

Augustine, Luther and Solomon: Providing Pastoral Guidance to Parents On the Corporal Punishment of Children¹

by Victor I. Vieth

A rebuke strikes deeper into a discerning person than a hundred blows into a fool.

—Proverbs 17:10

[W]hat a person enforces by means of [a rod] will come to no good end. At best the children will remain good only as long as the [rod] is on their back.²

—Martin Luther

Although I was only a small child, there was great feeling when I pleaded with you [God] that I might not be caned at school.³

—Augustine

The corporal punishment of adults and children was a commonly accepted practice in the early church with physical discipline rooted in several verses in the book of Proverbs.⁴ Although the church largely abandoned the belief that adults need physical discipline, the corporal punishment of children continues to be widely used in Protestant circles⁵ with some prominent Christian pastors contending that physical discipline is required by the Bible.⁶

Although the church largely abandoned the belief that adults need physical discipline, the corporal punishment of children continues to be widely used in Protestant circles with some prominent Christian pastors contending that physical discipline is required by the Bible.

In some instances, this pits the church against medical and mental health providers whose research concludes corporal punishment is associated with a number of risk factors.⁷ Even more problematic, the church's teaching on corporal punishment sometimes conflicts with the law.⁸ Although parents are allowed to use physical discipline in the United States, the practice is increasingly limited under the law and many acts of corporal punishment that were acceptable a generation ago are now unlawful.⁹

In order to assist pastors in addressing the myriad theological issues involved, this article presents a case study of a single parent accused by the government of excessive corporal punishment. Since the woman believes the Bible requires physical discipline, she turns to her pastor for guidance. In considering this case study, and the questions posed by this mother, the article discusses the limited information Scripture offers on physical discipline as well

(accessed May 23, 2017).

7. Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Andrew Grogran-Kaylor, "Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Family Psychology* 30 (2016): 453–469; Elizabeth T. Gershoff, *Report on Physical Punishment in the United States: What Research Tells Us About its Effects on Children* 17 (2008), available online at: http://www.phoenixchildrens.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/principles_and_practices-of_effective_discipline.pdf (accessed May 22, 2017).

8. Victor I. Vieth, "From Sticks to Flowers: Guidelines for Child Protection Professionals working with Parents Using Scripture to Justify Corporal Punishment," *William Mitchell Law Review* 40 (2014): 907, 909–910.

9. Vieth, "From Sticks to Flowers."

1. Senior Director and Founder, National Child Protection Training Center, a program of Gundersen Health System.

2. Eric R. Andrae, "Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child? Spare Me!" *Lutheran Forum* (Summer 2014): 12, 15.

3. Augustine, *Confessions* (Place: Oxford, 2008), 11.

4. See, for example, *The Rule of St. Benedict* (Place: Liturgical Press, 1981), 24, 50, 53, 94.

5. John P. Hoffman, Christopher G. Ellison, and John P. Bartkowski, "Conservative Protestantism and Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment," *Social Science Research* 63 (2017): 81–94. Henry Enten, "Americans' Opinions On Spanking Vary By Party, Race, Region And Religion," *FiveThirtyEight*, September 14, 2014, available online at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/americans-opinions-on-spanking-vary-by-party-race-region-and-religion/> (accessed May 23, 2017).

6. For example, Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary writes: "Does the Bible instruct parents to spank their children? The answer to that must be an emphatic, Yes. Though the words 'spare the rod and spoil the child' do not appear in the biblical text, the Bible makes the same point in an unmistakable way." Albert Mohler, *Should Spanking Be Banned? Parental Authority Under Assault*, available online at: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2004/06/22/should-spanking-be-banned-parental-authority-under-assault/>

as the historic and current teachings of the Christian community on this issue. Applying this knowledge, the article offers answers to the mother's questions. In order to better understand trends in the law and society, the article concludes with a summary of research on the physical, emotional, and spiritual risks associated with both harsh and mild physical discipline.

Carol, the church, and the law: A case study on corporal punishment¹⁰

When her husband died unexpectedly, Carol was forced to raise their little boy, only three years old, by herself. Although she had been a stay-at-home mom, she now had to work two jobs to make ends meet. Since she wanted more for her son, she also took college courses one night a week. Remarkably, she found the time to stay engaged with her son and neighbors often saw her playing in the park with her boy and regularly praising and hugging him.

Deeply religious, Carol relied heavily on her faith in these difficult days and regularly turned to her pastor and older parents in the church for guidance. She was raised in a home where her father disciplined the children with corporal punishment and she and her husband intended to follow suit when their son was old enough to understand the discipline was rooted in love and the word of God. Unfortunately, her husband was now dead and Carol was left alone to discipline her sometimes unruly son.

Based on her reading of the Bible, and influenced by popular Protestant parenting books, Carol began to paddle her son on the buttocks using a small board she found in her garage. She hated hitting her son, and often broke down crying. One day, she confessed to a co-worker what she was doing and said she was afraid she was hitting her son too hard because she was leaving marks. She also worried that she was sometimes hitting him out of frustration. Although she was scared of hurting him, Carol saw no other recourse. Although she was not convinced that corporal punishment was working, she reasoned that God must know what is best for her son.

