

Principles and Practices of Discipline in the Christian School

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In preparation for a sectional at the 2014 PRTI Convention, we were struck that, to our memory, there had not been a sectional on “Discipline” for a number of years and that in the past 5–10 years we have had many new teachers join our ranks. Being such a vital part of our work as teachers, it seemed wise to us that we all—experienced and new teachers alike—review the basic principles and practices of Christian discipline.

We are firm believers that good practices are founded on good principles. And when it comes to Christian discipline we have to base our practices on biblical principles. So we begin our sectional with some biblical principles on Christian discipline and then try to develop a few good practices.

We are confident that all of our teachers are unified on the principles—but it is worth some time to remind ourselves of the basic principles. Where we might not all agree is in the application of the biblical principles. There are a multitude of godly parents who have raised godly children, but have used different practices. Surely, there may be different ways to apply the principles. We come today, not claiming mastery or that our way is the only way to discipline. What we present today is what we have learned over the years as teachers. But there are many other parents and teachers out there who have accomplished the same goal but in different ways. So we hope you receive the sectional in that spirit—a humble willingness to share what we do and a willingness to learn also from you.

Part A: Principles

There are at least four broad areas of principles that we must have properly set before our minds when disciplining covenant children in our schools: our goal and calling, a proper view of the child, in whose place we labor, and the nature of how to wisely conduct discipline.

Our Goal and Calling

Scripture demands that children be disciplined (Deut. 6; Prov. 22:6; Prov. 23:13, 14; Eph. 6:4); that is, children must be directed to live a life of obedience and service to God. Discipline is that entire activity of the parents (teachers) of training and directing the child of God to obey and fear Him. It is that work of parents by which they nurture as well as chasten the child to walk in the ways of the Lord. Therefore, discipline is not optional. It is not something we may ignore or become weary in performing (Prov. 13:24; Prov. 19:18; Matt. 18: 5–7, 10, 15–18; Gal. 6:9; 2 Thess. 3:13; Heb. 12:11). For teachers, who stand in the place of parents, discipline (in this broad sense of the word) lies at the heart of our work. In fact, all of our education hinges on good discipline. Failure to properly discipline will negatively affect all of our instruction, from maintaining an orderly environment in which learning can occur, to the actual spiritual growth of the covenant seed.

This is true, in part, because our goal in instructing our covenant children is that they learn in every sphere of life to fear God and keep his commandments (Psalm 111:10). In all of our instruction in the school we strive to teach the children to bow the knee to Jesus Christ as King, and to live their entire life, in every area, as obedient friend-servants of God. If we teach them all sorts of science, for example, but do not teach them to obey and fear God, we have failed. Teaching them to obey God necessarily involves disciplining them. As we discipline the children we will punish them using both the rod and reproof (Prov. 1:7–9; Prov. 22:15; Prov. 23:13, 14; Prov. 29:15; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Punishments are the concrete means used to discipline (direct a child in the right way). Therefore, they are administered in love with the goal of

Deuteronomy 6:6ff

“And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house...”

Proverbs 22:6

“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Proverbs 23:13, 14

“Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.”

Ephesians 6:4

“And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

nurturing the child in the ways of God. Punishments will manifest themselves as a rod and a reproof. In theology we might make a distinction between punishments (given by God to the wicked with the goal of destroying them) and chastisements (given by God to the righteous with the goal of turning them from their sin). In this article we use the terms punishment and chastisement interchangeably—defined as the corrective measure used on the covenant child to turn them from their sin.

More specifically, we want their obedience to be genuine. We want them to obey God because they see God as the Almighty who calls them to obedience. But we *also* want them to obey out of gratitude for what God has done for them. This love for God and gratitude towards God must be based on something. Therefore, our instruction will show them the wondrous works of God that they might know (intellectually) who God is and what He has done. And our discipline will also direct them to know who they are and what God has done for them. Although we cannot put love for God in their hearts (“heart knowledge” or “knowledge of love”), we can and must use the God-given *means* (instruction and discipline) to direct them towards their God.

