



THE OTHER SIDE

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"Thou shalt beat him with the rod and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (Prov. 23:14, King James Version).

It's a familiar child's cry, interrupting my evening chores, but no less distracting. I walk wearily into the living room to find two tearful children howling amidst a litter of couch cushions, dolls, and small blankets. Accusations fly. Apparently the five-year-old was playing doctor, and her two-year-old patient tried to walk out of the game. The older child tried forcefully to detain her sister, who retaliated by pulling out a handful of hair. Neither will apologize. Both cry loudly, wanting to be held and wanting justice.

The chain of events has made both children

community, particularly our more conservative sisters and brothers, sees family and child-raising issues as crystal clear. Anyone who can read the book of Proverbs, they claim, should be able to tell where the Bible stands on these crucial matters. Hence, the last few years have seen a host of books and other educational materials on child rearing from a "clearly biblical" position. Inevitably, they advocate authoritarian parenting, including the use of spankings.

Beverly LaHaye's *How to Develop Your Child's Temperament* is an example of this "clearly biblical" approach. In her chapter on discipline, she quotes from Proverbs nineteen times, from Hebrews twice, and from Jeremiah and Matthew once. She spends two and a half pages discussing

Spanking the Rod:

Biblical Discipline and Parental Discipleship

Anne
Eggebroten

frantic, irritated their already tired mother, and thrown off the fragile equilibrium of the whole day. Worse, Roz has demonstrated the willful defiance of a five-year-old—scaring me once again with the spectre of sinfulness in my own deeply loved child.

What is a good, loving, scripturally faithful but very human Christian parent to do?

The issue of child discipline is receiving increasing attention in both Christian and non-Christian circles. And it brings with it the inevitable dialogue, debate, and controversy. Thousands of books and articles are available on the subject of how to discipline children, with advice ranging from the "permissive-democratic" approach to the severely authoritarian.

While the secular world struggles to find clear directives on how to raise how children well, surely this is one area where God's Word is clear and straightforward. Prodded by social complexities and our prayerful discernment, Christians may have found new understandings of what the Bible is saying on women's issues, on slavery and racism, on homosexuality—but surely the biblical position on child discipline is unequivocal.

Or is it? Even within the Christian community, parents face the same confusing range of practical and psychological advice on parenting and disciplining children—almost all of which claim some kind of biblical foundation.

Nevertheless, a large sector of the Christian

"the rod" as the only biblical method of correction. "The Bible gives sufficient instruction on how to discipline a child. It always refers to a rod when it speaks of correcting children. . . . I firmly believe that God did not intend parents to use their hands for correcting except for slapping the hands of a very young child"—such as when the child is reaching for an electric plug.

Along the same lines, James Dobson, perhaps today's most popular author of Christian books on child discipline, advocates the authoritarian approach, in which spankings play a prominent role and some form of the rod must be used instead of the hand. Unlike LaHaye, however, who quotes verses saying the backside alone may be the target, Dobson permits "thumps" on the head or hand. "My purpose," he writes in *The Strong-Willed Child*, "has been nothing more ambitious than to verbalize the Judeo-Christian tradition regarding discipline of children and to apply those concepts to today's families."

Thus it was all very clear. When my oldest child reached the age where discipline first becomes a crisis (shortly before two years old), I adopted Dobson's biblical approach as my guide. It seemed to make perfect sense: parents cannot let themselves be driven to frustration and anger by a child's behavior so that they eventually explode. Rather, they should nip the child's "willful defiance" in the bud by setting limits and spanking when those limits are crossed—before

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the boiling point is reached. I became a spanker with a clear conscience, doing it "the right way" and following the Bible.

But, as Roz reached age three, I noticed several problems inherent in enlightened spanking. First of all, physical punishment tends to escalate. My formerly rare spankings became more frequent; minor as well as major infractions were earning spankings, and the spankings were getting harder. I was becoming dependent on them as a fast, easy solution to misbehavior. Second, the recommended hugs and assurances of love afterward didn't seem to erase her profound anger and mistrust of me when I spanked her. It was getting less convincing to both of us that "I'm doing this for your own good." Roz's self-respect was so wounded and her trust so demolished that I began to question whether there wasn't a better way to handle her behavior. And, third, her behavior didn't change. She was still a strong-willed child—noticeably more defiant after a spanking than before.

Dobson's theory of spankings as a cure for "willful defiance" was just not working. The problem seemed to lie just as much in what I jokingly called "the strong-willed parent." My daughter and I were clearly engaged in a power struggle in which might was the only way to prove right. More relaxed parents, who managed to avoid power struggles, seemed to be doing a better job than I was.

