

Unfinished Business: From Punitive to Humane Parenting in the Bible and Contemporary Christianity

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This paper examines the role of religious texts in the legitimation of punitive parenting. Such texts predate Christianity, and go back to the Kethuvim or Writings of the Hebrew Bible, most notably passages from the book of Proverbs. They extend to pedagogical materials in use today, such as a pamphlet by Christian fundamentalist parenting guru Matthew McMahon. While McMahon advocates severe punitive parenting based on Biblical texts, I hypothesize that most Christians today practice a less abusive and more evolved style of parenting. As an example, I discuss the writings of parenting guru James Dobson, who moderates the severity of Biblical child rearing norms by introducing concepts from modern psychology, though still unequivocally advocating corporal punishment of children under many circumstances. Finally, psychohistorian and pastoral theologian Donald Capps defines the humane end of the punitive-humane continuum in Christian theology and child-rearing practice.

Christian Fundamentalist theologian Dr. C. Matthew McMahon has written a concise guide to parenting entitled, “A sober look at what Christian parents need to do in disciplining their children: How to Not Foul Up the Discipline of Your Children and Save their Souls from Hell.” McMahon is an American Calvinist Reformed theologian and adjunct professor at Whitefield Theological Seminary. Now in his 40s, he is the founder and chairman of “A Puritan’s Mind,” a website of Calvinist theological materials for students of the Bible.

As a fundamentalist Reformed Presbyterian, McMahon is a Biblical literalist. “The premise of this paper is quite simple,” he writes. “It is a short look mainly at the book of Proverbs in raising children and discipline.” McMahon then outlines three presuppositions: “First, the Bible is God’s Word and His authority reigns supreme in every area of the Christian life, including how to discipline your children...” (p. 2). “Second, the book of Proverbs is the book of ‘common sense.’... within the Bible’s Wisdom Literature... [It] is filled with information

about raising children, and discipline.”... “Third, this is a paper for Christian parents who need a boost, a kick in the pants, to raise their children according to the Bible.” (p. 2) [McMahon’s language is so striking that what follows is my digest of his ideas using his own words.]

What Do We Do about Covenant Children (the children of Godly Christian families)?

“Covenant Children are not free from sin. ... Of all children, covenant children should be disciplined most.” “The Fall has rendered children, the moment they come out of the womb, to sin. They are prone to it in every form.” He cites Psalm 58:3, “‘The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.’ Their character and heart are fallen. They are immature, foolish, full of self-love, and always try to press their parents to relinquish their authority over them....” (p. 3-4)

When Does God Expect Obedience to Take Place?

“Many people, many parents, think that the ‘age’ dictates the child’s behavior. ... This is secular nonsense. Stages of development must have the proper discipline so that the character is trained in a specific manner according to God’s Word. If the child is terrible at two, they will be ten times worse at twenty. ... God wants obedience from children to their parents at every age.” (p. 5)

“The rod, spanking, or corporal discipline, is the God-ordained means to correct children of every age. Children are naturally wayward, and the rod brings them back.... There is no age limit here. However, parents should not be so foolish to think that they should spank their 6 month old as they would a 5 year old. Yet, they should also not be foolish to think that their 6 month old does not need corporal correction.” (p. 6)

McMahon then cites Proverbs 19:18, “‘Chasten your son while there is hope and do not set your heart on his destruction.’ ... God says that there is a time in your child’s life where there will be no more hope in correcting them....(p. 6) He also cites Proverbs 23:13, ‘Do not withhold correction from a child, For if you beat him with a rod, he will not die.’ ... God says that you should not withhold correction from the child, and the means by which you should not withhold correction as a parent is through corporal discipline. God says that spanking a child will not kill him. God says that spanking your two year old in a proper manner will not kill him. God commands you that you withhold not correction from him. The Bible says nothing of giving your child a ‘timeout.’ What nonsense is this? Will you

listen to the New Age gurus and Dr. Spock, or will you listen to God? Dr. Phil will tell you that your child needs a timeout. God tells you to beat him with the rod. Who is right?” (p. 7)

“Parents need to understand the word, ‘beat.’ It is the Hebrew verb *nakah* (naw-kaw) which in Proverbs 23:13 literally reads, ‘to smite, strike, beat, scourge, clap, applaud, give a thrust’ In other words, scourge or strike the child so that he never does what he did ever again.... This is not brutality. Rather, it means that [the child’s] bottom is so red, that they have a hard time sitting back down when you are done. If the child is too young for that, then give them a good smack with a tense rubber band on their arm or their thigh. They will remember it!” (p. 7)

Secondly, why should you do this? McMahon quotes the rest of Proverbs 23:13-14: “Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell.’ God says that you will beat your child with the rod and deliver his soul from hell. (And you thought I was making it up!) ...