Finally, the goal of our discipline is that the children learn to be self-disciplined. Our goal and desire with discipline is that the children learn to *willingly* obey and serve God; not because father or mother told them to do so, but because they do so out of a genuine love for God (1 Chron. 29:9; 1 Cor. 9:17). We can have complete confidence that *in the way of* faithful instruction and discipline, God’s covenant children will continue to walk in His ways throughout their lives (Proverbs 22:6). In addition, when discipline has occurred we want them to submit to that

discipline and to genuinely repent (2 Cor. 7:9–10). They must learn that in the way of discipline they are directed to Christ and the foot of the cross for forgiveness. Therefore, discipline, though not pleasurable, will bring forth good fruit (Heb. 12:5–11; Prov. 3:11–12; Prov. 12:1, 15, 16).

Proper View of the Child

It is imperative before we do any instructing and disciplining we understand clearly that the students with whom we work are covenant children. There are two important things to remember about these children—they are sinners, and they are saints who are saved by grace alone.

Sinners

First, we note that they are sinners. Covenant children will do things they ought not do. They also will neglect to do what they should do. Both of these—sins of commission and sins of omission—need correction. We must not be blind or naïve regarding our children. They will sin. They do sin. From a certain perspective, their sins ought not to surprise us, because they have inherited a sinful nature as we have. We may not grow weary and turn our head the other way because we do not want to deal with a particular situation. In addition, we may not take their sins lightly, by thinking they are just kids and will grow up one day.

Understanding their sinful natures, we must be careful not to place temptations in their pathway. We must seek to create an environment that discourages cheating, dishonesty, or harassing, etc. Failing to supervise a test closely, for example, may place the temptation to cheat before the child whose sinful nature is inclined to do so. Or, recognizing that due to one’s sinful nature a child may be tempted to lie when

in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven. . . . Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

confronted with his or her sins, teachers must carefully verify the events of a discipline case. Teachers must be conscious of the sinful natures of their students and through diligent supervision of the classroom and halls and careful investigation in discipline cases, wisely keep opportunity and temptation to sin from the children.

Saints

Second, we must note that although they are sinners, they are also saints. As covenant children they have the Spirit of Christ in their hearts. They can and they do good works. They must not be treated as little heathens who will steal, lie, and cheat at every opportunity. But teachers must remember that the students have a desire to do good, and will do good works. Sometimes, in a discipline situation, we can lose sight of this and wrongly *assume* that the children in our care are lying about their actions. We sometimes err in discipline by emphasizing their sinful natures over against the work of the Spirit in their hearts. Sometimes we wrongly discipline those who should not have been disciplined on the basis of a mere assumption. Unjust punishment, in part, is what I believe the Scriptures warn against when it commands fathers not to provoke their children to wrath (Eph. 6:4).

We must learn to trust our children and to accept their “yea” as “yea.” We may (and must) try to verify their answers, but we must give them the benefit of the doubt, rather than charge them with lying in addition to another particular sin, without just cause.

This has practical implications. If I [Joel] could not be sure of the guilt of a child in a particular case, I have let the matter drop, telling the child that the matter is ultimately between him and God. If the child has lied to me, then God will be the judge and

Galatians 6:9

“And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

2 Thessalonians 3:13

“But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing.”

Hebrews 12:11

“Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”

will reveal his sins in time. This has happened in more than one case. In time the sins were revealed (and ultimately repented of and forgiven). In other cases, my suspicions were shown to be wrongly founded—the child had not done what I suspected. And I was grateful I had not wrongly disciplined him.

This is what makes discipline so very difficult. On the one hand the children are sinners and have a nature that is inclined to lie in order to (in their minds) escape punishment. We must not be naïve regarding this. On the other hand the children are saints and have the Spirit of Christ in them so that they do tell the truth and are genuinely sorry for sin. We must remember that God is perfectly just and perfectly judges all men. And although we strive to be just in our disciplining of our students, we must face the reality that we are not always correct in our judgment. Sometimes a child “gets away” with a sin, and sometimes we punish a child who did not deserve to be punished. We must be careful and deliberate in our discipline and pray for God’s blessing on our efforts. And we may be confident that God Almighty will use our discipline (even with its errors and shortcomings) to tenderly draw and turn His children from sin.

In Whose Place we Labor—In Loco Parentis

Our schools are based on a precious principle—that we stand in the place of the parent (*in loco parentis*). The parent’s calling is to train up the child in the fear and admonition of the Lord. That means we, who stand in their place, must discipline the children whom God has placed in our care.

There are a few important things to remember in this regard. First, we have an authority in the classroom. We stand in the classroom with the authority of the parents. We must not shy away from this but realize that we have an authority to set rules and demand obedience. And we must remember that with this authority comes a responsibility. We must discipline the children when they disobey or break the rules. To do less is to neglect our responsibility and to undermine our own authority. But above all, we must love these children, as our own, in Christ.

