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Should Spanking Be Banned? Parental Authority Under Assault

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In Brookline, citizens debated the spanking issue at a town meeting after resident Ronald Goldman convinced the Board of Selectmen to propose a measure "recommending" that parents refrain from spanking their children. According to Goldman, his goal was mutual respect between parents and children. Goldman, who has no children, said he was never spanked as a child. Nevertheless, he became interested in corporal punishment while doing research for a doctorate in psychology. Sound a bit strange? Actually, in liberal Brookline, Massachusetts, Goldman's crusade against corporal punishment fits the profile of political correctness.

Columnist Margery Eagan of the Boston Herald says that Brookline is not only an anti-spanking town, it is an "anti-discipline town, too." Eagan provided a hilarious report of Brookline mothers who buck the trend. These mothers, offended by the atrocious behavior of other children, quietly and secretly discipline their own. As one mother reported, "I put on a hat and dark sunglasses to go to McDonald's."

Of course, this is all consistent with Brookline's liberal culture and worldview. One mother, Monique Spencer, told of neighbors who would not allow children to visit because of a microwave oven in the home. She also told of giving small battery-operated toys as a party favor at a recent event. "A mother came up to me outside our next play group upset and said, 'I want you to know we do not have batteries in our home We are anti-battery.'"

Well, the anti-battery, anti-microwave oven, anti-spanking crowd got turned down at the Brookline Town Meeting, when citizens voted 105-to-78 not to adopt Goldman's proposal. Richard Wheeler, a Brookline real-estate attorney, made a motion to postpone the measure indefinitely, arguing that spanking "is an issue of personal freedom and personal choice." As Wheeler continued, "I didn't feel it was appropriate for the institution of [the] town meeting to interfere in parental decisions." Wheeler's comments indicate that some semblance of common sense remains in Brookline, but it may be hanging by a thread.

The spanking controversy is not limited to trendy Brookline. Earlier this year, the Canadian Supreme Court turned back an effort to outlaw spanking in that country. Nevertheless, the Canadian Parliament is expected to take up the issue in the near future, with human rights agencies lobbying for a change in Canadian law to eliminate corporal punishment in all Canadian provinces.

Spanking is already outlawed in Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Austria, Cypress, Croatia, and Latvia. Nations considering a ban on corporal punishment include Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Belgium, and the Republic of Ireland. Much of this is now driven by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is pressuring countries to ban corporal punishment or face censure and public criticism. Anti-spanking activists claim that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires a ban on all physical punishment.

Now, the British government is poised to deal with corporal punishment, and the Church of England appears to be joining the anti-spanking bandwagon. The issue of spanking has received a good deal of attention in England, with a notorious case resulting in the prosecution of a British father by an international court, simply for spanking his son.

Kenneth Stevenson, the Bishop of Portsmouth, is leading the effort in Great Britain to remove the allowance for “reasonable chastisement” from British law.

The British government has declined thus far to support a total ban on spanking (known there as “smacking”), but with backing from the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, and Methodist churches, the anti-spanking proposal will not go away anytime soon.

A proper Christian understanding of this issue begins with a simple question—how would God instruct parents to discipline our children?

The Bible presents a very clear and sober message about the absolute necessity of parental discipline. Parents are to teach and require obedience of their children. The issue of obedience is at the very center of the Bible’s concern for submission to authority and instruction in godliness.

Parents bear an unavoidable responsibility to discipline their children even as they are raised in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Failure to require obedience is characterized in Scripture as a tragic parental failure. In effect, parents who do not require obedience of their children are themselves demonstrating disobedience to the command of God.

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. “Do not hold back discipline from the child. Although you strike him with the rod, he will not die,” instructs Proverbs 23:13. The very next verse teaches that the use of physical discipline may actually rescue the child’s soul from hell.

The biblical worldview begins with an assumption diametrically opposed to today’s secular mindset. Influenced by humanistic psychology, most Americans assume that a child is born essentially innocent of all sin and blame any subsequent transgressions on the deleterious effects of socialization and bad influences. Of course, the Bible teaches that children emerge from the womb as sinners who throughout life will require discipline. In the case of children, this means physical discipline and corporal punishment. “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child,” declares Proverbs 22:15. “The rod of discipline will remove it far from him,” the text advises.

Today’s outbreak of out-of-control children can be directly traced to the failure of parents to discipline their children. Modern advocates of “timeouts” and similar forms of discipline miss the essential point that God intends spanking to underline the cause-and-effect relationship of disobedience and punishment. Swift and firm parental punishment is the necessary means of teaching children that their disobedience will not be allowed, and that they will be brought into obedience, one way or the other.

Of course, the Bible refers to punitive corporal punishment, not to injurious abuse. Parents should learn the method of judicial spanking, never using spanking as a demonstration of anger or wrath. As a judicial act, the spanking should be administered in a serious, private, and sober way by a parent who teaches the child that this punishment is necessary for the specific act of disobedience. Spanking is judicial in the sense that it is not the result of a parental loss of temper, nor of a parent’s whim, but of moral necessity.

Of course, parents should inflict sufficient pain to make the point clear, and to make certain that the child fears the punishment. The very act of spanking affirms parental discipline, and humbles the spirit of the child. The pain is real, but

temporary. The lesson must be equally real—and far more enduring.

Healthy discipline must emerge from a healthy family life and from the loving relationship between parents and children. Parents tempted to find an easier or less controversial method of discipline must realize that timeouts and grounding are generally more counterproductive and frustrating than anything else.

The attacks on spanking are thinly disguised attacks on parental authority. If current trends continue, Christian parents may find themselves forced to choose between obeying the law of the land or the law of God. Who knew that parenting in the 21st century would require such courage?

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