



No Cane Do?

How should we discipline our children?

John Button began life as the son of a Presbyterian minister in Victoria, but grew up to enter the Senate and become Industry Minister in the Jeral Labor Government from 1983 to 1993. In his autobiography *As It Happened*, he recalled life in the Ballarat manse in the 1930s.

Button's father, C. N. Button, was an ardent admirer of the arch-liberal and fascist-leaning Samuel Angus, Professor of New Testament Exegesis and Historical Theology in Sydney from 1915 to 1943. The elder Button apparently took no interest at all in young John's boyhood activities, and the Senator wrote: "*We lived in the same house but in different worlds. I came to believe that the role of a father was to administer discipline.*" Indeed, "*my relationship with my father seemed dominated by beatings*", and the reader is treated to some descriptions of these, in somewhat graphic detail.

Whether Button's record is accurate — and children and politicians are both noted for their ability to embellish the truth — it is the kind of biographical writing designed to delight the heart of any social engineer.

In recent times there has been no shortage of luminaries to tell us that corporal discipline is an evil which is unworthy of our enlightened times. So speaks the European Court of Human Rights, the vaguely-worded Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, and Alan Corbett, the child-rearing expert who sits in the NSW Legislative Council. It is Corbett who has seriously moved that a two-year jail term be meted out to parents who use the wooden spoon on their children.

It is, of course, quite possible for parents to administer the wrong kind of discipline. The apostle Paul warns us about this in Ephesians 6:4, "*Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.*" Fathers can provoke their children to wrath by administering harsh or inconsistent discipline, or a discipline which lacks any reasonable moral basis.

John Button writes revealingly on this: "*The prospect of the strap was a cause of constant apprehension, because I never understood what the rules were. It all seemed to depend on my father's mood rather than the nature of the offence.*" We can all imagine the kind of scenario: meet dad when he has won at golf, and you could almost get away with burning the house down; meet him when the GST has raised the price of beer, and he is a walking time-bomb.

Discipline which is cold and unloving is a travesty of biblical discipline. As Charles Bridges put it in 1846: "*The rod without affection is revolting tyranny.*" The Christian position is not that corporal discipline is an abuse, but that it can be abused.

The Christian can sympathise with John Button, but the fact that there is bad discipline does not prove that there should be no discipline, and the fact that a Presbyterian clergyman beat his son does not prove that Christ did not rise from the dead (not that the former moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria, Right Reverend C. N. Button, believed that anyway).

God gives parents the right and the obligation to administer "*the rod of discipline*" to their children. He does this because "*folly is bound up in the heart of a child*" (Prov. 22:15). Rousseau and other naive utopians have advocated not coercing the child in any way, but the Christian knows that there has been a Fall which has had devastating effects on this world.

Hence, a child left to himself will take the rebellious road to death (Prov. 19:18; 29:15); the effects of the Fall are too pronounced for it to be otherwise. At the cross God reveals both his love for sinners and his hatred for sin.

So too the Christian parent is to combine love and punishment: *"He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him"* (Prov. 13:24). God's love is not sentimental: *"Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die"* (Prov. 23:13). It makes sense, as C. S. Lewis put it, to speak of God's *"severe mercy"*.

The author of the book of Hebrews points out the links between the discipline of a human father and that of our heavenly Father.

"Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ... Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it ... Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness."

Hebrews 12:7-11

Such reasoning is often disputed today, often in the name of love and care. Even in the 1940s, in the context of World War II, the Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer made the rather surprising comment that *"most parents today are too spineless"*. The God of the Bible, however, is both merciful and just, and he is the model for the Christian parent. Love which is too soft makes for weakness; justice which is too hard makes for harshness.

There is a place for other methods of discipline, such as the withdrawal of privileges and rewarding good behaviour. There is even a place for distraction techniques, although they are just that — means for changing gear — not a basis for moral discipline. We have all been embarrassed — whether in the supermarket, the classroom, or even our homes — by a youngster in full flight who has completely flummoxed his parent or teacher.

Corporal discipline is not necessarily the last resort — in many cases, it would be better administered sooner rather than later — but there needs to be more in the parental armoury than bluff and the ability to manipulate.

Parents who refuse to use corporal discipline are not simply being foolish, they are deliberately ignoring God's clear commandments. Eli, the priest in the tabernacle of God, seems to have been a genuine believer, but not so his sons (1 Sam. 2:22). Eli rebuked them mildly (1 Sam. 2:24). But he did nothing else, so God removed the priesthood from Eli's family (1 Sam. 3:13). Eli did not commit the sins that his sons did, but he was still partially responsible because of his refusal to discipline his sons. David too failed in this area (1 Kings 1:5-6).

God holds us responsible for how we raise our children. God tells us to use the rod, and if we decide that that is barbaric, we will reap the consequences, and so will our children.

This schizophrenic society of ours loves children so much that it aborts 100,000 of them each year but cannot bear to think of a parent smacking a child for disobedience.

Those who cannot tell the difference between love and sentimentality or discipline and abuse are likely to create a state of affairs where anarchy is only contained by coercive state interference in schools and homes.

Hence at the same time we are facing increased anarchy, with rude, and even vicious behaviour, together with state intimidation of parents who use a wooden spoon for extra-culinary purposes. There are a multitude of would-be Sir Galahads, flying the banner of children's rights, who are more than willing to lead a crusade against corporal discipline. We are in serious danger of what Peter Berger calls *"therapeutic totalitarianism"*.

As one who, in my misspent youth, was sometimes on the receiving end of corporal discipline, my experience of it was that it was effective but did not arouse resentment. Other measures, such as

standing in a corner, sitting through detention, or being yelled at, tended to prolong the agony and increase resentment. Today, authority is softer in many ways, but somehow the angst is raised.

It is a precarious policy to try to be more loving than God. The Christian takes “God is love” seriously and he takes the Fall seriously. James Dobson is no five-point Calvinist but he gets this right: *“Children thrive best in an atmosphere of genuine love, undergirded by reasonable discipline.”*

Peter Barnes

©2017

www.christianstudylibrary.org