

# Until the Blood Ran: A Call to Re-Appraise the Experience of Child Physical Abuse in the Life and Works of Martin Luther

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*“Some day, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well-considered, and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child’s spirit.”*

—Erik Erikson<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

On three separate occasions, over a period of approximately eleven years, a mature Martin Luther<sup>3</sup> spoke of being beaten at the hands of his father, mother, and a schoolteacher. Although these beatings constitute acts of child abuse under modern criminal codes, biographers and other Luther scholars often ignore, excuse, minimize, or make light of the boyhood abuse inflicted on the Reformer.

The notable exception is Erik Erikson, whose psychohistory biography contended that the reformation was largely the product

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of Luther’s conflict with his father. Although many scholars rightly conclude that Erikson’s analysis went too far, these same scholars fail to adequately address the potential impact of child abuse on Luther’s theology, his own treatment of children, his views on child discipline, and his thoughts on education.

To address these shortcomings in Luther scholarship, this article takes a fresh look at Luther’s statements about child abuse and critiques the decision of Luther biographers to dismiss or minimize the importance of these statements. Lastly, the article advocates for a more balanced view of the childhood beatings of history’s most prominent Protestant, and suggests that a deeper, more honest assessment of these beatings will yield meaningful insights into Luther and his theology.

The fact that such an assessment has taken us this long may also reveal important truths about the longstanding reluctance of many Christians to acknowledge the harm of abusing children. If the church reaches a point where it can acknowledge the obvious fact that beating the boy Luther is abusive, perhaps it will become easier to acknowledge the ongoing physical abuse of children in our contemporary congregations.

## Physical abuse in Luther’s childhood

Information about physical abuse in Luther’s childhood is confined to three entries in *Table Talk*, a collection of comments from the reformer at his dining room table as recorded by students and

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2. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton & Co, 1958), 70.

3. Assuming Luther was born in 1483, he was 48, 53, and 59 years old when he spoke of child abuse. However, the year of his birth is disputed with Luther himself contending he was born in 1484. Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10.

guests.<sup>4</sup> This means the accuracy of these comments is dependent on the ability and willingness of the note takers to convey Luther's words as stated.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the fact that there are three entries spanning more than a decade and that each entry is consistent with the others in reporting childhood beatings suggests the statements should be taken at face value. As one Luther biographer notes, while "Luther's claims of family poverty were exaggerated, his claims of strictness and discipline in his upbringing almost certainly were not."<sup>6</sup>

### ***Luther's description of being "severely whipped" by his father***

Luther's first recorded telling of physical abuse took place in May of 1532.<sup>7</sup> In this entry, Luther encourages his listeners not to "whip children too hard."<sup>8</sup> To illustrate the danger, Luther states "My father once whipped me so severely that I ran away from him, and he was worried that he might not win me back."<sup>9</sup> Luther suggests the severity of this whipping was influencing his own attitude about hitting children. In reference to his own son, who was six years old at the time, Luther states "I wouldn't like to strike my little Hans very much, lest he should become shy and hate me. I know nothing that would give me greater sorrow."<sup>10</sup>

Luther then draws upon his childhood memory of a severe fatherly whipping and his own attitude toward such treatment of children to make a theological point. Specifically, Luther states "God acts like this [for he says] 'I'll chastise you, my children, but through another—through Satan or the world—but if you cry out and run to me, I'll rescue you and raise you up again.' For God doesn't want us to hate him."<sup>11</sup>

Although Luther doesn't detail the whipping from his father, he does describe it as "severe" and notes it caused him to run away and that his father also recognized the conduct was egregious enough that he was "worried" he might not be able to repair the relationship with his son. Luther's comments that he wouldn't like to whip his son "very much" because Hans might "hate me" suggests Luther knew that although whipping was more readily

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practiced in his era, physical abuse can nonetheless cause children to despise their parents. His comments about God disciplining us through the world or the devil suggests at least a rudimentary understanding of "natural consequences" as a means of disciplining children.<sup>12</sup>

Although some scholars contend from this entry that Luther was only beaten once by his father,<sup>13</sup> this is a misrepresentation of the text. Luther states that he was "once" beaten so severely that he ran away from his father, he does not suggest he was only whipped once. Indeed, in the second *Table Talk* entry discussed below, Luther states that both his parents "kept me under very strict discipline."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, a better reading of this text is that his father whipped him multiple times but that only one incident resulted in Luther running away from home.

### ***Luther's description of being beaten by his mother "until the blood flowed"***

Five years after discussing a whipping from his father,<sup>15</sup> Luther shared with his tablemates a belief that children should not be allowed to steal but the severity of the punishment should be reasonable. Children stealing apples, cherries or other "childish pranks" should be treated leniently but those stealing money or clothing should receive harsher punishment.<sup>16</sup>

Luther then offered this recollection:

My parents kept me under very strict discipline, even to the point of making me timid. For the sake of a mere nut my mother beat me until the blood flowed. By such

4. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed., American ed. *Luther's Works*, Volume 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

5. Roland Bainton notes the *Table Talk* entries that are the focus of this paper were spoken when Luther was much older and they were "recorded by students, often in discordant versions, and never seen by Luther himself. This does not mean that such material is to be automatically rejected, but it must be corroborated by firsthand evidence, and the exact language cannot be pressed." Roland Bainton, "Psychiatry and History: An Examination of Erikson's Young Man Luther," in Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychobiology and Religion: The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 23.

6. Herman Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 28-29.

7. Specifically, the statement took place between May 20 and 27. Luther, *Table Talk*, 157.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. A natural consequence is a direct result of the child's behavior. If, for instance, a child is playing roughly with a toy and a parent explains the conduct may damage the toy but the child persists, the subsequent broken toy conveys a lesson to the child that our misconduct can produce negative outcomes. For an explanation of these and other alternatives to corporal punishment, see generally, Robert D. Sege, & Benjamin S. Siegel, "Effective Discipline to Raise Healthy Children," *Pediatrics* 142:6 (2018).

13. See, e.g., Roland Bainton, "Psychiatry and History: An Examination of Erikson's Young Man Luther," in Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychobiology and Religion: The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 34.

14. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 235.

15. This conversation took place between March 28 and May 27, 1537. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 234.

16. *Ibid.*, 234-235.

strict discipline they finally forced me into the monastery; though they meant it heartily well, I was only made timid by it. They weren't able to keep a right balance between temperament and punishment.<sup>17</sup>

From this experience Luther concludes that parents should punish "in such a way that the rod is accompanied by the apple."<sup>18</sup> He calls it a "bad thing" if a child loses his or her "spirit on account of their parents and teachers."<sup>19</sup> He goes on to recall "bungling schoolmasters" whose acts of "torture" failed to take into account the differences in abilities among the children.<sup>20</sup> Luther believed that educators should "teach in such a way that all children are treated with equal love."<sup>21</sup>

### ***Luther's description of being beaten in school***

In the spring of 1543, Luther was asked about the admonition in Ephesians 6:4 not to exasperate our children.<sup>22</sup> In response, Luther contended that harsh discipline from a parent makes a child "timid," "dispirited," or "hopeless" and spurs the child to "do what they would otherwise probably avoid doing."<sup>23</sup> Luther believed that if a parent or teacher encounters a child who "can't learn, one shouldn't flog him to death on that account but should accustom him to something else."<sup>24</sup>

Luther then commented specifically on teachers, noting that some "are as cruel as hangmen."<sup>25</sup> In support of this statement, Luther says he "was once beaten fifteen times before noon, without any fault of mine" because he did not know the answer to something he "had not yet been taught."<sup>26</sup>

17. Ibid., 235. One scholar translates this entry in *Table Talk* to read: "My parents brought me up so strictly that it sometimes scared me... Even though they meant well, it made me scared." Selderhuis, *Martin Luther*, 29. Replacing the word "timid" with the word "scared," gives a different, perhaps deeper sense of what Luther felt at the time of the beating.

