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Christian Discipline of Children

— Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore

At Remnant Fellowship Church in Brentwood, Tennessee, only a short distance from my home, religious leader Gwen Shamblin encourages parents to spank their children, describing corporal punishment as a "time-tested, ancient teaching of the Bible" necessary to shaping adherence to God's authority. According to the February 7, 2007, issue of the *Tennessean* (and here was one time when I really hoped the reporting was unreliable), parents who bring children to the nursery have foot-long glue gun sticks in their diaper bags for physically disciplining them. These details hit the news because eight-year-old Josef Smith died in October 2003, and his parents, members of Remnant Fellowship, were finally facing trial for whipping, confining, and beating him to death.

Although later in February the parents were sentenced to life plus thirty years, the debate about Christian discipline is far from resolved. On the one hand, social scientists such as Alice Miller indicted Christianity in the 1970's and 1980's for perpetuating parental abuse. Initially Miller simply argued that narcissistic parents use children to meet parental needs — an iniquity visited on following generations, as emotionally deprived children become parents who use their children to get the affirmation missing in their own childhood. Over time, however, Miller became more strident, and eventually accused Christians of perpetuating a "poisonous pedagogy" of cruel mental and physical techniques designed to render children obedient, described in horrifying detail in childrearing manuals. Meanwhile, Philip Greven and others found ample historical and psychological evidence to argue that such discipline can indeed be quite hazardous to children's health.

On the other hand, in recent years some sociologists, such as John Bartkowski and Brad Wilcox, have tried to modify such assessments. Empirical research, they say, documents increased affection and paternal involvement as positively related to an emphasis on children's submission to parental authority and use of corporal punishment. There is even initial evidence that such punishment does not have adverse emotional or behavioral repercussions, an outcome that may result from its place within a broader set of positive parenting behaviors.

More than anything, all this politically loaded research suggests that Christians of all stripes should be wary of extreme claims on both sides. Subtle agendas shape social science facts and have serious social implications. Christians must take their troubled disciplinary history seriously, admitting the harm done in Christianity's name, and yet also question sweeping accusations that Christianity itself is inherently abusive. News about Josef Smith's death powerfully reminds us just how hazardous careless use of Christian proclamation can be, especially as it impacts those least able to protect themselves and most dependent on adult benevolence. Fervent promotion of doctrines about sin, obedience, and bending the will to God have had and can have devastating consequences.

At the same time, seeing children as sinful does not de facto lead to their harsh punishment. It can, in fact, have an inverse effect of assuring respect for their full humanity and agency. Many classic theologians commonly associated with ideas about children as depraved, such as Augustine and Calvin, did not condone corporal punishment, offered nuanced views of children's spiritual capacities, and even found such doctrines cause for greater compassion for all children, especially poor children.

Scriptural accounts of Jesus' ministry actually set a high disciplinary standard. Nowhere does Jesus advocate physical punishment. Instead, he goes out of his way to heal children, says they embody the kingdom, and threatens eternal damnation to anyone who would harm their faith. "Discipline" and "disciples" share the same root. The disciples follow Jesus not because he stands over them as commander in chief, but because he aligns himself with them and elicits their love, trust, and admiration. Perhaps influenced by Christianity more than she realizes, Miller herself concludes: "We do not need to be told whether to be strict or permissive with our children. What we do need is to have respect for their needs ... as well as for our own." For Christians, discipline means fostering conditions that induce a desire to love God and seek the good of others.

Whether Remnant Fellowship Church (or any congregation that talks openly about how to discipline children) encourages this kind of discipline or rather condones abuse is still up for debate. But when it comes to corporal punishment, there is ongoing need for serious caution, and for the work of a practical theology that studies not so much the truth of doctrine but how doctrine gets lived out in daily life.

For children in particular, what people believe about Jesus or God — whether God demands obedience or offers love — matters.

References:

"Child's Death Renews Scrutiny of Local Church," by Anita Wadhvani and Heather Donahoe, *The Tennessean* (February 7, 2007).

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