

# The Christian Family

## Chapter 4: The Importance of the Biblical Training of Children

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In the modern age one of the greatest needs for professing Christians is a biblical understanding of family religion. By family religion we mean the primary religious obligations that God has placed upon Christian families as covenantal institutions. This involves the duties and responsibilities of the father (the covenantal head of the household), the parents, the children and in rare instances live-in servants of a household. Although our examination of family religion will involve a variety of topics, the focus of this study will be on the biblical training of children.

Why is the spiritual training of Christian children by parents so important? There are many reasons. First, the initial covenantal and governing institution in creation was the family. God created Adam out of the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7). Then He made a covenant with Adam (Gen. 2:15-17) the covenant head of mankind and the first family. After this, God took one of Adam's ribs and made him a helper, Eve his wife. Adam and Eve as a family, as husband and wife were given the dominion mandate. They were to have children in order to fill the earth and subdue it. The dominion or cultural mandate which was given to the first parents before the fall clearly implies that the training of children in godly dominion was crucial to this task of developing a world-wide God-honoring and glorifying civilization. After the fall the dominion mandate continues through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ-the second Adam. Gentry writes, "It is important to realize that the Cultural Mandate was not withdrawn with the entry of sin into the world. The mandate appears in several places in Scripture after the Fall: Genesis 9:1ff; Psalm 8; Hebrews 2:6-8. But the new factor of sin did necessitate divine intervention and the supplementation of the original Mandate with the new factor of redemption."<sup>1</sup>

Immediately upon the fall of Adam into sin, God established the covenant of grace, which secured man's redemption. Genesis 3:15 promises the coming of a Redeemer ("the seed of the woman"), who will destroy Satan ("the seed of the serpent"). This verse is often called the "protoevangelium," or the "first promise of the gospel." The gospel of God's saving grace began at this point in history.

Before there was civil government or even an institutional church, God put a family in charge of all creation. Note also that for a great period of time after the fall before the establishment of church officers and distinct ecclesiastical assemblies the worship of Jehovah was apparently conducted only privately and in families. The head of the household acted as the priest of the family. Noah offered sacrifice for himself and his family (Gen. 8:20-22). After Noah offered sacrifice, God blessed him and his sons and then restated the dominion mandate (Gen. 9:1). Both Abraham and Jacob offered sacrifice as the heads of their households (Gen. 22:13; Gen. 31:54; 46:1, 5, 6). Job's role as the covenant head of the family in worship is also evident. "Job...would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all. For Job said, 'It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' Thus Job

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 10.

did regularly” (Job 1:5). Not only were the heads of the households (the husband and father) responsible for family worship, Jehovah Himself dealt with families through the heads of households. “God’s covenants are made with heads of households. The heads of households act as representatives of their entire household. In the case of the covenants with Adam, Noah and Abraham, one man represented his household.”<sup>2</sup>

Second, the family is the nursery of both the church and the state. Family government and instruction is foundational to thriving churches and peaceful communities. Parents (under normal circumstances) have the greatest role to play in the development of a child’s world and life view. Rushdoony writes, “The family is man’s first state, church, and school. It is the institution which provides the basic structure of his existence and most governs his activities. Man is reared in a family and then establishes a family, passing from the governed to the governing in a framework which extensively and profoundly shapes his concept of himself and of life in general.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is of the greatest importance (for the church and state) that Christian parents take their covenantal responsibilities seriously. The heads of families are obligated to use their God-given authority to instill in their children a love of God and a thorough training in the true Reformed religion. They are to raise up a godly seed. If fathers neglect this responsibility, then pulpits by and large will be filled with false prophets and the offices of civil magistrates will be filled with liars and whore-mongers.

Third, the biblical training of the children of believers is a crucial aspect of covenantal continuity. Contrary to American baptistic, atomistic thinking, God in the covenant of grace deals not just with individuals but whole families as covenantal persons (cf. Gen 17:1-14; 18:19; Ex. 10:9; Dt. 6:4-7; 29:9-15; etc.). The children of believers are not little heathens but are a part of the visible church. Booth writes,

The households of believers in the Old Testament, including their infants, received the special privilege of God’s redemptive covenants. These “little ones” of believers were marked out by God and set apart or sanctified from the rest of the fallen world. This inclusion of the children of believers in the covenant of grace was not a mere footnote in redemptive history. Rather, the children of God’s people played a central role in God’s redemptive plan from generation to generation. They continue to do so.

