

“FOR THE LORD DISCIPLINES HIM WHOM HE LOVES...” (HEBREWS 12:6): IN QUEST OF MORAL FORMATION IN CHRISTIAN FAMILIES OF CONTEMPORARY ERA.

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Abstract

In recent times, there appears to be a high rate of moral decadence amongst youths in our societies ranging from sexual abuse, drug addiction, rape, street and school cultism, lack of respect for elders to mention but a few, which can hardly be disassociated from what goes on in the family. This is because, the family still remains the smallest unit of socialization in any given society. It is where life begins for any given person or individual. Again, the saying remains valid that states that “charity begins at home”. Thus, whatever the family produces, the society receives and experiences its manifestations. However, it would not be an overstatement to opine that modern day families have gone cold in inculcating good morals and disciplines in their children (youths). It is no longer surprising to see students especially of secondary school level, who fight their teachers for scolding or flogging them. Some have even been bold to declare openly, that at home, their parents do not scold or flog them. This is quite appalling and undoubtedly, a new development in our Christian homes because, before this era, it was not so. Family moral formation and discipline have always been held in high esteem and is in fact the first gift any child receives from his or her parents/guardians. This paper, with the tools of exegesis and consultation of other previous written research works attempts what could be termed a ‘wake-up call’ to modern day Christian families on the need for moral discipline and formation in our youths if we must have a society void of moral decadence considering the fact that love revolves around the formation of good morality as seen in the exegetical text.

Keywords: Discipline, Quest, Moral formation, Love and Family.

Introduction

Moral discipline remains an indelible and an inevitable ingredient in the life of any person who must be relevant as well as significant to both him/herself and the society. It is an ingredient which can only be found in the character of a human person. Its absence however, can only give room for attitudes which are antagonistic to the positive development of the human person and the society at large. In other words, life without moral discipline can only become chaotic.

Hence, it is not surprising today to see people especially the youth who are radically unstable in terms of behavior as a result of acts they keep engaging in due to lack of discipline and the right character and moral formation. Gotan (2018) is of the opinion that such people are left in a one-dimensional universe where the only thing they are attracted to is whatever works or goes. In his words: "Such young people who are unable to find any meaning in life....turn to alcohol, drugs, the erotic, the exotic and should pose a huge challenge to those responsible to help them discover something of value in their lives" (p.17).

This therefore points to the fact that the disciplining and training of the human person is of great importance in every human society. Thus, since the family remains the basic and the smallest unit of the society, character formation and moral discipline being of paramount necessity, must have to start from there.

However, it would be a very difficult task for anyone to attempt the separation of the concept of love from that of discipline. This is because discipline, be it either self or external can only originate when there is love for oneself or for one another. Obviously, many young people today, who grew up in homes where love/care is lacking, always tend to be low and poor in terms of good morality. Hence, if a parent loves his/her child, he or she must not joke with moral discipline to such child. Likewise, any child or person who loves him/herself should not see the act of moral discipline as an act of wickedness.

This paper is still firmly holding on to the view that one can only be disciplined by one who loves him or her just as God, as would be interpreted from the exegetical Greek text, disciplines those he loves and accepts (**Hebrews 12:6** ο]n ga.r avgapa/ | ku,rioj paideu,ei(mastigoi/ de. pa,nta ui`o.n ο]n parade,cetai). Even among Africans, an Igbo adage has it that "*onye ahuru n'anya ka a na-abara mba*" (only the person who is loved is being chastised). The researcher would also use Aristotle's Virtue Theory of morality to make the work more coherent. To further enhance the coherency and comprehensiveness of the work, some of the key terms in the work would be clarified as follows.

Clarification of Key Terms

It is of great necessity and quite pertinent to clarify some of the key words in this paper, in order to give room for massive coherency. Some of these terms include: discipline, quest, moral formation, love and family.

Concept of Discipline

The concept of moral discipline is not only necessary but also very vital for the proper development of any civilized society. The term 'discipline' according to Hornby (2010), is the practice or art of training people to obey rules and order and punishing them if they do not obey. As a noun, it could be understood as the controlled behaviour or situations that results from the training. Further, he explains it as a method of training one's mind or body or of controlling one's behavior. In its function as a verb, discipline can as well mean to punish somebody for something he/she has done. It can also mean the training of someone especially a child, to obey particular rules and control the way he/she behaves. Then, on the part of self, discipline deals with controlling the way one behaves and the ability to make oneself do things one believes to be good and morally sound.

However, from the above explanations, the one that focuses on child upbringing appears to be the most suitable for this paper since the effort here is geared towards searching out the most efficient way of ensuring sound behaviour and moral formation in present day Christian families.