Carol's co-worker was worried enough to call child protective services. The subsequent investigation found a young mother with many parenting strengths but a glaring weakness that could not be ignored—Carol was hitting her son at a level that violated the law.¹¹ The government filed a child protection petition and asked Carol to work with them in finding a means of discipline that did not involve corporal punishment.

Carol went to her pastor with the petition and asked the following questions:

1. Does the Bible require me to use corporal punishment?

10. This case study was previously published as part of a law review article I wrote. For the complete version of the case, see Vieth, "From Sticks to Flowers," 907, 911–914.

11. Many courts and child protection laws frown on the use of objects in striking children and typically draw the line when physical discipline results in bruises or other injuries. Victor I. Vieth, "Corporal Punishment in the United States: A Call for a New Approach to the Prosecution of Disciplinarians," *Journal of Juvenile Justice* 15 (1994): 50–51.

Although she was scared of hurting him, Carol saw no other recourse. ...She was not convinced that corporal punishment was working, she reasoned that God must know what is best.

2. If the judge orders me not to use corporal punishment, should I abide by the court order?

Before answering Carol's questions, it is helpful to provide an overview of historic and contemporary church teachings on the practice of corporal punishment.

Corporal punishment and the early church

In the early church, the corporal punishment of adults and children was widely practiced though not universally accepted. This tension is illustrated in the life of St. Augustine and in the Rule of St. Benedict.

Augustine and corporal punishment

Augustine had painful memories of corporal punishment. With respect to beatings he endured in school, Augustine recalls praying to God for relief:

Though I was only a small child, there was a great feeling when I pleaded with you that I might not be caned at school. And when you did not hear me, which was so as 'not to give me to foolishness' (Ps 21:3), adult people, including even my parents, who wished no evil to come upon me, used to laugh at my stripes, which were at that time a great and painful evil to me.¹²

Augustine considered the teachers who beat him to be as sinful as he was.¹³ He also noted the irony that adults attended "public shows" and wished the "high dignity" of those who put on the shows to come to their children.¹⁴ Even so, adults "happily allow" their children to be "flogged if such shows hinder the study which will bring them, they hope, to the position of giving such shows."¹⁵

Augustine believed the corporal punishment he received in school was not only ineffective, it actually inhibited his learning. For Augustine, "free curiosity has greater power to stimulate learning than rigorous coercion."¹⁶ He notes that in his infancy he did not know Latin but "learnt it with no fear or pain at all, from my nurses caressing me, from people laughing over jokes, and from those who played games and were enjoying them."¹⁷ In contrast, teachers taught foreign languages by inflicting "fearful and cruel

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.

13. Ibid., 12.

14. Ibid., 13.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 17.

17. Ibid.

Augustine believed that sin was kept in check “by the birch, the strap, the cane, the schooling which Scripture says must be given a child.” The irony of this, of course, is that Augustine was not kept in check by corporal punishment. In his writings, he details a childhood and youth littered with acts of delinquency and sexual sins.

punishments” that Augustine believed kept him from learning “any of the words.”¹⁸

Augustine believed that “even an infant of one day” was sinful and gave as an example a baby “jealous” of a brother for sharing his mother’s milk.¹⁹ Nonetheless, Augustine urged Christians to “smilingly tolerate” this behavior “not because it is nothing or only a trivial matter, but because with the coming of age it will pass away.”²⁰

This does not mean Augustine was completely opposed to corporal punishment or that he had an entirely enlightened view of violence.²¹ He wrote approvingly of whipping slave girls and said that wives sometimes “bore the marks of blows and suffered disfigurement to their faces” because they could not control their tongues.²²

At least to some extent, Augustine believed that sin was kept in check “by the birch, the strap, the cane, the schooling which Scripture says must be given a child.”²³ The irony of this, of course, is that Augustine was not kept in check by corporal punishment. In his writings, he details a childhood and youth littered with acts of delinquency and sexual sins.²⁴ With respect to his own parenting, Augustine says he contributed nothing to his son “other than sin.”²⁵

The Rule of St. Benedict

The Rule of St. Benedict, implemented one century after Augustine, strictly regulated the practices of adults and children in monasteries and prescribed whippings for myriad infractions.²⁶

18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 9.
20. Ibid.
21. Wade R. Johnston, “Spare the Rod, Hate the Child: Augustine and Luther on Discipline and Corporal Punishment,” *Logia* 20.4 (2011): 11.
22. Augustine, 168–169.
23. Ibid., 14.
24. See Augustine.
25. Augustine, 164.
26. See Benedict.