18. Ibid., 235.

19. Ibid. As reflected in these comments, Luther appears to place a greater emphasis on the emotional impact of child physical abuse as opposed to the physical pain and injury blows can cause. One explanation for this may be that physical pain subsides, and injuries heal, but the memory of the beating and the emotional impact resulting from trauma may last a lifetime. Modern research documents this potential outcome. See e.g. Luisa Sugaya, Deborah S. Hasin, Mark Olfson, Keng Han Lin, Bridget F. Grant & Carlos Blanco, "Child Physical Abuse and Adult Mental Health: A National Study," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 25 (2012): 384-392. In addition to an impact on mental health, harsh physical treatment of a child can have long-lasting implications on the boy or girl's physical health. See Tracie O. Afifi, Natalie Mota, Harriet L. MacMillan and Jitender Sareen, "Harsh Physical Punishment in Childhood and Adult Physical Health," *Pediatrics* 132 (2013): e333-338.

20. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 235.

21. Ibid.

22. "And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" Ephesians 6:4 (NRSV).

23. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 457.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

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### **Views of beating children in Reformation Europe at the time of Luther**

In his analysis of "housefather books" in print during the Reformation, Steven Ozment says that corporal punishment was to be used as a "last resort" and must be administered "coolly" as well as "calmly explained," "justified in advance," and "accompanied by profuse assurance of parental love."<sup>27</sup> According to Ozment:

Moderate corporal punishment was a regular and encouraged part of discipline both at home and at school in Reformation Europe, especially during the formative years between six and twelve. Both children and adults, however, viewed harsh and arbitrary discipline as exceptional and condemned it, while outright brutality brought firings and fines and even deep personal remorse.<sup>28</sup>

If Ozment's analysis is correct, then the beatings Luther described—beatings that drew blood and caused him to run away—may have been frowned upon even in his era.<sup>29</sup> If this is true, then Luther's later objection to such harshness, and his urging of gentler parenting may not have been outside the norm.<sup>30</sup>

Luther's contemporary (and eventual foe), Erasmus, also condemned the harsh discipline of children. Erasmus described the schools of his youth as "torture chambers" and, even as a man, he could recall "the swishing of the rod, howling and moaning, and shouts of brutal abuse"—conduct that Erasmus believed led children to "hate learning."<sup>31</sup> Like Luther, Erasmus recalled an incident in which he was beaten by a teacher for an offense he did not commit and said the incident "flung my young mind into such a deep depression that I nearly wasted away with heart-break."<sup>32</sup>

27. Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1983), 148.

28. Ibid., 149.

29. Although Ozment concludes that "harsh, arbitrary discipline was not characteristic" of Luther's childhood, he concedes that Luther "did occasionally receive rough treatment" and that "(b)rutality toward children" is "suggested in the famous episodes reported by Luther of being beaten by his mother until the blood ran... and feeling alienated from his father after receiving a painful thrashing." Ozment, *When Fathers Rule*, 148.

30. See notes 135-162 and accompanying text.

31. Michael Massing, *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 10.

32. Ibid., 28. Centuries before Luther and Erasmus, Augustine

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### Views of beating children as reflected in current German and U.S. laws

Whether or not the beatings Luther received in his childhood would have been frowned upon in his time, they almost certainly would be considered acts of child abuse in our modern era. In Germany today, it is a crime for any parent to physically strike a child, even as an act of discipline.<sup>33</sup> In total, sixty countries prohibit parents from physically striking children, though prosecution typically occurs only in egregious cases.<sup>34</sup>

In the United States, all fifty states still permit parents to physically strike a child provided the blows are "reasonable."<sup>35</sup> In determining reasonableness, courts consider the size of the child, the age of the child, the place on the child's body being struck, whether an instrument was used, the degree of injury or pain, the reason a parent is hitting the child and whether the "discipline is part of an overall pattern of violence."<sup>36</sup>

Although we don't know all the details of the beatings Luther endured, it is likely that beating a child to the point he ran away from home, until his "blood flowed," or because he did not know a subject he had not been taught would be deemed unreasonable by modern courts of law. Depending on the extent of the injury, Luther's description of the beating from his mother could be a felony level act of child abuse punishable by prison.<sup>37</sup>

was also critical of the cruelties of parents and teachers beating children. Augustine said that, as a "small child" there was "great feeling" when he pleaded with God that he would not be caned at school but lamented that "adult people, including even my parents, who wished no evil to come upon me, used to laugh at my stripes, which were at the time a great and painful evil to me." Augustine, *Confessions* (Place: Oxford 2008), 11.

33. For a complete listing of the countries which have banned all corporal punishment of children, see Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children: <https://endcorporalpunishment.org/countdown/> (last visited June 29, 2020).

34. Ibid.

35. John E.B. Myers, *Myers on Evidence of Interpersonal Violence: Child Maltreatment, Intimate Partner Violence, Rape, Stalking, and Elder Abuse*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed (Aspen: Wolters Kluwer, 2011), 262-264.

36. Victor I. Vieth, "From Sticks to Flowers: Guidelines for Child Protection Professionals Working with Parents Using Scripture to Justify Corporal Punishment," *William Mitchell Law Review* 40 (2014): 907, 909.

37. In Minnesota, for example, a felony level act of child abuse includes the infliction of "substantial bodily harm" defined as bodily

### Psychoanalytical assessments of the impact of child abuse on Luther

#### Erik Erikson's "Young Man Luther"

In 1958, the acclaimed psychoanalyst Erik Erikson<sup>38</sup> penned a controversial analysis of Luther's childhood.<sup>39</sup> Although Erikson notes the beatings Luther described at the hands of his mother<sup>40</sup> and schoolmaster,<sup>41</sup> Erikson focuses on Luther's relationship with his father, Hans Luder. Acknowledging that many children were beaten in Luther's time, still Erikson rejects the "assertion that the cause was too common to have an uncommon effect on one individual" and contends it is critical to examine Luther's words to discover the impact.<sup>42</sup>

Erikson says a more literal reading of Luther's words pertaining to his father's beating would be "I fled him and I became sadly resentful toward him, until he gradually got me accustomed (or habituated) to him again."<sup>43</sup> From this one sentence, Erikson finds "two trends" in this father-son relationship. First, "even when mortally afraid," the boy Luther "could not really hate his father, he could only be sad."<sup>44</sup> According to Erikson, "a child can feel ugly toward somebody for whom he does not especially care; but he feels sadly resentful toward somebody he loves."<sup>45</sup>

Second, although Luther's father "could not let the boy come close, and was murderously angry at times," he also "could not let him go for long" (emphasis in the original).<sup>46</sup> Although Erikson acknowledges that some readers may think "this interpretation places too big a burden on one sentence," he finds this pattern reflected throughout the relationship between Luther and his father.<sup>47</sup> From

injury which involves a temporary but substantial disfigurement, or which causes a temporary but substantial loss or impairment of the function of any bodily member or organ, or which causes a fracture of any bodily member. Minn. Stat. section 609.02, subd. 7a. If, for example, Luther's mother did beat him on the knuckles and the bleeding or swelling was a "temporary but substantial disfigurement" or temporarily but substantially impaired Luther's use of his hands, the act could be a felony crime under this statute.

38. In addition to his achievements in psychoanalysis and human development, Erikson was a professor at Harvard University and recipient of both the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for his writing.

39. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton & Co, 1958).

40. Although Erikson finds that Luther's description of being beaten by his mother is "more specific," he notes "the resentment he felt against her was never expressed as dramatically as was his father-hate, which took the form of a burning doubt of divine righteousness." Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 67.

41. Erikson contends teachers in Luther's era were often "halfway qualified" and were either too young or were too old and couldn't get any other job. These factors made educators "apt to express their impatience with life with their treatment of children, which was very similar to the treatment that the town's miller men gave to their donkeys." Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 78.