God commanded that even the infants of believers were to receive the covenant sign (circumcision) and be numbered among God’s covenant people (i.e. the church). Baptism will have this same function as the new covenant unfolds the final redemptive revelation of the covenant of grace. The children of believers have always been included in God’s redemptive covenants. The children of believers who are faithful to God’s covenant will know the individual blessing of personal salvation. Covenant breakers will be cut off and receive the curses of the covenant.<sup>4</sup>

This does not mean that the children of believers are born regenerate or even that they are presumed regenerate by their parents. However, it does mean that the believing parents (especially the heads of households) have a moral responsibility to bring up that child (who is a precious gift from God and who has been set apart by God [1 Cor. 7:14]) in the Christian faith

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<sup>2</sup> Kerry Ptacek, *Family Worship: Biblical Basis, Historical Reality, Current Need* (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1997 [1994]), 7.

<sup>3</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *Politics of Guilt and Pity* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978), 331.

<sup>4</sup> Robert R. Booth, *Children of the Promise: The Biblical Case for Infant Baptism* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 46.

(i.e. the true Reformed religion). Consequently, the practice of Reformed churches is for parents to make a vow before God (at the baptism of their child) to bring up their son or daughter in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). It is important to emphasize that the children of believers do not automatically become Christians. When parents are bad examples and neglect family worship and send their children to public (i.e. state) or Arminian schools they should not be surprised when their children reject the faith. One cannot overemphasize the importance of the spiritual training of covenant children. Our goal should be that every Christian family would leave behind a number of solid Christian families for dominion work and kingdom expansion. When parents are faithful and a child is unfaithful and departs from the faith, he or she must be disinherited. Sutton writes,

Continuity is in the covenant, and it is very important to the being and well-being of the family. In our house, for example, we teach our children that if they really love us, then they will love the God that we love. They are warned that if they ever leave the covenant into which they have been baptized, then they will be cut out of their inheritance. In a Christian home, “blood is not thicker than (baptismal) water!”

Is this cruel? No. This is precisely how God treats us, and how the families of the Bible treated their children. When a son left the covenant, he was removed from the family inheritance. When Cain killed his brother and deserted God’s covenant, he was cast out (Gen. 4:9-15). Of course, to apply this concept of marriage and family, one must love the covenant more than he loves his children. Family continuity should be built on the covenant. Children should be taught to see the connection between covenant faithfulness and inheritance, both spiritual and material. Christians are not to subsidize evil, which is what unconditional inheritance does in a world of sin and covenant-breaking.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, the two other primary covenantal institutions—the church and the state are not qualified, nor have they been given, the task by God of the day to day spiritual training of children. This is the responsibility of Christian fathers. If the spiritual training of children is given over to the state or even the church by parents the end result will be a disaster. The history regarding this point is clear. At the close of the twentieth century it is obvious that the attempts of secularized civil governments (communist, socialist, fascist, welfare statism, etc.) to instill solid ethical guidelines in children have been a colossal failure. Serious Christian parents do not expect the public school system to teach their children anything about Christianity. Many professing Christian parents, however, have wrongly assumed that the spiritual training of their children is something that the church exclusively or primarily should do. Therefore, it is not uncommon for evangelicals to neglect family worship altogether in favor of Sunday school programs and church youth groups. However, an hour of instruction on Sunday morning cannot replace or compare to daily family worship and daily biblical instruction that is integrated into all of life (cf. Dt. 6:7). Further, the spiritual instruction of children rests squarely upon the shoulders of the father (the covenant head) and therefore should not be passed on to others without biblical warrant. (Other reasons will be considered under the section “motivations for discipline.”)

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<sup>5</sup> Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, TX: Dominion Press, 1987), 145.