Children making a mistake in a Psalm were to be “whipped for such a fault.”²⁷ Boys “guilty of misdeeds” were “subjected to severe fasts and checked with sharp strokes so that they may be healed.”²⁸ Adult monks were also subjected to corporal punishment with those refusing frequent amends required to “feel the strokes of the rod.”²⁹ Monks found to be “stubborn, arrogant or disobedient” were to receive “blows or some other physical punishment” as a first resort.³⁰ However, a brother who treats monks or even boys “unreasonably” would also be subjected to discipline.³¹

Martin Luther and corporal punishment

As a boy, Martin Luther was the recipient of harsh corporal punishment. Luther was beaten by his mother until the blood ran, beaten by his father until Luther ran away from home, and beaten by school masters for “nothing at all.”³²

The physical abuse of his boyhood initially led Luther to view God as an angry judge.³³ When Luther became a father himself, he adopted a different view of God—a view rooted in Luther’s gentler relationship with his own children.³⁴ Luther told the readers of his catechism “[Y]ou may believe in Jesus, that he has become your Lord...and set you on his lap.”³⁵

Luther’s tender view of the relationship between parents and children led him to have a robust theology of the child in which parents and civil authorities alike must act in the welfare of children.³⁶ Luther’s experiences also led him to have misgivings about the practice of hitting children as a means of discipline. As a father, Luther appears to have refrained from physically disciplining his own children.³⁷ With respect to his son, Hans, then five years old, Luther said:

I wouldn’t like to strike my little Hans very much, lest he should become shy and hate me. I know of nothing that would give me greater sorrow. God acts like this [for he says] ‘I’ll chastise you, my children, but through another—through Satan or the world—but if you cry out and run to Me, I’ll rescue you and raise you up again. For God doesn’t want us to hate him.’³⁸

27. Benedict, 67.
28. Ibid., 54.
29. Ibid., 52–53.
30. Ibid., 24.
31. Ibid., 93.
32. Roland Bainton, *Hear I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), 17.
33. Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 51.
34. Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms*.
35. Ibid., 56.
36. Jane E. Strohl, “The Child in Luther’s Theology: ‘For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other than to Care for... the Young?’” in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 134.
37. Frank C. Senn, *Lutheran Identity: A Classical Understanding* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), 80.
38. Martin Luther, “Severe Whipping Makes Children Resentful: Between May 20 and 27, 1532,” in John F. Thornton and Susan B. Verenne, eds., *Faith and Freedom: An Invitation to the Writings of*

For what a person enforces by means of [a rod] will come to no good end. At best the children will remain good only as long as [the rod] is on their backs. But this [other] kind of training takes root in their hearts so that they fear God more than they do [the rod].

In his *Large Catechism*, Luther makes references to pursuing misbehaving children with the rod but appears to use this term as a figure of speech, noting in the broadest sense that children simply need discipline.³⁹ When focusing on the actual means of disciplining children, Luther discouraged the practice of corporal punishment with these words:

With...simple and playful method...we should bring up young people in the fear and honor of God so that the First and Second Commandments may become familiar and constantly be practiced. Then some good may take root, spring up, and bear fruit, and people may grow to adulthood who may give joy and pleasure to an entire country. That would also be the right way to bring up children, while they can be trained with kind and pleasant methods. For what a person enforces by means of [a rod] will come to no good end. At best the children will remain good only as long as [the rod] is on their backs. But this [other] kind of training takes root in their hearts so that they fear God more than they do [the rod]. This I say plainly for the sake of the young...⁴⁰

Although Luther may have refrained from physical discipline⁴¹ and otherwise discouraged the practice, he nonetheless allowed for its use in at least some circumstances⁴² and may have favored the practice for certain transgressions.⁴³ Scholars have noted that he

continued to reference the “rod” in his writings though he found the practice “disagreeable and unpleasant.”⁴⁴

In commenting on the verse “judge not, that you be not judged,”⁴⁵ Luther observes “the mother and father have to judge among the children and the servants, have to administer punishment, even corporal punishment, when they refuse to behave.”⁴⁶ Like Augustine, Luther accepts the corporal punishment of both adults and children but the phrase “even corporal punishment” and the specificity of applying physical discipline when servants or children “refuse” to reform suggest limitations on the practice.

The views of other prominent Protestant theologians

Luther’s views on corporal punishment did not necessarily change the views of fellow Protestants in Luther’s era or the centuries that followed. In his Geneva Ordinances, John Calvin advocated for “rigorous corporal punishment” of adults who were wayward Christians.⁴⁷ Subsequent and prominent Lutheran theologians such as Wilhelm Loehe and C.F.W. Walther quipped about hitting young children with tree branches as a means of discipline.⁴⁸ In the U.S. today, a majority identify themselves as Protestant.⁴⁹ Most of these faithful continue to discipline their children by hitting them⁵⁰ with the practice particularly prevalent among conservative Protestants.⁵¹

Contemporary Protestant writers who encourage corporal punishment

In order to understand the prevalence of corporal punishment in many Protestant families, it is necessary to review the writings of some influential authors. To this end, two popular books, one

Martin Luther (New York: Random House, 2002), 305.

39. Andrae, “Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child? Spare Me!” 14.

40. Ibid., 15.

41. “If the records are accurate, we can count on one hand the number of times Luther used corporal punishment with his children and foster children. Clearly, despite the fact that the moralists condoned its use, he was reluctant to use physical punishment as a disciplinary measure, preferring a more measured verbal scolding instead.” Michelle DeRusha, *Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 232–233.

