Working With Molly: A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Parents Using Corporal Punishment Because of Their Religious Beliefs

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"As for parents, don't provoke your children to anger, but raise them with discipline and instruction about the Lord" — *Apostle Paul (Ephesians 6:4)*

Introduction: Working With Molly

Molly was in tears when the doctor showed her the pictures of the bruises on her 4–year-old son's buttocks and asked her what happened. "I didn't know I was hitting him that hard. I was just trying to get him to mind. I don't like spanking him, but my church says God requires it. I just want my son to grow up and be respectful of others. Mostly, I want to make sure my son goes to heaven."

This hypothetical but realistic scenario of child physical abuse reflects a controversial and often overlooked dynamic in the struggle to end hitting children as a means of discipline. Many parents hit their children because they sincerely believe this type of discipline is commanded by God. Accordingly, if child protection professionals are to aid parents in moving away from corporal punishment, they must be mindful of this dynamic and employ a culturally sensitive approach. This will be challenging, in part, because some commentators suggest that attempts to dissuade clients from physical discipline rooted in religious beliefs "generally represent an unethical violation of clients' autonomy" (Hodge, 2004, p. 255). Respect for religion, though, must be balanced against the large and growing body of research documenting the risks of even mild corporal punishment (Gershoff & Grogran-Kaylor, 2016). To that end, this article provides a brief overview of religious beliefs pertaining to physical discipline and offers a research-rooted approach to working with parents such as Molly.

Determining Molly's Religion

To understand Molly's comments, we need to determine her theological framework. In the United States, approximately 95% of Americans identifying with a particular religion describe themselves as Christian (Newport, 2011, pp. 9–11; Newport, 2017; Pew, 2015)[1]. It is not surprising, then, that Molly says her religious views are influenced by a Christian institution—namely, her church.

Within the Christian demographic, there are radically different views of corporal punishment. Although Catholic parents may employ corporal punishment, they rarely justify the practice by referencing their religious beliefs (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993). This may be because myriad Catholic commentaries discourage using the Bible as justification for physical discipline. For example, commentary in the *Catholic Study Bible*

[1] *According to Pew's Religious Landscape Study, 70.8% of Americans identify as Christian, 5.9% identify with a non-Christian faith, 1.8% are placed in a category of Other Faiths, and the remaining 22.8% are Unaffiliated or labeled by Pew as "nones" (Pew 2015). Gallup's 2017 survey finds the following demographics in the United States: 48.5% of Americans are Protestant, 22.7% are Catholics, 1.8% are Mormon, 2.1% are Jewish, 0.8 are Muslim, 2.5% are other non-Christian religions, and 21.3 have no religious identity (Newport, 2017).*

on Proverbs 23:13–14 states, "The sardonic humor means the exhortation is not to be taken literally, an argument for corporal punishment" (Senior, Collins, & Getty 2011, p. 867). In 2011, Archbishop Gregory Aymond noted, "I do not believe the teachings of the Catholic Church, as we interpret them today… can possibly condone corporal punishment" (Nolan, 2011). Accordingly, it is a relatively safe bet that Molly is not Catholic.

It is also a safe bet that Molly is not a member of a Protestant church that adopts a historical critical analysis of scripture. These churches, often described as progressive or "liberal," interpret the Bible with "historical and literary sensitivity" as well as a greater emphasis on the "direction" in which the Bible is moving (Migliore, 2014, pp. 55–57). As a result, these churches tend to view the Bible not as the "last word" but the "living word" of God, which enables them to employ a "creative and critical process" to interpreting scripture (Migliore, 2014, p. 57). Churches adopting this approach tend to discourage corporal punishment because they are less rigid in reading biblical references to corporal punishment and are more receptive to contemporary research on the potential harm of even mild physical discipline. (Sege, 2018). Indeed, progressive denominations that have passed resolutions discouraging corporal punishment reference research and don't specifically address biblical passages pertaining to physical discipline (Shapiro, 2012; United Methodist Church, 2012).