In addition, parents must remember that they have called teachers to stand in their place. And part of doing so involves recognizing that each teacher simply cannot apply the principles of discipline exactly as each parent would. A teacher stands in for 25 sets of parents who have a range of ways of applying the principles of Scripture. It is, therefore, unlikely that their preferred method of applying a particular principle will occur in every teacher’s classroom. Parents must learn to submit to the way in which the teacher applies the principle. Parents must

be careful not to undermine a teacher's authority by publicly bad-mouthing the teacher or by not submitting to the discipline meted out by the teacher. In doing so, the parent ultimately undermines his/her own authority.

On the other hand, parents have every right to discuss matters of discipline and instruction with the teachers. Teachers must be open to such dialogue and should not become immediately defensive. Parents may have very good advice for us that we would be wise to heed. That does not mean that a teacher must implement every whim of the parent, but they must be approachable and willing to listen and hear the concerns of parents.

In this context, teachers must be willing to involve the parents in discipline. Parents need to be kept abreast of the discipline situations that occur at school. Since we stand in the place of parents, then parents need to know how their children are behaving in school. Parent-teacher conferences should not be the first time that parents are informed of the misbehavior of their child. In addition, parents can be very helpful in discipline situations. They understand the weaknesses of their children and can give helpful suggestions for your dealing with their children. Finally, teachers must not hesitate to seek advice from the principal, and perhaps, even school board members. They can be very helpful in difficult situations.

Wisely Administering Discipline:

We found at least six important principle-based ideas that ought to be followed in order to wisely administer discipline: discipline or punishment ought to fit the offense, fit the child; be just, be consistent, and be brought with the Word and forgiveness.

Punishment fits the offense

A basic premise of discipline is that the punishment ought to fit the offense—be connected to the sin. This idea flows out of the principle of discipline found in Ephesians 6:4, “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath, but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” To nurture the children in the way they are to go, without provoking them to wrath, requires that we as clearly as possible make them see what their sin was. Our heavenly Father deals with us in this way. For example, when King David killed Uriah the Hittite (“hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon”), his punishment was that “the sword shall never depart from thine house” (2 Sam. 12: 9–14). The chastisements we receive from God for our particular sins are obvious to us and are

related to the sins we commit. (Understand that God sends us various trials and sicknesses in this life because of our general sinfulness. We cannot link every trial or sickness to a particular sin.) When there are serious sins in our lives, God as the perfect Father, chastens us in a specific way (related to the sin) to *make us see* our particular sin and to repent of it.

If the goal in administering punishment is that it be corrective and not merely punitive, then the punishment ought to be related to the offense, if possible. The goal in giving a particular punishment is to impress upon the child the *error of his way*. When the goal of the punishment is merely punitive, the child may be pained and inconvenienced. With such discipline, however, does the child really grow to see the sinfulness of his behavior? It would be better if the punishment was connected to the sin in order to help the child recognize the nature of his sin. Understandably, this will vary with the age and the maturity of the child. A punishment, such as a spanking (or a detention), will teach a child *that* he has done wrong. As the child matures the punishments he receives ought to more and more include elements that will bring a connection to the sin.

For example, if a child smears peanut butter on the wall of the classroom, then staying in at recess to write lines about how he will not smear peanut butter on the wall does not fit the offense very well. He should clean up his mess and perhaps have some additional cleaning to emphasize the extra work that his mess would bring to others. Writing lines, or having a detention, may also be appropriate as an *additional* punishment to deter and discourage such behavior. But, a detention or writing lines *in and of itself* does not necessarily fit the offense. Discipline brings good fruit when there is a *connection* between the sin and the consequence.

Punishment fits the child

Proverbs 22:6 (“Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it”) teaches the important principle that each child has a unique personality that must be taken into account as we discipline our students. As stated before, the goal is that students see what they have done wrong and turn from it. For some students, a stern look is enough to reprimand them and steer them onto the right path. For others, they need to spend a detention at school or have some privilege taken away to help them see the error of their ways. Similarly, different students are at different maturity levels and must be dealt with accordingly. During my first year of teaching, I [Michon] tried a warn-

ing system to keep my students in line. When students misbehaved, I started with a verbal warning. Then, if they continued misbehaving, I wrote their name on the board. Finally, if they still did not stop the behavior, they were required to stay in at recess. I found out pretty quickly, though, that 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders don't need that many warnings to behave. My warnings really turned into "free" chances to misbehave before the consequences actually kicked in. They knew just how many chances they had. My students were too old for that system, and as a result, it was not successful. Implementing discipline strategies and punishments that fit the child is necessary for effective classroom management.

