in God's salvation history in this world (Nel, 2016).

From a historical-cultural perspective, children occupied an essential place within ancient Israel's covenant community. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that Israelite households (*bayit*) functioned as the primary center for religious formation, where children were intentionally shaped through daily practices such as the recitation of the *Shema*, Sabbath traditions, and participation in annual festivals (Boda, 2017, pp. 112–115). These practices show that faith was transmitted intergenerationally through communal storytelling, ritual participation, and shared memory, making children active bearers of Israel's covenant identity rather than passive observers. Recent studies also affirm that Israel's covenant structure placed significant responsibility on families to nurture children spiritually, as seen in the pedagogical tone of Deuteronomy 6:6–7, where instruction was integrated into the rhythm of everyday life (Carr, 2011, pp. 45–48).

In the early Christian community, similar patterns continued as Christian gatherings took place in domestic settings where children naturally participated in worship, instruction, and communal meals. Archaeological and socio-historical research confirms that early house churches were intergenerational spaces that included children as part of the worshiping body (Balch & Osiek, 2020, pp. 72–76). Moreover, recent New Testament studies highlight that the household codes (Eph. 6:1–4; Col. 3:20) presuppose the presence of children within the liturgical life of the church, indicating their full inclusion in communal formation (Harvey, 2018, pp. 233–236). Evidence from early Christian writings

also supports this view. Contemporary patristic scholarship notes that early theologians saw children as capable participants in faith practices, reflecting a belief that spiritual formation began from infancy and continued through communal belonging (Harvey, 2004). Taken together, recent historical-cultural research demonstrates that both ancient Israel and the early church consistently regarded children as integral members of God's people. Their inclusion in covenantal rituals, household worship, and communal instruction underscores that children were not viewed merely as the "future of the community" but as present participants in the life, faith, and mission of the people of God. This long-standing tradition provides a strong historical and theological foundation for prioritizing children's faith education within the contemporary church.

Thus, the education of children in faith is an essential element in the *Missio Dei*, which is not limited to the cognitive transmission of doctrine but includes the formation of a holistic spirituality in the context of the community. Children are understood as active subjects who construct their understanding of faith through existential experiences, socio-religious interactions, and dynamic participation in church life. The church, family, and religious environment serve as incubation spaces for faith, where evangelical values are internalized organically through interpersonal relationships and modelling of faithful behaviour. This process is not merely an additional activity but is integral to the church's participation in the work of soteriology and cosmic renewal. By positioning children as participatory agents in the ecosystem of faith, the church not only preserves religious tradition but also empowers new generations as catalysts for theologically based social transformation. This approach emphasizes the teleological dimension of faith education, namely preparing children to contribute to the realization of the Kingdom of God amid the world.

Implementation Challenges: Between Church Reality and Plurality of Contexts

One of the main challenges in integrating children's faith education within the *Missio Dei* framework is resistance to paradigm shifts within the church. Many traditional churches are still fixated on institutional and programmatic approaches that emphasize cognitive transmission of knowledge, rather than forming faith in a relational and missionary context (Das, 2016). When the *Missio Dei* paradigm demands the church to be a living, dynamic, and engaged community in the world, many churches choose to maintain old forms for the sake of structural stability and comfort (Foster, 2014). This reflects a crisis of

theological courage to transform into a community that truly educates children in real involvement in God's mission, not just fulfilling curricular obligations or routine internal activities.

In addition to institutional resistance, there are also challenges in terms of uneven theological understanding among congregation members. The Barna Research Centre (BRC) revealed that there is a significant gap between the understanding of church leaders, especially pastors, and ordinary congregations regarding the meaning of the Great Commission. Pastors generally understand the mission of the church as sending and participating in God's work of salvation, while congregations often interpret it as merely an evangelical task or even just routine church activities (Irawan, 2019, pp. 11–15). This inequality has an impact on the congregation's minimal awareness of their role, including in children's faith education, as part of the church's missionary calling. Without a collective awareness that forming children's faith is part of fulfilling the Great Commission, faith education programs will continue to be seen as a liturgical burden, not a missionary mandate.