42. Wade R. Johnston, “Spare the Rod, Hate the Child: Augustine and Luther on Discipline and Corporal Punishment,” *Logia* 20.4 (2011): 11.

43. Luther apparently felt that boys should be disciplined more harshly than girls and reserved corporal punishment for more “serious offenses” such as stealing money and then lying about the offense. See Ernst Kroker, *The Mother of the Reformation* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 138–139.

44. Kroker, *The Mother of the Reformation*, 15.

45. Matthew 7:1.

46. Martin Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount,” in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. *Luther’s Works Volume 21* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, House 1956), 210.

47. Denis R. Janz, *A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 258.

48. After the birth of his son, Wilhelm Loehe wrote his mother-in-law about the newborn: “He lies at his mother’s breast and guzzles... Sometimes he is very friendly and loving. Then I feel that he is my son. But sometimes, when he wants to exert his will, I am glad that there is a hazelnut bush in my garden. A switch cut from this bush will do him some good someday...” in Erika Geiger, *The Life, Work, and Influence of Wilhelm Loehe* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010), 74. C.F.W. Walther wrote of his three-year-old granddaughter: “She has recognized that in her own district there is a higher authority who can take the beautiful little branches of the Acacia trees for a purpose other to give shade. Up to now this has not been necessary because all I did was show her the rod.” August R. Suelflow, *Servant of the Word: The Life and Ministry of C.F.W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 247.

49. Frank Newport, *God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America* (New York: Gallup, 2012), 22.

50. Elizabeth T. Gershoff, “Report on Physical Punishment in the United States: What Research Tells Us About its Effects on Children,” 10 (2008), http://www.phoenixchildrens.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/principles_and_practices-of_effective_discipline.pdf (last visited May 22, 2017).

51. Victor I. Vieth, “From Sticks to Flowers,” 907, 916–917.

The Pearls contend that “when your baby is tired and sleepy enough to become irritable, don’t reinforce irritability by allowing the cause and effect to continue. ...Get tough. Be firm with him. Never allow him to get up. ...It will become as easy as putting a rag doll to sleep.”

with extreme and the other with more moderate views, need to be considered.

In their book, *To Train up a Child*—which has sold more than 750,000 copies—Protestant writers Michael and Debi Pearl advocate for the switching of children beginning in infancy. The Pearls contend that “when your baby is tired and sleepy enough to become irritable, don’t reinforce irritability by allowing the cause and effect to continue. ...Get tough. Be firm with him. Never allow him to get up. ...To get up is to be on the firing line and get switched back down. It will become as easy as putting a rag doll to sleep.”⁵²

The notion of switching infants is not a new teaching in Protestantism. Indeed, the writing of the Pearls on keeping babies quiet through physical discipline is strikingly similar to parenting advice offered by Susanna Wesley, the mother of John Wesley, in the seventeenth century:

When turned a year old (and some before), they were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly; by which means they escaped abundance of correction they might otherwise have had; and that most odious noise of the crying of children was rarely heard in the house; but the family usually lived in as much quietness, as if there had not been a child among them.⁵³

Many modern Protestant proponents of corporal punishment reject the idea of physically disciplining infants. A much more moderate but deeply influential book is *Dare to Discipline* by James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family. This book has sold more than 3.5 million copies and can be found in Christian bookstores and church libraries throughout the country. According to Dobson, “[c]orporal punishment, when used lovingly and properly, is beneficial to a child because it is in harmony with nature itself... A boy or girl who knows that love abounds at home will

not resent a well-deserved spanking.”⁵⁴

In an editorial published in *USA Today*, Jared Pingleton of Focus on the Family explains his organization’s views of corporal punishment this way:

Parents have many tools at their disposal to discourage negative behavior — loss of privileges, time outs, etc. But for younger children (never infants or adolescents), sometimes the most effective means of guiding them toward positive attitudes and actions, specifically when dealing with willful disobedience, can be a mild spanking. The idea is to help them learn to associate that a brief sting on the bottom now can help them avoid severe pain in their life later.⁵⁵

Whether holding extreme or moderate views on corporal punishment, Protestant proponents of the practice contend, or at least suggest, there is a biblical basis for their beliefs. Many respected biblical authorities beg to differ. According to these scholars the Bible does not require parents to discipline their children by hitting them. Some of these scholars argue that the Bible actually discourages corporal punishment; a handful of them even make the argument the Bible does not authorize the physical discipline of children.

Contemporary commentators and commentaries that discourage corporal punishment

The Bible was written over the course of fifteen centuries.⁵⁶ Although the Scriptures were penned at times in which extreme acts of corporal punishment were inflicted on adults and children, there are relatively few passages providing instruction on this practice.⁵⁷ The verses most often cited in support of the practice are contained in the wisdom literature of King Solomon. These Proverbs include:

- “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them” (Prov 13:24).
- “Folly is bound up in the heart of a boy, but the rod of discipline

54. Dr. James Dobson, “Is Corporal Punishment OK?” available online at: <http://www.drjamesdobson.org/Solid-Answers/Answers?a=6bf44299-6930-4746-895d-77e52ca9e92a> (last visited May 13, 2015).