## The Starting Point for Discipline

The starting point for the discipline or training of Christian children is the fear of the Lord or the faith and obedience of the parents. Deuteronomy 6:1-9 says, “Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. Therefore hear, O Israel, and be careful to observe it, that it may be well with you, and that you may multiply greatly as the Lord God of your fathers has promised you – ‘a land flowing with milk and honey.’ Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

It is not uncommon today for parents who do not believe in Christ and who do not obey God’s commandments to get sort of “religious” after having their first child. The parents will have their children baptized or “christened” and when the child reaches a certain age they will drop off that child at a vacation Bible school or at a Sunday school program. In stark contrast, the biblical approach to child-rearing starts with the parents. The parents are commanded by God to observe the law (Dt. 6:1), fear the Lord (6:2), keep all of God’s statutes (6:2) and be careful to observe them (6:3). Parents are to love God with all their hearts, soul and strength (6:5) and must learn God’s law and place it in their hearts (6:6). The parents are to love God with their whole being and they are to express that love by learning and obeying God’s precepts. They in turn are to pass their total devotion to God to their covenant children.

What this means is that biblical child-rearing starts with covenant faithfulness on the part of the parents. The covenant promises that apply to the children of believers are not unconditional. The Jews of Jesus’ day and dispensationalists today are wrong when they assert that covenant blessings flow to the people automatically because of their race. God in the second commandment warned Israel saying: “...For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments” (Ex. 20:5-6). If parents want blessings from God for their children, grandchildren and beyond they must love God and keep His commandments. The Psalmist concurs, “But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them” (Ps. 103:17-18). These passages do not mean that God saves people based on their keeping the law or human merit. They simply point out that true faith in Jesus Christ results in good works. In other words, justification leads to sanctification. The reason that covenant continuity is associated with faithfulness on the part of the parents in Scripture is the simple fact that parents who habitually disregard God’s law do not exhibit the outward signs or fruit of regeneration in their own lives. Such parents pass their unfaithfulness down to their children by their example and defective doctrine. God blesses the children of faithful parents because: a) He promises to do so; and b) faithful parents are the normal means by which children are taught the

“sum of saving knowledge.” The parents introduce their children to the doctrines of God, Christ, the law, gospel and so on. Faithful parents exhibit the truth of the gospel every day before the eyes of their children. Of course God can and does (by His sovereign grace) sometimes save the children of wicked atheists. This fact, however, does not at all mean that professing Christians can neglect biblical principles and expect a good outcome. We must heed God’s commandments and not play Russian roulette with our children.

There are a number of important truths that should be noted in relation to the fact that biblical child-rearing starts with the parents and their relationship with God. First, Christian parents need to recognize that they are under the direct authority of God and His infallible, all-sufficient word. Parental authority is not arbitrary, dictatorial or autonomous. It is rooted in divine revelation. Therefore, it is ministerial, loving and limited. Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Eph. 6:1). Parents do not have authority to command their children to do anything contrary to God’s word. Consequently, they also must not use child-rearing blueprints and guidelines derived from an unbelieving, apostate or pagan worldview. Parents should never turn to modern psychology, psychiatry or heretical gimmicks for ethical advice or tips on child-rearing. To do so reveals a lack of faith in the sufficiency of Scripture. Dependence on these so-called scientific, secular vocations is akin to Israelites seeking counsel from the priests of Baal. It is a dangerous and destructive form of syncretism. Parents are to derive their standards solely from the Bible. This however, does not preclude orthodox (i.e. Reformed) Christian materials on the family.

