
Toxic Theology: A Pastoral Response to Bible Passages Often Used to Justify the Abuse of Children or Prevent Them from Seeking Care

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“To invoke God to justify violence against the innocent is not an act of sanctity but of sacrilege. It is a kind of blasphemy. It is to take God’s name in vain.”²

These words, from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, appear in a book addressing religious violence and extremism. They apply no less to the abuse of children in the name of God or Christ.

Many of the worst forms of child abuse are not justified by apathy or indifference as much as by scripture and religious grounds. An example is the case of Roy Moore, an Alabama senator accused in 2017 of multiple accounts of sexually molesting minors. Alabama State Auditor Jim Ziegler argued that, if true, Moore’s actions were not a big deal because the Bible features marriages across significant age gaps in Jesus’ family (Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary). Therefore, “There’s just nothing immoral or illegal here. Maybe just a little bit unusual.”³

This brief essay cannot dismantle the countless ways scripture has been used to justify violent and unjust activities against children. But it will briefly address three common offenders, showing how these interpretations run against the spirit of scripture itself.

Proverbs and corporal punishment

Ironically, Proverbs condemns physical violence between people, but recommends physical punishment to control household members.⁴ Many passages endorse forms of corporal punishment of children: “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them” (13:24).⁵ More than

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anything else, these verses show some radically different cultural norms at work in Ancient Israel regarding physical discipline, effective instruction, and the nature of children.

Like virtually all other cultures in the ancient world, the authors of Proverbs (here called “the sages”) drew no distinctions between corporal and non-corporal discipline.⁶ They felt no need to, since they believed physical discipline was a constructive and effective teacher—and not just for children: “Strike a scoffer, and the simple will learn prudence” (19:25a); “Blows that wound cleanse away evil; beatings make clean the innermost parts” (20:30); “Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die. If you beat them with the rod, you will save their lives from Sheol” (23:13–14). The sages, in fact, believed words alone could not bring about effective discipline the way corporal punishment could: “By mere words servants are not disciplined, for though they understand, they will not give heed” (29:19). All these proverbs sought the ultimate goal, not of inflicting pain, but of nurturing inward character and maturity.

Related to this are critical assumptions about children that were widespread in antiquity. The ancients valued childhood very little, esteeming children primarily for their potential to grow into contributing adults. Children were irrational creatures, needing firm and deliberate discipline if they were to develop rationality and self-control. For this reason, children typically began work and apprenticeship as early as possible, typically by five to seven years old.⁷ And so, Prov 22:15 observes “Folly is bound up in the

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

6. See R. D. Branson, “*yāsār; mūsār*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry; trans. David E. Green; 15 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 6:127–134.

7. Lynn H. Cohick, “Women, Children, and Families in the Greco-Roman World,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural*,

1. Associate Professor of New Testament, Wartburg Theological Seminary.

2. Jonathan Sacks, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken Books, 2015) 5.

3. Aisha Sultan, “Don’t Use Bible Stories to Justify Child Molestation,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Nov 10, 2017). Available at http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/parenting/aisha-sultan/aisha-sultan-dont-use-bible-stories-to-justify-child/article_7fa83c62-bded-5aea-a4e4-04b5308d0dab.html.

4. Pointed out by Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine, “Proverbs Study Notes,” *Harper-Collins Study Bible* Wayne A. Meeks, ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993) 960.

5. See also Prov 13:1; 19:18; 20:30; 22:15; 23:13–14; 29:15, 17. The phrase “Spare the rod, spoil the child” does not appear in scripture (appearing first in Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*), but may well have been based on Prov 13:24. All scripture quotations in this essay are from the

heart of a boy, but the rod of discipline drives it far away,” because the sages fundamentally believed any child, if left undisciplined, would wind up a disgraceful, irrational fool.

As may be clear, the sayings of Proverbs are products of their time (see also Sirach 7:23–24; 30:1–13). Michael V. Fox observes, “Ancient wisdom commended child beating with some zeal.”⁸ We, however, do not. The ancients cherished basic assumptions about physical discipline and children that today we simply do not share. They knew nothing about modern developmental psychology or the negative consequences (and traumas) associated with physical punishment—which we now know. Theirs was a different era, where child mortality rates were high (nearly 50 percent), vast economic discrepancies made poverty pervasive, and appreciation for the lived experiences of children was simply not a priority.

