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Spare the Rod: A Critique of Christian Justifications for Spanking

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The following was written for by a graduate professor in the field of education leadership, but its conclusions impact all aspects of society: law, religion, social justice, education, philosophy, family, cultural norms, and psychology. In my book, slated to be released this fall, I detail how recent studies have demonstrated that child abuse has long-term, psychological consequences that lead to problems with relationships, employment, and long-term health; it also explains how the effects of child abuse and corporal punishment are nearly identical when compared using social, emotional, and cognitive measures.

Too often in society, the focus quickly leaps toward a solution with an assumption that the problem is universally understood. However, since many issues are the products of some form of American culture, central problems are often so normalized and accepted as virtuous, people fail to examine the impact of unquestioned, antiquated, foundational cornerstones. That is not to imply that adults should not reflect and examine habits involving child development, however. Urie Bronfenbrenner, originator of the “Bioecological Model of Development,” explains the various “nested” systems surround each child in our society. The first element of this chronosystem, called the “microsystem,” defines the relationships between the child and members of his or her immediate circle and how that child is supported by that network of adults and institutions. The final and most ambiguous (difficult to detect and gauge) of these is the macrosystem. It analyzes the societal and cultural beliefs that influence the development of the child. It is interesting to point out that these influences, such as law and religion, can indirectly impact the child by influencing the members that are directly aligned with the child.² It is how customs and traditions form; while many are wholesome and innocent, some morph into unseen threats if not subject to routine analytical scrutiny. Ancient rituals, re-gifted from year to year, generation to generation until, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, nobody really understands how, when, or why they began. Yet in *Romeo and Juliet*, the blind, traditional, dispositional genes of hatred were normalized and logical until tragedy exposed how toxic unchallenged norms can become.

This is not to suggest that anyone can debunk a long-cherished, traditionally practiced custom in two hours as Shakespeare could, even if the belief could be proven to have an adverse impact on one’s own children. The adults in the child’s microsystem, also products of a culture infected with unmonitored habits, must pioneer the campaign to extricate the child from the trappings of his or her own normalcy. This is not to promote one theological ideology over another or to denounce religion in any way, but to encourage open-mindedness when considering recent findings that evidence the unintended consequences related to accepted customs and beliefs. This is, however, to challenge interpretations that influence habits that harm children. In a non-threatening approach to better understand the factors within the child’s macrosystem, adult members of that microsystem need opportunities to learn more about the influences that indirectly impact the child. Cooperative dialogue and the sharing of information might challenge adults in the child’s inner circle to defend the moral codes on which their values are based. The burden of change, if deemed necessary, is on the parent and those positioned in the child’s immediate “spheres of influence.”

This cannot be done if adults are unwilling to question things that they too might have normalized and accepted that could have an adverse impact on child development. In American society, especially in the area of child development, this is difficult because moralities that shape sometimes caustic parental philosophies are steeped in religion, and attempts to question interpretations and practices often are sensitive topics.

First, caretakers must precisely identify the actual central problem. Without this understanding, strategic remedies often morph into a cyclical pattern of addressing the recurring symptoms, often misidentified as the central problem. For example, adults spank children for behaviors that are symptomatic of the trauma common to children that are spanked; in this case, the adult is the source of the trauma, but the child's behavior is mistaken as the central problem. Reactive behavior (opposed to proactive behavior) does little to self-actualize a child.

How does this happen? When the accepted best practice (in this case, spanking was at one time) becomes an accepted, positive, unquestioned intervention that becomes habit over a long period of time, the best practice can erode or become obsolete with no decrease in its popularity. There is no question that the ethics that guided the lawmakers were developed on the foundation of religious beliefs because laws are written social codes; family values are heirloomed attitudes based on the same sources, for the most part. These are sacred to individuals, divinely-inspired idioms and stories designed to guide humans down a path of righteousness and clean living. Spanking, from this perspective, is validated and cocooned in a triangulation of law, religion, and family customs. If family practices lead to tragic outcomes, it seems the parent(s) or the aberrant child is blamed, not the applicability of the code to unique situations occurring during eras unrelated to the source of stated moralities. That makes Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem worthy of some form of critical reflection.