Just

In our discipline of our children we must be just. Their sins must be punished. We cannot ignore or minimize the seriousness of their sins. The numerous commands and instructions in Scripture to discipline our children indicate our tendency to shy away or neglect the calling to discipline. Every parent and teacher can testify to that temptation. It seems to be easier and more pleasant to pass by or overlook a particular sin or disruptive behavior.

In this context we must remember that our discipline must be firm and unpleasant for the child. Punishment that fails to be firm will not be very effective (Prov. 22:15; Prov. 23:13–14). Scripture warns of this too with the example of Eli's lack of discipline of his wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas (1 Sam. 2:17; 22–25). Eli only lightly rebuked his sons. His discipline was far too lax. We too can fall into this snare. Bringing the rod and reproof to our children is not enjoyable. But we must have our eyes set on the peaceable fruit that is produced in the way of faithful discipline (Heb. 12:11).

On the other hand, we must remember that the Lord, in His justice, is also merciful. We need to have a sense of patience and mercy when we discipline our children. Sometimes we can be very upset with a child for a particular sin, and because the student has hurt us or committed a serious sin we can come down very hard on them—perhaps rashly or too harshly.

We can err in this area in a number of ways. Sometimes our punishments are based on how inconvenienced we were, rather than based on the sin committed. Other times the punishments we mete out can be too much for the offense. A student does not clean up his lab materials one day, and we then punish the student by making him clean the lab every day for the rest of the semester. The punishment in this case is too extreme. If we view punishment as merely a puni-

itive measure we will likely err on the side of being unreasonable. But if we view punishment as a corrective, nurturing means we will give more thought to an appropriate and reasonable punishment.

As in all things a balance must be found in this regard. Too soft a punishment makes a mockery of the discipline and does not accomplish the goal. Too harsh a punishment does not reveal the justice of God, whose judgments are just and appropriate for our sins. When we discipline we must ask ourselves, "Does the child understand why he/she was punished (that is, a connection can be found between the punishment and the offense? Is the punishment reasonable and just?" Let us give more thought (and more *time*—hasty discipline often lacks wisdom and justice) to our punishments to ensure that they are firm (to teach who God is and what He requires of us) but reasonable (done in love and with compassion to direct the child in the right path).

As we have seen and will see throughout this sectional, disciplining the covenant children takes much wisdom. To find the correct balance in the sharpness and appropriateness of our discipline requires great wisdom. What parent has not been told from their older children that they have eased up in their discipline with the younger family members? What teacher does not look back at his/her early years and see all sorts of discipline failures? Perhaps some of the weaknesses in our discipline in our early years of teaching and parenting is due to inexperience and a lack of wisdom. On the other hand, perhaps as we age we grow weary and lax in our discipline. May we not fall into either ditch—too harsh or too lenient. May God grant us the wisdom we need to properly discipline His covenant children. And above all, may we remember that *in the way* of faithful obedience (disciplining our children) God is pleased to use weak and sinful means to fulfill His will.

Consistent

Few things are more detrimental to discipline than inconsistency. A teacher must know and draw the line for what kind of activity warrants discipline and what kind of activity does not. Then the teacher must work hard to ensure that when that line is crossed, the appropriate discipline is administered. Failure to consistently discipline can provoke a child to wrath (Eph. 6:4) and may lead to a lack of confidence in the teacher. Similarly a teacher must try to apply the discipline fairly to all children and not overlook some while disciplining others.

In this context, there is probably wisdom in having "school-wide" rules for

punishments for certain offenses. If a child cheats on a homework assignment in one class and receives a verbal warning, while another child commits the same sin in another teacher's class and is kicked out of school, then a serious inconsistency has occurred. To avoid such inconsistencies, schools are wise to have common policies and punishments outlined in their handbooks.