In the case of Molly, it can be safely assumed she is a member of a church that adopts a more conservative view of the Bible. Churches adopting this approach contend the Bible is "authoritative by virtue of its supernatural power and the direct identity of its words with the word of God" (Migliore, 2014, p. 49). This means that "every book, every chapter, every verse, every word was directly inspired by God" (Migliore, 2014, p. 49). Churches adopting this approach often fear a "slippery slope" of Biblical interpretation in which the dismissal of any passage of scripture may undermine critical teachings, such as the Christian belief of salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ (Vieth, 2014). Molly's comments about fearing her child may not go to heaven if she abandons corporal punishment may reflect, at least in part, a "slippery slope" concern that dismissing one passage may erode her trust in all of scripture.

Research Supporting the Necessity and Efficacy of Addressing Molly's Theological Concerns

If we are correct in placing Molly in a Protestant community that views every passage of scripture as directly inspired by God, then passages that appear to encourage or require physical discipline will not be dismissed lightly. Indeed, decades of research has found little movement in the thinking of conservative Protestants about physical discipline irrespective of educational attainment (Hoffman, Ellison, & Bartkowski, 2017).

When working with a parent such as Molly, two studies suggest that simply providing education about the research on the risks of corporal punishment will have little impact (Perrin, Miller-Perrin, & Song, 2017; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2017). However, if a discussion of the risks of corporal punishment is combined with education on alternative views of Biblical passages pertaining to physical discipline, research suggests there is a realistic chance Molly will change her views about the practice (Perrin et al., 2017; Miller-Perrin & Perrin, 2017). However, any theological discussion must be cognizant of Molly's cultural framework and thus employ a more conservative interpretation of scripture (Vieth, 2014).

To work within Molly's belief system, it is necessary to explore what the Bible has to say about corporal punishment and to offer arguments that are sensitive to Molly's understanding of these texts.

The Bible and Corporal Punishment: Understanding Molly's Cultural Framework

The Bible consists of a minimum of 66 books penned over the course of 16 centuries (*Lutheran Study Bible*, 2009, pp. 26–29). Although written in a time period in which children received egregious corporal punishment, there are very few passages addressing the subject. For example, the New Testament contains no reference to the corporal punishment of children even though child discipline is discussed (e.g.,

Ephesians 6:4).
When people speak of biblical support for the idea of hitting children as a means of discipline, they are typically referring to a handful of verses in the book of Proverbs, which is a collection of wisdom verses that tradition attributes to King Solomon (Vieth, 2017). The Proverb most commonly cited as justification for physical discipline is as follows: "Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them" (Proverbs 13:24).

The Hebrew word translated *rod* appears 190 times in what Christians refer to as the Old Testament (Green, 2013, p. 1025). Among other things, a rod can refer to a stick, scepter, lance, or spear (Green, 2013, p. 1025). In Proverbs 13:24, the word translated *rod* appears with another Hebrew word *musar*, which "can mean the idea of physical or oral reproof and the idea of a body of knowledge to be mastered" (Green, 2013, p. 1025). Taken together, these words may be referring to physical punishment, verbal correction, or the sharing of knowledge (Green 2013, p. 1025). Given the broad language in this verse, even some conservative Protestant theologians find it problematic to use this verse as justification for corporal punishment (Andrae, 2014).

There are, however, several other proverbs referencing corporal punishment that make it clearer that a child is being physically struck. These verses include references to the beating of children (Proverbs 23:13–14). Accordingly, even theologians who oppose the corporal punishment of children concede "there is no question" these verses are referring to "a physical instrument and that these proverbs commend its active use as a disciplinary measure (Brown, 2008).

In working with Molly, then, it is probably impractical to suggest the Bible does not at least authorize the corporal punishment of children. A child protection professional making such an argument is probably employing a more liberal interpretation of scripture that is unlikely to resonate with Molly or the church leaders she may turn to for direction (Vieth, 2014).