Most importantly, these verses do not necessarily aim to emphasize the enduring value of corporal punishment. Instead, they highlight the importance of intentional instruction for children in ways that yield maturity, character, and wisdom. In fact, the whole of Proverbs is patterned after the metaphor of parents instructing children in the ways of wisdom (1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; etc.). The goal of this wisdom literature is holistic and spiritual maturity, not specific models of physical discipline. Given this, models of discipline—in any era—that are *more* effective than corporal punishment truly achieve the goals of Proverbs best of all.⁹

To this day, there are interpreters who read Proverbs—and all of scripture—as endorsing corporal punishment,¹⁰ as well as an increasing number of those who take issue with this reading.¹¹ Meanwhile, debate rages on regarding the place of corporal punishment in effective parenting,¹² while studies increasingly show

Social, and Historical Contexts, eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 179–187.

8. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, Anchor Bible 18B, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 571.

9. See William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

10. For instance, Michael and Debi Pearl, *To Train Up a Child: Child Training for the 21st Century* (No Greater Joy Ministries, 2015), ch. 9; James C. Dobson, “Questions and Answers about Corporal Punishment and the Strong-Willed Child,” Dobson Digital Library, available at <http://www.dobsonlibrary.com/resource/article/9e6c1b33-b341-4617-aa11-70c9744fdf11>; Albert Mohler, “Should Spanking Be Banned? Parental Authority Under Assault,” (June 22, 2004), available at <https://albertmohler.com/2004/06/22/should-spanking-be-banned-parental-authority-under-assault/>. See also Paul D. Wegner, “Discipline in the Book of Proverbs: ‘To Spank or Not to Spank?’” *JETS* 48.4 (Dec 2005): 715–732.

11. For instance, “Thou Shalt Not Abuse: Misuse of Biblical Teaching on Spanking Can Have Deadly Consequences,” *Christianity Today* 26.1 (Jan 2012): 55; William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible*; John Shelby Spong, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible’s Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) chs. 15–20; Bruce and Carolyn Gillette, “Faithfully Disciplining our Children,” *Church & Society* 94.3 (Jan–Feb 2004): 45–49; Randall Heskett, “Proverbs 23:13–14,” *Interpretation* 55.2 (April 2001): 181–184.

12. John P. Hoffman, Christopher G. Ellison, and John P. Bartkowski, “Conservative Protestantism and Attitudes Toward Corporal

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it is not only unnecessary, but heavily associated with negative consequences and abusive practices.¹³ But in view of the ultimate goals of Proverbs—and all of Israel’s wisdom literature—it seems clear: a faithful reading of these passages (and all of scripture) does *not* require endorsing corporal punishment. Instead, a faithful reading calls for thoughtful evaluation (and reevaluation) of how best to instruct the young and untrained in the path of wisdom, in ways that are effective, holistic, and appropriate for our context. Forms of corporal punishment were typically part of that process in Ancient Israel, but that neither means nor requires they are appropriate for contexts in the twenty-first century.

The studies of an increasing number of psychologists, medical providers, and parenting professionals today regarding corporal punishment beg the question: because it appears in scripture, does that mean it is God’s will for all times and places? In my estimation, the sages who wrote Proverbs cared far more about spiritual maturity than corporal punishment, viewing the latter as merely a means (and a disposable one, at that) to a greater end. This gives us biblical grounds to leave corporal punishment behind for the sake of a more faithful scripture interpretation, and more effective and less problematic approaches to parenting and instruction.

Withholding medical care from children

Throughout scripture, evaluations of professional medical care are mixed, and for understandable reasons. In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), healing practices take place in homes (2 Sam 12:15–23) with physicians rarely appearing—and when they do, they are viewed negatively (2 Chron 16:12; Job 13:4; cf. Isa 38:21; Jer 8:22). But among ancient Israelites, the kinds of professional

Punishment,” *Social Science Research* 63 (2017): 81–94; Henry Enten, “Americans’ Opinions On Spanking Vary By Party, Race, Region And Religion,” *FiveThirtyEight* (Sept 14, 2014), available at <https://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/americans-opinions-onspanking-vary-by-party-race-region-and-religion/>.