With the Word

We must remember the goal of our discipline—to nurture (instruct) and chasten the child, so as to not dishonor God's name. We aim not at mere outward conformity to some laws and precepts. We are interested in genuine obedience out of a love for God. Since God is a God of *means*, He has ordained that the means we use to turn a child from sinful ways is His WORD and the ROD (Prov. 29:15). In discussing how the punishments must fit the offense and the child, we have discussed to some extent how we are to use the rod. The reproof we bring must include instruction from the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

In particular, the Scriptures must be used in two ways. First, the Scriptures show us that *what we did dishonored God and was wrong*. Teachers must learn the Scriptures and apply them to the situations that are faced in the classroom. Students must be shown, from the Scriptures, that they have transgressed God's laws. Second, the Scriptures teach us *that we are forgiven in Jesus Christ*. Teachers must also show the students that *in the way of repentance, they will experience* that God has forgiven them their sins.

In our desire to root out sin we can often err in ONLY showing the student the error of his way without giving proper attention to the forgiveness that we have in Jesus Christ through the way of our repentance. Without being shown the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, the child will lack the important encouragement and assurance of salvation that is key to a covenant life with God.

Forgive and Forget (“*Far as East from West is distant...*” —*Psalter 280:4*)

God wipes away all memory of our sins. “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 8:12; cf. Jer. 31:34; Ps. 25:6, 7; Ps. 103:12). We need to do the same for our students. When they sin, there may very truly be consequences. But when a matter is dealt with and repentance is made, we are to put the matter behind us and not bring up the sin again or hold a grudge against the student. Our students must be assured that we do not hold these sins against them. We must be able to move on later that day with the student and not treat them differently because they had

sinned against us.

This implies that discipline should be administered fairly swiftly, without being rash. A student should not be left for a lengthy period of time experiencing the anger of a parent or teacher without the knowledge of the consequences of the sin and without the experience of forgiveness.

When children observe this kind of forgiveness, they grow to love their teachers and grow to see the love of God working in and through the teachers. This experience alone is sufficient reason to have our precious covenant schools!

Part B: Dangerous and Unbiblical Philosophies and Practices

When trying to determine what our own classroom discipline systems will look like, it is important first and foremost to choose practices that will reflect God's Word and His dealings with us. It is easy to get caught up in the world's philosophies and research-based strategies, but those should only be used when they line up with what the inspired Word teaches. We must ask ourselves, “Is this a biblical way to discipline?” We include a few unbiblical philosophies and practices that, on the surface, may seem acceptable, but yet, do not follow a biblical model of discipline.

Reward systems are an easy trap to fall into. Positive reinforcement is often a much more enjoyable way of managing a classroom than by using negative consequences. Besides, our society today would much rather emphasize positive behavior rather than drawing attention to the negative. But is this really a biblical way to discipline? Proverbs 13:24 says otherwise: “He that spareth the rod hateth his son; but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.” This does not mean that there is absolutely no place for positive words, privileges, or small treats in a classroom. However, rewards must be used sparingly and ought not be used as incentives for obedience.

Having your students create a set of classroom rules at the beginning of the school year is another practice to consider carefully before implementing. This was something I [Michon] heard about a lot in college. If you really want to make your classroom a welcoming community, where each child feels valued and takes responsibility for his/her actions, try this. Again, at first, it sounds pretty nice. But, when we examine this practice more closely, we see that it encourages teachers to give up their God-given authority in the classroom and hand it over to their students. Even if the rules that students decide upon are good, the students have no right to make their own rules. God has not determined that children

have authority over their teachers and parents, but that they must learn to live under authority. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right” (Eph. 6:1).

The Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS) is another dangerous idea. It is a whole system for school-wide behavior management. It includes a tiered system of interventions to deal with students and encourage positive behavior. The majority of the system focuses on encouraging students to behave positively by handing out rewards for good behavior. It also emphasizes a need to teach students how to behave properly in many different environments. Within this system, the assumption is that children do not know what good behavior is, so teachers must spend ample time showing children examples and non-examples of how to behave in different settings: classroom, bus, bathroom, etc. One problem with this is that it falsely assumes children do not know the difference between right and wrong. But all men do know when they sin—“their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another” (Rom. 2:15). Another problem with this system is its extreme emphasis on positivity. If you have a rule for the kids, it must be stated positively. “Don’t budge in line” is not an acceptable way to deal with misbehavior. You should instead say, “Please wait your turn.” In addition, it seems that there is a desire to disregard the fact that our children are sinners who, at times, need to be reprimanded for things done wrong. This system also assumes that as long as students are taught how to act, most of them will behave properly. When students misbehave, then, it is not seen as a matter of a sinful nature as much as a matter of ignorance because of unclear rules. Finally, when there are students who cannot seem to behave within the system of positively stated rules and rewards, when those students are moved up to the second or third tier of more intensive interventions, even there we still find no mention of discipline based on God’s Word. Instead, interventions must be “research based” and “scientifically validated.” This is a dangerous way to discipline. When we begin to place our trust in man’s research apart from the Bible to guide our discipline, we’ve gone the wrong way.