Second, parents must be diligent regarding their own personal sanctification. They are to be doers of the word and not hearers only. It is the husbands’ and fathers’ responsibility as the head of the household to make sure that they are members of a Bible-believing truly Reformed church and that they regularly attend the means of grace. He is responsible for the spiritual training of himself and his wife. Therefore, he must make sure that there is regular family worship and that both he and his wife are engaging in daily Scripture reading, prayer, the study of good Reformed books and so on. Every Christian father has a responsibility to learn the Bible and theology in order to be a good spiritual leader of the household. While the church is a great help to families, God has not delegated a father’s responsibility towards his family to the pastor or elders of the local church. Paul tells us that if a wife has a question (which in context obviously regards doctrine or spiritual matters) she must ask the question to her own husband at home (1 Cor. 14:35). The apostle speaking under divine inspiration assumes that the husband is the biblical expositor and theologian of the family. This makes sense from a biblical perspective for two reasons. First, it is obvious that adequate training in theology, self-government and sanctification cannot be achieved in only a few hours each week on Sunday. Second, Deuteronomy 6:7 teaches parents that the spiritual training of covenant children is to occur both inside and outside the home, from the beginning of the day to the end of the day. In other words, God’s law-word is to permeate every sphere of life. Therefore, it is crucial that parents (especially fathers) have their spiritual life in order. Biblical Christianity is to permeate every area of a child’s existence. Asaph tells us that covenant continuity is dependent upon faithful fathers. “For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments; and may not be like their fathers [i.e. ancestors], a stubborn and rebellious

generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God” (Ps. 78:5-9).

## The Necessity of Discipline

A very popular concept of child-rearing today says that children are basically good and that what they need to thrive as a child and later as an adult is autonomy and freedom. This philosophy tells parents not to interfere with the child for that would impede the child’s growth and creativity. In line with this type of thinking many argue that spanking a child is barbaric; that one should praise the child when he does something good but ignore the child when he does something bad (i.e. behaviorism). One must be very careful (we are told) not to do anything that might erode the child’s self-esteem. All such thinking is founded on an unbiblical pagan anthropology. Note, also that all such thinking blatantly contradicts the reality of everyday life. The only reason that secular psychologists ignore the obvious (i.e. the sinful nature of children) is their spiritual blindness.

The Bible teaches that children are born depraved, corrupt, with a bias toward evil, with rebellious hearts and sinful natures. This is the doctrine of original sin, that all men (except Jesus Christ) are born with the guilt and pollution of Adam’s sin (cf. Rom 5:12). Because of the federal headship of Adam, we are all brought forth in iniquity and conceived in sin (Ps. 51:5). All are born “by nature the children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3) and all “go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies” (Ps. 58:3). “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it” (Jer. 17:9)? Babies are not born good or even neutral (i.e. blank slate) but are born bad. All children are “naturally” sinful, selfish, cruel, destructive, scornful, rebellious and foolish.

The reason God informs us of our own and our children’s inherent depravity is not so that we would despair and give up hope. God tells us the reality of what we are so that we will believe upon Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and deal biblically and effectively with our covenant children. The fact that parental instruction and discipline are the normal, God-ordained means used to regenerate covenant children should give us great hope and spur us on to diligent action. Christian parents have the responsibility to restrain sinful behavior in their children so that they will trust in Jesus Christ and develop life-long habitual patterns of righteous behavior.

The Proverbs contain many passages which speak to the need and urgency of parental correction, training and discipline of children. Proverbs 23:13-14 says, “Do not withhold correction from a child, for if you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell.” Most parents have a natural affection for their children. They do not like to see their cute little ones suffer pain and cry. Therefore, God warns us that the proper merciful and loving thing for a parent to do is inflict the pain of discipline at the proper time in the here and now, rather than raise up undisciplined rebels who will burn in hell for eternity. A lack of biblical discipline (which includes inflicting the pain of the rod) has negative eternal consequences. Children are born rebellious and sinful, therefore, if they are not taught biblical doctrine and ethics with the loving chastisement of the rod they will go right down the broad path that leads to destruction. “What parent then, that trembles for his child’s eternal destiny, can withhold correction?”<sup>6</sup> Many of the so-called experts in the field of child

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Bridges (revised by George F. Santa), *A Modern Study in the Book of Proverbs* (Milford, MI: Mott Media, 1978), 508.

psychology argue that spanking is cruel. They argue that it is a remnant of a barbaric pre-scientific past; that it is a form of child abuse. God, however, says the exact opposite, that withholding the rod is cruel, irresponsible, and an act of hatred (Pr. 13:24). To those who teach that spanking is uncompassionate, God says, “The compassion of the wicked is cruel” (Pr. 12:10, NASB).