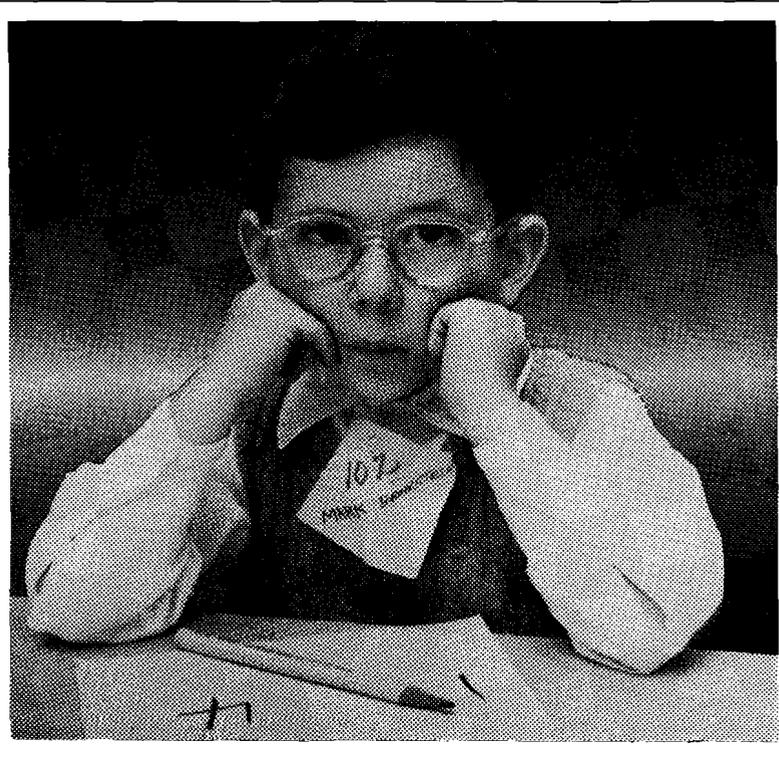
I gradually recognized that I was spanking in anger, releasing my own frustration—which was good for me at the moment but not good for Roz and certainly not improving her behavior in any long-term way. Furthermore, I had come across other Christian authors, such as Kathleen and James McGinnis in *Parenting for Peace and Justice*, who advocated "nonviolent discipline." It seemed that "the biblical position" was not as clear as I had first thought—and besides, it didn't work.

So I gave up spanking. I told my daughter, a couple of months beyond three, that she was now old enough for us to talk about things rather than just resort to spankings. She was very happy and accepted her new status with proud responsibility. Of course, neither her behavior nor mine became perfect overnight; she still enjoyed resisting commands like "Bedtime!" and I occasionally couldn't avoid a reflex-action swat on the rear or squeeze of the wrist. But it was clear to me that a nonviolent theory was working a lot better for us than the spanking theory.

Not long after my decision to try a new parental approach, I read an article by renowned child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim on "Punishment Vs. Discipline" (*Atlantic Monthly*, November 1985). I was stunned to read an expert describe all the negative effects of physical punishment that I had encountered in my experience with Roz. I was even more surprised to see that Bettelheim, a survivor of concentration camps during World War II and author of numerous books, based his whole theory on a biblical definition of the word

discipline as lived out in Jesus Christ's interaction with the disciples.

"The original definition of the word *discipline*," Bettelheim wrote, "refers to an instruction to be imparted to disciples. . . . Acquiring discipline and being a disciple are intimately related. . . . Their deepest wish was to emulate Christ. They made him their guide not just because they believed in his teachings but because of their love for him and his love for them. Without such mutual love, the master's teaching and example, convincing as they were, would never have persuaded the disciples to change their lives and beliefs as radically as they did. The story of Christ's disciples suggests that love and admiration are powerful motives for adopting a



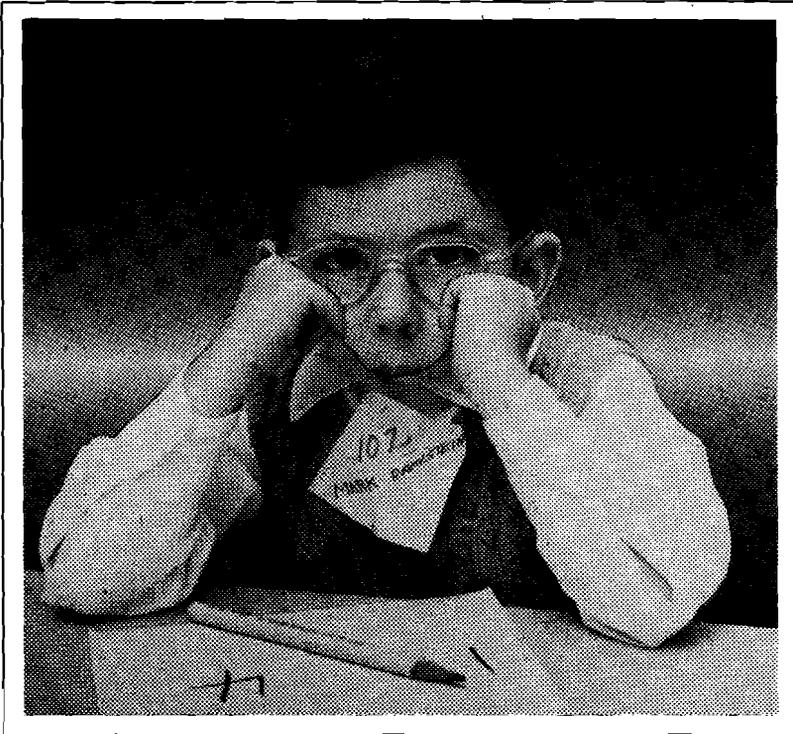
person's values and ideas."

My experiences since reading this article have convinced me even more that Bettelheim's approach is not only more biblical but more effective than Dobson's. When our second child began to crawl and walk, the new factor of sibling conflict was really difficult for my husband and me. At first I found myself unable to resist swatting Roz when she hit her little sister. But it was soon obvious that our violence was only causing the violence in the family to escalate: Roz saw us hit, and she learned to solve her problems by hitting. Soon Ellen too was hitting back. Only when we control ourselves and model Jesus Christ in separating the kids and mediating without violence do they see that hitting is not acceptable for anybody; only then does the level of violence in the household decrease.

My tentative explorations into "What works?" and "What is biblical?" in the area of child discipline provoked many more questions

for me. I embarked on an extensive study of all the books I could get my hands on, both religious and secular, that could help me blend some theoretical framework with the daily trial and error with kids.