55. Jared Pingleton, “Mild Spanking is part of Guiding and Encouraging our Children,” *USA Today* (18 Sept 2014), available online at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2014/09/18/adrian-peterson-spanking-focus-on-the-family-editorials-debates/15858037/>

56. Hans Dahl, “Introduction to the Bible,” in *Lutheran Study Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 200.

57. As one scholar notes: “At the time of Jesus’ birth, infanticide was legal. Children weren’t considered to be people, they were property, no different than slaves. So parents could do whatever they wanted to them. Children were stoned, beaten, flung into dung heaps, starved to death, traded for beds, sexually abused, sold into slavery and ‘exposed on every hill and roadside as prey for birds and food for wild beasts.” Paul A. Offit, *Bad Faith: When Religious Belief Undermines Modern Medicine* (New York: Basic, 2015), 121.

52. Michael and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up a Child* (1994), Chapter 9, available online at: http://web.archive.org/web/20101104141241/http://www.achristianhome.com/to_train_up_a_child.htm (last visited May 22, 2017).

53. Richard P Heitzenrater, “John Wesley and Children,” in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Eerdmans, 2001), 279, 284.

drives it far away" (Prov 22:15).

- "Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die. If you beat them with the rod, you will save their lives from Sheol [the grave or premature death]" (Prov 23:13–14).
- "The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by a neglected child" (Prov 29:15).

A number of modern Bible commentaries note these phrases to be figures of speech, referencing practices common to that era. For example, *The Lutheran Study Bible*, published by the conservative Protestant Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod includes the following language in their commentaries: "Flogging was a common form of punishment. The ceremonial scepter held by rulers symbolized their authority to judge and discipline."⁵⁸ The commentary goes on to quote Martin Luther's *Large Catechism* which, as noted earlier, finds that children are "best trained with kindness and delight" and concludes that children "forced with rods and blows will not develop into a good generation."⁵⁹

The *NIV Study Bible*, which has sold over 7 million copies, notes that parents are "encouraged to apply the rod of punishment to drive out folly" but also contends the rod is "probably just a figure of speech for discipline of any kind."⁶⁰ Identical commentary is contained in the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, which is a Lutheran edition of the *NIV Study Bible*.⁶¹

In discussing Prov 13:24, the *Common English Bible* concludes: "The Hebrew word translated 'rod' is *shevet*. It occurs 190 times in the OT and can mean 'stick, staff, rod, scepter, tribe, division, lance, spear.' In this verse, *rod* occurs with another Hebrew term *musar*, which can mean the idea of a body of knowledge to be mastered. Together the two words may refer to physical punishment; they may refer to verbal correction; and they may have to do with sharing knowledge with a young student."⁶²

This is also consistent with some modern Catholic and Jewish interpretations of Proverbs. For example, the *Catholic Study Bible* contends that the reference in Proverbs to beating children is an attempt at "sardonic humor" which "means the exhortation is not to be taken literally" or as "an argument for corporal punishment."⁶³

In an article titled "Corporal Punishment of Children in Jewish Law," Benjamin Shmueli writes that *halakhic* sources "reveal that, in practice, recourse to corporal punishment has been subject to a complex system of qualifications that diminish its scope, prevent arbitrariness, and make physical punishment difficult to resort to."⁶⁴

Since the underlying wisdom in Proverbs is simply to discipline our children, Webb argues that parents utilizing disciplinary approaches more effective than corporal punishment are actually operating closer to the heart of the text.

In his book *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*, seminary professor William Webb contends that the Bible requires discipline but not necessarily corporal punishment. In support of this argument, Webb points to the myriad references in Proverbs to the corporal punishment of adults (that is, "a rod is for the back of one who lacks sense" Prov 10:13) but notes we do not have whipping posts in our church basements nor do we insist the criminal justice system utilize corporal punishment.⁶⁵ Instead, we recognize the verses are referencing punishments in place at the time they were written and we strive to apply the wisdom to our era. In other words, while a thief may have been whipped in biblical times, a jail sentence is perfectly fine today. The underlying wisdom of the verses is simply that misdeeds result in consequences.

Since the underlying wisdom in Proverbs is simply to discipline our children, Webb argues that parents utilizing disciplinary approaches more effective than corporal punishment are actually operating closer to the heart of the text.⁶⁶ Webb's analysis has gained traction in prominent Christian circles. For example, the editorial board of *Christianity Today* notes that while the Bible never forbids the corporal punishment of children, "Webb's case is convincing that the Bible does not *require* it" (emphasis in the original).⁶⁷

Although Webb argues the Bible does not require corporal punishment, some clergy contend the Bible may not even authorize hitting children as a means of discipline. In an article published in *Lutheran Forum*, Eric Andrae analyzes the corporal punishment texts in their original languages and concludes the type of "rod" referenced in pertinent proverbs pertains to "shepherding, protecting, guiding and supporting."⁶⁸ According to Andrae, a Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor, "using the Scriptures, and especially Proverbs 13:24, for specific and divine permission to hit one's child

Jewish Law," *Jewish L. Ann.* 18 (2009): 137, 141.

