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## Biblical Discipline in Covenant Christian Education

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# EDITORIAL

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## BIBLICAL DISCIPLINE IN COVENANT CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Wherever a child is, at home, in school, on the street, in church, he is surrounded by rules. Adults are, too, for that matter. It would be inaccurate, from a Biblical point of view, to say a child's response to these rules must be either one of frustration or submission. Discipline in Covenant Christian education should have as its primary goal to lead children out of and beyond such responses towards something much more glorious: a full life of obedience and freedom in Jesus Christ. Such an objective does not invalidate the law of God, but recognizes that God's law is meant to undergird a total life purpose. Neither frustration nor mere submission are long-range alternatives, though both are often the experience of children because teachers fail, not the children. It is my contention, therefore, that obedience, originating in the Word of God,

should come to expression in the classroom work assigned to the children and in the way the subject matter is taught.

True Christian education does not seek as its goal the good, but the obedient person. The "good" person, as I am using the term here, is the one who takes his one talent and buries it until his Lord returns. He obeys the rules for the rules' sake. He is merely submissive. The obedient person, however, takes his five or ten talents and makes of them more talents. The school that prides itself, years later, simply on its small percentage of divorces, on its few incidents of alcoholism, on its low criminal rate, is a school which has a moralistic ideal.

Good behavior, in the limited sense of living a clean, moral life, is essential to true Christian witness, but in itself it is not enough. Rather, the Bible sets forth a much more posi-

tive objective: a full life lived out of a total commitment to Christ. This is a life of obedience where the rules fade into the background, where true freedom alone is possible. When they returned to Jerusalem to look for their son, Jesus' parents got this response: "Didn't you know that I am to be about my Father's business?" Kingdom business eclipsed the implied admonition of his parents to stay with them and not get lost. Such a response does not invalidate the law of honoring parents, of course, but it does point to a fuller meaning of the law as applied to living the Kingdom life. The Rich Young Ruler considered himself good, for he had kept most of the commandments; but he had not learned Covenant-Kingdom obedience, and in his heart his possessions were his idol. One can be, outwardly, a law-keeper while being, actually, a Covenant-breaker.

The first duty of Christian teachers in Christian education is to hold before children the rich promise of God: "I will be a God to you and your children who follow you." It should become a primary objective of every child in the Covenant to learn the meaning of this promise of God in terms of day-to-day living. He should be shown, in the classroom, how this promise places a tremendous demand upon him in his immediate and future life as public citizen, as family member (even as potential father or mother), as economic manager, as a member of the occupational community, as participant in mass media, as one who has to account for his leisure time in recreation and entertainment, as an imaginative being who avails himself of significant, artistically qualified books, music, drama, art, and sculpture, and as one who becomes sensitive to world conditions of poverty, famine, war, catastrophe, political suppression, environmental pollution, pornography, and materialism. These activities are only several of the many varied responsibilities that come to the Covenant child as a result of the promise of God and the child's subsequent commitment in faith.

The Good News, the Evangel, is as broad as the responsibilities named above. While the work of the church is to bring the Gospel to the heart of man, to draw the body of Christ into communal worship and to show where in

life the Gospel is relevant, it is the task of the school to show how the Good News applies to a fulfillment of the Covenant agreement in every area of life. In that respect, every child of God is a missionary, a carrier of the Good News. Only if one sees the distinctly separate, yet complementary character of the church and school, will he realize that they are not busy with two different tasks that presumably pull in two different directions.

The Scriptural precepts which tell Covenant children to obey their parents, to submit to the government of the church, and to live by the laws of the state, are not simple ends in themselves. The precepts, taken in the context of Covenant obligation, are useful for instruction, correction, reproof, and instruction in righteousness, but they are unified in giving Scriptural direction from the will of God for living the full, Christ-centered life.

