



Dear Editor

Having read David Skinner's letter in the Summer 2004 issue of *ACT Now*, I feel the need to ask, 'What sort of disciplinarian is God?'

Teacher (at the end of his tether, speaking to recalcitrant pupil): 'Go and report to the Headmaster at once.' Pupil (sneering, replies to the teacher): 'No I won't! Go yerself.' A recent, typical classroom exchange? No, it's an anecdote from the memoirs of a young teacher in London's East End in the 1920s. It is recorded that a wrestling match ensued with the teacher ultimately getting the upper hand outside the Head's door.

So, what has changed since those days? No corporal punishment, less parental support, less public support for teachers, less respect for authority of any kind. Classroom discipline certainly has not become easier, as even the powers that be seem to be recognising, but it is still true that a teacher who is going to succeed in the profession must be able to control a class. How? No doubt some are born disciplinarians, some achieve it by experience, and many continue to struggle as the necessity is thrust upon them.

The Bible has a lot to say about discipline – it refers to instruction, training and even punishment. We are told: 'Blessed is the person you discipline, O Lord' (Psalm 94:12) and 'The Lord disciplines those He loves' (Hebrews 12:6). But what sort of disciplinarian is God? After all, He copes with us, and the entire human race, who must cause Him more trouble and heartache than anything a class can come up with. What can Christian teachers learn from His methods?

I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight JEREMIAH 9:24

This is what the Lord says: 'I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight' (Jeremiah 9:24).

The Lord exercises **kindness**. This word is expressed as 'loving kindness' in older translations of the Bible. It involves patience, understanding, and forgiveness. God doesn't bear grudges, He doesn't write us off because of our past failures but is always ready to give us another chance. We know that in spite of our sins He still loves us. The psalmist writes: 'He does not treat us as our sins deserve' (Psalm 103:10). Isaiah says: 'You have put all my sins behind your back' (Isaiah 38:17).

Did I always act in the same way towards my pupils? Was I able to 'forget' a pupil's bad behaviour from last week and start again? So many today are looking for someone to care, to take an interest in them, to show some understanding, especially where the school is their main source of security. No doubt it is on occasions outside the classroom that such loving kindness will best be demonstrated to individuals but a whole class will soon know whether a teacher really cares about them and wants the best for them.

One of the best teachers I knew was in a then Secondary Modern school – as was customary there was quite rigid streaming and it was the top streams that got all the attention. As a matter of conscience – she was a Christian – this teacher volunteered to take on the final year, bottom stream no-hopers, taking them for all the core subjects. She devoted her time to them and the change in that group was remarkable. They knew that she loved them and would stand up for them and they responded. Nobody could ever forget the Nativity Play which she wrote and they performed and which earned a write-up and pictures in the local paper. Over time, notoriety changed into deserved pride because one teacher demonstrated loving kindness.

'It isn't fair' is the perennial grievance of pupils, especially when sanctions loom. Don't we say the same to God sometimes? Yet we believe in God's **justice**. We worship a God who distinguishes between right and wrong and the Bible has no



qualms about describing Him as one who 'will not let the guilty go unpunished.' (Exodus 34:6 – another key text on God's dealings with people).

God's loving kindness is often expressed in stern 'Thou shalt not!' demands. Jesus, known for His love, should never be portrayed as soft. Behaviour which transgresses the known rules carries its own consequences in God's scheme of things so shouldn't it be the same in a classroom? But what about forgiveness? Debts have always to be paid by someone and offences atoned for. Forgiveness offers reconciliation with the offender after the punishment – it doesn't mean letting them off. (Jesus took the punishment for our sins so we are 'let off' but as teachers we are not usually in a position to do that.) In any case it could be well argued that all of us have to learn the hard way if we are going to develop good character!

Of course, pupils don't always see it that way:

Pupil (to RE teacher): 'Sir, why don't you forgive us like Jesus said when we do something wrong?'

Teacher (thinking quickly): 'So that you can forgive me for punishing you.'

Nevertheless, **kindness** must be practised and **justice** dispensed according to the situation, not necessarily in that order or always in equal measure. (Most new teachers are advised to establish the justice before showing too much kindness!)

It was said of Jesus that the people listened to Him because 'He taught with authority.' There was something about Him that commanded respect. Not everyone liked Him, many disagreed with Him, but they could not find anything with which to tarnish His reputation. The centurion at the Cross is recorded as saying 'Surely this was a **righteous** man.' Absolute integrity, honesty and trustworthiness were His hallmarks. It is often said that the world watches Christians to see how we behave and if our deeds match our faith. Pupils are the most eagle-eyed of all such watchers! They want to see if their teacher's life is worth following, if the role-model commands their respect. It is so easy to get caught out. I shall never forget 'warning' one pupil against another, with the best of intentions, only to have my words flung accusingly back at me by the subject of the warning who had been briefed by the one to whom I had spoken – a case of pupils showing more loyalty to each other than I had shown. My attempts to wriggle out of the matter with half-truths probably didn't help either. As a better example, I recall, on arriving at a new post, being introduced to the Deputy Head. When she had gone out of earshot the comment was made, 'She's a Christian and it makes all the difference.' I found her reputation

was justified. Whether in the classroom or the staffroom, it is a high standard we have to aim for as we follow the One of whom it was said: 'He committed no sin and no deceit was found in His mouth' (1 Peter 3:22).

Kindness. Justice. Righteousness. God's discipline is always constructive. We are learning to rejoice in His love; to respect His justice and to reverence His Holiness. Maybe it is too much to expect our pupils to see us in the same way but there is no harm in trying!

Alison Wilson
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Psst....! Pass it on....



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This is a unique and exciting opportunity for a person with a dynamic vision for Christian education within the maintained sector.

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