“It is true, parents should say ‘No.’ But, if the child does not heed the parent at that exact moment, they should administer the rod. *No second chances*. If the child persists, the parents should persist.” McMahon tells the story “of a 19th century family in England sitting by the fire when ... the father came in from work. He sat down and then called over little Billy, their youngest son of five years old. The mother said that Billy had been learning his ABCs that day during school at home. The father wanted to see this. He held up a chalk slate and asked Billy to read his ABCs. Billy refused. The father put down the slate, and took Billy into the back room and spanked him. Then he brought him back and sat down, picked up the slate, and again, asked him to recite his ABCs. Billy shook his head. The father brought him back in the room and spanked him again, more harshly. They came out, and again the father asked him to repeat his ABCs. Billy sat with tears in his eyes quietly and said nothing. The father took him back again and spanked him a third time. They came out, sat down, and again the father asked Billy to say his ABCs. Billy, again, said nothing. The father got up, and the moment that he began to rise again, Billy began his ABCs. The father looked at him, sat down, held up the chalkboard, and had little Billy repeat his ABCs to him, then gave him a big hug. That is godly discipline. (p. 8)

To reinforce his position, McMahon recommends several parenting books, one of which is a best seller. The book entitled *Shepherding a Child’s Heart*, by Tedd Tripp is number 67 on Amazon’s best seller list of books on parenting.

McMahon concludes: “If you do not keep in step with God’s prescription for your children, (1) you will be judged for neglecting God’s commands and principles in His Word, and (2) you will have unruly children that bring you shame.”

Regarding McMahon’s warning not to neglect God’s commands in the Bible, even he avoids the text in Deut. 21:18-21 which calls for killing a rebellious child. For McMahon, you can beat the child to an inch of his/her life; just don’t kill them. So he gives preferential treatment to the Kethuvim over Torah. The Deuteronomy text reads,

“If a man has a wayward and defiant son, who does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them even after they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the public place of his community. They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Thereupon the men of his town shall stone him to death. Thus you will sweep our evil from your midst: all Israel will hear and be afraid.” (Deut. 21:18-21, *Tanakh*)

James Dobson was raised as a fundamentalist in the Church of the Nazarene, attended a Nazarene college, and went on to earn a doctorate in psychology at the University of Southern California. Entering this field was and is considered controversial for fundamentalists, who believe in “sola scriptura” (“only the scriptures”). As a psychologist, Dobson came to realize the inadequacy of traditional biblical child rearing norms and their potential for legitimizing severe child abuse, so he tempered these norms on the basis of psychological knowledge. Most notably, he advises parents to exhaust non-physical approaches to discipline before resorting to corporal punishment, with one exception as we will see.

As an Evangelical Christian, Dobson still adheres to Biblical literalism, at least in theory. Caught in the contradiction between modern psychology’s norms of child rearing and the Bible’s, Dobson resolves this contradiction in favor of corporal punishment but ends up with a synthesis that is markedly less severe than the purely Biblical teachings of McMahon. He also seeks out and associates himself with the small minority of psychologists who consider moderate corporal punishment under some circumstances as a salutary form of discipline.

In his classic best-selling books *Dare to Discipline* and *The Strong-Willed Child*, Dobson advocates the spanking of children from the age of eighteen months up to 10 years old when they misbehave, but warns that "corporal punishment should be a rather infrequent occurrence. I do not believe in harsh, oppressive, demeaning

discipline... parenthood does not give the right to slap and intimidate a child because Dad had a bad day or Mom is in a lousy mood.” (*Dare to Discipline*, p. 20, 51; *The New Strong-Willed Child*, p. 142-143) He warns against "harsh spanking" because "it is not necessary to beat the child into submission; a little bit of pain goes a long way for a young child. On the other hand, the spanking should not be too gentle. If it doesn't hurt, it fails to be a deterrent for the bad behavior in the future. The spanking should be strong enough to cause the child to really cry.” (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, pp. 160-161)

Unlike McMahon, Dobson does not rule out lesser forms of punishment, such as being deprived of a privilege, being sent to their room for a time out or being made to do a chore instead of playing. He advocates a hierarchy of punishments with spanking being near the top to be utilized after lesser punishments have failed. Further, while a switch or hairbrush may be used, the spanking should be confined to the buttocks area where permanent damage is not likely to happen. (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, pp. 157-9)

Dobson has called disciplining children to be a necessary but unpleasant part of raising children that should only be carried out by informed and mature parents. Anyone identified as a child abuser, who has an anger management problem or takes delight in another's pain should not engage in corporal punishment. (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, p. 157)

Like McMahon, however, Dobson emphasizes the fallen nature of children and the need for parents to be strong authority figures. The worst transgression of the child, in Dobson's mind is open defiance of parental authority. *Childish defiance is grounds for nothing less than corporal punishment.* “In my opinion spankings . . . should be reserved for the moment a child (between the ages of eighteen months to ten years old) expresses to parents a defiant ‘I will not!’ or ‘You shut up!’ When youngsters display this kind of stiff-necked rebellion, you must be willing to respond to the challenge immediately.” (*The New Strong-Willed Child*, p. 20)

Much as Dobson attempts to harmonize religious teaching with modern psychology, critics such as Bartkowski and Christopher Ellison maintain that Dobson's views veer sharply from contemporary mainstream experts and are nothing more than expressions of his traditional religious views. While this criticism is valid as far as it goes, Dobson does not represent the extreme abusive pole in the abusive-humane continuum in Christian child rearing. That distinction belongs to Matthew McMahon and his ilk, highly abusive fundamentalists who advocate frequent and severe use of corporal punishment as a first, not a last,

resort. McMahon and Dobson operate from the same theological paradigm based on Biblical literalism, but McMahon advocates harsh Biblical child-rearing norms in their pure form, while Dobson moderates them by combining them with non-Biblical ideas and practices drawn from modern psychology.