65. William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2011), 92.

66. *Ibid.*, 91.

67. Editorial, "Thou Shall Not Abuse: Reconsidering Spanking," *Christianity Today* (16 Jan. 2012), available online at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/january/editorial-spanking-abuse.html> (last visited May 23, 2017).

68. Eric R. Andrae, "Spare the Rod, Spoil the Child? Spare Me!" *Lutheran Forum* 12 (Summer 2014): 14.

58. *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 1015.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2011), 1049.

61. *Concordia Self-Study* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986).

62. Joel B. Green, ed., *The CEB Study Bible* (Nashville: Common English Bible, 2013), 1025.

63. *The Catholic Study Bible*, Donald Senior and John Collins, eds. (New York: Oxford, 2011), 867.

64. Benjamin Shmueli, "Corporal Punishment of Children in

is hermeneutically suspect and exegetically dubious, at best.”⁶⁹

Many biblical scholars would disagree with Andrae’s contention that the Bible does not authorize corporal punishment. However, some scholars have made the argument that the Bible *discourages* corporal punishment. For example, William Brown, an Old Testament professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, notes that much of Proverbs pertains to the training of children by words, deeds, and reprimands that do not involve physical discipline.⁷⁰ He also concludes that Prov 17:10⁷¹ “holds a clear preference for the verbal, rather than the physical, form of instruction.”⁷²

There are passages in the New Testament that may bolster Brown’s contention that Scripture discourages the corporal punishment of children. When speaking of the obligation of parents to raise their children “in the training and instruction of the Lord,” Paul does not mention corporal punishment (Eph 1–4). Indeed, Paul urges parents not to “provoke your children to anger” (Eph 6:4). Although some prominent Protestant ministers have used these passages to justify the frequent spanking of children,⁷³ many biblical scholars note Paul’s writing is counter-cultural to the corporal punishment practices in place at the time. For example, Jerald Joersz, a Missouri Synod Lutheran theologian, writes:

In Paul’s day Greco-Roman fathers had absolute power and control over their children. Children’s education often included excessively harsh discipline. Training and discipline of children that is distinctly Christian requires parental self-control and restraint (especially of one’s temper).⁷⁴

69. Ibid., 15.

70. William P. Brown, “To Discipline without Destruction,” in Bunge, *The Child in the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2008), 63, 71.

71. “A rebuke impresses a man of discernment more than a hundred lashes a fool” Prov 17:10 (NIV, 1984).

72. Brown, “To Discipline without Destruction,” in Bunge, 63, 76.

73. Relying on these passages, Voddie Baucham, a prominent Baptist minister in Texas, contends children are in desperate need of spanking and need to be spanked often. He goes so far as to suggest “shy” children deserve corporal punishment:

Let me give you an example, a prime example. The so called shy kid, who doesn’t shake hands at church, okay? Usually what happens is you come up, ya’ know and here I am I’m the guest and I walk up and I’m saying hi to somebody and they say to their kid, ‘Hey, ya’ know, say good-morning to Dr. Baucham,’ and the kid hides and runs behind the leg and here’s what’s supposed to happen...I’m supposed to look at their child and say ‘Hey, that’s okay.’ But I can’t do that. Because if I do that, then what has happened is that number one, the child has sinned by not doing what they were told to do, it’s in direct disobedience. Secondly, the parent is in sin for not correcting it, and thirdly, I am in sin because I have just told a child it’s okay to disobey their parent in direct violation of scripture. I can’t do that, I won’t do that. I’m gonna stand there until you make ‘em do what you said.

June Anne, “Voddie Baucham: Prescription for Spanking and the Shy Child,” *Spiritual Sounding Board* (June 17, 2013), <http://spiritualsoundingboard.com/2013/06/17/voddie-baucham-prescription-for-spanking-and-the-shy-child/> (last visited January 6, 2016).

74. Jerald C. Joersz, *Reformation Heritage Bible Commentary: Ga-*

William Brown, an Old Testament professor at Columbia

Theological Seminary, notes that much of Proverbs pertains to the training of children by words, deeds, and reprimands that do not involve physical discipline.

Answering Carol’s questions

With this history as a backdrop, let’s turn to answering Carol’s questions. First, Carol wants to know if the Bible requires her to use corporal punishment. Although Eric Andrae’s conclusion that the “rod” referenced in Proverbs encompasses more than physically disciplining children is likely correct, it is a stretch to say Proverbs, as a whole, is not referencing corporal punishment.⁷⁵ However, even if certain proverbs are read as authorizing corporal punishment, this does not mean physical discipline is required. Webb, among others, makes a theologically sound argument that the Scriptures require discipline, but are not prescribing a particular form of discipline. If this is true, then Carol is free to employ other means of discipline.