Notion of 'Quest'

The concept of quest simply has to do with an effort made to find or discover something. Hornby (2010) presents it as a long search for something of high importance or quality. Often times, the term is used when the object of search happens to be a very difficult one or thing to find. Obviously, with the kind of immoral attitude the young people are exhibiting these days, one cannot help but agree to the fact that efficient and effective moral formation is gradually going into extinction. There is actually the need for a stronger quest for it (moral formation) in order to search it out and have it properly implemented. This is what this paper sets out to achieve.

Moral Formation

Oekumene (2019) projects moral formation as a nurturing process in which a certain sense of identity, a certain pattern of motivation, evolve. He is however, of the opinion that this type of formation can only be the gradual work of culture and upbringing which emanates through discipline or can as well be self-conscious and intentional. He equally notes that it is the duty of any family or community of which one is a member, to form such person in the sense of orienting the person to the world in a certain way, encouraging certain kinds of behavior and discouraging others.

It is therefore very needful to note that the concept of moral formation as explained above cannot take place in the absence of discipline which can only come with care, concern and love for someone or oneself. This is why the modern-day Christian families must stand up to the task of forming the character/morality of the young adults as a sign of love for them and care for the progress of the society at large. However, using the Christian principles to achieve this is never out of question as they remain efficient to a large extent if properly applied by both parents and guardians. This is the more reason why this paper goes on to present Hebrew 12:6 in the quest for sound moral formation for Christian families of modern era. The concept of family which would be clarified later remains one of the primary agents of moral formation in the society.

The Notion of Love

Love as a concept entails a strong and genuine desire, affection or feeling one has for somebody or something. For Hornby (2010), it is “a strong feeling of affection for something or somebody, especially a member of your family or a friend” (p.884). However, just like various concepts in the scholarly world, the concept ‘love’ has multiple definitions. In other words, scholars have defined it from different perspective. For Fehr and Russell (1991), love can be studied as a relationship, as an attitude, as an experience, and so on. He views love as an emotion. Hence, Rubin (cited in Fehr and Russel, 1991) defines love as “an attitude held by one person toward another, involving a predisposition to think, feel, and behave in certain ways toward that person” (p.427).

Nevertheless, a closer look at the above definitions would certainly give one the impression of ‘care’ and great concern if the notion of ‘love’ must be fully comprehended. This is because, for one to be predisposed to think, feel and treat another in a special way, a deliberate effort is actually required. Thus, the definition from Rubin goes a long way in fitting the notion of love as implied in this work. Some other scholars like Skolnick (cited in Fehr and Russell, 1991) also projects the term ‘love’ as “a constructed experience built with feelings, ideas and cultural symbols” (p.427). Here, Skolnick is still pointing at feelings and the cultural symbols which of course are inclusive of the culture of discipline held in high esteem by Christians.

The Family

According to Nmah (2004), the family is generally regarded as a major social institution and a locus of much of a person's social activities. He therefore defines it as a social unit created by blood, marriage, or adoption, and can be described as nuclear (parents and children) or extended (encompassing other relatives). What is implied here is that the family is where life begins for any human person, be it with parents, foster-parents or guardians. This therefore supports the ideology that moral formation must start from the family.

Obiefuna and Kanu (2018) are equally of the opinion that the family is the primary setting for the education of the child on human values. It is from the family that one learns the wise use of freedom. This is because, certain characters that are formed in childhood become deeply rooted and remain with the human person through a life time. Thus, in the words of Obiefuna and Kanu (2018); "The family is the primary setting for socialization, since it where we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another and live as one" (p.276).

From the above assertion, one can easily deduce the fact that the family remains the first school of human values and moral formation. Hence, for these human values and moral formation to become a reality in the human person, love which propels the smooth running of the family in line with sound discipline must have to be present. This would be more elaborated with the interpretation of the exegetical text of this paper which is the major focus here.

Theoretical Framework

Attempt is made here to present a suitable and workable theory for this research work. This would go a long way in giving the work more coherence. The focus however, would be on moral formation theory. Moral theories according to McMillan (1998) are different from other theories. He points out some of the moral formation theories which include Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Virtue Theory and the Four Principles Approach and Casuistry.

However, for the purpose of this study, the virtue theory would be used and thus would be explained. This is because, to a great extent, sound morality is parts and parcel of good moral virtue.