Like Dobson’s secular critics, Professor Donald Capps, who taught pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, condemned Dobson’s child rearing doctrines as contributing to child abuse. In addition, he critiqued the religious and theological foundations of Dobson’s doctrines—his reading of the Bible—which Dobson shares with McMahon. Capps’ book, *The Child’s Song: The Religious Abuse of Children*, was written to explain “the ways in which religious practice and theological ideas have sanctioned the abuse and torment of children.” (*The Child’s Song*, p. 156.) Capps’ analysis is fully aligned with the ideas of Alice Miller, Lloyd DeMause, and other psychohistorians and psychologists who are highly critical of all forms of physical and emotional punishment of children.

Capps offered a Biblically informed but thoroughly humane theological paradigm for parenting and child discipline. He did not consider the story of the Fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden to be the last word concerning the heart of a child. Nor did he view the Book of Proverbs as normative for today, but rather superceded by the teachings and actions of Jesus concerning children.

Rather than viewing the child as morally inferior and in need of molding, Jesus elevated the child as embodying the Kingdom of God. Placing a child in the midst of his disciples, Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.’ (Matt. 18:2-3) Capps understood the Kingdom of Heaven to be a return to the Garden of Eden, the archetypal garden, also referred to in the Book of Revelation with the ushering in of the New Jerusalem and access to the Tree of Life. It signifies that place where the human psyche and soul find wholeness.

Capps explained: “The original Garden of Eden story undermines this belief [in humanity being given a second chance], and, in so doing, leaves us feeling demoralized, as though we have been condemned to live in a world in which all of us must get perfect marks and any mistake or failure means that we are condemned for life. The author of Revelation also challenges the story, as he envisions all the children of the world gathering beside the river where stands the Tree of Life, with its 12 kinds of fruit and its healing leaves (Rev. 22:2).

Which is to say, Capps continued, that the Bible itself, this book of our lives . . . envisions our return to the garden, there to reexperience the inner peace that surpasses all understanding.” (*The Child’s Song*, p. 170-1)

Capps cited William James’ description of conversion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

“To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which **a self** hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.”

Capps not only provided an alternative religious teaching for truly nurturing parenting, he also offered words of healing to wounded adults who themselves may have suffered from abusive parenting:

“When we find ourselves reaching out over the seemingly impassable years to the child we used to be, taking this child in our arms and loving this child, perhaps for the very first time. To know such wholeness, to be at enmity with ourselves no longer, is the very essence of religion, for it is the purpose of religion to bind together that which was once broken asunder, and this must surely include **the self** which has been hopelessly divided.... The Garden of Eden is a place where the self is reunited and is consciously right, superior and happy. This is not hubris, but self-appreciation.” (*The Child’s Song*, p. 168)

In this survey of three contemporary Christian theorists of child rearing, I have delineated a developmental continuum from severe abuse at one end to nurturing and humane norms at the other. This same continuum is found in the Bible itself, with the Books of Deuteronomy and Proverbs being a repository of abusive norms and the Christian Gospels and Book of Revelation a source of fundamentally different and more enlightened images of the child and of human nature. Contemporary Christians, depending on the extent of abuse in their own childhoods and the degree to which they have found healing from this abuse, gravitate to these diametrically different Biblical norms as guides to the rearing of their own children.

Indeed, many Orthodox Jews today take a much more moderate view of child discipline than Christian fundamentalists like McMahan or Dobson. They do not believe in original sin or literal hell fire. “Parents are to (1) educate your child

according to whom he is (Prov. 22:6) and (2) balance discipline between the left hand of judgment and right hand of love.” The Talmud teaches that only the proverbial left hand, the weaker hand can discipline children and it must be guided by the dominant right hand of love. One must never cross over into any form of abuse. (Jewish Values Online: Multi Jewish Perspectives on Morals and Ethics. <http://www.jewishvaluesonline.org/index.php>)

Tehillah Lichtenstein goes a step further, addressing the common temptation to over-protect the child. “There are mothers who swallow their children, who absorb them into themselves to such a degree that their psychic identity and separateness are completely destroyed.... All in the name of love, every breath the child draws is at mother’s direction, and in accordance with goals which mother has set for the child.... When you tell him at each step where to go, at each moment what to do, what to think, what to feel, you are taking his life away from him, you are destroying him; for that is life, thinking, doing, feeling; what right have we to take that away?”

“We have a pattern of Divine Love before us all the time. Why not follow it?”
T. Lichtenstein, *Applied Judaism*, pp. 585-7.

That healing occurred in the ancient world and continues to occur in our own is a reason for hope in a more humane future.