42. Erikson, 64.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 65.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

this pattern, Erikson offers explanations for Luther's rebellion and return to his father<sup>48</sup>—and for many of the reformer's struggles and decisions in his life.<sup>49</sup> According to Richard Marius, "Erik Erikson thought that Luther was repressed by his harsh father and then, in the Reformation, burst out into a torrent of words and rebellion against the artificial fathers men construct for themselves in a tempestuous world."<sup>50</sup>

### Lyndal Roper's "Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet"

Although Lyndal Roper penned a more traditional biography of Martin Luther, she nonetheless explored psychological and sociological themes in an attempt to investigate the influences that shaped Luther's mind and led him on the path of reformation.<sup>51</sup> Roper calls Erikson's work a "classic" but contends the focus is too narrow. Specifically, Roper writes "although Luther's relationship to his father was fundamental to his personality and his religiosity, and although his understanding of paternal relations pervades his theology, father figures are only part of what shaped him."<sup>52</sup> Roper devotes considerable attention to Luther's boyhood in Mansfeld and the influence of this culture in shaping Luther's toughness and his coarse language.<sup>53</sup>

In the context of the Mansfeld community, Roper describes Hans Luder as a "physically powerful man" who was "a force to be reckoned with."<sup>54</sup> She describes an incident in a pub in which a fight broke out and Hans "poured beer over the two combatants to separate them, clouting both on the head for good measure with a jug until the blood ran."<sup>55</sup> Although Roper describes the strength and willingness of Hans to resort to violence, even to the point of drawing blood, she does not mention Luther's account of being beaten by his father.

Roper references Luther's mother, Margarethe,<sup>56</sup> at several

48. Erikson writes: "Faced with a father who made questionable use of his brute superiority; a father who had at his disposal the techniques of making others feel morally inferior without being quite able to justify his own moral superiority; a father to whom he could not get close and from whom he could not get away—faced with such a father, how was he going to submit without being emasculated or rebel without emasculating the father?" Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 67.

49. For instance, Erikson writes: "The theological problems which [Luther] tackled as a young adult of course reflected the peculiarly tenacious problem of the domestic relationship to his own father; but this was true to a large extent because both problems, the domestic and the universal, were part of one ideological crisis; a crisis about the theory and practice, the power and responsibility, of the moral authority invested in fathers: on earth and in heaven; at home in the market-place, and in politics; in the castles, the capitals, and in Rome." Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 77.

50. Richard Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 19.

51. Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2016).

52. *Ibid.*, xxvi.

53. *Ibid.*, 3-20.

54. *Ibid.*, 11.

55. *Ibid.*

56. Roper uses the name "Margarethe," other biographies use the

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points in the biography,<sup>57</sup> and even credits her for influencing Luther's spirituality.<sup>58</sup> As is the case in discussing Luther's father, Roper also does not mention, much less analyze, the impact of Luther being beaten by his mother until blood was drawn—a curious oversight in a biography attempting to decipher what made Luther tick. Roper does make a reference to Luther's description of receiving fifteen blows from a schoolteacher and contends the beating may account for the "bitterness" in Luther's description of the education of his time.<sup>59</sup>

Roper's biography is highly acclaimed<sup>60</sup> and was published in 2016, on the eve of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. Despite the many strengths of this book, the absence of any discussion of parental beatings, particularly in light of modern knowledge of the potential impact of child abuse,<sup>61</sup> is perhaps the clearest

name "Margaret" or "Margaretta."

57. *Ibid.*, 4, 5, 8, 13, 16-17, 18, 23-24, 30, 141, 347, 401.

58. Roper contends "it is doubtful that Luther's intense spirituality came from his father" because Hans was a self-made man. Roper, *Martin Luther*, 17. Although there is "scant information" about Luther's relationship with his mother, Roper nonetheless concludes she was a "powerful influence" on Luther and "may have been one of the reasons" why he chose a religious life. Roper, *Martin Luther*, 23. Roper finds it "telling" that Luther gave Margarethe a copy of *On the Love of God*, written by Johann von Staupitz and inscribed it to "my dear mother." Roper, *Martin Luther*, 23-24. Roper concludes the "spiritual tradition that Luther shared with his mother" eventually "became part of Lutheran devotional life." Roper, *Martin Luther*, 401.

59. *Ibid.*, 22.

60. In reviewing books released for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, *Christianity Today* called Roper's biography "brilliant" and, while noting that "some readers will find her psychological approach a stretch," nonetheless concludes "hers is the most original and compelling Luther biography to mark the 2017 anniversary." Bruce Gordon, "Reading the Reformation in 2017," *Christianity Today* January/February 2017 47, 48-49.

61. For an overview of the potential long-term medical and mental health consequences of being beaten as a child, or suffering other forms of maltreatment, see Vincent J. Felitti and Robert F. Anda, "The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare," in Ruthe A. Lanius, Eric Vermeten, and Clare Pain, eds., *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2010). For an overview of research

indication of scholarly refusal to engage with even the possibility that beating a child can have a harmful, and lifelong, influence.

### Biographies that minimize the beatings Luther received as a child

Most modern biographies of Luther reference the beatings he discussed at the supper table but minimize the significance of this violence. Some biographers suggest Luther is exaggerating, several contend beatings were so commonplace that they warrant little attention, several note the “good intentions” of those beating Luther, others suggest any impact on Luther was “temporary,” others contend Luther was only beaten a handful of times, some suggest the beatings may have been justified, and one Luther biographer writes light-heartedly about beating, or at least physically striking a child. These claims are considered below.

#### *The claim Luther was exaggerating*

In his biography of Luther, Erwin Scharf,<sup>62</sup> contends that Luther's depiction of being beaten by his mother until the blood ran is a “story” that is “frequently repeated” but “is at worst an exaggeration.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Scharf dismisses Luther's depiction of being beaten in school as an “attempt to discredit the scholastic schools” and thus he used “strong language” such as describing the instrument of discipline as a “whip, large as a broom.”<sup>64</sup> Eric Metaxas's biography of Luther also concludes the Reformer “is somewhat exaggerating” about the brutality he encountered at school.<sup>65</sup> This is because “the school maxim was decidedly positive toward education and students.”<sup>66</sup>

In his biography of Luther, Martin Marty also suggests Luther was exaggerating schoolhouse cruelties, writing he “came to admire his teachers at Eisenach, so the Latin schools cannot have been the purgatories and hells as a scornful Luther later deemed them to be.”<sup>67</sup> In his Luther biography, Scott Hendrix notes that when Luther referred to his schooling as “hell and purgatory” he held two advanced degrees and was seeking to reform public education.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, Hendrix contends, Luther's “standards were

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unrealistically high and his opinions of teachers low.”<sup>69</sup>

The problem with Scharf's analysis is that Luther did not describe being beaten by his mother as a “story” but instead related it as an actual event he recalled with some specificity (e.g., blood was drawn). Although it is true that Luther exaggerated some aspects of his childhood, Luther's description of beatings are consistent with our general understanding of the treatment of children in his era. As noted earlier, other scholars who allow for exaggerations in some of Luther's reminiscences about childhood do not believe he was exaggerating about being beaten.<sup>70</sup>

Metaxas's claim that a positive school motto suggests Luther may be exaggerating his reports of schoolhouse beatings is contrary to scripture and common sense. We know from God's word that sinful humans often fail to live up to their words.<sup>71</sup> We also know from modern child abuse scandals within Catholic<sup>72</sup> and Protestant<sup>73</sup> communities that Christians often fall short of pious words inscribed on our buildings. Moreover, the motto Metaxas is referring to is an admonition not to neglect children.<sup>74</sup> In Luther's era, school and home corporal punishment was not considered neglectful—it was thought to be a necessity and the adult administering excessive blows was less problematic than the adult who was too lenient.<sup>75</sup>

Marty's contention Luther later expressed gratitude toward some teachers, and thus the beatings and other cruelties couldn't have been so bad, reflects a poor understanding of child abuse.

on the spiritual impact of child abuse, see Donald F. Walker, Henri Webb Reid, Tiffany O'Neill, and Lindsay Brown, “Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 1 (2009): 130-145; Amy Russell, “The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse and Exploitation: What Research Tells Us,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45 (July 2018): 14-19.