As mentioned, religious, community, and family caretakers in a child's chronosystem must be willing to question their own attitudes and challenge them in a healthy manner. This is not heresy or civil disobedience; it is growth that requires a painfully critical examination of the bedrock of one's personal codes. Parents, teachers, preachers, social workers, etc., must also understand the foundation on which these atrocities are unconsciously promoted by other adults charged with the child's development so that they can collectively better navigate a positive outcome. In this regard, child advocates must proceed with precaution. For example, sharing recent research findings about domestic child adversity with preachers, politicians, and parents might help them arrive at their own conclusions without a direct confrontation misconstrued as provocation or accusation. The proper approach to these delicate conversations is critical, however, and must start with a complete awareness of the problem. There are no quick fixes, despite what the snake-oil salesmen may promise before leaving town. However, there will be gradual, palpable results and long-term, sustained growth if implemented patiently and cooperatively, especially when parents and community stakeholders are properly informed.

The influence of religion on the American way of life is indisputable. Whether or not a citizen chooses to follow the teachings and moral codes primarily influenced by Christianity, all are held to the divinely-inspired influences (both directly and indirectly) in the culture, social values, and foundations for multiple forms of justice. In the United States, 70 percent of the population is affiliated with Christian churches, with more than a quarter (25.4 percent) of the entire United States population determined to be Evangelical Protestant.³ Half of all Evangelical Protestants claim to abide by the literal doctrines of the Bible.⁴ Evangelicals are not only the largest subgroup of Christians, which suggests their values dominate established norms and laws, they are also the group that has the highest rate of endorsement for spanking children. According to Ben Irwin of *Wordpress*, "To this day, 80 percent of (Evangelical) parents think it's appropriate—even necessary—to spank. That's down just slightly from 90 percent when I was growing up."⁵ Catholics, the second largest denomination, are not far behind. *The Washington Post* and *National Catholic Reporter* reported the results of an eight-year study that concluded in 2014, revealing that about two-thirds of Catholics endorse spanking as a means of punishing children.⁶

The steadfast belief in the moral codes of Christianity or the adoption of a theoretical approach to the perspectives that seem to be universally accepted by a denomination is admirable on the surface, but any subject within its realm of influence should not be immune to objective analysis. Failure to examine the logic or rationale of something that has such a profound impact on morals and values that influence lifestyles is an issue that creates defensiveness and frustration.

This purpose is not to challenge anyone's faith, but any beliefs should be able to withstand objective, constructive scrutiny, especially in an attempt to understand its impact on critical decisions that influence the manner in which children are developed. So much has been learned about human development since the Old Testament verses were forged, so it seems reasonable to suggest that new learning has a place in the discussion.

Evangelicals, Catholics, and Spanking

Evangelical Protestants and Catholics comprise two-thirds of the Christians in the United States, and Christians form nearly three-fourths of the population, as mentioned. Their influence is the most evident, so the justification for their beliefs and practices will be examined from the perspective of their impact on human child development in America. The largest religious group in the United States is the Evangelical Protestant, constituting a whopping 36 percent of all Christians, which is why this population has had such a profound impact on American laws and values. Catholics comprise of nearly 30 percent of all Christians, who are slightly over 70 percent of all Americans.⁷ While it is impossible to examine every possible religious influence on every individual's chronosystem, various degrees of influence come from all forms of spirituality that underlie the culture. According to the Pew Research Center, Evangelicalism was formed in the eighteenth century, based on the formation of a personal relationship with God and a commitment to spreading God's message around the world. Many Evangelicals adhere to a strict and rather literal interpretation of the scripture as the direct word of God. Travis Mitchell of the Pew Research Center explains, "In response, critics have questioned the bible's inerrancy, but some evangelicals have pointed out, among other arguments, that because God cannot err, the Bible cannot err."⁸ This is called the "*Sola scriptura* which means that only the Bible is the sole, infallible rule of faith and the sole source of public revelation given by God to man. Under this doctrine, Scripture is the first, best, and ultimate depository for divine truth, as well as the only one that is without error, having been inspired by God himself, who cannot lie."⁹

Respecting the belief in that concept, this article will not detail how often the modern Holy Bibles have been translated, updated, and modified to enhance understanding by humans. It will not challenge literal interpretations by arguing that the language is figurative or metaphoric, but it will point out that the term "Scripture" refers to the sacred writings of Christianity in the Bible; the text of the Gospel and the rest of the New Testament. The passages most Christians use to defend the practice of spanking, however, are from the Old Testament, phrases coined centuries before Jesus Christ existed. In addition, this will not point out that many adults did not actually research and choose their religions; most were born into it or recruited. In other words, this article will not even argue that about 80 percent of Evangelical Protestants were raised in that church and probably have never objectively considered other options.¹⁰ This article will not challenge these variables to minimize the chances of offending the reader, so it will make points within the philosophical constructs each religion supports.