Working With Molly: Theological Arguments That May Influence a Change in Practice

Prior to broaching the subject of religion with Molly, it is critical for the professional to note two things. First, Molly likely loves her child and very much wants the best for him. Indeed, her comments reflect a concern not only for his temporal but also his eternal welfare. If this is true, there is a foundation to work with her on—the mutual concern for her child.

Second, Molly is likely skeptical of professionals who are insensitive to her religious views. Research indicates that evangelical Christians "often feel excluded, marginalized, and discriminated against by secular institutions and elites" (Hodge, 2004). If Molly feels this way, it is particularly important to articulate respect for her cultural belief and to assure her you are not attempting to change her religious views but to explore whether there is a basis within these views to use other forms of discipline that may be more effective in achieving her goals. Indeed, Molly's comments that she doesn't like spanking but her church requires it suggests she is open to finding an alternative to physical discipline that doesn't run counter to her religious beliefs.

To that end, there are at least five arguments appearing in moderate to conservative theological journals or other publications that may resonate with Molly.

Scripture may authorize, but it does not require corporal punishment.

Given the broad nature of the word *rod* in Proverbs 13:24, some theologically conservative Protestant writers contend that although the Bible authorizes physical discipline, it does not command it (Schuetze, 2017, p. 295). The periodical *Christianity Today* (2012), which was founded by Billy Graham, has adopted this position.

In a similar vein, several conservative protestant Bible commentaries note that many of the proverbs are "figures of speech" referencing types of discipline at the time but are simply intending to convey the need to correct children as opposed to commanding a particular form of discipline (Barker 2011, p. 1049; Hoerber, 1986, p. 965). Although this trend is growing in conservative Protestantism (Merritt, 2014), the strand has always been present. For example, Martin Luther rarely used corporal punishment and expressed

grave concerns about its use (Vieth, 2017).
If Molly accepts these arguments, she may now have a theological basis for letting go the idea that she must employ corporal punishment in the discipline of her children.

There is as much scriptural support for the corporal punishment of adults as children.

Although some conservative Protestant leaders insist the Bible requires the corporal punishment of children (Mohler, 2004) and contend the Bible has a clear preference for physical discipline with a switch as opposed to a hand (Hindson, 2013, p. 942)[2], they are noticeably silent about the numerous proverbs pertaining to the corporal punishment of adults (e.g., Proverbs 18:6, 19:25, 19:29; 26:3, 10:13). Although early Catholic and Protestant writings required the corporal punishment of wayward adults (Janz, 2008, p. 258; Rule of St. Benedict, pp. 24, 50, 53, 94), the modern church recognizes these verses as conveying an underlying wisdom that misdeeds bring consequences—whippings at the time of Solomon and jails and fines in our current era.

It is unlikely that Molly or her church believes that she or other adults should receive corporal punishment for their transgressions, but it is also something she may have given little thought to. Reminding Molly that the church does not interpret Proverbs about hitting adults as therefore requiring corporal punishment may make the move away from the physical discipline of children more comfortable.

Scripture emphasizes non-corporal forms of discipline.

As a collection of wisdom verses, Proverbs contains a number of sayings that are seemingly incompatible (e.g., Proverbs 26:4–5). In the case of physical discipline, the verses referencing corporal punishment must be balanced against verses that note corporal punishment is not needed or is ineffective (Proverbs 17:10) as well as the many verses about instructing children with words, examples, and other non-corporal forms of guidance and discipline (Brown, 2008). According to one Protestant seminary professor, the overall lesson of Proverbs is that "wisdom in all her authority and majesty…*spares* the rod, and in so doing relativizes its use, much in tension" with the Proverbs referencing physical discipline (Brown, 2008).
As noted earlier, there is no reference to the physical discipline of children in the New Testament. Indeed, references to child discipline in the New Testament discourage parents from provoking their children to anger—a message that was counter-cultural to the harsh corporal punishment in place at the time (Joersz, 2013, p. 161).