62. Erwin R. Scharf, *Martin Luther: Reformer in the Making* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1987).

63. Ibid., 18.

64. Ibid., 23-24.

65. Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (New York: Penguin 2017), 15.

66. The maxim was “neglecting a student is no less than deflowering a virgin.” Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 15.

67. Martin Marty, *Martin Luther* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 4.

68. Scott H. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2015), 21.

69. Ibid.

70. Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography*, 28.

71. In the words of Apostle Paul, “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Romans 7:18-19 (NRSV).

72. Michael D'Antonio, *Mortal Sins: Sex, Crime and the Era of Catholic Scandal* (New York: Dunne 2013).

73. *Caring Well: A Report from the SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group*, available online at: <https://caringwell.com/report/> (last accessed June 29, 2020).

74. The maxim was “neglecting a student is no less than deflowering a virgin.” Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 15.

75. “Although condemnable, the harsh parent was thought to err less than one who was too lenient, for an indulgent and permissive parent who neglected the discipline of his children spurned the most basic responsibility of parenthood: to instill in a child the inner virtues and qualities that will enable him to serve and survive in the world and before God.” Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*, 147.

We know from a large body of research that victims of abuse often have mixed feelings about their perpetrators, even expressing love toward them.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, prosecutors of child abuse often cite the child's love or affection for a parent, teacher or other offender as proof the child is *not* lying.<sup>77</sup> This is because if we love someone, we are not likely to lie about them. Apart from this, we also know that Luther was not the only person in his era to complain of educator cruelties<sup>78</sup> and even Steven Ozment, who believes there were limits to teacher abuses, concedes there were "horror stories."<sup>79</sup>

Hendrix's suggestion Luther had "unrealistically high standards" for education in his time<sup>80</sup> may be true. However, if Luther's reservations about beating children were outside the norm,<sup>81</sup> even "unrealistic" for the era in which he lived, this is evidence that the beatings did, in fact, influence him to adopt a very different view than many of his contemporaries. In describing the schools of his boyhood as "hell and purgatory," Luther says he and his fellow students "learned less than nothing despite all the flogging, anguish, and misery."<sup>82</sup>

### ***The claim the impact of beating Luther was temporary***

Erwin Scharf acknowledges "it is true" that Luther was beaten so severely by his father that he fled.<sup>83</sup> Even so, Scharf contends the impact on Luther was no more than a "temporary grudge."<sup>84</sup> This is because, at least in part, "Luther often recalled in touching language the many instances of his father's love."<sup>85</sup>

Other Luther biographers reach similar conclusions. Roland

**The fact Luther is describing the beating from his father decades after the event suggests the impact was more than a "temporary grudge" or "flash of resentment."**

Bainton, who wrote one of the most heralded Luther biographies,<sup>86</sup> concludes the beatings Luther received from his parents produced nothing more "than a flash of resentment."<sup>87</sup> Timothy F. Lull and Derek R. Nelson comment on a "tenderhearted, pastoral, and theologically rich" letter Luther wrote to his parents inviting them to stay in Wittenberg and concludes the letter "does much to discredit the caricature of Luther as a moping son with unresolved 'father issues' who had problems with authority."<sup>88</sup> Citing a letter Luther wrote after his father's death, in which Luther speaks of the "memories of that extremely loving relationship," Herman Selderhuis concludes "these are not the words of someone who needs psychological or emotional recovery from his parents."<sup>89</sup>

There are at least three shortcomings to the suggestion that the impact of being beaten by his father had only a "temporary" impact on Luther. First, the fact Luther is describing the beating from his father decades after the event suggests the impact was more than a "temporary grudge" or "flash of resentment."

Second, not every scholar concludes that Luther fully reconciled with his father. Richard Marius notes there are 7,075 entries in six volumes of *Table Talk* but that Luther only mentions his father twenty-seven times.<sup>90</sup> When Hans was dying in Mansfeld, Luther said he couldn't make the short trip to visit him because he

76. Most children delay disclosure of abuse until they are adults and, of those who disclose abuse as children, a significant number recant their allegations. One of many reasons for the delay in disclosure and the risk of recantation is love for the offender, who is typically a parent. Ramona Alaggia, "Many ways of telling: Expanding conceptualizations of child sexual abuse disclosure," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 28:11 (2004), 1213–1227; Thomas D. Lyon, "False denials: Overcoming methodological biases in abuse disclosure research," in *Child Sexual Abuse: Disclosure, Delay, and Denial*, Margaret Ellen Pipe, Michael E. Lamb, Yael Orbach, & Ann Christin Cederborg, eds. (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 41–62.

77. Victor I. Vieth, "Investigating and Prosecuting Cases of Child Abuse," in David L. Chadwick, et al, eds., *Chadwick's Child Maltreatment* (St. Louis: STM Learning, 2014), 179–222.

78. Massing, *Fatal Discord: Erasmus, Luther, and the Fight for the Western Mind*, 10 (detailing Erasmus' description of abusive conduct by his teachers).

79. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe*, 148.

80. Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 21.

81. In his proposal for compulsory public education, Luther says "schools are not what they once were" and specifically references the cruelties he experienced as a child. If this is true, there may already have been a lessening of teachers beating children or otherwise instilling fear in their pupils. Martin Luther, "To the Councilman of all Cities in Germany that they Establish and Maintain Christian Schools," in Theodore J. Tappert, *Selected Writings of Martin Luther 1523–1526* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2007), 61.

82. Ibid.

83. Erwin P. Scharf, *Martin Luther: Reformer in the Making*, 13.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid., 13–14.

86. Heiko Oberman dedicates his biography of Luther to Roland Bainton, writing that Bainton "combined the gifts of profound penetration and powerful presentation to make Martin Luther come alive for generations of students of the Reformation, on both sides of the Atlantic." Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), page unnumbered.

87. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950), 17.

88. Timothy F. Lull & Derek R. Nelson, *Resilient Reformer: The Life and Thought of Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 176. The letter at issue is found in Martin Luther, *Letters II*, Gottfried G. Krodel, ed., American ed. *Luther's Works*, Volume 49 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 267–271.

89. Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography*, 30. Selderhuis is referencing a letter Luther wrote from the Coburg Castle to Philip Melanchthon. Although he mentions his father's death, this discussion takes place at the end of the letter. The letter can be found in Martin Luther, *Letters II*, Gottfried G. Krodel, ed., American ed. *Luther's Works*, Volume 49 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 316–319. For a different perspective on this letter, see note 83 and accompanying text.

90. Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, 23. Not only is the number of references to Luther's father small in number but, as reflected in the three *Table Talk* entries discussed in this article, not all of the references are positive.

was afraid peasants might hurt him. Marius suggests this excuse is not genuine since Luther was willing to make the much longer trip to the Coburg Castle during the same period.<sup>91</sup> Although Luther did write his father and offered to take him in, Marius describes the letter as “formal, dutiful” and “devoid of personal reminiscence.”<sup>92</sup> Although Luther described grieving after his father's death, Marius surmises “his feelings involved the natural meditation and sorrow for the self that come to any son whose father dies after a long life, leaving a middle-aged son sharply confronted by his own mortality.”<sup>93</sup>

Other scholars have observed the odd structure of the letter Luther wrote to Philip Melanchthon after his father's death. Michelle DeRusha notes that Luther “mentions his father's death only after first complaining about a lack of letters from friends and then communicating several bits of news and gossip” and then discusses possible reactions to a recent publication “before finally, in the second half of the letter, announcing his father's death.”<sup>94</sup>

Despite the unusual placement of his father's death in the letter to Melanchthon, Luther does speak of the natural bonds he had with his father and states that “through him my Creator has given me all that I am and have.”<sup>95</sup> However, two years after this letter, Luther speaks at his dinner table about the beating from his father and the dangers of parental strictness.<sup>96</sup>

When read together, the letter Luther wrote after his father's death and the conversation recorded in *Table Talk* suggest the possibility, if not likelihood, that Luther had both positive and negative feelings toward his father and mother—feelings that caused him to speak about the dangers of their strictness while also expressing gratitude for the blessings he received from them. If we see Luther only as an abused child or only as a boy who loved his parents, we forfeit the deeper, more nuanced conversation that lies between these extremes. It also impedes our ability to minister to today's victims of abuse—many of whom also have conflicting emotions about their parents.

