

What Does God Think About Hitting Children?

Glynn Cardy © November 22, 2005

With a title like that, firstly let me categorically state that I don't speak for God. Nor do I think that any one religious tradition has a monopoly on God. I am simply a Christian priest giving my perspective on the Bible in the hope that when Christians try to justify smacking as 'the will of God' and 'a parent's duty' you will be more equipped to engage with them.

The Bible is not the product of God using a dictaphone or dropping the manuscript from the sky. Rather the Bible is a complex book, written over thousands of years, with multiple authors and communities contributing. Although predominantly Jewish it is reflective of a variety of cultural influences including Persian, Greek, and Roman.

To give an example the Gospel of Matthew is not a book written by a chap called Matthew. It is a compilation of stories and events, passed on from one community to another, altered and enlarged in their transmission, at times sown together by various editors, and eventually organized by one chief editor whom we call "Matthew". It is reflective of Jewish, Hellenistic, and Syrian culture. It was completed some 50 years after Jesus died.

What is also very interesting in our current age when some people wish there should be one 'right' way to think is that the Church chose to include in the Christian Scriptures [or New Testament as it is commonly called] four separate and at times conflicting accounts of Jesus ministry. They deliberately did not edit out the discrepancies.

As you might imagine the communities, authors and the editors that shaped the texts have different, and at times conflicting, ideas about God and humanity. Often violence is sanctioned, though sometimes it isn't. Sometimes God is violent and sometimes God isn't.

In chapter seven of the book of Genesis, for example, we meet a genocidal God. The God in the Noah's ark story has no qualms about killing off most of the human race – including small children and other innocents. In contrast later in Genesis [chapter 18] we have the story of Abraham petitioning God to spare the people of Sodom even if there are only ten righteous people in the town. This God is prepared to live with those who are deemed to be wicked.

So within just the first book of the Bible, Genesis, in addition to other images of God, we have a killer god and a tolerant god. Some will argue that these are

'faces' of the same God. But that is difficult to sustain. Within Genesis these gods are even given different names.

Others will try to argue that God 'evolves' as the Bible progresses – namely God begins as more violent and proceeds to being less violent. That too is difficult to sustain.

It is not hard to find examples of a violent God within the pages of the Bible. Whoever the authors deemed as the enemy was assumed to be the enemy of God. Think of the sacking of Jericho in Joshua 6. Joshua's army put to the sword every man and woman, young and old, oxen, sheep and donkeys [v.21].

On the other hand, the authors who tell the stories of Jesus usually portray a non-violent God. The author of the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus telling his followers to love their enemies and turn the other cheek.

You can't though cut the Bible in two – saying the Hebrew Scriptures [commonly called the Old Testament] are about laws and punishment and the Christian Scriptures are about Jesus and love. Both violence and love are imbedded in both religious traditions. Many Jews and Christians struggle with the violence within their scriptures and tradition seeking to promote the images of God as compassionate and loving.

The Bible contains multiple images of God. While "Father" and "Lord" seem to dominate, reflecting the patriarchal and hierarchical times when the texts were written, there are other images too. God is imaged as a mother bird sheltering her offspring [Psalm 17:7, Isaiah 31:5, Matt 23:37]; as a wife and mother [Psalm 51, Deut 32:18, Is 46:3, Ps 131:2]; and as Sophia or wisdom. The feminine, sheltering, and loving images stand in stark contrast to the lordly King who controls and violently punishes.

Lesley Max offers us the insight that the verse from Proverbs of "Spare the rod, and spoil the child" is really a comment about the rod or rule of the Torah. It isn't about a literal stick at all. If the Torah can be simplistically summarized as loving God and one another, then the verse means if you don't teach your child to love God and love one another you spoil him or her.

The hard truth however is that throughout most of the Bible God is portrayed as a male power figure that is righteously pure and violently punishing. Human beings in contrast are fallen sinful creatures, prone to rebellion. The whole salvific enterprise as understood by most Christian theology and history for example has Jesus dying in order to atone for humanity's sinfulness.

Beating sin out of people has a long and sad history in the Church. It is based on erroneous understandings of psychology and sexuality. It is based too on the notion of a violent God, who encourages more violence.

This understanding of God, humanity, and Jesus is anathema to many of us. Human beings are not born sinful. Rebellion is often a good thing. We all make mistakes and need to learn to forgive ourselves and put things right. We don't need someone to die for us; we need someone to inspire us. We don't believe in a God who punishes and is appeased by blood sacrifice. Rather we believe in a God who is a loving grace-filled energy calling and encouraging us to live loving grace-filled lives.

It is an urgent task of the Church to banish this violent God, consigning it to the pages of a never-to-be-read-again fairy tale, before any more violence is inflicted on our children.

The statement "The Bible says" is therefore a very difficult one. Which part of the Bible is one talking about? If it is talking about the violent god, should we pay heed to it? Haven't we got God-given brains and consciences to make a better future for our children rather than revisit the mistakes of the past?

There is a sense in which we choose the God we can relate to. People who grow up in a Church often leave that environment. While they might not articulate it as such, a number of leavers are dissatisfied with the God of their childhood. Most dismiss that God entirely. Some though search out other churches or faiths to find a God that is less judgmental, more compassionate, that values the equality of women and men, and is less violent.

The Bible does not serve us up easily digestible, fast-food answers. It rather gives us the ethical raw materials and invites us to cook up solutions for our own time and culture.

I think we need to choose a God who abhors violence. I think we need to connect with a historical Jesus who did not use violence to create solutions but rather was a victim of those who did. There are no biblical stories about Jesus or any of his disciples being violent towards, or condoning violence towards children. Rather there are stories of Jesus welcoming and healing children.

As an aside, in the earliest books of the Christian Scriptures, namely the letters of Paul, there are two examples of Paul admonishing believers to address child abuse. One is about slavery. Slaves were often children abandoned at birth and taken in by people who wished to make a profit. The other example is pederasty. Often mistaken as a condemnation of homosexuality, pederasty was where an older man took a younger man as his lover. This was not a mutual relationship of affection, but rather a relationship of dominance and submission. It was a widespread practice in the Hellenistic world and condemned by many Jewish and early Christian writers.

Despite what some Bible thumping Christian might tell you, there is nothing in the Christian Scriptures to support the use of violence against children. There is no verse that says, 'If your child is disobedient, then you have a parental duty to hit him or her'. There are admonitions to children to 'obey their parents', yet the counter admonition to parents is 'not to provoke their children to wrath' [Ephesians 6:4]. There are no verses in the New Testament about hitting children.

Some would say however that the entire so-called Christian scheme of salvation – with a God requiring obedience, with humans inevitably disobeying, and God thereby punishing [or punishing his son in our stead] – is supportive of those parents who use physical punishment when their children disobey them. I think there is some truth in this. I would however say that this is not the only Christian understanding of salvation. One can read the Bible and understand that a God of love and compassion, writ large for Christians in Jesus, should be a guide and a plumb line for our living. Jesus' death was a victory for the forces of violence. His resurrection [however you might understand that] is a victory for those who believe that love ultimately triumphs over violence.