

The Need for Christian Military Schools

by Michael G. Herrin¹

A Definition of Discipline

Discipline is the application to a student of an external structure of consequences for behavior. The external structure is both a model of a well ordered life and a stimulus toward proper behavior. The goal of discipline is for the student to internalize the structure so that behavior will no longer be shaped from without but instead motivated from within. Discipline should move its recipient from disordered living to ordered living.

The discipline involved in Christian schooling seeks to impose three types of structure. Students need to be socialized so that they can participate productively in society. Students need to be educated so that they can succeed in college or technical school. Students also need to be taught the way of the Cross and encouraged to follow Jesus. Each of these types of structure involves external discipline until the student becomes a disciple, a voluntary follower of the ordered system of behavior.

The Biblical Basis for Discipline

Although they dislike them very much, adolescents need firm and fixed parameters on behavior for the proper development. Unfortunately, many modern parents and teachers have neglected their responsibility to provide such resistance to teens' pushes for authority, mainly because resisting is unpleasant and exhausting. Other authority figures have misunderstood the necessity of such resistance, thinking that acting in an authoritarian fashion is either immoral or harmful to the developing adolescent.

The morality of exercising parental control is without question in the Bible. Proverbs 22:15 points out, "Foolishness *is* bound in the heart of a child; *but* the rod of correction shall drive it far from him." Proverbs 13:24 says, "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently." Likewise, in Ephesians 6:1, children are exhorted to obey their parents, as Paul recalls the fifth commandment.² Perhaps the principal reason for modern parents' rejecting such clearly biblical teaching is the widespread misconception that people in general, and children in particular, are basically good, and that if parents would allow them freedom to develop naturally, then they would turn out all right.

This notion of the basic goodness of humanity was made popular by Rousseau, but has absolutely no biblical basis. Indeed, it is contrary to the very foundations of the Christian faith. Paul devastates the

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² This is not a license for parental abuse, however, as fathers are immediately thereafter exhorted to avoid exasperating their children.

contention of mankind's basic goodness in the first three chapters of his letter to the Romans, summing up his argument with this chilling conclusion:

As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat *is* an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps *is* under their lips: Whose mouth *is* full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet *are* swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery *are* in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes (verses 10-18).

Knowing that all human beings, since Adam's Fall in the Garden of Eden, are basically bad and in need of a Savior, underlines the need for parameters on behavior. Christians look at the Law of God and are convicted of their sin. At the same time, as they grow in grace, they tend to avoid doing things forbidden by the Law. If the Bible is such a needed and effective tool of discipline for adults, certainly children and adolescents are in even greater need of parameters to mold their behavior.

The Psychological Need for Discipline

Even modern psychologists recognize that adolescents have a special need to have parameters placed around them. Thus, firm maintenance of these parameters is not harmful at all, but helpful. John W. Santrock points out that adolescents naturally push for greater freedoms:

Adolescence is a period of development in which the individual pushes for autonomy (or the perception that he or she has control over his or her behavior) and gradually develops the ability to take that control. (Life Span Development, 2nd ed., 1986)

Of course, if there is no parent or authority figure against which to react, the adolescent's ability to exercise control over situations will never really develop. Just as a muscle must work against some sort of resistance in order to be strengthened, so must a person's understanding of control over both self and external situations be strengthened through opposition. When parents take the easy way out by giving in to their children, they are actually depriving their children of the ability to grow and develop. However counter-intuitive it may appear, the loving thing for parents to do is to discipline their children, providing external structure until their children internalize that structure and begin to lead ordered lives.

The Spiritual Need for Discipline

It is clear that the Bible encourages parents to discipline their children. This need is unquestionably present in children who have not yet been born anew of the Holy Spirit. In fact, discipline that trains the mind and body can be an effective preparation of children for evangelism.

Modern society is filled with children who do not understand the basic concepts on which the gospel is based. They do not understand absolute truth because they think that truth is relative. They do not understand trust because they have never been able to trust anyone. They do not understand sin because they have been taught that right and wrong are determined situationally. More frightening is the fact that many have been surrounded by sin for so long that they think sin is normative and even good. Most tragically, such damaged children may not even understand the concept of love.

How can the church communicate the gospel to a generation that doesn't understand these concepts? And why should a child who does not believe in right and wrong, in justice and mercy, in love and trust, believe the gospel when it is presented? It is not enough simply to explain the terms, for trust, love and sin must be grasped by experience as much as by analysis.

Effective discipline models the concepts that form the building blocks of the gospel. Children learn about absolute truths by following rules. As they break rules, they learn about justice and the consequences of sin. As they are forgiven, they learn about mercy. As they build relationships with their authority figures, they learn love and trust. These concepts, which children learn through experience, enable them to understand the gospel when it is presented to them.

God's Model for Discipline: The Family

Because of the breakdown of large numbers of families in modern society, many teens are in need of surrogate disciplinarians. Some schools fill this void by replicating the structures of the family as much as possible. The family, of course, is an excellent model for raising children, instituted as it was by God Himself. This is the model toward which all students must grow if they are to achieve health and wholeness.

Healthy families perform the functions of pre-evangelism without even thinking about the concepts being taught. Children learn the basics of the gospel – truth, sin, love, trust, justice and mercy – organically in families. Healthy families blend such pre-evangelism with presentations of the gospel so that children often grow up never knowing a time when they didn't know that they were sinners trusting in a savior.