Third, and most importantly, even if Luther did fully reconcile with his father and did genuinely love him, this does not mean the act of being beaten by his father is of little consequence. If Luther had been sexually abused by his father it is inconceivable that scholars would dismiss the act as irrelevant because, in essence, Luther got over it. The fact we make such a distinction for physical

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abuse says less about Luther than it does about those who write of him. If it is wrong to beat a child, that wrongfulness does not change simply because the victim comes to terms with the beating or expresses affection for the perpetrator. Unless and until Luther scholars grasp this truth, we will always discount the significance of the physical abuse he endured.

### *The claim Luther was only beaten a few times*

Roland Bainton asks the rhetorical question “what do we know about bursts of temper at [Luther's] home?”<sup>97</sup> In answer to his question, Bainton says there “is just one saying about a beating at the hands of his father” which “certainly cannot mean that the father got the son used to being thrashed.”<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Bainton says the “main point” of Luther recounting his mother's beating is that she “treated him severely” by drawing blood. According to Bainton, she “treated him in this fashion *once* (emphasis in the original), just once.”<sup>99</sup> With respect to the *Table Talk* entry in which Luther describes a beating by a teacher, Bainton again notes that only “once he received fifteen strokes from his teachers.”<sup>100</sup>

There are at least two weaknesses in this argument. First, the fact Luther describes a particularly gruesome incident at the hands of his father does not mean that this is the only time his father beat him but rather the only time it was so bad Luther ran away. Similarly, it may be that Luther singled out the beating from his mother which drew blood or the beating from a teacher in which he committed no infraction as particularly problematic, but it does not follow from this that he was only beaten three times. Indeed, Luther says his “parents kept me under very strict discipline” and they “weren't able to keep a right balance between temperament

91. Marius, *Martin Luther*, 23.

92. Ibid., 23. In the letter Luther says “it is right and God-pleasing for me, as a son, to mourn such a father...” This is the sort of “dutiful” tone Marius is likely referring to. Martin Luther, *Letters II*, Gottfried G. Krodel, ed., American ed. *Luther's Works*, Volume 49 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 316-319.

93. Marius, *Martin Luther*, 24.

94. Michelle DeRusha, *Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 65.

95. Martin Luther, *Letters II*, Gottfried G. Krodel, ed., American ed. *Luther's Works*, Volume 49 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 319.

96. Luther said his parents weren't “able to keep a right balance between temperament and punishment.” Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 235.

97. Roland Bainton, “Psychiatry and History: An Examination of Erikson's Young Man Luther,” in Roger A. Johnson, ed., *Psychohistory and Religion: The Case of Young Man Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 34.

98. Ibid.

99. Ibid., 30.

100. Ibid., 23.



and punishment.”<sup>101</sup> These comments suggest there were other acts of physical discipline which Luther considered excessive.

With respect to Luther's schooling, it is important to consider not only the number of beatings Luther received, but also the number of beatings and emotional cruelties he was exposed to. According to Luther biographer James Kittelson, “coercion and ridicule were chief among the techniques” Luther would regularly have witnessed.”<sup>102</sup> Kittelson describes the routine this way:

Any child caught speaking German was beaten with a rod. The one who had done least well in the morning was required to wear a dunce's cap and was addressed as an ass all afternoon...Under these conditions, all that the children knew for certain was that they wanted to avoid the beatings and the dunce's cap.<sup>103</sup>

Second, even if Luther received “only” three beatings (and witnessed many more at school), it still means he was beaten multiple times by multiple persons. Since one beating would be egregious, it is troubling to suggest that three beatings is too small a number to have a lasting impact on Luther. Again, it is hard to imagine a scholar contending that a child “only” witnessed three acts of domestic violence or was “only” touched sexually three times. When, though, it comes to physical violence against the boy Luther, there is a clear pattern of minimizing the potential harm.

### ***The claim beating Luther was justified***

With respect to Luther's reference to being beaten by his mother for the sake of a nut until the blood ran, Roland Bainton contends Luther is not complaining so much “that she thrashed him” but that the beating was excessive for the offense committed.<sup>104</sup> Bainton interprets Luther to mean it “would have been entirely in order to beat him for stealing money, a coat, or a chest, but not for stealing an apple, a pear or a plum.”<sup>105</sup>

Luther biographer Heinz Schilling goes one step further and suggests the beating may, in fact, have been justified under the circumstances of the time. According to Schilling, “Due to the harsh climate few walnut trees grew in the east of Germany, and those few trees bore little fruit. A walnut was therefore valuable, and its allocation, as for other foodstuffs, fell to the parents.”<sup>106</sup> Though far less extreme, Luther biographer James Kittelson puts the beating of Luther by his mother in the context of an ongoing lesson “that every expenditure had to be watched with great care.”<sup>107</sup>

Even if Luther felt that his mother's beating would be justified if he committed a greater offense, this does not make the conduct

**To be clear, it is appropriate and necessary for Luther biographers to explain why parents and teachers may have beaten him. An understanding of what leads adults to act violently toward even children they love is critical if we are to reverse course. What is not appropriate, though, is to fail to label the beating of Luther as abusive.**

any less egregious. A victim of abuse often assumes he or she deserves the maltreatment.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, even if a child did commit a serious transgression, would this truly justify beating the child? Similarly, even if walnut trees were in scarce supply, this would not justify the conduct, it would simply provide a basis for the mother's motive in beating her son bloody. It may be a valuable lesson to teach children to account for every expenditure—but it is not valuable to instill this lesson with violence.

To be clear, it is appropriate and necessary for Luther biographers to explain why parents and teachers may have beaten him. An understanding of what leads adults to act violently toward even children they love is critical if we are to reverse course. What is not appropriate, though, is to fail to label the beating of Luther as abusive.

### ***The claim beating Luther does not need to be taken seriously***

In his biography of Luther, Eric Metaxas appears to make light of the childhood beatings Luther received. Specifically, Metaxas writes:

Whereas no one should doubt that Hans Luther would have clouted his son about the head when the situation demanded it—and what boy would not create situations along these lines from time to time?—such

101. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 235.

102. James M. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer: The Story of the Man and His Career* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 37.

103. *Ibid.*, 37.

104. Roland Bainton, “Psychiatry and History: An Examination of Erikson's Young Man Luther,” 30.

105. *Ibid.*, 30.

106. Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval*, 46.

107. Kittelson, *Luther the Reformer*, 33.

108. Describing a dynamic in many cases of abuse, psychologist Diane Langberg writes, “The child-mind attempts to understand what is happening and concludes that the abuse must be someone's fault. In that child-mind there are two possible choices. The abuse is either her fault or it is the abuser's fault. Now when the abuser is your father, the idea of it being his fault is terrifying, for how can she feel safe in the home? He has power, she does not. People listen to him; no one listens to her. So she decides it is her fault. It gives her a sense of control. If the abuse is my fault because I am bad, then if I can figure out how to be good, I will be able to stop the abuse.” Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God* (Greensboro: New Growth Press 2015), 51.

corporal discipline was de rigueur at the time, and not only then but throughout nearly all of the history and cultures of the world.<sup>109</sup>

Luther does not specifically say where parents or teachers administered blows to his body. Although some scholars suggest it may have been to his knuckles,<sup>110</sup> others to his buttocks,<sup>111</sup> and some to his back,<sup>112</sup> Metaxas suggests that the blows may have been to Luther's head—a curious elevation particularly in light of modern medical knowledge of the risks of administering blows to a child's head.<sup>113</sup>

It is even more curious to write lightheartedly about hitting a child. It is curious, but not altogether surprising. Throughout history, there are examples of lighthearted references to hitting children<sup>114</sup> and there are modern examples of evangelical preachers exhorting a congregation to laughter by recalling instances of childhood beatings.<sup>115</sup>

109. Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 13. Joan Durrant, "Corporal Punishment: From Ancient History to Global Progress," in Robert Geffner, Viola Vaughan-Eden, Victor Vieth, Alan Rosenbaum, Kevin Hamberger, & Jackie White, eds., *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan* (Cham: Springer, 2021) (Durrant, though, also points out the corporal punishment is not universal). Erik Erikson notes that not all cultures condone hitting children, writing "the American Plains Indian tribes were...deeply shocked when they first saw white people beat their children." Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 69.

110. Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography*, 29 ("A common form of corporal punishment in Luther's day was a rap on the knuckles").

111. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 79 (finding that school children in Luther's day were struck on the buttocks and concluding it is "probable" this was the location for corporal punishment in the home).

112. Discussing the home and school corporal punishment present in Luther's world, one scholar writes "The stick was applied to the backs of children with the alacrity with which it was used on cattle, horses and dogs. The worst crime parents could commit against children was to indulge them." Richard Marius, *Martin Luther, The Christian Between God and Death* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 22.

113. See Suzanne B. Haney & Suzanne P. Starling, "Abusive Head Trauma," in David L. Chadwick, Randell Alexander, Angelo P. Giardino, Debra Esernio-Jenssen & Jonathon D. Thackeray, eds., *Chadwick's Child Maltreatment: Physical Abuse and Neglect* (STM Learning: St. Louis, Mo., 2014), 31 (noting "head injury is the leading cause of mortality in abused children").

114. Victor Vieth, "Corporal Punishment in the United States: A Call for a New Approach to the Prosecution of Disciplinarians," *Journal of Juvenile Law* 15 (1994), 22, 25 (noting the "humorous" references to hitting children as a means of discipline found in nursery rhymes). C.F.W. Walther, who was instrumental in establishing Lutheranism in the United States, once wrote lightheartedly about the prospect of physically striking his three-year-old granddaughter with a branch: "She has recognized that in her own district there is a higher authority who can take the beautiful little branches of the Acacia trees for a purpose other to give shade. Up to now this has not been necessary because all I did was show her the rod." August R. Suelflow, *Servant of the Word: The Life and Ministry of C.F.W. Walther* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 247.

115. It is relatively easy to find examples of Protestant ministers exhorting their parishioners to laugh at tales of hitting children as a means of discipline. E.g. <https://twitter.com/fakesermon/status/11713>

As evidence of the risks of hitting children accumulates, the more uncomfortable we may become with our conduct and the conduct of those around us. If we are unable to address this evidence in a serious manner, our only recourse is to dismiss it lightheartedly. When we fail to take seriously the beating of a child, we only add to the misery of those who endured violent childhoods.

Although there are many possible explanations for writing lightheartedly about hitting or even beating children, the most obvious explanation is that it makes us feel better.<sup>116</sup> Metaxas is correct that hitting children is a long-standing practice in many cultures.<sup>117</sup> As evidence of the risks of hitting children accumulates,<sup>118</sup> the more uncomfortable we may become with our conduct and the conduct of those around us. If we are unable to address this evidence in a serious manner, our only recourse is to dismiss it lightheartedly. When we fail to take seriously the beating of a child, we only add to the misery of those who endured violent childhoods.<sup>119</sup>

### ***The claim beating children was commonplace and thus inconsequential***

Eric Metaxas notes that corporal punishment was so commonplace in Luther's time that "to attach some significance to it is to embrace an anachronism...Luther's upbringing, from what we know, was about as typical as can be, and the only thing that would be worth remarking on, given the ubiquitous practice of physical parental

[97055161540608?lang=en](https://www.pathos.com/blogs/nolongerquivering/2019/11/spanking-ministries-fail-to-protect/) (last visited June 29, 2020).

116. Noting that most corporal punishment of children is on their bottom, Erik Erikson writes "To those who believe in corporal punishment, this seems to take the sting out of the matter, and even to make it rather funny." Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 79.

117. Joan Durrant, "Corporal Punishment: From Ancient History to Global Progress," in Robert Geffner, Viola Vaughan-Eden, Victor Vieth, Alan Rosenbaum, Kevin Hamberger, & Jackie White, eds., *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

118. Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, "Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Family Psychology* 30 (2016): 453-469.

119. M. Dolan Hickmon, *Spanking Ministries Fail to Protect*, available online at: <https://www.pathos.com/blogs/nolongerquivering/2019/11/spanking-ministries-fail-to-protect/> (last accessed, June 29, 2020).

discipline, would be if we had information that Luther's father had indeed spared the rod."<sup>120</sup>

Metaxas is not alone in expressing the sentiment that beating children was commonplace in Luther's era and thus, perhaps, not something worthy of scholarly emphasis. Luther biographer James Nestingen writes "like good German parents in the Middle Ages, they weren't afraid to use discipline to bring out the best" in their children and that, although Luther "remembered his mother's stick and his father's sternness" he "also knew of the love that went with both."<sup>121</sup>

In the first of his three volume biographies on Luther, Martin Brecht observes that, in Luther's era "the rearing of children in home and school was strict" and that "the demands of the father's occupation and the mother's large family required this."<sup>122</sup> In their biography of Luther, Timothy Lull and Derek Nelson note that the "strictness" with which Luther was raised was "typical for that place and time" and although Luther's description of childhood beatings may lead us to view Luther as an "abused child...this is probably to read modern standards into a very different world."<sup>123</sup>

Although it is true that the harsh treatment of children was more prevalent in Luther's time than ours, it is nonsensical to suggest this means he was not an abused child. Domestic violence was also likely more prevalent in Luther's era<sup>124</sup> than ours and yet it is inconceivable that a modern scholar would suggest that categorizing a woman beaten in the sixteenth century as a victim of domestic violence would be "to read modern standards into a very different world."

Moreover, the impact of being beaten as a child is not dependent on how many of your contemporaries are also being beaten. In the United States today, as many as 28% of children are beaten to the point of receiving an injury<sup>125</sup> and, according to a national survey published in 2019, more than 5% of parents strike infants, approximately one-third of parents strike one-year-old children, more than half of parents hit two-year-old children, and more than 60% of parents hit three-year-old children.<sup>126</sup> Despite the

widespread practice of parents hitting children, fifty years of research has found the practice elevates the risks for poor outcomes later in life.<sup>127</sup>

Given this large and growing body of research, modern Luther scholars suggesting that the Reformer was not a victim of abuse simply because so many children were beaten in his era must make the case that widespread violence in the fifteenth century muted the impact on individual victims in a way it does not in the twenty-first century. In reality, fifteenth century<sup>128</sup> violence was likely more widespread and cruel, child victims had fewer protections under the law, and certainly beaten children were lacking in modern day medical and mental health care. Given these factors, the likelihood that fifteenth century victims of child abuse were profoundly impacted is even more pronounced than in our day.

This is not to say that every abused child is impacted to the same extent. Indeed, modern studies find that a number of egregiously maltreated children not only adapt but thrive.<sup>129</sup> However, this is not true of every abused child in our modern era and it was almost certainly not the case for every abused child in Luther's era.<sup>130</sup> As Richard Marius writes, it may be that some German children were able to take beatings "in stride," but "Luther's recollections seem to mean that he at least did not."<sup>131</sup>

## In search of a balanced view of Luther's childhood beatings

In minimizing Luther's description of childhood beatings, it may be that many of the biographers are directing attention away from these acts of violence and more toward Erikson's analysis of them.<sup>132</sup> As we have seen in this article, Erikson's psycho-

received higher rates of corporal punishment than girls.

127. Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, "Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Family Psychology* 30 (2016): 453-469; Jennifer E. Lansford, et al., "Corporal Punishment, Maternal Warmth, and Child Adjustment: A Longitudinal Study in Eight Countries," *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 43:4, 670-685 (finding that anxiety increased over time for children with high levels of corporal punishment even when there were also high levels of maternal warmth).

