Spoiling Children [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Sunday, 27 October 2013 - 23:08



Read time: 12 minutes
A local Cape Town church, Joshua Generation [2] has recently come into the spotlight over some of its teaching. A complaint had been lodged with the South African Human Rights Commission [3] (SAHRC) that the church instructs and sanctions corporal punishment. The complaint concerns the church's literal interpretation over certain verses in the book of Proverbs and there are, presumably, fears that this could lead to child abuse. The resulting controversy has led to a rare discussion about freedom of religion in South Africa, which is a culturally diverse, tolerant, yet often religious, society. In this article I want to describe the issue thus far and give a couple of personal opinions on the matter.

The Context

At the centre of the controversy are verses such as Proverbs 13:24, Proverbs 22:15, Proverbs 23:13–15 and Proverbs 29:15. For the remained of this article the first verse will be considered as representative of the rest.

The timing of this complaint seems suspicious. This came at a time when legislation had been proposed [4] which would ban parents from exercising corporal punishment on their children. Corporal punishment was banned in schools many years ago, so this proposed legislation does not come as a surprise. This move has been met with opposition from religio-political [5] sectors.

But there may be something deeper at work. It has been reported [6] that the complainants are motivated by an anti-religious agenda. A Google search shows that the complainants, Adriaan and Hannah Mostert, are affiliated with the South African Secular Humanists and Atheists group on Facebook (and it seems like other groups are involved as well).

Joshua Generation church has issued an appeal [7] for other churches in the country to unite with it to stand up against attacks against religious freedom in the country. However, I am aware that at least certain local churches are reluctant to throw their weight behind Joshua Generation. While these churches seem to recognise that a fight for religious freedom is coming—and that they would indeed need to unite when it comes—they are weary of this particular battle as Joshua Generation's reaction could be construed as being fundamentalist. I cannot say whether their caution is justified or not, but it opens up the possibility that unifying South Africa's typically isolationist churches could prove to be difficult.

The Problem

This issue involves two distinct issues. One is the concern about freedom of religion. The other is the issue of potential child abuse. Neither of these are trivial.

Of the many vices which South Africa has, child abuse is not the least of it. Many children have been "spoilt" through abuse. It is so rife that we can even laugh about it [8]. But apart from beatings, child sexual abuse is rife in South Africa, and absolutely horrific stories of abuse have, sadly, become commonplace in the news.

Crying out "freedom of religion!" at the expense of the welfare of thousands, if not millions, of children is a farce. Religion should not enable abuses like these to occur. That said, I am personally in favour of corporal punishment. I was on the receiving end of it myself when I was a small child. And from an early age I could see the value of it and appreciate it. At the same time, I am able to say so now exactly because I was *not* abused, but *disciplined*. That is an important distinction, which I shall expand upon in the following sections. The problem with making this fight about freedom of religion is that it shifts focus to the shadowy cabal of secular humanists and atheists which want to destroy religion and away from real abuse which does happen in South Africa every day.

As for what they are trying to do, I do not believe that you can wrap society up in bubble. Heaven knows that some countries—like the UK—tries. You can only do some much, within reason, to protect people from themselves, other people, and external factors. But having just one child suffer real abuse is a terrible, terrible thing. The government needs to protect children from abuse. At the same time, a parent should have the discretion to raise and discipline their children as they sincerely believe best.

It has been reported [9] that "regular beatings can cause aggression in children and impoverish their vocabulary". This seems hardly surprising, as one would expect those to be the consequence of abuse. But the church does not advocate beatings and abuse, but rather disciplining through spanking (although not exclusively). A few things become apparent from this article. The article was clearly titled to provoke to polarised public (some news editors like doing that kind of thing, and in South Africa it is *far* too easy). There is a desire to create sensationalism rather than take a stand on the issue. The article (and most probably the study as well) also blurs the lines between beating and disciplining. I also have questions about the sample of the study: how many of those families were in an environment, like the church should be, where they are taught to discipline [10] their children and to be aware of their own sin before those of others? And if this study does sway politicians, then I just wish that they would be consistent in how the legislate based on scientific studies [11].

If the government wants to draw a line in the sand on this matter, then why not at conception? Like driving and owning a firearm in South Africa, would it not be better for someone to take courses, write and exam and be deemed "worthy" of having a child before that child exists? But if one would try to propose governmental restrictions on conception and you would be laughed at. Not even China goes to that extreme. This argument is absolutely ridiculous, I know, but it can be made. And I put it to you that some people, part of the intelligentsia, do.

The Text

So what does the Bible say? The passage in Proverbs advocates the physical punishing of children to the end of their betterment. The direct warning is that if a child is left unchecked, they will be "spoilt", i.e. become disrespectful, apathetic and narcissistic. More than being problems which the parent eventually would have to live with, these are attitudes with which the child will one day have to live and function in the larger world. What is being advocated, is not the parents disciplining the child for the parents' sake, but for the sake of the person which the child will one day become, and how that person will function in and think about the world. Disciplining a child is therefore a selfless, not selfish, act. It is *not* supposed to be something which the parent takes pleasure in[1], and it is *not* something which the parent should do out of anger and frustration. Indeed, if a parent is being

emotional, they should not act out on the child[2].