The results were fascinating. Only a few books related discipline to its root word, *disciple*, and to the obvious model in Christ pointed out by Bettelheim. Furthermore, most of the books did not even clearly define *discipline* as teaching. In many books, *discipline* was assumed to be nearly synonymous with punishment—and often synonymous with physical punishment. For example, Dobson, my former mentor, titled his first child-rearing book *Dare to Discipline*. He describes “the disciplinary session” (the spanking) and speaks of



“when the disciplinary measures fail” to answer a question about why spanking doesn’t work. At one point, he acknowledges that “discipline is not merely punishment” and that “children also need to be taught self-discipline and responsible behavior.” (In addition to punishment, he encourages rewards for good behavior, especially monetary rewards.)

The definition of discipline as a continuous teaching process (as between Jesus and the disciples) was much more persuasive to me than the discipline-as-punishment school of thought. Said one author, “Discipline is education! In contrast, punishment is ‘pain inflicted upon someone for crimes’” (Frank Main, *Perfect Parenting and Other Myths*). Adrienne Popper in the *Parents Magazine Book for the Toddler Years* states that discipline’s original goal is “developing self-control and character. You cannot beat self-control and character into a child, but you can make her want to develop these traits through the emotional rewards she receives for doing so.” On the basis of thirty-five quotations from Scripture, Bruce Nar-

ramore concludes in *Help! I’m a Parent*: “Discipline is instruction or training designed to correct misbehavior and develop the disciplined one. It doesn’t involve justice, punishment, or getting even.” The most succinct summary of this position is made by Gerald E. Nelson and Richard W. Lewak in *Who’s Boss? Love, Authority, and Parenting*: “To discipline is *not* to punish because to punish is *not* to teach.”

I also learned that the whole debate over raising children is rooted in some relatively recent historical developments. The concept of childhood is itself a new idea, first occurring in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Prior to that time, children were considered little adults who simply needed to be controlled and integrated into the labor force as soon as possible. Historian Lloyd deMause describes his own findings in *The History of Childhood*: “The further back in history we went, the lower the level of child care we found, and the more likely children were to have been killed, abandoned, whipped, sexually abused, and terrorized by their caretakers.”

Not until the eighteenth century, with the American and French revolutions, were the accepted inequities of the past questioned. Slaves, the poor, the insane, and even children became subjects of empathy and inquiry rather than known quantities to be handled as efficiently as possible. The philosopher John Locke, writing in 1693, suggested that parents could teach their children effectively through respect and affection; they should use simple approval or disapproval rather than punishment to gain compliance. French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, seventy years later, made a similarly radical proposal: children, he argued, are not just incomplete adults; there is a natural order of developmental events. They should sometimes learn, he suggested, through the natural consequences of their behavior rather than through the authority of their parents—which often arouses hostility.

In nineteenth-century North America, democracy created a need for educated citizens. Free public education became available as an alternative to putting young children to work. By the end of the century, child-labor laws had further defined childhood. “The child, now become more precious as the ‘father’ or ‘mother’ of the democratic citizen, required a more effective rearing. The newly aroused empathic spirit dictated a change from punitiveness and brutality to kindness and compassion,” writes one historian.

By the early twentieth century, child-guidance clinics had been established for deviant children, and psychology had been launched as a science by Freud and others. By 1930, child development was a self-conscious field of science. In addition, child-mortality rates were dropping—the pre-1750 rate of three out of four children dying before age five in London was yielding to very low mortality in modern, developed countries. This

change encouraged parents to invest more time and emotion in their young children.

As a result of these changes, from the thirties through the fifties, new ideas on childhood and child rearing were increasingly broadcast at a popular level. The "democratic" approach to discipline stressed the use of positive and negative reinforcements (often verbal) rather than physical rewards or punishments. This approach confused many parents, who took the absence of physical punishment to mean the absence of discipline (no guidance). It became known as "permissiveness."

This is where James Dobson enters the scene. Like other conservatives, he sees the "permissiveness—democratic" approach as "the absence of instruction" and the "rejection of parental authority." He feels that "loving parental authority" and "the conscientious leadership" of parents have been thrown out the window. Thus he campaigns to reinstate these qualities—which must include physical punishment.

Dobson devotes an entire chapter of his 1978 book, *The Strong-Willed Child*, to arguing against an enormously popular book and course offered by Thomas Gordon called *Parent Effectiveness Training (PET)*. The Dobson-Gordon debate is worth examining in detail because it represents two popular but conflicting approaches to child rearing. Dobson, of course, claims that the Bible and tradition are on his side, while Gordon, not writing from a Christian perspective, argues that traditional methods don't work and need to be improved.

Gordon's primary thesis is that the power struggle between a parent and a child is self-defeating. When the parent uses power or authority to "win" this battle, he believes, no one wins. Parental power wielded against children has many deeply negative effects: resistance, defiance, resentment, aggression, lying, blaming others, forming alliances against parents, excessive compliance, conformity, lack of creativity—and more.

Instead, says Gordon, the parent should defuse the power struggle by talking with the child about the problem until a solution is found that is acceptable to both. This is a no-power, no-lose method. Gordon points out that no persuasion is needed to sell the solution and no power is needed to enforce it because the child is not resisting the decision. Many benefits can come from this approach, including deeper communication and respect and a sense of mutual responsibility for problems.

Dobson, meanwhile, insists that the parent-child power struggle is the critical point at which the parent must show the child who is boss. A display of "willful defiance" is the signal for the parent to use physical punishment—then and only then. "When a youngster tries this kind of stiff-necked rebellion, you had better take it out of him, and pain is a marvelous purifier. . . . You have drawn a line in the dirt, and the child has deliberately flopped his big hairy toe across it.