Children in healthy families obey their mothers and fathers not primarily out of fear of punishment, but out of love and respect for them. This love and respect grows in an atmosphere that is organic and often flexible. Parents may use different disciplinary tools on different children, depending on the personality of the child. Children internalize systems of behavior often simply by imitating their parents. Families often have very few absolute rules, but are governed instead by the mutual concern the members have for each other.

However, some adolescents, given their personal history, are not ready for the relative freedom that a family system offers. They need greater structure than a family system can provide. Those who have been severely damaged through neglect or abuse simply don't know how to love and respect others. They do not have the basic building blocks necessary to make the gospel make sense or to make a family system work. Because they have been exploited, they tend to exploit others' forbearance, interpreting it as weakness. These teens may temporarily require more external structure because they have so little structure inside themselves. Such adolescents often thrive in a total institution, which limits their choices and thus allows them time and space to move away from their inner instability toward a more ordered life.

Total Institutions and the Military Model

There are at least three types of total institutions that serve as models for schools today. One is the monastery model. In this system, students decide to attend the school and voluntarily submit to a certain code of ethics. This model provides structure, but only to those who desire it. At any time, the student can choose not to comply with the code, but he must therefore leave the community. This model has been successful with colleges, but is probably not optimal for use with rebellious adolescents. A school that simply

expels students who are not compliant is by definition not correcting the aberrant behavior that caused the students to be enrolled in the school.

Another is the prison model. This removes all personal decision making from the students, and thus can be therapeutic for the most rebellious teens. However, such a model has difficulty in rewarding compliant behavior. It encourages infantilism, as there are few opportunities for growth and advancement. The harsh treatment necessitated by the model can also serve to alienate those students who wish to be compliant. It is difficult for the disciplinarians to model the love of Christ in such a setting, as the main motivator of behavior is fear of punishment.

A middle way, and certainly the most popular until relatively recently, is the military model. It is the most flexible of the total institutions because it can serve the needs of adolescents who are compliant as well as the needs of those who are rebellious. Compliant teens can advance in rank and authority, growing as they assume positions of leadership and greater responsibility. They can take pride in their accomplishments, but they nevertheless are constantly reminded of the need for teamwork. The esprit de corps of a smoothly functioning military unit takes advantage of an adolescent's need for peer approval, channeling it into positive and productive directions.

For the rebellious adolescent, the military model provides firm discipline. Rules are clearly stated, and any breach of them is accompanied by sure and swift punishment. This is often physical in nature, through activities such as marching or calisthenics, and these activities are helpful in taking the edge off of the aggressive adolescent's energy level. At the same time, consequences are clearly related to breach of the rules, so that the adolescent's desire for fairness and justice is not disturbed. At any time, an aggressive, rebellious student can decide to become cooperative and compliant. At that time, his punishments will cease and his rewards will begin, allowing room for growth and change.

The Decline of the Military Model

Why did the military model fall out of fashion, when it once dominated the landscape of boarding schools in America? Simply put, society degenerated to the point where it would not tolerate such a model. In the second half of the twentieth century, at least three trends in American culture came together to destroy the model.

First, self-proclaimed experts in child rearing counseled parents that children did not need firm discipline to grow into healthy adults. Instead, these experts warned that any strict discipline would damage children's self-esteem and leave them psychologically incapable of functioning in an adult environment. Disregarding history and sound theology, these experts persuaded many parents not to send their children to military schools.

Second, the anti-authoritarian streak within the American personality became exaggerated with the growth of the youth culture in the "baby boom generation," those born between the years of 1945 and 1964. People born in these years were encouraged throughout their developing years to avoid, and even to resist, any authority, legitimate or not. As a result, they resist having their children subjected to discipline. In short, the teenagers of today remain rebellious in large measure because their parents have never stopped being rebellious.

Third, within the Christian community, the military model is no longer trusted. While the non-Christian confuses meekness with weakness, the modern Christian often confuses strength with harshness, or even with hatred. This is an occupational hazard of Christianity, because Christians are gradually being sanctified by the work of the Holy Spirit. They are becoming less hateful and less rebellious as God cleanses

them of sin. As a result, they find it more and more difficult to believe that other people remain wicked and rebellious. They also tend to forget the need for strict discipline to curb those who have not yet been made new by the power of the Holy Spirit. In short, nice Christians don't need strict discipline anymore, and thus they tend to forget that there are indeed some people who still need it.

The Church's Response to the Collapse of Families

Given the pressing needs in modern society, what should the church as a whole do? How should the body of Christ show love to the victims of broken or abusive homes? The answer, of course, is that different methods must be used with different children.

Some children will respond best to adoption, being placed in the center of a warm and loving Christian family. Legal adoption seems to work best with children who are still very young at the time of their adoption, as they have gained few patterns of life which will disrupt the adopting family. Adoptions need not be formal, however. They may simply take the form of a family reaching out and including a child in many of their activities, even while the child still lives with other guardians.

Some, who are more naturally compliant, will respond best to a monastery-style total institution. Children who are longing for inclusion in a family often respond well to such a voluntary institution. Such an institution should, of course, mimic a family model as closely as possible, because these children are ready for inclusion in that most subtle and informal of social groupings. The church should support such institutions where they exist, and found them where they do not.

For children who are not naturally compliant, a military model is the best solution. The church should support the few military schools that remain, if those schools are also committed to a Christian world and life view. If the church abandons military education, less compliant children will have only one option. Unable to flourish in families or monastery-style institutions, they will have to be placed in prison style schools, unless their behavior results in their being sent to a real prison. ■