128. Since Luther was born in 1483 or 1484, most of his childhood was in the fifteenth century. However, he lived until 1546 and thus most of his life was spent in the sixteenth century. For a timeline of Luther's life, see Selderhuis, *Martin Luther*, 11-13.

129. See e.g. Megan R. Holmes, Susan Yoon, Laura A. Voith, Julia M. Kobulsky, & Stacey Steigerwald, "Resilience in Physically Abused Children: Protective Factors for Aggression," *Behavioral Science* 5:2 (2015), 176-189. For a practical guide in helping children become resilient, see Casey Gwinn and Chad Hellman, *Hope Rising* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2019).

130. In Luther's time, there were instruments of torture used to remove the hand of a child who killed his parents and then to behead the child. As one scholar notes, "The law and the device indicate that enough sons murdered their fathers to require savage laws to deter them." Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, 22.

131. Marius, *Martin Luther: The Christian Between God and Death*, 23.

132. For instance, Heiko Oberman agrees with Erikson that "Luther made some telling comments about his upbringing" but adds

120. Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, 13.

121. James A. Nestingen, *Martin Luther: A Life* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003), 10.

122. Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to the Reformation 1483-1521* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 6.

123. Lull & Nelson, *Resilient Reformer*, 5.

124. Although domestic violence was prevalent, Luther sought to protect women from spousal abuse. See Timothy J. Wengert, "Martin Luther on Spousal Abuse," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (2007): 337-339.

125. Vincent J. Felitti and Robert F. Anda, "The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare," in Ruthe A. Lanius, Eric Vermetten, and Clare Pain, eds., *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2010).

126. David Finkelhor, Heather Turner, Brittany Kaye Wormuth, Jennifer Vanderminde, Sherry Hamby, "Corporal Punishment: Current Rates from a National Survey," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 28 (2019), 1991-1997. Although published in 2019, the survey was conducted in 2014. Parents of younger children were asked if they had spanked their child or children in the past year. Hitting children as a means of discipline increased if a parent had more children. Boys also

analytical approach “has not carried the day with many Luther biographers.”<sup>133</sup> Richard Marius is blunter, writing that Erikson has been “pummeled by Luther scholars.”<sup>134</sup>

Although Erikson went too far in his analysis of violence in Luther's childhood, modern biographers do not go far enough. It is reasonable to debate how, if at all, acts of violence may have influenced Luther. However, it is not reasonable to assert definitively that abuse had little or no impact. This is true for at least two reasons.

First, Luther himself makes it clear the beatings impacted him at the time the blows were administered. In response to his father's beating, Luther was frightened enough to run away.<sup>135</sup> In describing the “strict discipline” of both his parents, Luther says the blows made him “timid.”<sup>136</sup> A more recent translation replaces “timid” with the word “scared”<sup>137</sup>—which suggests a fear of imminent harm.

The lasting impression of being beaten by his mother until the “blood flowed” is often brushed aside by Luther scholars but is worthy of particular emphasis. Indeed, the most salient writing of this beating was penned by Erikson and, even if scholars disagree with Erikson's overall approach, his words on this front should linger in the mind of anyone professing to care for children.

‘Until the blood came’ (often translated as ‘flowed’) has become a biographical stereotype which, in reading, one passes over as lightly as news about a widespread famine in China, or the casualties of an air raid. However, in regard to these larger news items one would, if one paused to think, detect some subliminal horror in oneself; but in regard to the blood extracted from children there seems to exist a widespread ambivalence.<sup>138</sup>

Although it may be a stretch to definitively attribute the Reformation to violence in Luther's childhood, it is not a stretch to conclude a little boy would recall in horror the sight of his own blood resulting from blows administered by his mother. Indeed, the image was etched in Luther's mind to the point he could recall it decades later.<sup>139</sup>

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that since Luther “does not distinguish between his father and mother, there is no way to diagnose either a father-or-mother fixation; both his father's intimidating hand and his mother's thrashings lingered in his memory.” Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (Image Books: New York 1992), 91. Scott Hendrix dismisses Erikson's analysis with the phrase “Blame it on the parents!” However, he also notes “Erikson's analysis offered some insight into Luther's complex psyche...” Hendrix, *Martin Luther: Visionary Reformer*, 16-17.

133. Lull & Nelson, *Resilient Reformer*, 5, n. 5.

134. Marius, *Martin Luther*, 20. Marius suggests that jealousy may be one reason for the harsh reaction, noting that Erickson “wrote so well and was read by so many.” Ibid.

135. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 157.

136. Ibid., 235.

137. Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography*, 29.

138. Erikson, *Young Man Luther*, 68.

139. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 235. According to Heiko Oberman, “both his father's intimidating hand and his mother's thrashings lingered in [Luther's] memory.” Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God*

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**L**uther himself makes it clear the beatings impacted him at the time the blows were administered. In response to his father's beating, Luther was frightened enough to run away.

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Second, although the beatings of his childhood may not have been at the heart of the Reformation, they clearly influenced Luther. According to Jane Strohl, “Whatever reservations one has about the potential extravagances of the kind of psycho-history Erikson produced, it is clear that Luther's own experiences as a child, particularly in the parent-child relationship, influenced his reflections on children and the life of Christian faith.”<sup>140</sup> The influence of physical abuse on Luther's views of children, discipline, and education is considered below.

### *Disciplining children*

Commenting on Ephesians 6:4, Luther urged parents not to discipline children in a way that makes them “dispirited,” “hopeless,” or “timid”<sup>141</sup>—the latter the very word he used to describe the impact of parental beatings on his childhood.<sup>142</sup> Simply stated, Luther regarded the beating of children, even if well intentioned, to be a sin against God.

In his *Large Catechism*, Luther urges parents to train children “with kindness and delight.”<sup>143</sup> This is because “children who must be forced with rods and blows will not develop into a good generation. At best they will remain godly under such treatment only as long as the rod is upon their backs.”<sup>144</sup> As noted earlier, Luther expressed grave reservations about using corporal punishment on his son Hans (interestingly named after Luther's own father), out of fear that “he should become shy and hate me.”<sup>145</sup> As Luther biographer Heiko Oberman writes:

When Luther himself became a father, it is clear that he had learned a lesson from the punishments he had experienced as a child. This was not the way he wanted to bring up his son Hans; God does not treat [human] kind that way either.<sup>146</sup>

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*and the Devil*, 91.

140. Jane E. Strohl, “The Child in Luther's Theology: ‘For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other than to Care for... the Young?’” in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 136.

141. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 457.

142. Ibid., 235.

143. *Luther's Large Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 30.

144. Ibid.

145. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 157.

146. Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, 92. Roland Bainton suggests Luther may have spoken about his child-

This doesn't mean that Luther abandoned the notion of ever using corporal punishment on a child,<sup>147</sup> but he did express views contrary to the ethos of his time—and in stark contrast to the strict discipline his parents utilized.<sup>148</sup> Moreover, Luther didn't simply warn parents about the dangers of hitting children with instruments, he offered a gentle alternative. He urged parents to teach the commandments of God “in a childlike and playful way” so that “children fear God more than rods and clubs. This I say with such simplicity for the sake of the young, that it may penetrate their minds. For we are preaching to children, so we must also talk like them.”<sup>149</sup>

### *Luther's view of children*

“Luther loved children,” writes Carl Trueman, and “regarded being childlike as an extremely important characteristic in the Christian when it comes to matters of faith.”<sup>150</sup> Indeed, “it appears that children as examples of simple, trusting faith fascinated” Luther.<sup>151</sup> Roland Bainton shares a similar assessment, noting that “Luther's comments on children” are “forthright, affectionate, unsentimental, and highly varied.”<sup>152</sup>

This is also true of Luther's personal interactions with his children. According to one biographer, Luther “played and prayed with his children. He listened to them laugh—and cry. Sometimes when they cried he would take them in his arms until the last sob had come and gone.”<sup>153</sup>

In his analysis of Luther's catechisms, Timothy Wengert notes that “Luther's early use of the word *Father* for God was often connected to God as judge, which makes sense when we hear

hood beatings in the hope of obtaining a more “human treatment” of children. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, 17.

