

1-1-1998

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Jerry L. Graham
A.C.T.S. Associates

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Recommended Citation

Graham, J. L. (1998). Forgiveness: The Key to Spiritual Warfare. *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth*, 9(1), 71-80. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/jascg/vol9/iss1/6>

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Forgiveness: The Key to Spiritual Warfare

Jerry L. Graham

Virtually all Christians have endured a multitude of sermons on the topic of forgiveness. Indeed, forgiveness is one of the basic Christian tenets. Teaching abounds regarding the need to forgive as well as the severe spiritual, and often physical, consequences associated with failing to do so. In spite of all the attention given to this vital topic, unforgiveness remains one of the most difficult obstacles that most Christians struggle with in their daily living. The ability to forgive seems to run counter to mankind's basic nature, and is definitely a characteristic of unregenerate man.

This article is not to rehash any of teaching on forgiveness, but to associate the need to forgive with spiritual warfare, an arena of Christianity which is receiving increasing attention of late. While some still argue the legitimacy of spiritual warfare, the number who deny the reality of dark spiritual forces is rapidly decreasing even in the highly rationalistic culture of the United States. Gary Kinnaman, pastor of Word of Grace Church in Mesa, Arizona, has observed that every circumstance in life has a cause: God, the devil, natural forces, the individual, or frequently a complicated blend of all four. Admittedly, some situations are a consequence of sin, but even those are likely to have dark forces somewhere in the equation, since sin itself is one of the ways that the door to demonic influence is opened to the Christian and non-Christian alike.

Noted author and seminary professor, C. Peter Wagner, finds it useful to enumerate three levels of spiritual warfare, although he admits that they are not discrete entities, but are inter-

connected with each other. Wagner labels the first level “ground-level spiritual warfare.” This is simply the casting out of “ordinary” demons. (Note that this article is not going to add rhetoric to the ongoing argument about whether or not Christians are subject to demonic influence — the assumption is clearly that such influence is not only possible, but is a common occurrence.)

The second level of spiritual warfare according to Wagner is “occult-level spiritual warfare.” The distinction between ground-level and occult-level is admittedly a bit thin at times, but generally occult-level warfare is distinguished by either a greater number or by more highly organized demons. Examples of occult-level situations include shamans, New Age channelers, occult practitioners, witches and warlocks, satanist priests, fortune-tellers, Eastern religions, Freemasonry, et al. As Wagner points out, these powers are quite different from “ordinary” demons (i.e., ground-level) who may be the cause of an individual’s maladies such as unwarranted fear, grief, infirmities or disease, anger, lust, marital discord, and the like. Clearly, spiritual warfare against such occult-level activity requires a much greater level of faith and understanding due to the greater power and usually greater havoc wrought by organized demonization. There is also an implication of a hierarchy among dark angels, with those responsible for occult-level activity having more rank and power than those responsible for ground-level activity.

Finally, Wagner defines a third level which he calls “strategic-level spiritual warfare.” At this level the activity is due to territorial spirits, or what the Apostle Paul calls “principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, and spiritual wickedness in high places” in Ephesians 6:12. Here again, it should be noted that strategic-level spiritual warfare is highly controversial within many circles. Naysayers challenge the notion that there even exists spirit beings that rule whole sections of geography or other territorial entities such as people groups, religions, etc. Even if they did exist, how could humans be so presumptuous as to purposely seek to do battle with them? Needless to say, again this article will not take on those arguments, but will assume that such a level of demonic activity exists and that it is definitely within the responsibility of Christians to do battle in, if led to do so by the Holy Spirit.

Strategic level spiritual warfare received a great deal of attention and notoriety with the writing of the two popular novels

by Frank Peretti in the late 1980's, *This Present Darkness*, and *Piercing the Darkness*. The documentation for strategic-level activity now goes far beyond that of a couple of what some have called "fanciful" novels, and has been discussed in some fascinating warfare encounters described by several respected authors such as C. Peter Wagner, John Dawson, Cindy Jacobs, Ed Silvano, Clinton Arnold, Francis Frangipane, et al.

There is yet another segment of spiritual warfare that does not fall neatly into any of the categories outlined above, and which will, for the purposes of this article, be treated separately. It is becoming clear that entire organizations, such as churches, can have spiritual "baggage" much like an individual, and from time to time find themselves pulled into battles that defy rational explanation. It appears there may be territorial spirits assigned to specifically demonize churches. While it may seem like a trivial distinction setting this apart from the three levels defined by Wagner, it is useful to the notion being developed in this article, i.e., that forgiveness is a required key to spiritual warfare — indeed, a key that extends across all levels of spiritual warfare.