Virtue Theory of Morality

Virtue theory, as propounded by Aristotle states that the right thing to do in a given situation is what a good or virtuous person would do. Intuitively, this is an appealing idea: most, perhaps as noted by McMillan (1998), all of us want to be good people, so doing what a good person would do does seem to capture what we aim for when faced with a moral decision. Aristotle in this theory claims that what is distinct about human beings is our ability to reason and to live in accordance with reason. Therefore, good human beings live and act in accordance with reason and can be described as existing in what he termed 'a state of eudaimonia'. He further argued that the right action would be performed in a particular situation by a virtuous person.

Applying the above theory to this work, one can assert that showing love and inculcating discipline which could result to good moral formation in a person can only come from one who is virtuous and as well morally sound. However, it is quite an irony today that there are parents who are morally bankrupt but expect their children and wards to be morally formed and sound. A virtuous act is likely to come from a virtuous person since one cannot give what he/she do not have. God for instance is a loving and just God. This is why it is in his interest to have those he loves well nurtured. Hence the character of God as seen in Hebrew 12:6 is being interpreted here in an attempt to have loving and morally sound parent who would in turn produce loving and morally sound children and persons.

The Quest of Moral Formation

As was indicated earlier, during the clarification of concepts, whenever the word 'quest' is used in search of an issue, it simply implies that the issue is a very important as well as qualitative one. Again, since it is a quest, it also means that such issue in question has been lacking over a time. Sound morality today especially among the youth is becoming a force to reckon with even in Christian homes.

According to Ijezie (2018), the programme of forming the young morally is a very delicate one in every human society. He thus opines that different cultures adopt different methods of educating their young ones. In his words: "The whole project can be summed up as the imparting of knowledge and understanding to the young. There is a very thin line between the youth and the fool and, most of the time, foolishness is the lot of the youth, as foolishness is simply the lack of knowledge and understanding" (p.63). From the above view, it could be understood that one that lacks good moral formation is equivalent to a fool and

since no family or society would want to be dominated by fools, the quest of or for sound moral formation becomes inevitable.

However, since the future of every generation hangs on the caliber of young people it produces, Ijezie (2018) is quite optimistic that solutions to training them rightly lie on the pages of the Christian scriptural text; the Bible. He therefore presents Proverbs 1:2-7 which points out that knowing wisdom and discipline, for understanding word of insight as well as the fear of God, serves as the beginning of sound morality. This paper as has been stated earlier is pointing to Hebrews 12:6 as one of the measures which must be taken by parents and guardians as well as teachers in Christians homes and schools to ensure that sound morality is formed and inculcated into the young in line with the principles of divine love. This is because like the text suggests, God due to his love for his own, applies discipline and correction, not just for his own good but for the good of man.

Establishment of the Textual Form and Orientation

Here, effort is made to view the text, Hebrew 12:6 with an exegetical lens, pointing out its textual problems if any. This would be followed by the delimitation/orientation of the text.

a. Textual Criticism of Hebrews 12:6

Nestle – Aland presents the text as: **Hebrews 12:6**

⁶o]n ga.r avgapa/| ku,rioj paideu,ei(mastigoi/ de. pa,nta ui`o.n o]n parade,cetaiÅ

A careful comparison of the text with other variants reveals few textual difficulties. This few would be pointed out as follows.

Here, the relative pronoun *o]n* is presented as *[ontivna* by papyrus 66 (D⁶⁶) 1241 pc. The conjunction coordinator *ga.r* was completely omitted; rather *dio.ti* was used in its place. The verb *mastigoi* becomes substituted with *mastigo.nei*. Looking at the text as it is, it would not be wrong to suspect an obvious correction of the text by the omission of *ga.r*. However, since the text as presented above with its myriads of witnesses proves to be the *lectio difficilior* (more difficult reading), it is considered closer to the original and correct manuscript.

b. Orientation of the Text

For a proper exegesis of Hebrews 12:6, one requires the understanding of the logic of the text. With this, the logic and sense would be followed provided

that one is able to set out the text as a unit of its own. Thus the delimitation of the text is the major aim of this section.

The background to the text takes one back to Paul's exhortations/admonitions to the Hebrew Christians as seen in Hebrews 12. Fowler (2006) opines that the contextual paragraph in Hebrews 12:1-13 serves as an introductory to the concluding practical section of the whole epistle to the Hebrews. He therefore states that Hebrews 12 could be tagged "The inevitable discipline of God" (p.373). He further sub-divides it as "The inevitable discipline that is part of the process of developing endurance" (Hebrews 12:4-11).

Specifically, observing Hebrews 12:6, Fowler (2006) avers that Paul continues to cite from Proverbs 3:12 from the Greek Septuagint translation (LXX): "For those whom the Lord loves he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives". Hence the exegetical text here is just a periscope of Paul's exhortations to the Hebrew Christians of his time. The verse is carefully selected since it portrays love as what propels discipline and chastisement from God and from an earthly father. The verse therefore serves as the delimitation of this exegetical analysis.

c. Presentation of a Working Translation

The working translation of the exegetical text is proposed thus: "For whom the Lord loves, he disciplines, and he scourges every son whom he receives".