13. Victor Vieth, “Augustine, Luther, and Solomon: Providing Pastoral Guidance to Parents on the Corporal Punishment of Children,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44.3 (July 2017): 25–33; Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Andrew Grogran-Kaylor, “Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 30.4 (2016): 453–469; Adam J. Zolotov et al., “Speak Softly—and Forget the Stick: Corporal Punishment and Child Physical Abuse,” *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 35 (2008): 364–365.

medical care so familiar to today's world simply did not exist. For them, the body was a mystery known only to God. These evaluations reflect mainstream biases against Greek medicine throughout antiquity, not just in ancient Israel.¹⁴

In later centuries, Jewish thinkers embraced professional medical care with increased openness: "Honor physicians for their services, for the Lord created them" (Sir 38:1); "The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and the sensible will not despise them" (v. 4).¹⁵ By the time of New Testament writings, physicians were relatively common (Mark 2:17; Luke 4:23). Still, the concept of "healing" overlapped significantly with notions of divine intervention, as seen in the blurring of language for "healing" and "saving" (doctors were called "saviors," and holy men "doctors"), as well as in how prevalently healings were associated with holy men.¹⁶ Unstandardized as it was, medical care was still expensive and prone to be ineffective (Mark 5:26). However, medicinal practices were embraced by several New Testament authors (1 Tim 5:23; Rev 3:18; cf. James 5:14), and nowhere explicitly rejected by them. A physician is counted among Paul's ministry colleagues (Col 4:14),¹⁷ and several New Testament passages associate basic medical treatment with hospitality in homes (10:34–35; Acts 16:33–34; see also Luke 4:23).

Given the historical realities of professional medical care in the ancient world, it is not surprising that scripture lacks a rousing theological endorsement to go to the doctor. There were very different stages in the development of modern medicine. Still, several New Testament writings embrace effective forms of medical care, without at all insinuating it was antagonistic to faith in God. More to the point, the New Testament, taken as a whole, does not view faith and medicine—as well as the practices associated with each—as conflicting things. In varying degrees, the authors of scripture increasingly embraced medicinal developments as good gifts of God for the care and well-being of creation (James 1:17).

To this day, Christians have perennially been tempted to view advancements in professional medical care as things contradictory to reliance on God—perhaps even as meddling in the affairs of God. On these grounds, many non-mainstream church bodies today—such as Christian Science and Jehovah's Witnesses—condemn receiving certain forms of professional medical care as

14. On this, see Vivian Nutton, *Ancient Medicine*, 2d ed.; Sciences of Antiquity, (London: Routledge, 2012).

15. See 38:1–15; Philo, *Leg.* 3.226; *Congr.* 53; Josephus, *Life* 404; *Ant.* 4.277.

16. E.g., Hanina ben Dosa (first cent. CE), the philosopher Apollonius of Tyana (first cent. CE), Emperor Vespasian (Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.81), Emperor Augustus (Philo, *Legat.* 144–45), and King Solomon (Josephus *Ant.* 8.44–49). Galen (second cent. AD), whose medical theories and practices were practiced down to the seventeenth century, gave one of his writings the title *That the Best Physician is also a Philosopher*, showing how blurred the categories were. See Wendy Cotter, *Miracles in Greco-Roman Antiquity: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1999); Joel B. Green, "Healing and Healthcare," in *The World of the New Testament*, 330–341.

17. "Luke, the beloved physician," who is traditionally credited with authoring the Third Gospel and Acts.

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antithetical to their faith.¹⁸ And when it comes to refusing children these basic forms of care, such practices are not merely alternative or counter-cultural, they are abusive.

As Luke's New Testament writings show, many early Christians saw basic medical care (like bandaging wounds) as an integral part of the ministry of hospitality (Luke 10:34–35; Acts 16:33–34). This was part of what it means to be a "neighbor" to those in need (Luke 10:36–37). Given this, extending basic medical care is a fundamental way to continue love for neighbor and the healing ministry of Jesus. In the centuries shortly after New Testament times, Christians took it upon themselves to nurse the sick and take in exposed infants, not because they were "nice" things to do, but in order to live out a calling to emulate the healing ministry of Jesus in the face of sickness and death.¹⁹ To this day, ministry organizations of various kinds carry on healing ministries for the same reasons, to extend the healing ministry of Jesus in ways made possible through the tools of modern medicine.