Part C: Practices for Preventative Discipline

We must correct and discipline the students God has placed in our care. But many situations which may require corrective discipline can easily be prevented. And so the saying is true: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In

our experience, we have found that there are three general practices that are helpful for Preventative Discipline: Presence, Preparation, and a Proper Example.

Presence

In my years of teaching I [Joel] found that one of, if not the most effective way to prevent troubles in the classroom is to be in the classroom. Mr. Cal Kalsbeek always reminded us younger teachers to “meet the kids at the door.” And the veteran teachers could be found at the door waiting for the students to arrive. Two things were accomplished by that: (a) teachers could meet and greet each student (and at the same time do attendance), and (b) students knew that the teacher was right there, so no bullying, no horsing around, no cheating was going to occur as quickly.

That has been our experience as well. When we don’t meet the kids at the door, and the classroom is unlocked, the kids are invariably looking into and touching materials, equipment and other things that they ought not. But when we are present as the students arrive, trouble is averted. Or, when we teach, if we sense someone is misbehaving, we will move toward the student or students that we are concerned about. Just standing closer to them ends the problems without a word needing to be said. The same is true in the hallways. Where no teacher is, trouble is likely to be brewing. But if teachers are present, students are more quickly to behave as they ought.

If you want to avoid discipline issues, it is wise to be in your classroom—not chatting with the teacher across the hall, not out getting a cup of coffee, not sitting behind your desk grading papers or making lessons, not in the lab making solutions or cleaning up. You need to be with the students.

Preparation

If not the best way to prevent discipline, being prepared is a close second for preventing discipline problems.

When you walk into your classroom you must be prepared. That preparation includes what you will be teaching that day, the activities that accompany the lesson, and the homework and worksheets and other materials needed for the day.

Your preparation begins with being to class on time. Even before the bell rings, your preparation shows. Are you ready to teach? Or are you scrambling around for handouts, materials, etc.? If you are not attentive to the students and ready to teach, then trouble is brewing. You need to start engaging the students the moment class begins. For some teachers that engagement may not necessarily be

imparting new knowledge, but you have to be attentive to the students and they need to know you are in charge and in teacher-mode. How will you collect the homework? What is the most efficient way of checking homework or collecting it? What is your first move in instruction? Do you have a plan of attack for your delivery of content? Do you have all the supplies for your activity, or do you have to dig through a drawer or a cupboard or run across the hall to see if your colleague has some extra matches? Obviously, we are not perfect and sometimes we forget the matches. But if the times we overlook something is a rare situation, the students will not be ready to get rowdy. But if your lack of preparation is regularly observed, students will begin to take advantage of this. Besides this, it communicates to the students that you are not prepared to teach. They will respond with a similar attitude—they will not be prepared to learn.

Sometimes it helps to think like kids think. What would a kid do or say in this situation? If you can anticipate what will happen in your classroom, you can prevent many discipline situations. Students, in many ways, act in a predictable manner. After a number of years, you know exactly what they will do during that first lab in which distilled water bottles are available. They will squeeze them and get others wet. You must anticipate this and address this temptation before it becomes a problem. Perhaps you have done an activity and everyone seems to get bottle-necked at a certain lab station. When this happens kids are standing around and trouble ensues. So to make sure there are fewer bottlenecks, a teacher may have more than one station, or have the students start the project at slightly different times.

You must learn to anticipate and be prepared for problems. The more you can anticipate and address by the way you organize your classroom and activities, the fewer discipline issues will arise.

Proper Example

As in all things of life, you do well by being a good example yourself. Your attitude towards the school rules and the administration is quickly read by your students. You undermine your own authority if you undermine the decisions made by the administrator or the school board.

And you and I alike are sinners. Students need to see us apologizing for our sins and mistakes. Nothing is more harmful to student-teacher rapport than a teacher who never admits his mistakes. Owning your mistakes is not a sign of weakness, but shows genuine maturity. The students will grow in their love and

respect for you when they see you admit your mistakes. This in turn will help to prevent disruptive and disrespectful behavior.