The Bible contains some sobering examples of what happens to covenant children when they are not disciplined or biblically restrained by their parents. There is the example of Eli and his wicked sons. From a reading of Scripture one gets the impression that Eli was a genuine believer in Jehovah who himself was upright in character. Yet Eli was deficient in one crucial area, the restraint of his own children. In 1 Samuel chapter 2, we are told that “the sons of Eli were corrupt and did not know the Lord” (v 12). They were even guilty of committing sexual immorality with women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting (v. 22). When Eli heard about all the evil activities that his sons were engaged in, he warned his sons that God would not tolerate such evil (vs. 23-25), yet did not restrain their actions. As a result Eli was judged along with his sons. Indeed, his whole house was judged and cut off forever. “Then the Lord said to Samuel: ‘Behold, I will do something in Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knows, because his sons made themselves vile, and he did not restrain them.’” (1 Sam. 3:11-13). Poole writes, “He restrained them not; he contented himself with a cold and gentle reproof, and did not severely rebuke, and punish, and effectually restrain them from their abominable courses, nor use that authority which God had given him, as a father, as a high priest, and as a judge, or chief magistrate, against them, as by the law of God he was obligated to do.”<sup>7</sup>

King David and his failure to deal with his wicked sons also serve as a concrete example of Proverbs 23:13-14. David’s first born son Amnon deceived and forced himself sexually upon his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:6-14). Then he treated her with hatred and contempt. How did David deal with this serious transgression? He became very angry (2 Sam. 13:21), yet did not punish Amnon. If David had dealt with Amnon, then perhaps Absalom (David’s third born son) would not have been filled with hatred toward Amnon and planned revenge against him. But tragically Absalom in a premeditated plan had Amnon murdered (2 Sam. 13:28-29). What was David’s response to this death penalty offense? David did virtually nothing. Absalom had to live in exile for a few years after which he returned (with David’s permission) to Jerusalem. After returning to Jerusalem Absalom rebelled against David’s kingship and was killed by Joab the command of David’s forces. David’s fourth son Adonijah also came to an ignoble end because of David’s parental negligence. Note, David’s refusal to rebuke his son when he set his heart on the throne that had already been promised to Solomon. “Then Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, ‘I will be king’; and he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. (And his father had not rebuked him at any time by saying, ‘Why have you done so?’)” (1 Kgs. 1:5-6). After David had died and Solomon was king, Solomon had Adonijah executed because he still desired his throne. David repeatedly refused to discipline his sons and the end result were sons who were out of control, who died by violence and went to hell.

A further reason for prompt biblical discipline is seen in Proverbs 19:18: “Chasten your son while there is hope, and do not set your heart on his destruction.” The phrase “while there is hope” clearly implies that if diligent discipline is not applied to children by their parents there

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1962 [1685]), 1:522.

will come a time (from a human perspective) when the child or young adult is beyond hope. The God-given opportunity to shape the child's character in a biblical manner has forever been lost. Christian parents who have neglected discipline and thus have lost their children to heathenism carry a heavy burden. They know that they have missed a one-time opportunity. If they could, they would go back in time and do things differently. But sadly, they cannot. The Holy Spirit warns us that there are serious, deadly and eternal consequences to parental neglect of discipline. Withholding correction is no different than setting one's heart upon the destruction of one's own precious child.

In the same vein, Proverbs 13:24 equates a lack of discipline to hatred: "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly." This passage does not mean that a neglectful parent actually has feelings of hatred toward his children. It rather refers to the fact that such a parent is turning his own child over to ethical chaos, destruction and misery. "Doesn't he at least act as if he hated him-by bypassing a duty so necessary for his welfare; overlooking his vicious habits and wayward will, which must surely issue in bitter sorrow. Isn't this delivering him up to his worst enemy? Better that the child had been trained in the house of strangers, than that he should be the unhappy victim of the cruelty of parental love."<sup>8</sup> It is tragically ironic that our culture which is obsessed with the young and which is constantly passing laws to "protect the children," is by and large a society that by its permissiveness actually hates children.

Hebrews 12:6-8 states positively what Proverbs 13:24 states negatively. It says, "For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives. If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons." The author of Hebrews says that God's chastening of believers is proof of His love for them. A father who refuses to discipline his children treats them as unwanted bastards. Many children who live in households with no discipline know intuitively that their parents really do not care. Often such children have a longing for discipline. True love and biblical discipline go hand in hand.