Second, Carol is wondering if she must abide by a potential court order to refrain from using corporal punishment. In answering this question, pastors may benefit from a deeper understanding of the rapidly shifting view of courts and policy makers on what is acceptable corporal punishment. A quarter of a century ago, many parents hit their children with tree branches, belts, or other objects and rarely faced prosecution even when injuries resulted. This is no longer the case.⁷⁶

Although criminal codes in the U.S. still permit parents to hit their children with “reasonable force,” the definition of reasonable force is contracting and will likely continue to contract in the decades ahead.⁷⁷ Other countries have gone even further in limiting the practice of physical discipline. Germany—the birthplace of the Reformation—is one of fifty-two countries that has banned all forms of corporal punishment, including parental hitting of children as a means of discipline.⁷⁸ Fifty-four percent of the children

latians, Ephesians, and Philippians (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 161.

75. “[T]here is no question that the ‘rod’ (*sebet*) refers to a physical instrument and that these proverbs commend its active use as a disciplinary measure.” Brown, “To Discipline without Destruction,” in Bunge, 63, 71.

76. See generally, Victor I. Vieth, “From Sticks to Flowers,” 40.

77. John E.B. Myers, *Myers on Evidence of Interpersonal Violence: Child Maltreatment, Intimate Partner Violence, Rape, Stalking, and Elder Abuse*, 5th ed. (Aspen: Wolters Kluwer, 2011), 262–264.

78. For a complete listing of countries that have banned corporal punishment, see, Center for Effective Discipline, Gundersen Health System, at: <http://www.gundersenhealth.org/ncptc/center-for-effective->

Germany... is one of fifty-two countries that has banned all forms of corporal punishment, including parental hitting of children as a means of discipline.

of Latin America and ten percent of the children of the world live in a nation where *all* corporal punishment is unlawful.⁷⁹

Paul encourages Christians to abide by the law, contending that those who rebel against the government are “resisting what God has appointed” (Rom 13:1-2). If, as Webb and others argue, the Bible does not require parents to hit their children as a means of discipline, clergy should urge parents to engage in conduct that does not break the law. In the U.S., this means severely limiting the practice of hitting children and, in many countries, it means completely abandoning the practice.

In Carol’s case, the judge is likely concerned that she has used a board on her child, has caused injuries that exceed the law, and has expressed concern that she is hitting the child simply because she is frustrated. The judge is likely aware of research that parents who are out of control emotionally, or who are using objects, are at greater risk to engage in abusive behaviors including kicking, beating, burning, shaking, or hitting a child in places other than the buttocks.⁸⁰

Protecting children from abuse is a legitimate concern for the government and, if a court concludes Carol is at high risk of abusing her child and thus orders her to refrain from using any corporal punishment, a pastor should urge her to comply with the order. Stated differently, there is nothing in Scripture that would allow her to disobey such an order.

The physical, emotional, and spiritual risks of corporal punishment

Although most parents who administer corporal punishment do so out of love, there is a growing body of research documenting the fact that the practice is associated with significant risk factors. Since God has given us the gift of medical and mental health research, it is appropriate for Christian parents to be aware of and consider this research in determining the most effective course of disciplining their children. It is also sage for Christian pastors and other church workers to consider this research in recommending

parenting classes, books, or other resources.

Medical risks

In 2012, CNN aired a series of newscasts detailing the deaths or significant injuries of children hurt at the hands of parents who claimed they were administering Christian discipline.⁸¹ These are not isolated instances.

In the U.S., 28 percent of children are hit so hard that they receive injuries.⁸² Research has found that a majority of substantiated cases of physical abuse involve parents attempting to correct a child’s behavior or “teach them a lesson.”⁸³ Apart from the risk of injury or death, children who are hit are at greater risk to suffer other long term health consequences.⁸⁴

Even in the absence of more severe child maltreatment, researchers have found that harsh physical discipline (pushing, shoving, grabbing, slapping, and hitting) is associated with higher risks of cardiovascular disease, arthritis, obesity, history of family dysfunction, and mental disorders.⁸⁵ Harsh physical discipline has also been associated with a loss of brain gray matter which, in turn, may increase the risk for depression and addictions.⁸⁶

This is one reason the American Academy of Pediatrics discourages parents from venturing down the path of hitting children as a means of discipline.⁸⁷

Mental health and behavioral risks

There is a very large body of research that associates corporal punishment with a number of mental health or behavioral risks.⁸⁸

81. This series can be viewed online at the CNN website: <http://www.cnn.com/search/?text=ungodly+discipline+anderson+cooper> (last visited May 13, 2015).

82. Vincent J. Felitti and Robert F. Anda, “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare,” in Ruthe A. Lanius, Eric Vermetten, and Clare Pain, eds., *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2010), 78.

83. Elizabeth T. Gershoff, “Report on Physical Punishment in the United States: What Research Tells Us About its Effects on Children” (2008): 17, available online at: http://www.phoenixchildrens.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/principles_and_practices-of_effective_discipline.pdf (last visited May 22, 2017).

84. See Felitti and. Anda, “The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease,” in Lanius, Vermetten, and Pain, 78.

85. Tracie O. Afifi, et al, “Harsh Physical Punishment in Childhood and Adult Physical Health,” *Pediatrics* 132 (2013): e333–338.