Amid rapid changes in the era, the next challenge is the reality of the digital and pluralistic world. Children and adolescents live in a world full of information, opinions, and competing identities. Exposure to social media, pop culture, and relativistic values leads them to existential confusion and a spiritual identity crisis (Riyanti et al., 2024). In this context, a dogmatic, one-way, and unreflective approach to faith education becomes irrelevant. The church can no longer simply transfer doctrine but must enable children to think theologically contextually, understand faith in the light of their realities, and be critical and loving in facing a complex world (J. Smith & McSherry, 2004).

Furthermore, children's faith education in the digital era demands creative involvement from the church in both methods, media, and relational approaches. Education cannot be separated from the world of children themselves. The use of digital platforms, visual narratives, educational games, and open dialogue spaces are important means to reach and foster them (Nye, 2014, p. 109). But more than that, children need to be formed in a community that can become a real example of living faith: a community that dares to struggle with them, answer their existential questions, and live God's love authentically. In this case, the church is called to be an incubator of faith that is inclusive and relevant to the needs of the times (Yust, 2004, pp. 79–82). These challenges require a profound transformation in theological awareness, church structure, and the approach to

faith education. A process of disseminating understanding of *Missio Dei* is needed for all elements of the congregation, including parents, Sunday school teachers, and church leaders (Hartono, 2018).

Participatory and contextual formation must be developed so that all people understand that children's faith education is not only a moral obligation or educational task, but a missionary action that places children as part of the movement of the Kingdom of God. The church needs to reformulate the curriculum, strategy, and educational vision that is rooted in a comprehensive theology of mission (McEvoy, 2019). Finally, the church needs to realize that forming children's faith is not an instant process, but rather a shared spiritual journey in a community that is open to transformation. Missionary faith education requires the courage to re-evaluate old forms of service that may no longer be relevant, as well as a commitment to building an open and Christ-centred learning culture. When the church is willing to step out of its comfort zone and enter the *Missio Dei* flow, children's faith education will become a vital tool in transforming generations to take part in the work of world renewal.

Towards a Holistic and Transgenerational Mission

In the face of the complexities of the modern era, the church is challenged to develop a mission paradigm that not only touches on the spiritual aspect, but also responds to the social, emotional, and cultural needs of humanity. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20) is the main foundation of the Christian mission, which for centuries has been the starting point for cross-cultural evangelism and church formation (Kgatle, 2018). However, in the context of a world that is constantly changing and experiencing global challenges such as environmental crises, social inequality, and demographic and cultural shifts, the understanding of the Great Commission needs to be creatively reinterpreted (Witoto, 2022). This reinterpretation does not abandon its Christocentric essence but expands its applicative dimensions to reach all aspects of life and across generations. The Great Commission must be understood within the framework of the overall biblical narrative of God's mission (*missio Dei*) which involves the whole of creation, not just individuals who are saved from personal sin (Wright, 2013, p. 203).

A holistic mission approach includes serving the spiritual, social, economic, and ecological needs of humanity (Ringma, 2004). This refers to Jesus' mission, which not only proclaimed the Kingdom of God but also restored the dignity of humanity and creation through concrete acts of love (Luke 4:18–19). A

holistic mission avoids the dichotomy between proclaiming the gospel and serving others since both are integral expressions of God's love (Hughes, 2004). In this sense, the church today must be an agent of reconciliation and cultural transformation contextually and prophetically.