A passage that speaks to the necessity of biblical child rearing that is often misunderstood is Proverbs 22:6: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." This verse is almost always regarded as a promise to parents that if they are diligent regarding the biblical training of their children, their children will not depart from that training when they are adults. Although the common understanding is (generally speaking) a legitimate application of this passage, it is based on the translation of the King James Version (that virtually all English translations have followed-NASB, NIV, RSV, etc.) and not a literal rendering of the Hebrew text. A literal translation reads, "Train up a child in the mouth of his way; even when he is old he will not depart from it." There are basically two different interpretations of the literal rendering of the Hebrew. The first interprets "in the mouth of his way" in the sense of "conformably to his way." That is, the biblical training of children needs be conformed to the age or intellectual ability of the child. A child's degree of development must be carefully considered by parents so that they are catechized at the proper level, according to their own mental capacity. A second interpretation regards this passage as a promise that is a solemn warning. Parents are warned that if they allow their child to determine his own path that child will never depart from his rebellious autonomy from God. Jay Adams writes,

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<sup>8</sup> Bridges, 202.

The verse stands not as a promise but as a warning to parents that if they allow a child to train himself after his own wishes (permissively) they should not expect him to want to change these patterns when he matures. Children are born sinners and when allowed to follow their own wishes will naturally develop sinful habit responses. The basic thought is that such habit patterns become deep-seated when they have been ingrained in the child from the earliest days.<sup>9</sup>

Proverbs 22:6 is a negative promise. If parents allow their children to call the shots, to determine for themselves what is right and what is wrong, then those children will never learn biblical discipline. The Bible once again reminds us that our cute little children are sinners. They are natural born rebels. A child in many ways is like a garden. One turns the soil and plants the seeds. However, that freshly turned earth is also full of weed seeds. If the garden is left to itself and is not watered and weeded early and often, then one will not have a lovely useful garden but an ugly, useless patch of weeds. If children are left to themselves and are not given the biblical nurture that they need, then they will absorb the surrounding pagan world-view. When professing Christians leave their children to themselves and these children go to state schools; watch anything they want on television; listen to popular music and hang out with the so-called cool crowd; is it any wonder that their adult years are wasted as unregenerate rebels?

Children need stern discipline in order to drive the innate ethical foolishness out of their hearts. Proverbs 22:15 says, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him." The Hebrew word for foolishness does not simply refer to stupidity, stubbornness and a flippant attitude. It refers to a bad spiritual condition, to moral insolence. It does not refer to the fact that small children lack knowledge, but to a child's inborn sinful obstinacy. "[F]oolishness is the mighty tendency to evil-imbibing wrong principles, forming bad habits, entering into an ungodly course. It means the very root and essence of sin in a fallen nature-the folly of turning away from a God of love. It includes all the sins of which a child is capable-lying, deceit, willfulness, perverseness, want of submission to authority-a fearful tendency toward evil and revulsion against good. It is not a sheet of pure white paper; not the innocent, or even the easily controlled creature, easily guided by proper means, that we are looking at; but a little heart full of sin, containing all the seeds of future evil, multiplying to a fruitful harvest."<sup>10</sup> What is needed to remove foolishness? The only answer is parental discipline biblically applied. Today in our post-Christian culture, sinful foolishness is not only tolerated in children, it is accepted as perfectly normal and even celebrated in sitcoms, movies, magazines and pop music. God does not tell Christian parents to accept foolishness, or to medicate it with Prozac or Ritalin®, or to coddle it with psycho-babble, but to drive it out with the rod of correction. Children will not drive it out. Parents in the context of love must use the divinely-appointed means to rid their children of this ethical poison.

The passages considered thus far regarding the necessity of discipline have been primarily negative. That is, they warn parents of the consequences of a neglect of their duties. There are also passages that speak to the necessity of biblical discipline from a positive perspective. One such passage is Proverbs 29:15, "The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother." Wisdom in the book of Proverbs is loaded with meaning and should not be confused with a mere moralistic theism. It involves not only learning God's precepts but a loving reverential relationship to Jehovah Himself. Wisdom is founded in the fear of the Lord. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

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<sup>9</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 158, footnote no. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Bridges, 488-489.