What makes refusing children modern medical care abusive is that they have no voice in the decision-making. It is not their faith and reasoning that motivate the refusal, but their guardians'. Meanwhile, the Jesus we find in scripture reacted indignantly to adults who refused children basic blessings (Mark 10:13–16). Jesus also warned strictly against placing any stumbling blocks before "these little ones who believe in me," likening it to a fate worse than being attached to a millstone flung into the sea (Mark 9:42–43; Matt 18:6–7).

In antiquity and today, children were and are the most vulnerable demographic in the world. To deny them modern extensions of Jesus' healing ministry, it seems to me, is to lay down stumbling blocks before a people most dear to the heart of Jesus.

Resistance to professional mental health resources

Many child abuse survivors, especially in adulthood, have significant needs to live healthy and productive lives. But they also encounter resistance from faith leaders and communities against using professional mental health resources such as psychologists and counselors.

18. Paul A. Offit names over twenty in *Bad Faith: When Religious Belief Undermines Modern Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

19. See Amanda Potterfield, *Healing in the History of Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Hector Avalos, *Health Care and the Rise of Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999).

The resistance is fueled by arguments similar to those against receiving medical care (see section II). But two additional challenges surround mental health services: widespread social stigmas and greater perceived overlap with spiritual care. As a result, many people think of mental health challenges as individualistic problems, perhaps even spiritual ones, to be addressed without professional assistance. A 2013 survey of over 1,000 Americans, for example, showed 35 percent of them—and 48 percent of Evangelical Christians—agreed with the statement: “With just Bible study and prayer, ALONE, people with serious mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia could overcome mental illness.”²⁰

Some Christians use instances from Jesus’ ministry to support resistance to mental health resources. For example, in the Gospels, some of those whom Jesus healed display symptoms shared by forms of mental illness known today.²¹ Based on healing stories such as these, some believe mental illnesses today are better addressed by spiritual than psychological resources. But the fact that first-century people—including the authors of scripture—did not differentiate between the spiritual and the psychological does not make it constructive for us to do the same. In fact, conflating the two can be remarkably harmful.

Modern mental health practices have shown not only the value of differentiating mental illnesses from those who suffer from them, but also the dangers of mislabeling mental illnesses. To demonize (or sanctify) mental health conditions can be not only unproductive, but also damaging. For instance, a pastor friend of mine once witnessed a day-long prayer vigil around a young woman, with the hopes of exorcising an “evil spirit” from her. She was later diagnosed with schizophrenia. She still refers to the vigil as a traumatic experience.

Others interpret scriptural encouragements to “counsel” or “instruct” one another (e.g., Rom 15:14) as endorsing the notion that the spiritual resources of a Christian community are all that is necessary to facilitate mental health and healing.²² Some underlying assumptions here may be that prayer should initiate all forms of true healing (see Mark 9:29), that scripture is sufficient for all kinds of instruction (see 2 Tim 3:16–17), that true healing can take place only within

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the context of Christian community (see James 5:14–15), or that only Christians can know what true mental health looks like.²³

However, although these scripture passages give significant roles to spiritual resources for healing and instruction, none of these passages explicitly bars believers from pursuing other resources in addition.²⁴ These passages aimed primarily to emphasize the healing value of spiritual resources (prayer, scripture, inter-community counsel)—not necessarily to advise how to cure specific instances of complex mental trauma. Scriptural writings naturally emphasize the value of spiritual resources, and without necessarily questioning—or addressing—the worth of modern mental health resources. In short, valuing the healing power of spiritual resources by no means requires an antagonism against the assistance of mental health professionals.

Related to this is the concern that some Christians have, that professional mental health practices do not appreciate the ethics and ideals of Christian spirituality. The concern is that these services are fundamentally “secular,” grounded in an alternative worldview, and potentially antagonistic to religious faith. Therefore, only practicing Christians can truly know what mental health in the sight of God looks like. To be fair, mental health professionals tend to be less religious than the general public, and some are suspicious of certain forms of traditional religious faith, for understandable reasons.²⁵

20. John Peteet, “The Interface between Religion/Spirituality and Mental Health,” 1. Essay featured by the American Psychiatric Association: <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/faith-community-partnership>. Accessed January 24, 2018. Capitalization original.