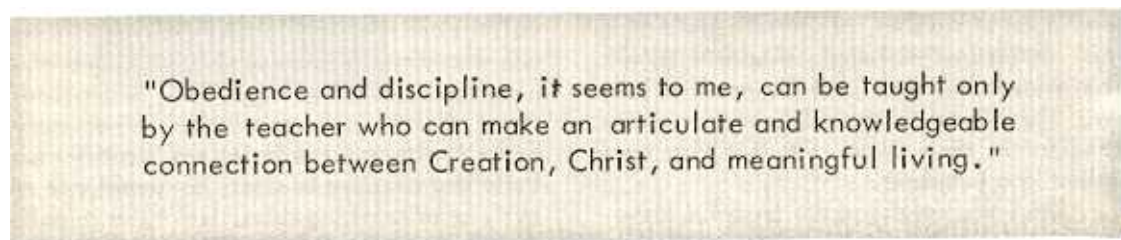
"Spare the rod and spoil the child" is as applicable today as it was in Bible times, but the "hickory stick" must be a pointer first of all and most often in the hand of a Kingdom-inspired teacher before it is applied in the "boiler room." Staying after school, writing lines, sitting in the corner, drawing circles around your nose while standing against the chalkboard, copying pages from the dictionary, or filling in squares on a piece of graph paper are only a few of the ingenious alternatives that teachers have dreamed up for disciplining delinquents. But a teacher should be chagrined and conscience-stricken to use any of these methods if he has failed in the first place to show the students where they should be going with their lives. Herein lies the burden of this essay.

Discipline must arise first of all out of a Scriptural purpose for living. The well-motivated child will have caught the sense of direction provided by the home, the church, and the school, if these are truly in harmony with each other; and he will be disciplined by their Kingdom demands on his time, his talents, and his energies. This Covenant child will not be like the foolish traveler who counts fence posts and sees only fences along the road as he goes across the country, concluding at the end of his trip that his passage was distressingly limited by boundaries and enclosures.

Rather, the child should be taught in such a way that he sees beyond the fence line, taught that he must stop his vehicle often, sometimes for long periods of time, to observe changes in the landscape, or to work mightily the will of God in a village or city, that is, to enact laws, to give direction to mass media, to lay the claim of God on justice in the land, or to seize recreation in the Name of the Lord. Always, as this child is shown, his mode of travel, his car, stays on the road of salvation, the fences only signposts on the right-of-way. Beyond the fence line lies his real obligation, his domain for living and applying the Word of God. How different from the child who sees only fences! How much more glorious! How much freedom in discipline when behavior is ruled by Kingdom obligation, by the vision of

discipline will be necessary in the classroom and school with clear Biblical vision.

I fear, however, that too few teachers have worked out for themselves what their calling means, how their subject or "discipline" (as it is appropriately called) is relevant to the Covenant and the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and how behavior is only symptomatic of how one responds to the Biblical call to obedience. I fear that many Christian teachers have as a primary and ultimate objective a well-behaved class. Towards realizing this objective, the moralistic teacher applies scores of atomized precepts, some from the Bible, some from his own wisdom, and some from the sages of literature. The militarist teacher, on the contrary, has few precepts, simply his authority, which he applies with threat and force. The tactical



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the Covenant and the new life in Jesus Christ.

Discipline must arise out of the things that the children are doing. If the teacher's plans are purposeful, that is, knowledgeably directed towards the goal of a Covenant-Kingdom life for each child, then each lesson will carry its own motivation to be obedient, even to behave. Too often, however, knowledge, lesson learning, and routine, become ends in themselves. I would guess that almost every normal child has asked again and again why he has to study history, or language, or mathematics. It is possible that the teacher answered these questions in the context of his teaching, as ought to be done if there is purpose. It is even possible that the teacher has a considerable knowledge of the relationship of history or language or mathematics to the meaning of a full life in Jesus Christ and that he has tried to show the relationships. In spite of his efforts, however, some children will resist the demands of the Covenant, while others will have difficulty in seeing what it is all about. Patience, repetition, prayer, preventive and corrective dis-

or psychologistic teacher uses his own adroitness and swift changes of pace to maintain his right to educate, keeping the class slightly off balance and staying one short step ahead of them.