Who is going to win? Who has the most courage? Who is in charge here?"

In this situation, the spanking must be hard enough to hurt, and it must be "of sufficient magnitude to cause the child to cry genuinely." However, the child must not be allowed to cry more than two to five minutes; at that point the "protest crying" must be stopped, "usually by offering him a little more of whatever caused the original tears."

This is part of the method that Dobson calls "loving leadership" and "loving parental authority." Gordon calls it the "power and authority" method. He writes, "Parental power does not really 'influence' children; it *forces* them to behave in prescribed ways. . . . Compelled or prevented by someone with superior power, a child is not really persuaded. . . . *It is paradoxical but true that parents lose influence by using power and will have more influence on their children by giving up their power or refusing to use it.*" Thus when parents win the power struggle, says Gordon, the children are compliant but lacking in inner controls and often resentful. When children win, they grow up to be wild, impulsive, lacking in inner controls, and feeling resentment toward their parents. The "nonpower methods of influence," as an alternative to the power struggle, will give the parents more actual influence and the child more inner controls.

Dobson is concerned about "Gordon's rejection of parental authority in any form." "It is my belief that these antiauthority views are directly contrary to the teachings of Scripture," he states. He then quotes 1 Timothy 3:4-5—"He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way"—and Colossians 3:20—"Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." He argues that parental authority rather than discussing and bargaining is important for teaching children to submit to other forms of authority and for teaching them how "to yield to the benevolent leadership of God." After quoting Ephesians 6:4—"Father, do not provoke your children to anger"—Dobson concludes, "Whereas Gordon and his allies write derogatorily about the uses of parental 'power,' the Bible strongly and consistently supports the role of loving, parental *leadership* in raising a child. Forced to choose between two alternatives, I'll cast my lot with the immutable, everlasting Word of God!"

Circle the wagons! Raise the troops to keep out those secular influences on our families! It's hard for me to resist a call to allegiance to the Bible, but I have real doubts that Dobson's method is truer to God's Word.

For instance, one must question Dobson's use of the word *leadership* to describe his method. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines "to lead" as "to show the way to, or direct the course of, by going before or along with" and "to guide or direct, as by persuasion or influence, to a course of action or thought." Only under definition 5b, in

"Parents should follow God's example and not try to win respect through wielding power."

a military application, does the word "command" occur. *Leading* seems to me a poor word to describe Dobson's system of rewards and punishments. The dictionary definition seems closer to Gordon's "nonpower methods of influence." The words "going before or along with" also bring to mind Bettelheim's theory of discipline as the kind of modeling/teaching that Jesus used with the disciples.

A deeper problem is whether God's discipline of the Christian is more like Dobson's authoritarian approach or Gordon's "nonpower methods of influence." "God never motivates us by fear or punishment," writes Bruce Narramore. After

analyzing in detail God's methods **with us as** recorded in Scripture, Narramore **concludes that** parents should follow God's example and not try to win respect through wielding power. True, on Judgment Day God will invoke punishment and reward; but in our daily lives God uses dialogue and influence more than "spankings." (In fact, it is dangerous to interpret disasters such as fires or fatal car accidents as God disciplining us.)

Gordon's answer to the parent-child power struggle seems to me to be an excellent way of modeling to our children how God listens to our prayers. We should bring the problem to our Savior, discuss it, tell God the solution *we* want,

The Politics of Discipline

Early in my parenting experience, while trying to follow the advice of James Dobson, I came across a digression in one of his books strongly criticizing the Equal Rights Amendment. That caused me to entertain doubts about the general reliability of his advice. Since my husband and I were dedicated to feminist as well as Christian ideals, I could hardly believe that, as Dobson argued, feminism and the ERA would threaten "the future of our families, America's homes, this foundation of democracy."

In my subsequent study of the discipline debate, I continually noticed the strongly political context of some of the key Christian authors favoring authoritarian parenting. It is obvious that, in the minds of James Dobson, Beverly LaHaye, the Schaeffers, and others, the defense of strongly authoritarian parenting, including physical punishment, is one item in a tightly woven conservative agenda. Along with opposing communism, feminism, birth control and sex education for teenagers, legalized abortion, and homosexuality, this same agenda contains all the elements of a clear-cut, law-and-order patriotism: the death penalty, capitalism, strong military defense and nuclear armaments, even military aid to often repressive pro-American governments.

Basically, these conservative goals revolve around protection of the American status quo—as measured on a suburban sunny day in about 1951. The main commodity to be protected is the Family, and the main danger to be avoided is One-World Government (a communist takeover).

For example, when children in

today's elementary schools are taught to have a global perspective on life, many conservative Christians consider this a dangerous step in the wrong direction. The maintenance of a strict hierarchical authority—from God to government to men to women to children—is the only method of protecting what is good and avoiding danger. The discipline of children is thus part of that larger subject: maintenance of authority.

John Whitehead is another Christian author for whom the authoritarian discipline of children is just one peg in a whole structure of critical issues for "the future of the American family." His book *Parents' Rights* alerts Christians to such government intervention in the family as forcing children to attend public schools, providing state-financed child-care facilities, and removing children from abusive parents. At one point Whitehead defends a parent's right to hit a toddler in the supermarket without being investigated for child abuse. He has also written numerous books on topics such as the need for physical punishment in schools, prayer in public schools, home education as a constitutional right, and legal ways to stop abortion.