The modern concept of "spanking" is not found anywhere in the Bible.

Protestant proponents of "spanking" recommend striking the buttocks one or two times but never hard enough to leave marks. Hitting the child should also be preceded by an explanation and followed with a comforting prayer. This is a modern invention that has no direct biblical support (Merritt, 2014). Instead, references to corporal punishment in the Bible speak of blows to the back that result in bruises or stripes—conduct that would be considered criminal in most jurisdictions today (Merritt, 2014).

As a writer for *Religion News Services* noted,

> The spanking restrictions Christians promote as Biblical would sound bizarre to those from the ancient Jewish cultures from which these passages arise. "Biblical spanking," if one reads and applies these passages literally, is much more severe than the modern Western behaviors. (Merritt, 2014)

In working with Molly, this may be a critical lesson. Because she is concerned about abandoning a biblical concept, it may be helpful for her to realize that even conservative Protestants advocating for spanking have abandoned a literal interpretation of these verses.

Non-corporal forms of discipline are operating closer to the heart of the text.

[2] The King James Study Bible, Second Edition *(Hindson, 2011) includes the following commentary on Proverbs 13:24: "Love and discipline go together. The rod does not necessarily mean a spanking but simply whatever physical discipline is reasonable for the offense. The rod refers to a branch or switch. It is a small object that stings, but does not inflict serious bodily harm. The use of the rod for spankings is clearly taught in scripture in preference to spanking with one's hand" (p. 942).*

Once we realize that even advocates for spanking do not encourage the type of corporal punishment referenced in the Bible, it becomes easier to ask what, exactly, is the purpose or meaning of these passages? As noted earlier, the writer of Proverbs was conveying bits of wisdom and did so by referencing practices in play at the time. Each generation is called upon to apply these verses to its era (Troftgruben, 2018).

As one example, Proverbs 31:6–7 tells us to give wine or strong drink to ease the pain of those in anguish. According to some Bible commentaries, this is a reference to the use of alcohol as a medication (Engelbrecht, 2009, p. 1046n). Applying this standard today, we wouldn't be obligated to give someone in great pain wine, we would instead use morphine or another modern drug.

In his book *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*, Tyndale Seminary Professor William Webb (2011) noted that the underlying purpose of the corporal punishment verses is "avoiding folly and embracing divine wisdom" (p. 91). Because decades of research informs us that non-corporal forms of discipline are more effective in achieving the goal advanced in Proverbs, Webb (2011) points to the "delightful irony" that parents using non-corporal forms of discipline "have in fact become more (not less) biblical in their child-rearing practices" (p. 91).

Conclusion: The Need for Faith Partnerships

With the growing body of research documenting the ineffectiveness of corporal punishment and its association with many cases of child physical abuse, a number of Christian writers, both liberal and conservative, have urged the church to re-evaluate ancient texts often used to justify physical discipline. Early research suggests a deeper, culturally sensitive analysis of these texts can be helpful in moving many conservative Protestants away from physical discipline.

Unfortunately, many multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) lack a professional qualified to work with parents worried that abandoning physical discipline will be frowned upon by God. For this reason, a number of child abuse experts have urged MDTs to develop working relationships with faith leaders or even to consider adding a chaplain to an MDT to assist in securing appropriate spiritual care services when appropriate (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017; Vieth, Everson, Vaughan-Eden, & Tiapula, 2013). At least one child advocacy center (CAC) has done just that (GSA Biz Wire, 2017).

There is every reason to believe that a culturally sensitive approach to the issue of corporal punishment will aid religious parents in maintaining traditional beliefs and practices even as they let go of the physical discipline of children.

About the Author

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Working With Molly: A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Parents Using Corporal Punishment Because of Their Religious Beliefs

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