To begin to see the importance of forgiveness, let's begin with ground-level warfare. While ground-level activity is defined as being the result of "ordinary" demons, actually the amount of literature providing justification and strategy for this arena of spiritual warfare is growing rapidly. Among the most complete and most useful is an integrated approach to such warfare described in a detailed manual entitled *Restoring the Foundations: Counseling by the Living Word* by Chester and Betsy Kylstra (Santa Rosa Beach, FL: Proclaiming His Word, Inc., 1994). In that manual, still in its preliminary edition, the authors approach the overall issue of deliverance by first removing all grounds for an individual's being influenced by demonic activity. This is done in a very systematic and orderly fashion by dismantling the effects of ancestral sin and resultant curses, of ungodly or unscriptural beliefs which have developed in the mind of the individual, and of the wounds or hurts suffered at the hands of others. Once these areas (which in themselves are usually intricately interrelated) have been addressed, the actual casting out of demons (or elimination of their influence) is a relatively innocuous process. As we explore the commonality of the concept of forgiveness across all these steps it will be clear that forgiveness is fundamental to the whole issue of ground-level spiritual warfare.

Ancestral sins, or sins of the fathers, takes into account God's view of individuals as being an integral part of a family that has existed over the generations. This concept is sometimes difficult for the highly individualistic American mind to understand, but has an abundance of scriptural backing (e.g., Hebrews 7:9,10). Exodus 34:6,7 reads:

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave *the guilty* unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations. (NAS)

(Similar sentiment is found in Exodus 20:5; Numbers 14:18; and Deuteronomy 5:9.) As hard as it is for the western mind to accept, this states in no uncertain terms that individuals are affected by their ancestor's sin. It is important to realize that the "iniquity" for a particular ancestral sin that is passed from generation to generation is a propensity toward that particular sin rather than an actual irresistible force to repeat the sin. But, consistent with God's nature, the gospel (good news) provides a way for us to be set free from the negative influences of those who have gone before. As with all sin, whether it be imputed or actual, the steps to freedom include confession and repentance as described in 1 John 1:9.

The process as outlined by the Kylstras for breaking the effects of ancestral sin is to confess, release and forgive, repent, and renounce. Specifically, an individual wishing to be free from the iniquity of sin passed down from preceding generations must first specifically confess those ancestral sins (as well as any participation he or she as an individual may have had); release and forgive the ancestors for committing the sin as well as for any resulting curses that have caused trouble; repent of the sin and for yielding to it (asking for forgiveness); forgive one's own self for participating in the sin; and finally renounce the sin and thereby break the power of all resulting curses through the redemptive work of Christ on the Cross and His shed Blood. Note that forgiveness was sought on three different planes, i.e., forgiveness by the individual of his or her ancestor, forgiveness by God to the individual for any direct or indirect participation in

the sin, and finally forgiveness from one's own self for that participation. All three planes of forgiveness are significant and must be present for the procedure to be successful.

The second step in the Kylstra process is that of dealing with those ungodly or unscriptural beliefs that an individual tends to take on through the course of a lifetime. Virtually everyone lives his or her life out of wrong beliefs or lies – lies about themselves, about others, or about God. Basically, these are beliefs which do not agree with God's Word, His nature, or His character and which affect one's perceptions, decisions, and actions. Often a person's major belief system is made up of beliefs which are ungodly.

Most ungodly beliefs come from the natural, unredeemed mind, and appear logical from the viewpoint of man's worldly standards. Examples include thinking which suggests "I am not worthy to receive anything from God," or "I have messed up so badly that I have missed God's best for me." A second major source of ungodly beliefs come from hurts (both during childhood and after reaching adulthood), traumas, and negative experiences. An example would be a child whose father misses all of his ball games, all of his birthday parties, and is never there when he or she needs guidance. The child may form beliefs which cause him to think "I am not important because my dad does not have time for me." Beliefs such as these lead to a belief-expectation cycle which causes one to engage in certain negative actions or behavior based on their negative beliefs and expectations. These negative actions usually result in a negative experience which simply reinforces the ungodly belief, and results in a downward spiral.