The ultimate authority for all this authority? These conservative authors generally refer to "the Judeo-Christian tradition." Often it's not the Bible itself which is cited as normative, because the Bible can only be stretched so far; the appeal, in Dobson and others, is apparently to "the way of our forefathers." For instance, Dobson has written in defense of a vague "Judeo-Christian concept of manliness," which he argues "has been blurred by

the women's liberation movement." He implies that Jesus calls us to defend some clearly biblical model of manliness—a topic which Jesus neglected to discuss.

I am concerned that our conservative brothers and sisters are promoting "family issues"—and a broader social agenda—in an aura of fear and defensiveness. Consequently, they see the need for sundry means of force, whether it's physical discipline of children or a strong military, to "protect" the family and the society against what they consider threats.

Yet that fear itself may be the greatest threat, both to families and to Christian social witness to the gospel. "Fear is one of the most effective weapons in the hands of those who seek to control us," writes Henri Nouwen in his recent book *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective*. "Fearful questions never lead to love-filled answers." Nouwen invites us to move from the house of fear to the house of love.

Nouwen's invitation is crucial for Christian families and the role Christians play in society. Instead of trying to keep communists, feminists, homosexuals, and a host of others out of our lives, Nouwen suggests that we "are called to bear witness to the truth that God has gathered all people into one family. There is no one who has not been embraced by God in and through the flesh of the Word."

Beginning in our own households, our challenge is to nurture within our children—and within ourselves—a spirit not of fear but of love.

—Anne Eggebrøten

and listen for whether the Holy Spirit is leading us to a different solution or some kind of compromise. A child who feels secure in sharing problems with the parent in this manner will have a solid foundation for a trusting prayer relationship with Jesus Christ.

Two central Christian beliefs are at the heart of the conservative "biblical" theory of discipline. First, Dobson, LaHaye, and others cite the doctrine of original sin as part of their reason for firmly authoritarian parenting. Children are not naturally good, as some humanists would like to believe, but must be literally whipped into shape. Strict parental authority demonstrates belief in original sin. Furthermore, writes Dobson, if a child does not learn to submit to his parents, "then it is most unlikely" that this same child will later yield his or her life to Christ.

But let us think: does the parents' control of "willful defiance" create the possibility of a child being able later to commit herself or himself to Christ? Isn't cleansing by Christ the only long-term solution to the problem of the sinful will? Even Dobson admits that Christian parents hope "to lead their children to Jesus Christ, who alone can 'cleans' them of rebellion." Thus the doctrine of salvation in Christ is somewhat compromised by an insistence on the good works of the parent making this salvation possible.

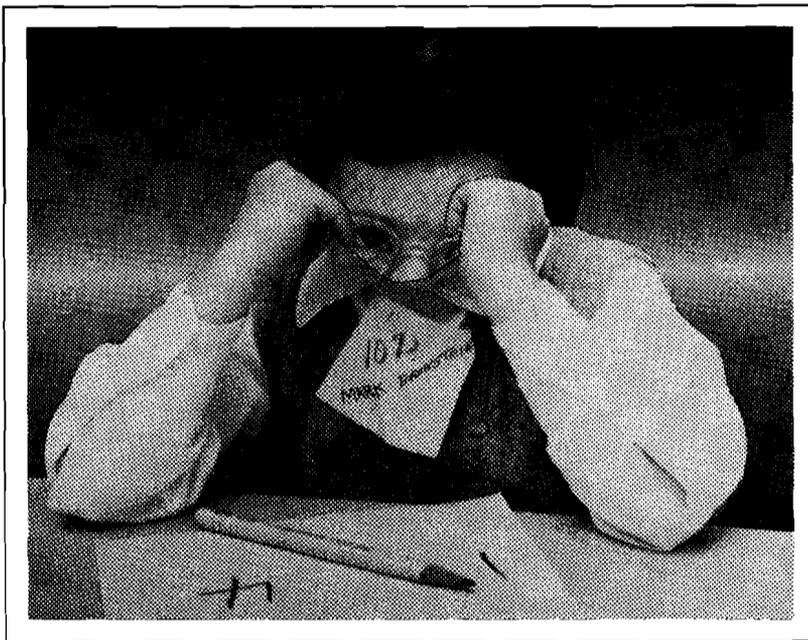
But even if we choose to turn our focus away from salvation by faith and toward original sin, why must we emphasize the sin of the children and ignore the potential for sin by the authoritarian parents? Gordon comes close to quoting the Bible when he says, "All persons are fallible—and that includes parents and others who possess power." He rightly warns against parental abuses of power.

A final question is whether a theology of child rearing based primarily on Proverbs indicates allegiance to the Bible or allegiance to the Calvinist-Puritan phase of biblical interpretation. In general, our theology has developed greatly since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; we no longer preach hellfire and damnation as often as we preach "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Nevertheless, as Jane and James Ritchie point out in *Spare the Rod*, "hard, tight capsules of moral precept" within the Judeo-Christian tradition have persisted in some areas, such as in our views of child rearing, despite profound overall changes. The Puritans believed quite seriously that the child's will must be broken, the sooner the better; the emphasis of Dobson and others on taming "the wild and woolly will" comes out of this tradition. Whether it accurately represents the whole teaching of the Bible as we understand it today is a serious question.

If we take a closer look at the "parental attitudes and practices of more than two thousand years" that Dobson upholds, we find that child abuse was prominent. Excessive beatings, locking children in closets, withholding food, and

using torture were common—all a part of "breaking the will" and all biblically justified. The Puritan law in the state of Massachusetts permitted civil authorities to whip children for acts of disobedience against their parents; in fact, a 1648 law mandated execution for a persistently rebellious son of fifteen years or older and for mature children of either sex who cursed or hit a parent.