21. E.g., a boy with convulsions (Mark 9:14–29), about whom Jesus says, “This kind [of demon] can come out only through prayer” (v. 29). See also Mark 5:1–20. Some argue these conditions were, in fact, psychological conditions interpreted in spiritual terms by the ancients. See David George Reese, “Demons,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2:138–142 (esp. 142).

22. Romans 15:14 is often cited: “I, for my part, am convinced, my sisters and brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct one another.” See also 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Cor 4:14.

23. The definition of “nouthetic counseling” offered by the Institute for Nouthetic Studies fits several of these categories. See <http://www.nouthetic.org/about-ins/what-is-nouthetic-counseling>. Accessed February 13, 2018.

24. Mark 9:29 may be read as an exception (“This kind [of demon] can come out only through prayer”), but this situation assumes a diagnosis of supernatural origins, in ways not necessarily assumed for most twenty-first century maladies.

25. As John Peteet summarizes, a “mutual suspicion persists” between some Christians and mental health professionals. “A religious figure recent acknowledged that psychiatry and psychology have made

But such concerns with “secular” mental health services assume that Christians have superior access to divine wisdom and healing, and that non-Christians have nothing to teach Christians. These assumptions risk both hubris and naivete. Mental health resources can help people of all faiths avoid some serious and perennial pitfalls. Many church leaders are ill-informed about mental health resources, and their communities silent about the challenges many face. As a result, ministers often approach symptoms of mental illness through the lens of spirituality, which in turn can be prone to overemphasize individual responsibility for coming to terms with persistent trauma.²⁶

In the New Testament, both Jesus and Paul envisioned people in right relationship to God as not only right in “heart” and “soul,” but also in “mind.” The believer’s mental state is a part of loving God (Mark 12:30; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27), as well as part of her spiritual renewal (Rom 12:1–2; see also Eph 4:23; Col 3:10). For the New Testament writings, the mind is an integral part of humanity’s whole self, making its welfare extraordinarily important to both spirituality and holistic health. In short, mental health matters profoundly to God.

Survivors of abuse—particularly abuse in childhood—have traumatic experiences and complex mental challenges far beyond what most ministers and church communities can appreciate and address. As people of faith, we need the assistance of professional health resources, as gifts of God, to help us discern and foster more authentic and lasting health among those with distinctive challenges. In standing alongside such individuals and mental health professionals, we stand together as allies for healing and wholeness in Jesus’ name.

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Conclusion

In the Postmodern Era, I have frequently heard the statement “People can use the Bible to justify anything they want.” Sadly, to some extent this is true. But in response, I argue there are not only *bad* interpretations—but *wrong* ones. And wrong interpretations deserve not only to be discredited, but in cases as these to be cast out as evil.

Where biblical interpretations endorse hatred, abuse, or violence against other human beings created in God’s image—especially the most vulnerable and powerless—such readings become acts of blasphemy. They contradict the spirit of the One who taught love for the neighbor, welcome to the child, and special divine concern for “little ones,” wherever and whoever they may be. Such acts take God’s name in vain, justifying violence against the most vulnerable among us.

useful contributions, but warned that ‘much of those disciplines are built on a faulty worldview and must be (at least partly) rejected.’ . . . For their part, many mental health professionals, who as a group are much less religious than the general public, suspect religion of being judgmental, masochistic, homophobic, misogynistic, and monolithic” (John Peteet, “Interface,” 1).

26. For example, an investigation of Bob Jones University by the Grace Institute showed an unhelpful emphasis among the school’s teachers upon individual sin as the primary cause of behavioral problems. “Final Report: For the Investigatory Review of Sexual Abuse Disclosures and Institutional Responses at Bob Jones University” (Dec 11, 2014). Online at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54596334e4b0780b44555981/t/552e9be7e4b0498e9c4b8c24/1429117927390/Bob+Jones+U+Final+Report.pdf>. Accessed January 24, 2018.