Part D: Practices for Corrective Discipline

Despite how much we try to prevent discipline issues, we will have to deal with sinful behaviors. This will require us to administer corrective measures. When we must correct students for sinful activity we must remember some of the areas of emphasis and basic principles that we outlined earlier. Remember the goal of your discipline. This is always the key. If you remember that the goal is to nurture and chasten the covenant child so that he grows to honor and obey God, then you will be properly guided to administer corrective discipline. In addition, you must remember that the covenant children are sinner-saints and must be approached and treated that way. Do not forget to keep parents informed and involved and be open to their suggestions. When you administer some form of punishment remember to evaluate the punishments. Does the punishment fit the offense (connected to the sin)? Is the punishment appropriate for the age and nature of the child? Is the punishment reasonable and just for the offense that was committed? Have you been consistently punishing this sin? Have you used the Word to show the child his sin? And have you used the Word to show the child the way of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus Christ? And after the matter has been dealt with (sin addressed, consequences given, repentance offered, forgiveness granted) have you assured the child that truly the matter has been forgiven and you will remember those sins no more?

We take no further space to give examples or illustrate corrective discipline. But we encourage teachers to pray for wisdom to apply these principles to the unique and challenging situations which they will encounter. In fact, we must pray for grace to discipline. Our nature is to turn away from the sins and try to ignore them. As difficult of a task as it might be, we must discipline these children—for they are children of the covenant that must be directed in the ways of God.

Corporately

One final matter to consider is the corporate nature of our discipline. The Scriptures teach that God deals with us organically. We are a body of believers and He in His perfect wisdom and justice sends judgments upon us organically. Therefore, a Daniel can pray, “We have sinned,” though he personally did not commit the sins worthy of captivity; the church in Corinth could be admonished

for toleration of the sin of fornication, though not necessarily everyone personally tolerated it; the nation of Israel suffered many defeats in battles and captivities because of the sins of the nation, though not everyone actively committed those sins. We may face the judgments of God on the United States, though not personally committing outwardly the certain sins that characterize the nation.

So, in our classrooms we sometimes discipline the entire group and we tell the kids that we do so because they share in the sin and guilt of the classmates—they are corporately responsible. This is an important principle that we must teach our children. We must all learn this truth because our natures are opposed to this. I think that we all have experienced situations where we did not think it just that we, or our children, were punished as part of a body because of the sins of the body. Nevertheless, Scripture teaches that we share in the guilt of our fellow saints. “But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accused thing: for Achan... took of the accused thing: and the anger of the Lord was kindled against the children of Israel” (Josh. 7:1).

The difficulty, however, is in recognizing exactly *when* we should punish the entire group and *how* to do so. Though a case could be made that all share in the guilt of the sins of individual classmates, should we in every instance punish the whole, and to the same degree? What dangers might we face in punishing corporately?

Consider what Mr. Fred Hanko, Sr. says about corporate punishments in a 1996 issue of *Perspectives* (vol. 21:2, 3).

Many teachers have gotten themselves into impossible positions through the use of mass punishments. Often it happens something like this: Some student in the class has done something very wrong, such as writing graffiti on the washroom wall, and the teacher is sure that others in the class know who is guilty. The teacher is certain that someone in his class is responsible. He tells the class that they will lose all recesses until the guilty person confesses or until others in the class report the guilty person to the teacher or persuade him to confess.

Although it's not wrong for a teacher to impose such a punishment, it is usually most unwise to do it. If no student comes forward, the teacher is in serious trouble. You can keep the students in only so long and you will have to cancel the punishment. The private code of students that says a student does not report the misdeeds of another no matter how serious will probably prevail in this situation. The students will, in such circumstances, feel required to band together against the teacher.

You need to consider all possible outcomes before you impose such a punishment.

Group punishment may sometimes be appropriate, however. I think that it can be used in the appropriate situation as a way to teach corporate responsibility. If, for example, I have to be out of the classroom for some good reason and a number of students misbehave. It is usually impossible to determine exactly which of the students were responsible. I may, then, keep the whole class in during recess and explain to them that people are responsible for the misdeeds of others *when they are aware of them and make no attempt to discourage them*. It is an important lesson: we are our brother's keeper. We may hope that this lesson will carry over to the playground where students frequently use the worst kind of language, and no fellow student even attempts to discourage them [emphasis mine, JM].