The process outlined by the Kylstras for breaking the effect of ungodly beliefs is again to confess, forgive, repent, and renounce. Specifically, an individual wishing to be free from the influence of an ungodly belief must first identify that belief, confess the belief as being a sin; forgive those who contributed to the formation of that belief; repent and ask God's forgiveness for living their life based on the ungodly belief; forgive one's own self for believing the lie; renounce and break agreement with the ungodly belief and the kingdom of darkness; and finally articulate and choose to believe a corresponding godly belief in place of the former ungodly belief. (Then the counseled is encouraged to spend a sufficient amount of time over the next several days

meditating on the godly belief to allow it to develop as the new habitual way of thinking.) The important thing to note about this step in ground-level spiritual warfare is that here again, forgiveness across three planes plays a vital role.

The third step in the four-step process outlined by Chester and Betsy Kylstra is that of dealing with what they label soul/spirit hurts, which some other authors simply call inner healing. While this is still another area that is theologically challenged by some, again it is outside the scope of this article to enter into this debate. Suffice it to say that God heals hurts, and desires to do so if individuals will but let Him.

The hurts being spoken of here are hurts of either the soul or the spirit of man that are then carried and continually experienced within that person himself. They are not physical, and therefore others cannot visually see them. However, they often manifest in the emotions, behaviors, and thoughts of people. The hurts tend to come to the surface quickly when a person or situation appears which parallels the person or situation involved in the original hurt. A common example is the fear of public speaking. Often this irrational fear is related to an earlier experience in which the person was embarrassed or humiliated in front of others.

The adverse consequences of soul/spirit hurts as described above include the fact that in addition to the wound occurring to the soul/spirit, the behavior of the hurting person is likely to be affected; the hurts are likely to distort the individual's identity and purpose in life; the hurts often result in shame and restrict growth as well as leave an ongoing vulnerability; and finally, it is well understood that hurting people propagate their hurt to other people. Clearly hurts of this nature open the door to ground-level demonic activity.

The healing steps outlined by the Kylstras begin with a passive listening to the Holy Spirit as He responds to an invitation to reveal a hurt He desires to heal. Once the hurt has been revealed, it must be released and given over to God by expressing the feelings associated with the hurt. Next, those responsible for the hurt in the first place must be released and forgiven for causing the pain. Then the individual must repent for hurting others out of his or her hurt and ask God to forgive him or her for that act. After that, the individual must forgive himself or herself for allowing the hurt to control their behavior. Finally, the counseled

must ask Jesus to come and heal the hurt and receive the ministry of the Holy Spirit in response to that request. Here once more, the reader should note the significant presence of forgiveness on all three planes.

The final step in the healing process defined by the Kylstras is what most practitioners of ground-level spiritual warfare do as the first (and often only) step, i.e., deliverance. While this is sometimes effective, the results tend to be short-lived since the situation which opened the door to demonization in the first place is not sufficiently eliminated. Additionally, the process itself is likely to be far more difficult, and perhaps even violent, for the same reason, i.e., the legal grounds for the presence has not been eradicated.

Once again the ministry steps include confession, forgiveness, repentance, self-forgiveness, renouncing and breaking all implicit agreements with the demons or strongholds, and finally taking authority over the dark spirits and commanding them to leave based on the finished work of Christ. As might be expected by now, forgiveness is a fundamental cog in the wheel of freedom from demonization through a deliverance ministry. In summary then, the four steps to ground-level spiritual warfare as defined by the Kylstras clearly incorporate forgiveness throughout the process.

Moving on to Wagner's second level, occult-level spiritual warfare, we find that much the same process holds true. Demons are demons, and especially with respect to issues requiring forgiveness, there is virtually no difference between ground-level and occult-level. As Wagner has pointed out, the primary difference between the two levels is one of degree and strength of the demon powers. Whether it is numerically more demons or more highly organized demons such as found surrounding various New Age practices, witchcraft, Freemasonry, et al., the process for effectively eliminating them is still the same. The Kylstras simply call it removing the legal grounds, while Professor Charles Kraft of Fuller Seminary in his book *Defeating Dark Angels: Breaking Demonic Oppression in the Believer's Life*, metaphorically speaks of removing the garbage so the rats won't return looking for food. The point is that forgiveness is an essential and integral part of the process.