Most Americans are very familiar with the idiomatic directive, "Spare the rod, spoil the child." If the "rod" is interpreted as something more akin to "parental guidance" or "accountability," it might dispel the concept of assaulting children in the name of God with an object designed to inflict pain. In this argument, it is assumed that the "rod" in this phrasing is indeed an instrument used to beat children and not some metaphor that means "teach" or "lead," as some suggest. The "punish" version of the rod is aligned with some theories that base beating children on the concept of original sin. Children are threatened to this very day with, "I am going to beat the devil out of you!" Even if the only explanation to be considered is a violent application of God's directives, the interpretations of those literal words are still prone to human error in the degree of application. The degree to which a lashing is too much, not enough, for example, is not mentioned. Rarely is religion scrutinized this way; people find the support for their actions and the manner in which that rod is used is at the adult's discretion.

If the Bible is to be taken literally, then the contradictions, especially those between the Old and New Testaments, must be part of God's design as well. There is no divine indication that some verses in the Bible or any other religion are more important than others. If so, it stands to reason that the literal Biblical scholar would have to consider all scripture related to a particular topic, instead of an isolated pearl of wisdom to be conveniently applied to a situation-or used as a means by which to justify impulsive, reactive, emotional acts motivated by anger more than benevolence.

While the intent is not to dispute the certainty of the existing Hebrew text or Scripture for the reasons many embrace or the chance that their interpretation is completely accurate, the willingness to ignore some aspects of the Bible and embrace other aspects is indicative of normal, human bias which is commonly and easily observed.

For example, during workshops and conferences, most people (when asked) share a belief that “Spare the rod, spoil the child” is an Old Testament verse. In actuality, Samuel Butler, a seventeenth century poet, coined the phrase in Part II of his poem “Hudibras,” Canto I, line 843: “Love is a boy by poet’s sty’d; then spare the rod and spoil the child.” Butler, however, was making a Biblical allusion, so any confusion is understandable, except if the justification for following that creed is based on a literal interpretation of the Holy Bible. It is based on an interpretation of a neoclassical poem’s indirect allusion to what might be a Biblical concept. In fact, there are only six verses in the Bible that seem to directly suggest hitting children to save them from err or extricating original sin; they are all in Proverbs:

Proverbs 13:24: “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him often.”

Proverbs 19:18: “Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying.”

Proverbs 22:15: “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.”

Proverbs 23:13-14: “Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.”

Proverbs 29:15: “The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.”¹¹

It seems that there are many who approach The Bible conservatively who have been hitting their kids by mistakenly attributing one line from a neoclassical poem to something that they thought appears in one book in the Old Testament of the Bible. If so, that is not practicing a literal interpretation of the Bible, it is practicing hearsay without verifying the source. If a parent who beats his child supports the decision by saying or thinking, “Spare the rod...”, then that parent is possibly making a critical mistake that will cause lasting harm to their own child based on some unpopular poet’s quest for notoriety. One could argue that “Spare the rod...” is Biblical, but that would not be a literal interpretation of the word of God. It was probably edited and modified for meter and rhyme, not to form literal doctrine. Yet that line has been the creed by which parents have spanked children with the authority and duty given to them by God for generations. If true, it is irresponsibly careless and tragic, exemplifying how a belief can guide practice without much critical examination of its origin.