Studies of contemporary child abuse indicate that 90 percent of known cases stem not from psychotic parents but from parental disciplinary measures gone awry. Power does corrupt—psychological studies show that use of physical punishment is addictive and tends to escalate as the child's tolerance for it creates a need for increased measures. In the words of one psy-



chologist, "The single most important determinant of child abuse is the willingness of adults to inflict corporal punishment upon children in the name of discipline." Another study reports that "anyone may slip into patterns of child abuse . . . in a culture which permits violence against children as part of ordinary correctional practice." The same study reports that in countries where physical punishment is not a widely practiced disciplinary technique, child abuse is rare.

Spanking, most experts agree, benefits only the parent by relieving frustration. It may also show a child what *not* to do, but it fails to provide a positive model for how to live. Even when some parents feel physical punishment is a necessary "last resort" or extreme measure, we can think of Jesus' comments on divorce in the Mosaic law—it was not desirable but permitted because of "the hardness of your hearts" (Matt. 19:3-10). In many cases, spanking represents an admission of failure on the part of the parents—what one Christian writer blamed on not having worked hard enough for a better idea.

There are better ideas, ideas truer to the way of Jesus. I offer two fundamental keys to dealing

well with the hundreds of small crises that occur during a fourteen-hour day with children: 1) know the general types of situations that can occur (and the responses appropriate to them); and 2) know many specific techniques, so that when misbehavior occurs, spanking will not seem like the only alternative. Perhaps the most important thing is to try to feel good about yourself if you have dealt well with 90 percent of the day's disciplinary challenges—even if you feel that you have failed in the others. No one can have a batting average of 1.000—baseball players who bat better than .400 are in the Hall of Fame.

At this point in my own parenting journey, the Bible passage that speaks to me most about discipline is John 21. This chapter describes a scene similar to a typical daily family situation: a meal, which Jesus has prepared for the disciples. In the midst of the meal, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And when Peter affirms his love, Jesus then tells him, "Feed my lambs. . . . Tend my sheep. . . . Feed my sheep."

Jesus' gentleness with Peter is all the more striking when we consider that Peter had been one of the greatest disciplinary problems among the disciples; in the last few weeks Peter cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, denied ever knowing Jesus, and led half the disciples back to their fishing boats.

If we parents see ourselves as Peter, Jesus the Good Shepherd is challenging us to "feed his lambs"—not beat them. The famous Twenty-third Psalm speaks of "thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Perhaps this is a valuable moderation of the rod in Proverbs—the shepherd uses the rod not to beat the sheep but to guide them.

If we parents see ourselves as Jesus and our children as Peter, then we need to model our Lord's gentle words to Peter: "Do you love me? Then do this for me."

A final word of advice: never trust books or articles on raising children or how to be a good mother or father—including this one. Their cheery, confident advice is often worlds away from the multifaceted, pain-and-delight-filled reality we face daily. At best they may provide some guidelines; at worst they may fill us with despair over how difficult everything is that should be so easy.

Last week I was driving a friend to the airport with Roz and Ellen, ages four and a half and nearly two, in the back seat. They had had a long, tiring day; so I wasn't too surprised when Roz burst into loud tears. But I *was* surprised when the howls lasted the entire thirty minutes to the airport. My appeals, scoldings, and offers of snacks got nowhere.

I knew that the solution was to stop the car, take her in my arms, and ask, "What's the matter, honey?" But I didn't do that, since we were already cutting it very short for my friend's 8:30 P.M. flight. She and I agreed on the likely cause of the crying: Roz was tired and jealous of the spirited conversation in the front seat. Her howls

were undoubtedly a demand for attention.

Two hours later, after seeing my friend off and after a lively discussion with Roz about dinosaurs and tar pits (while Ellen slept), we arrived home. At that point Roz mentioned for the second time satisfaction about "getting my blanket back." I suddenly realized the real cause of the problem: during the shuffle of piling into the car, she had tossed her yellow blanket into the front seat. "My, what a cozy, warm blanket," my friend had commented, spreading it over her knees. She later put it aside, but neither of us remembered to return it to the back seat.

"Why didn't you just ask for it?" I pleaded in disbelief.

"Because she might be cold and need it," answered Roz. "And she might say, 'Well, why did you give it to me?'"

I struggled with the realization that simply returning the blanket would have spared us all a nerve-racking half hour. I was shocked that my usually brazen four-and-a-half-year-old did not have the courage to confront and possibly inconvenience a guest. Instead she had suffered deprivation noisily but alone for thirty minutes. Finally understanding, I hugged her to try to make up for that suffering. "Well, at least I didn't stop the car and spank her," I thought.

I remembered times during her infancy when nothing I could think of would stop her crying. I had then formed a motto: "The little customer is always right." Inevitably time would prove that she had had a legitimate complaint: a soaked diaper, hunger, an earache, incipient diarrhea. If I searched long enough for the answer, it would turn up. Once again, she had been nonverbal but had had a real grievance.

Lying awake in bed that night, I resolved always to take time to find out what the problem was from her point of view. But even in making this mental memo, I admitted ruefully that next time the situation would be different, and this particular bit of advice may not help.

Raising children—it may never be easy, even for Christians, but it keeps us growing. 

Many fine resources are available for parents who want to explore alternatives to strongly authoritarian parenting. Among them are: Bruno Bettelheim's article in *Atlantic Monthly* (Nov., 1985), "Punishment Vs. Discipline;" Thomas Gordon, *Parent Effectiveness Training (PET)* (New American Library, 1970) and *PET in Action* (Bantam, 1976); Frank Main, *Perfect Parenting and Other Myths* (CompCare Publications, 1986); Kathleen and James McGinnis, *Parenting for Peace and Justice* (Orbis, 1981); Charlie Shedd, *You Can Be a Great Parent!* (Word, originally published as *Promises to Peter*, 1970).