Furthermore, the reinterpretation of the Great Commission also demands a transgenerational approach. The mission is not only directed at the "present generation" but also at the formation of future generations who have the spiritual, intellectual, and moral capacity to continue God's work in the world. The formation of children and adolescents' faith is not just a secondary task, but the core of the church's mission. H. Smith (2009) reminds us that spiritual formation is liturgical and continues through practice and culture. Therefore, the church must be involved in creating an educational and cultural ecosystem that supports cross-generational faith growth in a living and contextual community (Dean, 2010). Transgenerational mission strategies also include discipleship that emphasizes not only cognition (doctrinal teaching) but also relationships, experiences, and character formation. This is rooted in Jesus' pattern of discipleship that involves closeness, example, and sending. This concept is in line with the "transformational discipleship" approach developed by Bosch, who sees mission as a process of total life renewal through participation in God's work in the world (Bosch, 2011). Thus, the church is not only an evangelistic institution but a community that forms the whole person in the light of the Kingdom of God (Gelder & Zscheile, 2011, pp. 125-128).

Realizing a holistic and transgenerational mission means aligning God's heart with the real needs of people in every generation. When the church is willing to embrace a mission approach that touches all dimensions of life, both spiritually and socially, and installs the values of the Gospel from an early age in the next generation, then the mission will remain alive and sustainable. In the light of the Great Commission, this kind of mission is not just a task, but a legacy of faith that continues to flow from one generation to the next, becoming a testimony of God's infinite love across space and time. Reinterpreting the Great Commission does not mean replacing the Gospel message, but placing it in a broader, contextual, and relevant horizon. A holistic and transgenerational mission is a response to the dynamics of the times and God's calling to be a light for the nations. In a world full of fragmentation, this kind of mission becomes a prophetic witness that brings to life the Shalom of God, the integrity of the relationship between God, others, and creation. Through this reinterpretation,

the Great Commission finds its vitality again, not only as an evangelistic mandate but as a vision of world renewal in all its dimensions.

Implications

The research findings in the article “Reinterpreting Jesus's Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 in the Context of Children’s Faith Education”, show that the Great Commission can be understood not only as an evangelistic mandate to adults, but also as a theological basis for early childhood faith guidance; theoretically, this broadens the hermeneutical and theological framework of the church’s mission by placing children’s faith education as an integral part of the task of discipleship, while practically, this research emphasizes the need for churches and Christian educators to design more inclusive, contextual, and sustainable learning strategies for children’s faith growth. The strength of this research lies in its reinterpretative approach that opens new perspectives in biblical studies and Christian education, thus impacting the development of science both mission theology, hermeneutics, and Christian pedagogy by enriching academic discourse on how biblical texts can be applied relevantly in building a generation of faith from an early age.

Recommendations for further research

This research opens space for further, more in-depth study, particularly due to its strength in offering a reinterpretative perspective on the Great Commission as the theological foundation for children's faith education. To strengthen this contribution, future studies need to develop more empirical analysis, for example through field research in various church and cultural contexts to see how the principles of children's faith education are applied. Furthermore, the limitations of this research which still focuses on theoretical approaches and textual studies suggest the need for broader methodological exploration, including comparative, interdisciplinary, and evaluative approaches to models of children's faith education, so that understanding of the Great Commission's relevance can be broadened and practically tested in various Christian educational settings.

Conclusion

Reinterpretation of the Great Commission in the light of *Missio Dei* affirms that children's faith education is not a secondary task, but rather a central part of

the church's mission. The church is called to develop a holistic, contextual, and sustainable discipleship model, involving families, communities, and modern media. Thus, the Great Commission is not only about reaching the lost but also ensuring that the next generation remains rooted in the Christian faith. Children's faith education is at the heart of the Great Commission, not just a complement to church programs, because it contains Christ's mandate to make disciples of all nations, starting from the smallest circle, namely the family. In facing the digital era, which is full of challenges and distractions, the church is required to innovate in methods and approaches, without obscuring the essence of discipleship which is rooted in biblical truth. Therefore, the formation of a child's complete and transformative faith can only be achieved through strong synergy between the family as the first place of spiritual education, the church as a community of faith formation, and the media as a strategic tool to reach the digital generation. This tripartite collaboration is key to producing a generation that not only knows Christ cognitively but also lives the Gospel existentially in a world that is constantly changing.

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