Anticipating the criticism that this argument is bound to stimulate, and adopting the position that the rod is a disciplinary tool (because it very well could be, considering the state of mankind in 900 B.C.), we shall all assume that the lessons of the Bible are to be practiced literally to be fair. But if they are establishing the premise for the argument based on this ideological position, then there is a fair question to be asked: If they spank their children based on a literal interpretation of Proverbs, are they applying an equal adherence to all literal directives mentioned in the Bible? In Leviticus (20:9) it literally says, “If anyone curses his father or mother, he must be put to death. He has cursed his father or his mother, and his blood will be on his own head.” Were the children who used profanity toward Mom and Dad because they were given the wrong color Power Ranger toy by mistake, triggering a profanity-laced tantrum executed? Did Mom and Dad shoot their adolescent son for calling them a curse word when they were denied access to the car keys on a Friday night? Are some Christians “cherry picking” the Holy Bible to justify their actions, or are they negligent for not killing their kids for losing their tempers and tongues? This creates a dilemma for literalists, as do other Biblical verses that counter these Proverbial demands, most housed in the New Testament.

To demonstrate this position, the Holy Bible contains more civil, pedagogical interventions: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4). According to child psychologist and psychotherapist Thomas Haller and parenting expert Chick Moorman, “The Bible simply does not support spanking, it supports holding children accountable. It supports ‘train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it’ (Proverbs 22:6). ‘Training’ does not mean spanking, hitting, or any other form of corporal punishment.”¹² Yet in the “Bible Belt” of the United States, where the majority of Evangelicals are located, corporal punishment is dramatically more common than in other areas of the country, according to a recent ABC poll.

Surveyed parents revealed that spanking or corporal punishment is practiced by 62 percent of the parents residing in the “Bible belt” versus 41 percent of parents rearing children beyond the region of the country where Evangelical Protestants dominate the Christian landscape.¹³

The popularity of spanking is indisputable and it is far from an isolated practice. Without questioning the practice of applying a literal interpretation of words written around the eighth century B.C. to today’s child disciplinary practices, a simple expansion of scope is all that is necessary to encourage more caution for literalists who endorse spanking as a Biblical directive. For example, the New Testament has passages that, if taken literally, seem to serve as warning for those who elect to harm children for any reason:

Matthew 18:6: “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”¹⁴

Recent studies show a direct correlation between domestic adversity and how trauma causes the child to make harmful life choices, such as self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, gang affiliation, and numerous, casual sexual partners in the quest for acceptance and validity. Spanking and corporal punishment, according to a study of over 160,000 children, has the same traumatic impact as physical child abuse, with the only measurable differences attributed to physical healing.¹⁵ These studies, when combined, clearly show the relationship between spanking and undesirable life choices that many call “sins.”

Ephesians 4:15–19: “Speak the truth in love and use our words to build others up, not allow rotten or destructive words to pour from our lips, especially toward the tender hearts and minds of children.”¹⁶

Most forms of corporal punishment features some degree of psychological and emotional shaming, often in the form of sarcastic belittlement, which increases the likelihood for psychological trauma. How often do adults administer the lessons of “the rod” without raising their voices or degrading their children? These verses are significant because they indicate an awareness of psychological and emotional harms (“the tender hearts and minds of children”) that impede child development. This concept seems to recognize the vulnerability of children and the phrase “build others up” acknowledges the importance of resiliency, love, and esteem in communicating the truth to children. How many children are disciplined in accordance to this advice?

James 1: 20: “For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”¹⁷

In a recent study published in *Journal of Family Psychology*, it was concluded, “...that parents tend to strike their children out of anger and quite quickly after the children misbehaved — in other words, not as last resort.”¹⁸ The article added that the parents often resorted to physical punishment within one half minute of the initial conflict. In another study, it was determined that nearly half (44 percent) of parents spank because they “lose it.”¹⁹ It seems, based on the available data from these two sources, that any attempt to use any part of The Bible to justify hitting children while upset or angry is more excuse than adherence to religious discipline.

There is no reasonable, justifiable, data-driven, moral, ethical or principled reason to strike a child. As a part of a child’s chronosystem, adults have the responsibility to serve that child’s best interests. Spanking does not serve the child educationally, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, or economically. Yet it is common. Trauma scars children for life, and spanking is emerging through research as the most widespread form of complex trauma, deeply embedded in the moral fibers of well-intending adults. The first step is coming to terms with the reason adults adhere to such a violent practice when there is mounting evidence that demonstrates how destructive it is. If we do not question the practice, then we are subject to its destructive forces beneath a veil of crippling blind tradition and false entitlement. We must not wait until it is too late, as the Capulets and Montagues realized while weeping over the bodies of Juliet and Romeo, who failed to cope with the insanity of their realities.

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