My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother; for they will be a graceful ornament on your head, and chains about your neck” (Prov. 1:7-9). “The controlling principle of life, which crowns a man and enriches his days with wisdom, is the fear of the Lord, and this fear is inseparable from the law, instruction, or direction of God.”<sup>11</sup> The goal of biblical discipline is not just to impart ethical guidelines or “family values.” Also, discipline is not applied merely so that parents will have a well-ordered, peaceful household. The children of believers need wisdom (ethical and doctrinal knowledge, Christian character, biblical discernment, sanctified shrewdness and discretion) that is inseparably connected with and flows from a saving relationship to Jesus Christ. Anything less is just moralism. Heathen wisdom is foolishness for it is anthropocentric. Its focus is not upon the true God but the glorification and exaltation of man. That is why moralism degenerates into a self-righteous Pharisaical arrogance. Matthew Henry writes, “In order to the attainment of all useful knowledge this is most necessary, that we fear God; we are not qualified to profit by the instructions that are given us unless our minds be possessed with a holy reverence of God, and every thought within us be brought into obedience to him.”<sup>12</sup>

Some object to the idea that parents can teach the fear of the Lord. They argue that only the Holy Spirit imparts a love and fear of God in regeneration. Although it is true that regeneration is an act of the Holy Spirit, one must not forget that regeneration (in the broad sense, e.g., 1 Pet.1:23, Jas. 1:18) always accompanies a knowledge of revelational truth. Once again one must be reminded that Christian parents are the normal God-ordained means of imparting the knowledge that is used by the Holy Spirit to cause conviction, conversion and devotion to God in covenant children. Believing parents are to impart knowledge of the divine character, the precepts of the law and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Children need to learn the nature of true religion, in its principles and in its practice. “For the commandment is a lamp; and the law a light; reproofs of instruction are the way of life” (Pr. 6:23).

## Conclusion

In this chapter we considered the importance, starting point, and necessity of biblical child-rearing. The biblical training of covenant children by their Christian parents is important because: (1) The family is the first covenantal and governing institution in creation. God has given the family a crucial role in the task of godly dominion over creation. (2) The family is the nursery of both the church and the state. Solid Christian families are needed for thriving churches and peaceful, well-ordered communities. (3) The biblical training of covenant children is crucial for covenant continuity. The normal God-ordained means of a covenant child’s salvation, sanctification and spiritual maturity comes by means of parental instruction and discipline. (4) The two other primary covenant institutions, the church and the state are not qualified and have not been given the task by God of the day to day spiritual training and discipline of covenant children. This is the responsibility of Christian fathers and parents.

The starting point of Christian child-rearing is parents who love the Lord with all their heart, soul and strength; who are faithful to God and keep His commandments. If Christian parents want to be good at biblical child-rearing then they need to: (1) Recognize that they are under the direct authority of God and His infallible, sufficient word. The sole standard for

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<sup>11</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 692.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 3:793.

biblical child-rearing is Scripture. (2) Be diligent regarding their own personal sanctification. Fathers especially need to lead the whole family in godliness. The father must be spiritually mature and must have a solid knowledge of Scripture and theology.

The Bible also gives many reasons why covenant children need to be diligently disciplined by their parents. (1) Biblical discipline is necessary because of the fall of Adam. All children are born depraved, corrupt, with a bias toward evil, with rebellious hearts and sinful natures. (2) Covenant children need to be disciplined in order to save them from hell. A lack of biblical discipline has negative eternal consequences. (3) Discipline also delivers covenant children from destruction or a life of violence, chaos and evil. (4) Discipline drives foolishness out of children. (5) Discipline imparts wisdom to children so that they are equipped for a life of service to Christ. (6) Discipline and instruction are the ordinary means used by the Holy Spirit to cause conviction, conversion and devotion to God in covenant children. The Bible says that parents who do not discipline their children hate them. Biblical discipline is a true expression of biblical love.

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