147. Joel R. Beeke, “The Family Man: Luther at Home,” in *The Legacy of Luther*, R.C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols, eds. (Reformation Trust Publishing: Ann Arbor, Mich., 2016), 89 (noting that “Luther believed in corporal discipline, but a restrained and merciful use of it.”); Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Christian Life* (Crossway: Wheaton, Ill., 2015), 190. (“Indeed, when it came to discipline, even in the rather brutal times in which he lived, this was to be tempered by loving restraint: he taught that parents must not whip their children too severely, lest the children come to resent them. That may seem harsh by our standards, but one can still appreciate the underlying sentiment.”)

148. Michelle DeRusha, *Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and Renegade Monk* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 65. DeRusha concludes “If the records are accurate, we can count on one hand the number of times Luther used corporal punishment with his children and foster children. Clearly, despite the fact that the moralists condoned its use, he was reluctant to use physical punishment as a disciplinary measure, preferring a more measured verbal scolding instead.” *Ibid.*, 232-233.

149. *Luther's Large Catechism*, 30.

150. Carl R. Trueman, *Luther on the Spiritual Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 189.

151. *Ibid.* 190.

152. Roland Bainton, “Luther on Birds, Dogs and Babies: Gleanings from *Table Talk*,” in *Luther Today, Volume 1* (Luther College Press: Decorah, Iowa, 1957), 9.

153. Frederich Noll, *Luther: Biography of a Reformer* (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, Mo., 2003), 170.

“Luther's early use of the word *Father* for God was often connected to God as judge, which makes sense when we hear about Luther's father...” However, after Luther became a father himself, there was a “marked change” in Luther's use of the word “Father” for God.

about Luther's father...”<sup>154</sup> However, after Luther became a father himself, there was a “marked change” in Luther's use of the word “Father” for God.<sup>155</sup> Accordingly, “Father-like was no longer a simile for Luther's father but the experience of Luther himself as father...”<sup>156</sup> For instance, in Luther's explanation of the second article of the Apostle's Creed he writes, “(Y)ou may believe in Jesus, that he has become your Lord...and set you on his lap.”<sup>157</sup>

Wengert notes that in Luther's explanation of the fourth commandment to honor our parents, he saw not simply an obligation of children toward their parents but also a responsibility of parents toward their children.<sup>158</sup> In his *Large Catechism*, Luther admonishes parents this way:

Everyone acts as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement, gave us servants merely to put them to work like cows or donkeys, gave us subjects to treat as we please... We really must spare no effort, time, and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world.<sup>159</sup>

### *Luther's views of education*

When commenting on being beaten by a teacher, Luther noted that “bungling schoolmasters” had “spoiled many excellent talents by their rudeness.”<sup>160</sup> Noting that teacher cruelty can cause a child to “lose his spirit,” Luther admonished teachers to “pay attention to the difference in aptitudes and teach in such a way that all

154. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 51.

155. *Ibid.*, 51.

156. *Ibid.*

157. *Ibid.*, 56.

158. *Ibid.*, 35. In his commentary of Genesis, Luther spoke of a proper parental attitude toward children: “For who is there who does not know how intense a father's affection toward his children and wife is? It is easier for a parent to suffer death than to forsake his own or to permit great harm to be done to them.” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 21-25*. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen, eds., American ed. Luther's Works, Volume 4 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 41.

159. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms*, 35.

160. Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, 235.

children are treated with equal love.”<sup>161</sup> Of course, Luther became a great champion of education for boys and girls and issued “one of the earliest calls in history for universal public education.”<sup>162</sup>

## Conclusion

Throughout the history of the world, parents and teachers have hit children as a means of discipline,<sup>163</sup> a practice that has contributed significantly to egregious cases of physical abuse and death.<sup>164</sup> This is an uncomfortable fact given that many Christians, particularly Protestants, justify hitting children with passages from scripture.<sup>165</sup> This may explain why many Protestant scholars are quick to dismiss Luther's claims of excessive corporal punishment at the hands of his parents and teachers.

Nonetheless, Luther did speak of violence received at the hands of those charged with his care and instruction—and his descriptions run afoul of what even the most ardent supporter of hitting children as a means of discipline would deem acceptable. Beating a boy until the child is bleeding or is so afraid as to run away is contrary to scripture (Ephesians 6:4) and every standard of human decency.

In failing to acknowledge the obvious, that Martin Luther did, in fact, experience egregious violence, we also rob ourselves of the remarkable account of a man who pushed back against the harsh treatment of children—and rooted this new view of parent and child relationships in the relationship we as children of God have with our maker.

There is, though, a much deeper truth. Every year, a great many children are, just like Martin Luther, beaten to the point of injury. In failing to acknowledge that what happened to Luther was child abuse, we are also cutting ourselves off from providing a sympathetic ear to the physically abused children in our pews, Sunday schools, and catechism classes. Many of these children will grow up and vanish from the houses of God.<sup>166</sup>

161. Ibid.

162. Lull and Nelson, *Resilient Reformer*, 296-297.

163. Joan Durrant, “Corporal Punishment: From Ancient History to Global Progress,” in Robert Geffner, Viola Vaughan-Eden, Victor Vieth, Alan Rosenbaum, Kevin Hamberger, & Jackie White, eds., *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan* (Cham: Springer, 2021).

164. Tanya S. Hinds & Angelo P. Giardino, *Child Physical Abuse: Current Evidence, Clinical Practice, and Policy Directions* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer 2017): 77-86 (noting “corporal punishment is long recognized as a significant risk factor for physical abuse”).

165. John P. Hoffman, Christopher G. Ellison, John P. Bartkowski, *Conservative Protestantism and Attitudes Toward Corporal Punishment, 1986-2014*, *Social Science Research* 63 (2017), 81-94. See also, William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2011); Victor I. Vieth, “Augustine, Luther and Solomon: Providing Pastoral Guidance to Parents on the Corporal Punishment of Children,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44 (2017): 25-33.

166. For an anecdote of a survivor of child physical abuse expressing a reluctance to return to church until God's people abandon their insistence children must be hit as a means of discipline, see Victor I. Vieth, “Augustine, Luther and Solomon: Providing Pastoral Guid-

Every year, a great many children are, just like Martin Luther, beaten to the point of injury. In failing to acknowledge that what happened to Luther was child abuse, we are also cutting ourselves off from providing a sympathetic ear to the physically abused children in our pews, Sunday schools, and catechism classes.

Jesus made it clear that our treatment of children reflects our view of God (Mark 9:36-39) and reserved his harshest words for those who hurt children (Mark 9:42).<sup>167</sup> Applying the words of Christ to the life of Luther, the gospel truth is that the parents and teachers who beat Luther were reflecting a poor view of God. In contrast, when Luther rejected, albeit imperfectly, similarly harsh treatment of his own children, he was operating closer to the heart of our Lord.

Martin Luther said the “life of children is most blessed and best. They have no earthly cares, they do not see the churches rent by radicals, they feel no pangs of death and hell, they have only pure thoughts and joyous fantasies.”<sup>168</sup> As a result of his own boyhood, Luther understood that the blessedness of childhood can be distorted, even crushed at human hands. Through the grace of God, Luther chose to give his sons and daughters a childhood different from his own. Let us pray that, one day soon, Christians the world over will make a similar choice.

ance to Parents on the Corporal Punishment of Children,” *Currents in Mission & Theology* 44:3 (2017): 25, 33. There is research suggesting that men physically abused as children are at higher risk to reject God. Alex Bierman, “The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality: Rejecting God the Father Because of Abusive Fathers?” in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44 (2005): 349, 357.

167. For a fuller assessment of the teachings of Christ as they pertain to child abuse, see Victor I. Vieth, *On this Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

168. Roland Bainton, “Luther on Birds, Dogs, and Babies,” in *Luther Today* (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1957), 11.