I agree with Mr. Hanko on the danger of group punishment. One better evaluate very carefully before making such a punishment (keep them inside until someone confesses). A teacher is in a losing situation in that case.

His comments also touch upon *when* we should punish the whole for the sins of a few. Though all the students share in the guilt of a sin to a certain degree, they do not necessarily need to be punished corporately for each sin. For example, if in a class a small group of students in the back is rowdy, we would be wise in not applying a group punishment. The individuals must be punished for their own specific sins. In the case of Achan, for example, though all of Israel was guilty, after careful examination Achan's family was specifically punished. Teachers must strive diligently to determine which individuals are primarily responsible for misbehavior in a classroom setting.

At other times, however, it is wise to punish the entire group. Although God does not necessarily bring judgments upon the entire body for *each* particular sin of an individual, nevertheless, at other times God wisely punishes the whole because we need to be disciplined. We may not be *actively* involved in a particular sin of some members of the congregation but we may be inclined towards that particular sin or commit such a sin in our hearts. In such cases, God wisely and lovingly visits the entire body with various judgments to make us aware and turn us from our sins, as He did with all of Israel in the matter of Achan and the loss in the battle to Ai (Josh. 7:10–12).

This should guide us in our application of group punishments. If a class repeatedly becomes rowdy we might wisely apply a group punishment. Classes

that are regularly disruptive need to learn proper behavior and it would be wise to keep them all in for recess. In such a case, students who may not have initiated the misbehavior may share in the guilt because of their “silence or connivance” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 99). As teachers, we need wisdom in considering whether or not an entire class *needs* to be punished in a particular case for the sake of leading them to see their own motives and sinful natures. Could all the students benefit from a group punishment in which we encourage them to proper behavior, and also discourage inappropriate behavior? Here the teacher must exercise wisdom to determine which circumstances necessitate a group punishment and rightly discern when the body needs a group punishment.

What can make proper corporate discipline so very difficult is the degree of involvement that can be found in a classroom. There are in a classroom the individuals that initiate the misbehavior, as well as those who laugh along and encourage a small group of students to continue in their antics. But, there can be also those who admonish and discourage their classmates from such behavior. In such cases, a teacher must use wisdom to determine whether or not all should be punished for the misbehavior of the few.

Corporate responsibility is an important principle. Applying it correctly, as is true for many things, is more difficult and requires great wisdom. We do well to examine our use of group punishments. Perhaps, we too easily use corporate punishment as the “easy way out,” rather than doing a bit more investigating and punishing the individuals who are the primary guilty parties. Or perhaps, our class would benefit from the use of some corporate punishment, by which we drive the sinful desires from the hearts of all the students, who actively or not, share in such a sin. All of this takes great wisdom. May we call upon God to grant us the wisdom in our use of corporate punishments.

Part E: Conclusion

What an amazing and challenging work we have to do each day! God calls us to discipline the covenant children so that they learn to fear God and keep His commandments. Ultimately, all discipline is performed so that God’s name is honored and not blasphemed. This goal must govern all we do in regards to discipline.

For such a high calling, we do well to examine our teaching and our discipline efforts. Examine how things are going in your classroom. If you are having discipline issues in your classroom, ask yourself:

- a) Am I sufficiently prepared?
- b) Am I present in my classroom?
- c) Is my discipline based on biblical principles? Or have I adopted worldly techniques and philosophies of discipline?

And when you discipline, if you find that the student or parent does not agree with your discipline, ask yourself:

- a) Was the consequence just? Or did I provoke to wrath?
- b) Did the consequence fit the offense? Is there a connection, if possible, between the two?
- c) Have I been consistent? Or am I more moody or sensitive to this activity today? Or perhaps am I weary of discipline?

Discipline is required of the Christian school teacher. It takes work and wisdom. May we study God’s word to guide us in all of our work—particularly the work of discipline. May we spend much time in prayer asking God for the wisdom and grace to properly lead and discipline the lambs of Christ. Finally, be assured that God Almighty will bless the faithful labors of parents and teachers alike and will use our efforts (as weak and frail as they are) for the up-building of His covenant children. Thanks be to God for His work in and through us!

“So let there be on us bestowed
The beauty of the Lord our God;
The work accomplished by our hand
Establish Thou, and make it stand;
Yea, let our hopeful labor be
Established evermore by Thee,
Established evermore by Thee”
(Psalter 246:3)