Whereas something of value can be found in each of these model teachers, their mutual weakness lies in failing to understand the real purpose of education and obedience, and failing to bring this purpose to bear within the context of learning. Pragmatism is the ruling purpose in the secular classroom, with tolerable behavior achieved through more or less arbitrary authority. The Christian classroom ought to be different.

Obedience and discipline, it seems to me, can be taught only by the teacher who can make an articulate and knowledgeable connection between Creation, Christ, and meaningful living. Such a teacher welcomes to his classroom the shy, the brilliant, the dull, the mischievous, the coy, and together they go about learning the relationships, the meanings. Together they testify to the glory of the Creator,

the renewal and coherence in Christ, and the joy of living a full life in the Lord. This setting, which should have its reminder in every unit and every lesson without embarrassment or cliché, should then also be the dynamic for obedience.

That the Lord wants Covenant obedience is clear from the book of Malachi. The children of Judah had married into heathen tribes and defended what they did by the rules of the house. Being married by the temple priests, they argued, they had a "residue of the spirit." The judgment of God was as follows, however: "Ye have caused many to stumble at the law." They did not bring the Word of God to the marketplace; they did not cry out against the injustice in the land; they did not seek solutions to the problems of the poor (Malachi 3:5). The people of Judah did, however, keep up a semblance of worship, religiously performing their duties in the Temple (Malachi 1:7-8). They were law-keepers, but Covenant-breakers. They lived by the rules, yet were disobedient in their lives. For this they were called into judgment.

Since men have begun to organize knowledge into books and since society has deemed it necessary for every child to be acquainted with such knowledge, things have changed. Three hundred years ago, a child knew when he was six years old what occupation he was destined for. If his father was a cobbler, he, too, would be a cobbler. Whatever society needed by way of reform was also within his immediate experience, for his experience was probably no larger than the village or city he lived in. How simple it would seem to have been then for a Covenant family to understand the will of God for their lives and to do it!

Then schools became more and more popular. First for the boys, later for the girls. Knowledge was compounded upon knowledge. Textbooks went into regular printing. First it was compulsory for children to go to school until they were through the eighth grade, then until they were sixteen. Families became mobile, relocating sometimes a half dozen or more times during the maturing years of the children. And occupations sprang up, so many that it became necessary to hire vocational counselors in the schools. What happened, one may

ask, to Covenant Christian Education? What happened to Covenant obedience in this period of transitions and specializing?

With the loss of prescribed occupational destinies, with Covenant responsibilities becoming worldwide and even inter-planetary, and with knowledge becoming increasingly an idol and end in itself, what happened? The greater concept of the Covenant was lost, at least in its practice. Security became the all-consuming necessity: to be safe with what we can do and understand in this frighteningly complex situation. Stay on the road and watch the fences!

Where knowledge would not serve to make the child behave, new rules of conduct were instituted, excerpted often indiscriminately from the Scriptures themselves. The merely good, the well-behaved child became the model, the one who would grow up a non-drinker, one who stayed sexually "straight," one who never got hooked on drugs. You understand, I trust, that these characteristics are necessary in the Christian. The Scriptures identify such evils and excesses as sins. But avoidance of evil, or of breaking rules, is not, as in golf, a matter of winning with the fewest strokes and staying on the fairway.

The prophet Malachi holds before the people of Judah the goal of true discipline and obedient living when he writes: "For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My Name shall be great among the Gentiles." Herein lies the challenge for obedience in the Covenant home, church, and school. Covenant Christian education must rise to that challenge, to make God's Name great in a nation and beyond its borders. Children are never too young to be shown that Mission; and once gripped by it, once obediently seeking to take up the challenge of the Scripture, a child will begin looking for The Great Commission in his classrooms. And that is where it ought to be found. Is it there? Christ said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven," and, as it were to teachers in particular, "It were better that a millstone...." One hardly dares to contemplate the alternative.

J. K