Now there is the question about other kinds of punishments. Are there not other, less violent and potentially harmful, ways of disciplining children? There certainly are. But the application of a particular punishment should be context specific. There are various factors involved: the parenting style, the type of wrongdoing which the child has done, the personality of the child, the way in which the child has previously reacted, et cetera. I am not even going to attempt to examine and critique the merits of the various forms of discipline which a child can be given. But the point of this discussion is that, according to God's Word, corporal punishment, if applied correctly, is acceptable, justified, and sometimes necessary.

There is one more issue at stake: whether the literal use of a rod is justified. This obviously inflicts more pain and can more easily be abused[3]. On this matter I am hesitant to comment. Following the same line of argument as above, its use *can* be righteous and justified. But it needs to be reiterated that it is more prone to abuse. And getting legalistic about the size and shape of the rod is completely missing the point of the issue.

Implications

What would happen if a ban on corporal punishment is enacted? Some of my friends who are parents are asking this question at the moment. They seem to lean in the direction of having to defy the government on this. They are reluctant to say so, as Christians should abide by the law. It is only when the law contradicts what God instructs Christians to do that they should defy the law. But because there are alternatives to corporal punishment, this question is difficult to answer.

However, on a practical level I think that such a ban would be almost impossible to to enforce. If unlawful corporal punishment was discovered, which would automatically be labelled as abuse, I imagine the children would be removed from the care of their parents and placed with foster families. But this procedure could backfire if it is discovered that the foster parents (many of whom are Christian) themselves practise corporal punishment (whether Christian or not). The government would quickly find itself lacking the resources to accommodate all of the "abused" children. Justifying the ban would further be complicated by the fact that the children and families are generally happy, healthy and well cared for, even if there is corporal punishment.

Conclusion

The efficacy of corporal punishment is part of God's common grace: not just Christians benefit from it or understand the value of it. Amongst my peers, whether Christian or not, virtually all of them recognise the positive value of corporal punishment. They do so because they were brought up with it, and have an understanding of how they would have learned to reason differently if they were not spanked. For this reason I do not think that the current debate should be one about freedom of religion. The efficacy of corporal punishment, if administered with wisdom and love, can be argued on secular grounds. If it is so that this fight was raised to attack Christianity, the response should not be "because God said so", but it should be showed how it *works* (and it does, because it is God-granted in God's created world, but it does not necessarily have to be argued this way). The context of the book of Proverbs should be explained. For example, many ancient cultures (including Egyptian and Babylonian) shared the same or similar wisdom writings. This will show that the book of Proverbs really is about living wisely, is culturally independent, and does not teach to blindly follow what the (religious) text says, but to *think* about what is written. We should not be afraid of the opponents of religion and hide behind the concept of freedom of religion. We are not entitled to it; it is granted to us by the constitution, but that need not have been the situation. Rather we should argue rationally and pray for the best outcome. And if it is true that this case was brought up primarily to combat religion and not for the welfare of children, this will weaken their argument if you move the focus away from religion and to the children.

- 1. I know parents who have told me that they have agonised over having to discipline their

child. It is not an enjoyable thing, but it needs to be done for the child to understand right and wrong.

- 2. Again I can cite stories, both from parents and people I know who were disciplined in this way when they were children, where one parent, emotional and devastated by what the child has done wrong, leaves the room and hands the responsibility of disciplining the child over to the other, more rationally thinking parent.
- 3. In South Africa there is a practise of not using a rod, but a wooden spoon. The benefit of this is that one is always handy in the kitchen. A child quickly learns to respect the stern warning of going to fetch "the spoon". At the same time it is not only ever feared, as this is the same object which is used to make their porridge in the pot on the stove. I myself learned to respect the "houtlepel" and think that it can be a good tool with which to raise a child.

Categories:

- In the Media [12]
- In the News [13]

Tags:

- joshua generation [14]
- spanking [15]
- discipline [16]
- disciplining [17]
- correction [18]
- abuse [19]
- beating [20]
- beatings [21]
- violence [22]
- human rights [23]
- secular humanism [24]
- proverbs [25]
- wisdom [26]
- wisdom literature [27]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1044

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1044
[2] http://www.joshgen.org.za/
[3] http://www.sahrc.org.za
[4] http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/new-spanking-law-in-the-works-1.1553842#.UmWS-BA37oM
[5] http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71654?oid=404955&sn=Detail&pid=71616
[6] http://gatewaynews.co.za/militant-atheist-group-using-sahrc-to-attack-church/
[7] http://www.joshgen.co.za/en/Catch-Up/A-Call-To-Unite/#.UhOLOfGgHVM.facebook
[8] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcyuIKzpYJQ
[9] http://www.timeslive.co.za/thetimes/2013/10/25/spanking-kills-kids
[10] http://www.gotquestions.org/disciplining-children.html
[11] http://winteryknight.wordpress.com/2013/10/25/new-study-abortion-more-than-doubles-the-risk-of-child-abuse/
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/17
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/16

[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/196
[15] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/197
[16] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/198
[17] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/199
[18] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/200
[19] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/201
[20] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/202
[21] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/203
[22] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/204
[23] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/205
[24] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/206
[25] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/207
[26] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/208
[27] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/209