"The shepherd uses the rod not to beat sheep but to guide them."

Reassurance

We needed this article! Anne Eggebrotten provides a theological basis for what we have experienced with our children. Her reassurance also helps us deal with many Christian friends who are so certain in their use of corporal punishment that we have doubted our approach.

With our own children, we have had a real struggle with nonviolent discipline. The few times we have resorted to spanking have not been satisfying or effective in the long run, and it *does* escalate, as the author points out. Recently we have begun a concerted effort to reward good behavior instead of using punishment as our main "tool." The improvement in cooperation and behavior has been dramatic.

*Anne Lafferty Crotty
Columbus, Ohio*

Three daughters, ages three to nine

Appropriate

From her description, we feel Anne Eggebrotten misused spanking, which has affected her ability to see it as an infrequent but appropriate part of disciplining children.

As one seasoned mother told us early in our parenting years, "Read all the books on raising children, then throw them away and relax. Do what works best for you and each child." We've tried to do that, finding good, usable ideas in all the varied authors we've read. In defense of Dobson, we haven't seen the "authoritarian—physical discipline" idea come through as strongly as the "be-consistent-and-build-strong-parent-child relationships" theme.

We use a wide variety of disciplinary measures, considering the age and personality of each child. "Time-outs" and finding the natural consequences for one's actions are our most frequent approaches. Lying is the one thing that brings an automatic paddling for any child over age four. The children understand we will work with them through difficult situations, but that is only possible if they are truthful with us.

Parents often get into power

struggles with their children when the children whine, fuss, or throw temper tantrums. Spanking usually doesn't help then. *Rachel and Duane Yoder
Fort Wayne, Ind.
Five children (two adopted)
Ages five to eleven*

God's Presence

My heart aches for any parents who are led to believe that child raising is a power struggle with the goal of gaining control, "shaping" the wills or "cleansing" the evil out of children. I

God—whether in Jesus, our children, or our own souls—requires such support and care.

*Dave Brauer-Rieke
Florence, Oreg.
Two-year-old son*

God-given Authority

Anne Eggebrotten's article evokes two seemingly opposite biblical principles which must be held in balance. First, children are people, too (affirmed both by Jesus and Paul), deserving of profound respect. That is why the McGinnis's prac-

the world is no reason to throw out the baby of God-given authority with the bath water of abuse.

The best way for parents to teach children to bend their wills to another or to God is by daily modeling a mutual bending of the wills to each other in a living dialogue of give-and-take.

*Arbutus Sider
Philadelphia, Pa.*

Three children (one adopted), twelve to nineteen

Begin at Home

As a pediatrician who has seen too many cases of child abuse masquerading as "discipline," I can attest to the fine line between parents' "right" to discipline "as they see fit" and a child's welfare. We all recognize that parenting is rarely easy and that no simplistic guidelines are likely to be appropriate or effective in every situation. Consistency of response (especially between the two parents) helps, as does attempting to understand the situation from the child's perspective. In addition, recognition and understanding of various developmental stages and inherent temperaments in children can go a long way in helping us deal with outbursts and misbehavior of all sorts at different ages.

Those of us who strive for a vision of world peace and justice through nonviolent, scripturally based means can derive no more important lesson than "it all begins at home." We must show our children that there are better ways to solve problems than with violence.

*Carl Stafstrom
Seattle, Wash.*

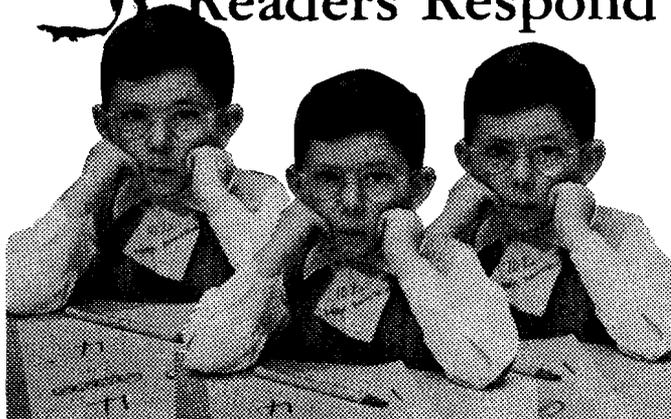
Nineteen-year-old son

Communication

When placed in the position of rearing a child alone, I found myself looking back at some of the things I feel were wrong when I was growing up. I am convinced that the lines of communication between my son and me are the core of our relationship and the basis for dealing with disciplinary prob-

— Continued on page 42

Spanking the Rod: Readers Respond



certainly have my frustrations with our two-year-old, and a swat on the bottom is something I occasionally resort to; but I agree fully that such techniques say more about my lack of creativity than my child's needs!

I was raised by parents and am surrounded by friends who understand the energy and drive in children as a God-given gift. Obviously, that energy needs guidance, and certainly children aren't free of sin; but children are some of our most vibrant witnesses to the presence of God. Our desire to "control" our children and our fear of their love of life strike me as examples of our unwillingness to let God bless us.

For me, Scripture's best teaching on child rearing is Luke 2:41-52. Mary and Joseph were part of a loving community who shared the trials, joys, and confusions of parenting. Dealing with the blessed presence of

tical suggestions for "nonviolent discipline" are helpful tools with which every parent should be equipped.

Secondly, though, the theme of parental authority runs through Scripture. Families are not democracies. Parents and children are unequal partners; parents make a choice to bring children into the world, and with that choice they take on the awesome responsibility of raising them "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Children, especially the very young, are vulnerable and totally dependent on their parents for primary care and for preparation to become independent, care-giving adults themselves.