86. Akemi Tomoda, et al, “Reduced Prefrontal Cortical Gray Matter Volume in Young Adults Exposed to Harsh Corporal Punishment,” *Neuroimage* 47 (2009): T66-T71, available online at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2896871/> (last visited May 23, 2017).

87. Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, “Guidance for Effective Discipline,” *Pediatrics* 723 (1998): 101.

88. Elizabeth T. Gershoff, “Report on Physical Punishment in the United States: What Research Tells Us About its Effects on Children” (2008): 17, available online at: http://www.phoenixchildrens.org/sites/default/files/PDFs/principles_and_practices-of_effective_discipline.pdf (last visited May 22, 2017).

[discipline/discipline-and-the-law](#) (last visited May 23, 2017).

79. “Peru becomes 9th Latin American State to Prohibit all Corporal Punishment of Children,” available online at: <http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/news/12/2015/peru-becomes-9th-latin-american-state-to-prohibit-all-corporal-punishment-of-children.html> (last visited May 23, 2017).

80. Adam J. Zolotov et al, “Speak Softly—and Forget the Stick: Corporal Punishment and Child Physical Abuse,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 35 (2008): 364–365.

In 2016, Elizabeth Gershoff did a meta-analysis of research over the past fifty years involving mild acts of corporal punishment on more than 160,000 children.⁸⁹ Gershoff found “no evidence that spanking is associated with improved child behavior and rather found spanking to be associated with increased risk of 13 detrimental outcomes.”⁹⁰

Although this research is voluminous and largely consistent, it is also often misunderstood. The research does not say if a child receives corporal punishment that the child will grow up to have poor outcomes in life. Instead, the research describes corporal punishment as a risk factor and notes that the more a child is hit and the harsher the discipline, the greater the risk factors for poorer mental health, including depression, anxiety, anger management, and inability to sustain healthy relationships.⁹¹

It may be best to view the research on corporal punishment as similar to the research on smoking. Although no reputable study concludes that smoking is wise, one cigarette taken as a dare in the back of the school house when a child is still in their teens will not likely result in death or disease. However, smoking three packs a day for decades will dramatically increase the risk for cancer or death.

Given the risks associated with smoking, many Christians choose to refrain from smoking at all. In the same vein, there are documented risks associated with corporal punishment and Christian parents can legitimately choose forms of discipline that researchers find to be less risky and more effective.

Spiritual risks

Martin Luther lamented the beatings he received from parents and teachers, and openly worried that harsh discipline would drive children away from the church. As we observe the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Luther’s words appear prophetic.

There is a large and growing body of research on the spiritual impact of child abuse. According to thirty-four major studies, involving more than 19,000 abused children, a great many children are spiritually damaged from maltreatment.⁹² This happens when religion is used in the abuse of a child, when a church ignores the needs of a maltreated child, or simply because a child has unresolved spiritual questions about the abuse.⁹³ According to this body of research, many of these children grow up to leave their church and, in some instances, to abandon their faith.⁹⁴

Research finds that men physically or emotionally abused by their fathers are at significant risk of distancing themselves from religion, perhaps because they associate the harshness of an earthly

Unless and until the church speaks differently about corporal punishment, many survivors of egregious physical abuse are likely beyond our reach.

father with the perceived harshness of a heavenly father.⁹⁵ As noted earlier, the harsh discipline Luther endured as a boy influenced him to initially view God in a similarly cruel context.⁹⁶

I once spoke to a man who said that if he fidgeted in church, his parents would force him to take a branch from a tree. His parents then used the branch to inflict whippings that scarred his body. The physical pain, however, pales in comparison to the spiritual damage. The man told me he cannot so much as look at a church without having shivers of fear. As a result, he never again set foot inside a house of worship—but he prays daily and hopes that somehow God will find him. This man is one of hundreds of survivors I have met over the years for whom it is emotionally and spiritually painful to be in a congregation that permits any hitting of a child, no matter the location and no matter how mild. Unless and until the church speaks differently about corporal punishment, many survivors of egregious physical abuse are likely beyond our reach.

Conclusion

Corporal punishment is an emotional topic because, at least in Protestant circles in the U.S., many of us received physical discipline as children or have administered it as parents. Pastors, however, are not bound by cultural practices but must instead offer guidance rooted in the Word of God. If it is true that Scripture does not require the physical discipline of children, this is the message that must be conveyed in Christian writings and sermons. Moreover, if we take seriously the instruction of Paul to abide by the law, the prohibition of corporal punishment in many countries and its increasingly limited use in the U.S. must be honored. There is, even more, a deeper challenge for the church. Many survivors of physical abuse have left our churches because of teachings on corporal punishment. If we take seriously the command to seek the lost (Matt 18:10–14), we need to consider the impact of our language on these survivors and implore God’s guidance to address their spiritual needs.

89. Elizabeth T. Gershoff & Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, “Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 30.4 (2016): 453–469.

90. Ibid.

91. Ibid.

92. Donald F. Walker, et al, “Changes in Personal Religion/spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 1 (2009):130.

93. Ibid.

94. Ibid.

95. Alex Bierman, “The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44 (2005): 349, 357.

96. Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms*, 51.