The third level of spiritual warfare according to Peter Wagner is the strategic-level dealing with territorial spirits. In his

book *Warfare Prayer: How to Seek God's Power and Protection in the Battle to Build His Kingdom*, Wagner outlines the major considerations which must be present in order to do battle at this level. First, he warns that the warriors must be submitted to God, be close to God, and have pure hearts and hands. In other words, they must be constantly moving toward every Christian's goal of being more and more Christ-like. Next, Wagner discusses a couple of new spiritual technologies, spiritual mapping and identificational repentance. He postulates that these are new tools God has given the Church because this level of firepower has not been needed prior to this time of the endgame of The Great Commission.

The thesis of this article regarding forgiveness focuses on the strategic-level tool of identificational repentance. Identificational repentance assumes that whole nations or people groups can (and do) sin corporately, and parallel to an individual's sin, the corporate sin of the nation or people group must be identified, confessed and repented from. For example, it is commonly accepted that the principle sin of the United States is that of racism, i.e., treating other humans as if they didn't matter. This sin extends not only to African-Americans, but also to Hispanics, Indians, and even to the unborn.

The major controversy surrounding identificational repentance is the need for members of a generation who are not guilty of the sin to have to repent in the place of those who committed the corporate sin. Few Americans today can identify with the act of slavery, but somebody has to repent for the sin since the forebears who committed the sin are no longer living. The idea is that the passing of iniquity from generation to generation will finally stop once the sin is remitted, and since repentance requires the Blood of Jesus, Christians are the only ones who can seek that repentance.

Just as with individual repentance, the process requires forgiveness, but not forgiveness just for those who committed the sin, but forgiveness for the nation or people group as a whole who committed the sin. John Dawson, author of the acknowledged textbook on identificational repentance, *Healing America's Wounds*, describes the process as confession, repentance, reconciliation, and restitution where reconciliation is further defined as expressing and receiving forgiveness, and pursuing intimate fellowship with previous enemies. Here again, we see the key

role that forgiveness plays in yet another level of spiritual warfare.

Finally, let's turn to that unnamed level of warfare that involves churches and other organizations. The textbook for this arena of battle comes from authors Neil Anderson and Charles Mylander in their book *Setting Your Church Free: A Biblical Plan to Help Your Church*. Part Two of that important book deals with several steps involved in bringing freedom to a church – freedom that is needed as a result of the bondage of past corporate sins of the church or organization. The steps to healing are amazingly like those outlined by the Kylstras, and constitutes an equally detailed process directed at an organization but paralleling the process directed at an individual. Given that parallel, it does not take a lot of explanation to see that forgiveness will also play a key role in setting a church free.

The members of a church body have memories. Just as with individuals, they have both been the victim of hurts from as well as committing hurts toward others. These are painful corporate memories that must be dealt with through the general process of forgiveness. If left unattended to, Satan can corporately take advantage of a church because of sins associated with their painful memories. Those memories can be exploited to create additional strife and problems and stir up even more trouble in the church or organization. As Anderson and Mylander point out, it is not the memory itself that gives the enemy the advantage, but how the body responds to the memory. So, for one final time, we see how critical and fundamental the command from Christ to forgive is to the whole arena of spiritual warfare.

It is amazing how the basic principles which the experienced and mature in any discipline tend to take for granted are usually the vital keys which must resurface as the discipline reaches out for new heights. Christianity as a discipline is no different in this respect. Forgiveness, which Francis Frangipane has likened to the very spirit of heaven removing the hiding places of demonic activity from the caverns of the human soul, is emphasized time and time again by the Scriptures and by those whom God anoints to preach the gospel. It is too often set aside as a mundane issue only for the beginners, while the old-timers move out in new directions such as spiritual warfare. But, as is so often the case, whether it be football or Christianity, the outcome is always improved by returning to the basics. That mundane issue of for-

givenness is one of the basics that we must all return to time and time again.

...Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

(Matthew 6:12-15, NIV)

Writer

Graham, Jerry. Address: A.C.T.S. Associates, 421 Currituck Dr., Chesapeake, VA 23322. Title: Administrator. Jerry earned an M.S. degree in industrial engineering from the University of Arkansas (1966) and worked for 25 years with Eastman Kodak Company in Rochester, NY. He earned a M.Div. at Regent University (1992) and is working toward his D.Min. degree at Fuller Theological Seminary. An independent consultant, Rev. Graham has worked with more than 80 churches since 1992.