Because of this existential inequality, a model that downplays the use of authority suggests an abdication of a fundamental parental task. The fact that power and authority are abused all over

lems. I've made it clear to him that he has the right to express his opinion in a respectable manner in just about any situation involving him. I never felt that kind of security.

Also, I can't stress enough the importance of teaching children rules to live by, shown to them by our own example.

*Virginia Pringle
Philadelphia, Pa.
Sixteen-year-old son*

Confusion over Dobson

I listen daily to James Dobson's radio program. He says that in his family, few spankings occur, and he talks of the loving atmosphere in his home. He has featured interviews with those charged with "parental abuse" for spanking. So, though I generally agree with Dobson, I am confused. He does encourage me to take my role as a mother seriously and view it as the most important job I'll have.

People resort to hitting whenever someone does something we don't like. My three-year-old daughter will instinctively strike her baby brother when he grabs her toy. Likewise, I wanted to spank her when she was unruly at the dinner table in front of visitors. And when she crawled under the pews at church, I was mortified. So when I admonish her, "Don't hit your brother," why shouldn't we parents expect to be told, "Don't hit your children"?

*Socorro Luna
Casa Grande, Ariz.
Two children, ten months
and three years*

Damage Done

My parents were devout Christians who firmly believed in using frequent corporal punishment to keep their six children "under control." For some reason, I seemed to provoke their anger more than my siblings, and spankings often turned into rather severe beatings with a belt. As a result, I spent my childhood afraid to do or say anything that might possibly turn their wrath on me again—but it

always happened anyway. Thinking that my parents must hate me, I found myself hating them, confused about why they wanted to hurt me when I tried so hard to stay out of trouble.

In therapy, I later learned that my parents struck out at me not only out of generalized anger but also because they really believed this was loving, Bible-based discipline. They did not realize the damage it was causing to our relationship and my feeling of self-worth.

Now, with a two-year-old

ter parents, and our children know this. One important thing we've learned is to ask our children for forgiveness when we've been unfair and to encourage them to forgive one another.

I think the Peace Corps's slogan—"The toughest job you'll ever love"—applies equally to parenting. We see ourselves as nurturers and guides rather than absolute authorities, though no doubt at times we must appear very controlling to our children. We try to pray regularly for our children and ask for special wis-

dom and patience when discipline problems arise. This has helped release us from feeling that our actions as parents "make or break" the future outcome of their lives. Ultimately, they are in God's hands—and that's a reassuring thought.

*Mary Lou and Tom Van Denend
South Portland, Maine
Four children, one to six*

*Mary Liepold
Washington, D.C.
Six children (three adopted)
Nine to eighteen*

Sparing the Rod: Readers Respond

child of my own, I'm all too aware of how easy it is to repeat family patterns. So, with heightened sensitivity to my own anger and frustration, I'm working out a (generally) nonviolent form of discipline, determined not to bear down my child's spirit just because he's unknowingly pushing certain "emotional buttons" in me. It's hard sometimes—anyone with a two-year-old knows that attempts at calm reasoning are not always effective, yet firm limits need to be maintained. However, I try not to let my feelings lead to the victimization of a kid who is just trying to learn his way in the world. *Name withheld by request*

Two-year-old son

Make or Break

Spanking is something we still struggle with. We normally use a lot of "time-outs," separations, denial of privileges, and verbal reprimands. But at times we are desperate for a quick, simple solution to an ongoing crisis—and spanking does have that immediate effect. Eggebroten is right—physical punishment escalates and becomes increasingly easier to rely on. Fatigue and stress often keep us from using more creative responses. When we've had enough sleep and are more at ease with each other, we are definitely bet-

ter parents, and our children know this. One important thing we've learned is to ask our children for forgiveness when we've been unfair and to encourage them to forgive one another.

*Mary Lou and Tom Van Denend
South Portland, Maine
Four children, one to six*

Another Way

I believe in restitution not retaliation. When a toddler hurts another child, she can be challenged to help you find a way to make that child feel better. Older kids can replace the candy they filched from a sibling's drawer out of their own allowance, or write a letter—one of the cornerstones of coexistence in our house. For an adult to add more pain to what has already been inflicted only adds to the sum of pain in the universe.

If parents decide to parent nonviolently and make up their minds not to practice retaliation, they will always find another way. Parents trying to quit throwing their weight around are going to run into a situation when they have put their authority on the line: "I said, 'Do this.' What will I do if they don't?"

The clearest evidence of grace in my own life is the fact that a

Sacred Beings

As a director of a child-welfare program, I've investigated many horror stories of child abuse—including one child's death that started with a spanking after a spilled glass of juice.

Corporal punishment is savage, the crude expression of an unhealthy need to totally control another person. I believe that children who are spanked (for whatever reason and by whatever method) are tortured. It is our duty as parents and care-givers, especially when we are followers of the Prince of Peace, to ensure that children are treated as sacred beings.

At one time the people of my nation, the Lakotas, regarded children as sacred beings—and never hit them. Most of my people, though, have acquired the ways of the white person; so now we have child abuse. Christians taught the people of my nation, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." In the late 1800s, Lakota children experienced corporal punishment for the first time in the Catholic mission school. The elders of my nation met with the missionaries and asked that corporal punishment not be used, but the request went unheeded. Lakota people were also shocked at how non-Indian people treated their own children. It was they who needed a conversion experience.

*Elizabeth Little Elk Garriott
Rose Bud Reservation, S. Dak.
Two children, nine months
and six years*