The Exegesis of the Text

The above text as presented is simply put, Paul's exhortation to the Hebrew Christians. Henry (2008) notes that the best of God's children need chastisement since they like every other human being have faults and weaknesses which need to be corrected. In his words: "Though God may let others alone in their sins, he will correct sin in his own children; they are of his family, and shall not escape his rebukes when they want them" (p.1929). This text remains a strong tool for ensuring sound moral formation for the young in Christian homes and schools as it helps both the parents and the children to understand that disciplining and scourging are features of genuine loving parents, guardians and teachers. However, a careful semantic analysis of the text will lead into a more fruitful and coherent interpretation of the text.

a. Semantic/Linguistic Analysis

This text is very rich in style and sound. An interpretation of the text makes an understanding of words used a necessity. The verbs, both main and

subordinate clauses are highlighted differently and then commented upon very briefly.

⁶ *o]n ga.r avgapa/| ku,rioj paideu,ei(mastigoi/ de. pa,nta ui`o.n o]n parade,cetai*

Main verbal clause: *o]n ga.r avgapa/| ku,rioj paideu,ei(*

Parsing/Comment: *o]n* – Accusative, masculine singular of the relative pronoun; *ovj*. As used in the text, it means ‘whom’.

ga.r – This is a conjunction coordinating article meaning ‘for’ or ‘concerning’.

avgapa/| – 3rd person singular, present indicative mood, active voice of the verb ‘agapaw’. It simply denotes ‘love’, referring to the love of God.

ku,rioj – Nominative, masculine singular of the common noun; *ku,rioj* which means ‘Lord’ or ‘the Lord’ as the text suggests.

paideu,ei – 3rd person singular, present indicative mood, active voice of the verb; *paideu,w* which translates as ‘to teach’, ‘to chastise’, or ‘to discipline’. However, as seen in the context of the text, it is taken as ‘to discipline or correct. Barnes (1834) avers that it was a general principle that God disciplines those whom he loves as this is regarded as evidence that we are under his paternal care, and that he has not forsaken us. Barnes carefully points out that it does not mean that God sends chastisement which is not deserved; or that he sends it ‘for the mere purpose of inflicting pain’. For him, this discipline means to restrain and govern a child; to correct him when he errs, as this shows that there is a parental solicitude for the child, and that he/she is not an outcast. This is also necessary since there is in the life of every child of God something that deserves correction.

Main verbal clause: *mastigoi/ de. pa,nta ui`o.n o]n parade,cetai*

Parsing/Comment: *mastigoi/* - 3rd person singular, present indicative mood, active voice of the verb; *mastigo.w* which means ‘to scourge’. However, some English translations read it as ‘to chastise or chasten’. Thus, this scourging is done in order to correct in love and not to kill, inflict pains or wounds. Fowler (2006) opines that “God’s love always seeks the highest good of the other. In order to do so, it must often be expressed as “tough love”; love that cares enough to confront” (p.386). He further notes that the ‘scourge’ often refers to the corporeal discipline of spanking, whipping, or flogging. In his words: “As the root word of *mastigoi/* is *massw*, meaning ‘to squeeze’; a more general interpretation might be that in the midst of his discipline, God often ‘puts the squeeze on’ or ‘puts the pressure on’ those who are his spiritual children” (p.386).

This should be the right attitude of earthly parents, guardians and teachers towards the young ones under their care. Hence, scourging should not be seen as an attack on the self-esteem of the child because a high self-esteem without sound morality is nothing but foolishness.

de. – This is a conjunction coordinating article which translates as ‘but’ or ‘and’. As used in the text, it means ‘and’.

pa,nta – Accusative, masculine singular of the indefinite adjective; *paj* which could be rendered in English as ‘all’, ‘every’ or ‘all things’. As presented in the text, it denotes ‘every’.

ui`o.n – Accusative, masculine singular of the common noun; *ui`o.j* meaning ‘son’.

parade,cetai – 3rd person singular, present indicative mood, middle voice of the verb *parade,comai* which means ‘to receive’ or ‘to accept’. Vincent (1886) is of the view that this reception or acceptance offers or admits one to filial privileges; God acknowledges the person as his own. One then becomes a legitimate son. In other words, one who rejects God’s discipline and scourge rejects God’s acceptance and therefore becomes an illegitimate child. This is also applicable to our modern day Christian homes.

