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DISCIPLINE AND THE CHRISTIAN PARENT

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To smack or not to smack that is the question . . . or that is the question that invariably comes to the fore when the problems of disciplining children are being raised. At the end of May headline news reported the court hearing of Martin Flynn with his infamous pulling down of pants and public smacking of his daughter. The court's 'guilty' verdict created an outcry, with a huge majority of people speaking against it. So what is the Christian response? Is there a Christian response? What does the Bible have to say about this issue?

I am a nearly-40-something mother-of-two and I have grappled with this question throughout the short ten years of my parenthood. Most parents are seeking to do the best by their children, but we are living in a society which is steadily moving away from the once accepted norms of respect for authority and the natural hierarchy of grandparents - parents - children. Children are being taught their 'rights', and while few of us would want to return to the days of *Oliver Twist* and the workhouse ethic, I suspect that I am not the only one with fond memories of the days when children would accompany parents to church and sit quietly for an hour without too much fidgeting!

Today's children know their rights, they cannot be exploited, abused or bought - but knowledge in itself does not confer wisdom; as Solomon said,

"Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him." (Prov 22: 15)

And again,

"Do not withhold discipline from a child, if you punish him with the rod he will not die. Punish him with the rod and spare his soul from death." (Prov 22: 13,14)

Solomon was the wisest of men (the Bible says that only Jesus was greater than he in wisdom) and we would be foolish indeed to ignore what he has to say. What is interesting to me about the two quotations above - and indeed nearly all of Proverbs' teaching on the subject - is that it takes the long term view. Discipline is the means to an end - and the end is the integration of the child into society, the imparting of wisdom, the saving of the soul. Discipline is far, far more than a smack because of a tantrum or a cheeky comment or a bout of disobedience - it is training for life. The aim of consistent discipline is to build character - and that is always a long-term goal. Discipline encompasses correction, encouragement, punishment, rebuke and will leave its mark on every attitude our children carry with them into later life.

When I was a child my father bought a new car. It was a very special day for him (it still is!) and it was a special day for me, too, because I was bought my new pair of school sandals. I was taken for a ride in the car - sitting in the back, of course, as children always did! Trouble hit when we returned home. On the back seat of the car were two tiny holes where you could see the white stuffing coming through. The scene is still vivid nearly 30 years later though my father has no recollection of it whatever!

He was furious. He demanded to know how I had done it. I knew I had done nothing. He knew I had and he called me a liar. He was the parent, I was the child and I was smacked (a rare occurrence) and sent to my room where I cried. Looking back, it seems obvious now that I had probably caught the buckle of my new sandals on the seat as I climbed in or out, but no such thought occurred to me then - I was, instead, mortified by the fact that my father could have thought that I was lying. It was so unfair.

For many years after, when I read Heb 12: 9 which says, 'Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it', I felt extremely guilty, because this one incident would come to mind and I would feel very little respect for my father. That was before I realised that discipline is so much more than corporal punishment! Discipline was my training for life, the 'way I was brought up,' and for that I can only thank him.

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training [the same word is translated 'discipline' nearly everywhere else] and instruction of the Lord." (Eph 6: 4)

As in almost every area of behaviour, the Bible gives us a wonderfully wide brief when it comes to the question, how do I bring up my children? There is no, 'You must begin each day with family devotions', 'You must not play games on Sunday', 'You must smack your child at least once a week'. No, instead we are given the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth, who will teach us how the truth revealed in the Bible is to be lived out in our unique family setting. If we lack wisdom in this area then it is to God that we should turn, trusting that as He knows our child better than anyone else in the world, He will show us the best way of dealing with his particular problems. He might lead us to a parent who has faced something similar, or to a wise book or to a passage of Scripture - but He will answer, because He has promised He will!

There is, however, one important thing still to be said. We are given the responsibility, under God, of providing our children with the loving discipline that will train them for life. We will do that most effectively when they see that we ourselves are submitting, as children, to the discipline that God, our Father, metes out to us.

"God disciplines us for our good that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." (Heb 12: 10,11)

Our children's character and their understanding of God will be most solidly formed if they are able to watch us face adverse and painful circumstances with the confident hope that there is a harvest round the corner!

So let's continue to train our children - to go through the painful process of consistent, loving correction. Let's not expect them to appreciate it just yet (after all, the Bible says they won't!) but let us share in the assurance that as we strive to obey God in the way we bring up our children, we, and they, will surely receive the promised holiness, righteousness and peace.

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