Hebrews 12:6: A Hermeneutical Application

According to Marshall (cited by Ekpunobi,1999), Hermeneutics is “the attempt to understand anything that somebody else has said or written” (p.7). For Richardson (1969), “It is the science and art of interpretation” (p.154). It is the study of those principles that should guide our work of interpretation. In the view of Harvey (1964), Hermeneutics literally means to make clear or to interpret. It is the inquiry concerned with “presuppositions and rules of the interpretation of human expression, usually a written text” (p.117). Hermeneutics in its simplest form is a concept which equips a scholar with the appropriate tools for the interpretation of the scriptures. Thus, while exegesis is the study of the texts’ meaning, hermeneutics encompasses both what the text meant and what it means. This is the aim of this section.

Missler (2008) in his interpretation of Hebrews 12:6 opines that the author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 to prove two (2) things:

- i. God disciplines those whom he loves.
- ii. Discipline is a sign of true sonship.

He further outlines the reasons for this discipline as:

- i. To make Christians see the need to glorify, honour and respect God.
- ii. To help Christians understand that sins have consequences.
- iii. To prevent Christians from falling into sin.
- iv. To keep them from pride.
- v. To teach them obedience and moral discipline.

Applying the above to the modern-day Christian families will undoubtedly render an effective solution to the quest for sound moral formation in the young people. It will go a long way in correcting the wrong ideologies of most homes that scourging children as a form correction is archaic and should be dropped. Hence all the reasons outlined above show that disciplining one's children is an act shrouded in love as it is done mostly for the good of the person being disciplined.

Fowler (2006) asserts that God's love is not sentimental, indulgent permissiveness that allows us to do as we selfishly desire. This should also apply to the type of love parents, guardians and teachers show to the growing ones. He further avers that:

Neither is God's love a heavy-handed coercive force that castigates until we capitulate. God disciplines in love so that his children may become disciples who will listen under him in dependence of the obedience of faith...God's love takes the risk that the individual might blame him for the problems and pressures, doubt his love, reject him altogether, and rebel in sinful self-orientation. That is the risk God takes in disciplining those he loves. (p.386).

The view above could possibly be the reason while most parents today are growing cold when it comes to strict disciplining in moral formation. The truth remains that most young people would never find it funny when scourged for wrong doings. Some would definitely rebel as seen in some homes and schools. But then, like the author here states, it is a risk parents, guardians and teachers must take in order to bring out the best character and morality from them. However, like the author also points out, this should not be done harshly or coercively. Wisdom should be applied even in this type of correction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Having come thus far, this paper has attempted to prove the relevancy of chastening and scourging the young in today's Christian homes in order to achieve and inculcate sound morality in them. Looking at the high rate of moral decadence

witnessed amongst the youth today, it would not be an overstatement to deduce that modern day parents, guardians and teachers are failing when it comes to moral discipline. It appears that the western way is the trending thing; where flogging, spanking or even scolding children is seen as damage to self-esteem. This should not be so. Obiefuna and Kanu (2018) clearly note that in the formation of the young, it is quite essential that they are helped to realize that misbehavior has consequences. Thus, when they make mistakes, they must be corrected, and when necessary they should be asked to ask for forgiveness and make up for whatever damage they may have caused. Hence, sound moral discipline remains inevitable if we must have a society void of arrogant and immorally behaved youth.

Recommendations

It is still the strong view of this paper that chastisement and scourging should not be sidelined as viable tools for moral formation in young people. However, just as Obiefuna and Kanu (2018) assert:

While correcting, they are not to be treated as enemies or as people on whom to pour out one's frustration. When they do well, however, they must be acknowledged and appreciated. When they are lovingly corrected, they feel that they are cared for and that their potential is recognized. Discipline must not lead to discouragement, but a stimulus to further progress. (p.333).

To support the above view, this paper still recommends that:

1. Living in the age of globalization, parents, guardians and teachers should not allow western civilization to deprive them of the African cultural and even the Christian scriptural mode of character formation.
2. They should also take cognizance of the fact that moral formation is a gradual process. Hence, in disciplining and correcting the young ones, they should not expect an automatic positive response; it proceeds gradually.
3. Children on their own part should not see strict parents, guardians and teachers as arch-enemies. Rather they should see them as role models and mentors who are after their own good.
4. Parents, guardians and teachers should follow God's standard in their disciplining of the young and not neglect them because of rebellious acts. This is because even as adults, when we rebel, God still pardons us. Thus it should be correction and discipline shrouded in genuine love.

If these are carefully implemented, sound morality would certainly be achieved in the youth in virtually every Christian Family even in this modern era.

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