



Biblical Foundations Unconditional Forgiveness?

by Jack Spender

One of the most challenging responsibilities that elders face, is to be certain there are no roots of bitterness troubling the assembly; to make sure that relationships are healthy and that all in the fellowship know how to resolve problems that arise in the normal course of life; to "keep the air clear."

The question of when a Christian should forgive someone who has wronged him is a frequent topic of discussion these days. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, every true believer has experienced God's gracious forgiveness through Christ, and finds the subject a source of delight. Forgiveness is also a basic part of the good news to be shared with people who do not know the Lord, and are weighed down by sin. But there is another reason. A growing number of Christian teachers are promoting the idea of unconditional forgiveness, i.e., forgiveness that takes

no account of repentance on the part of the one who did the wrong. One man in an informal gathering of believers recently proclaimed in my hearing that even though a certain brother had "never yet sinned against him," he had already forgiven him and so had great peace! Others smiled and nodded approvingly. This sounds large-hearted but is it right?

At the outset, we need to be clear about two things: First, we are not calling into question the salvation of the sinning believer, only the matter of fellowship between brothers, and the harmony that should be maintained within the family of God. Secondly, there is a difference between the attitude to be taken toward the unsaved, and toward those in the household of faith. When considering the abuses and wrongs done to us by sinners, no better example can be found than of the Lord Jesus who prayed: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34 KJV). Stephen, the first martyr followed this example at the time of his death saying: "Lord lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60).

But what about when we are wronged by fellow believers? Jesus warned His disciples about this in Luke 17:3,4. "Take heed to yourselves. If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him." Notice that the one who sinned is called a brother. Can we find other Scriptures that make this teaching void? I am not aware of any. In fact, other Scriptures support our Lord's instruction.

Checking the Old Testament, we note that in the place where the word "forgive" occurs most, Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple (II Chron. 6), the king asks God to forgive His people when they sin. In all five petitions, forgiveness

follows confession of sin; e.g., "if they pray toward this place and confess thy name and turn from their sin.....then hear.....and forgive (vs. 26); "whatever supplication shall be made.....when everyone shall know his own plague and his own grief.....then hear thou from heaven.....and forgive" (vs. 29).

As one surveys the many passages in the New Testament that deal with wrongs between believers, there is a consistent pattern developed in which forgiveness is granted when the sinner repents. Consider the foundational teaching for dealing with offenses in Matthew 18:15-18. What would be the point of following the three steps laid down by the Lord, (going to the person privately, then with witnesses, and finally to the whole church), if the truly Christ-like response was to simply forgive and be done with it?

Commenting on the word "forgive," W.E. Vine

What would be the point of following Matthew 18:15-18 if the truly Christ-like response was to simply forgive without any repentance?

in his Expository Dictionary says, "Human forgiveness is to be strictly analogous to Divine forgiveness, e.g., Matt. 6:12. If certain conditions are fulfilled, there is no limitation to Christ's law of forgiveness....The conditions

are repentance and confession." Paul's instructions in I Corinthians 5 on how to proceed "if any man is called a brother...." and pursues a sinful lifestyle are pointed. The man is to be delivered to Satan! Why not just pronounce him forgiven, and skip this difficult part? The answer is given in verse 6 (and again in Gal. 5:9). Put simply, leaven (sin) spreads.

Think for a moment of the way God saves every sinner. "Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21) is the basic formula. Who ever heard of God granting forgiveness to a man who denied his sin and had no thought of repentance? This is universalism, the teaching that God is too good to damn anyone, and eventually all will be saved.

Once a person has been saved by repenting of his sin and believing in the Lord, one of the first lessons he is taught is to understand how to deal with sins committed as a Christian. I John 1:9 is very clear; forgiveness is granted by God on the one condition of confession of the sin. And so the prodigal son (who was a son indeed) returns to the father with the words, "Father I have sinned...." and is received with rejoicing (Luke 15:21). Can we imagine the Father sending word to the son in the far country to relax since forgiveness had already been granted?

Taking the Easy Way

How, then, can such teaching not only be entertained as a theory, but also be taught by godly men and even thrive? I believe there are a number of reasons for this.

Many have rightly concluded that resentment

(Continued on page 4)

The church is the largest “volunteer” organization in the world. How are we treating our volunteers? How can you get more people to share the load? A volunteer is an individual who willingly serves. Their livelihood does not depend on their serving. Sometimes leaders in the local church (most of whom are also unpaid volunteers) do not expect high standards for service. They fear volunteers will withdraw if too much is expected, thinking, “Well, I am giving my time with no pay, so take my service as I give it, or I will stop serving.” That notion, however, is superficial, for it assumes money to be the primary motivator to excellence.

Scripture makes it clear that all should be involved in serving: “... we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Eph 4:15-16 ESV).

Helping people apply this verse is more than preaching a sermon at them, pounding the pulpit and then throwing them into ministry slots on the monthly schedule. Shepherding the flock of God surely includes *helping* them grow into their serving. Unfortunately, too often people are dumped into ministry with the thought, “They will learn to swim if they just stick with it.” How can we help volunteers serve with joy and excellence?

Leaders need to motivate

First, we must understand that others in the fellowship perceive themselves just as busy as we elders and leaders are. They don't want to be “guilted” into giving of their precious time. As leaders, we need to think about what motivates them. The easy answer is that the Holy Spirit is the One who motivates. But, note that the Spirit works through the gifts of the Spirit, one of which is leadership: “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: ... the one who leads, with zeal ...” Romans 12:6, 8. The New Living Translation puts it this way, “If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously.” As with all spiritual gifts, leading does not reside only with the elders, nor do all elders have the gift of leading. But, since elders are to shepherd the flock of God, their role includes leading to some degree.

Paul addresses them succinctly: “So I exhort the elders among you...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to

the flock” (1 Peter 5:1-3). The prime characteristics of a godly elder (and, by analogy, leader) include serving willingly, self-sacrificially, eagerly and humbly modeling Christ-like service. The example of Christ-centered service is a powerful motivator for others to serve and to do it in the same way.

If the church were perfect, then every member would tacitly agree with and live out the ultimate spiritual motivation regardless of what the elders do or say: “... walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10). We certainly want to lead people to that place of joyful service where they look forward to the only accolades that really matter: “His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master’” (Matt 25:21).

Since we live in a fallen world and each member of the church is still a work in pro-

People need to know how their ministry is significant to the building up of the body of Christ.

gress, not everyone can ramp up to full Christ-like maturity immediately after conversion. Here are some “big picture” things you can do that will help motivate believers to serve and continue to serve joyfully:

Articulate the vision. People need to know how their ministry is significant to God and to the building up of the body of Christ. The leader needs to help people see this for their respective ministries. The bricklayer is either laying bricks, building a wall, constructing a building or helping craft a cathedral. Which is the more motivational view point? The leader helps each volunteer see the higher calling in what he is doing.

If you can't explain clearly how a particular ministry is essential to the mission of your church, then maybe that ministry should be terminated, having lost its purpose and usefulness.

A greeter (for visitors on Sunday morning) can think of himself as just a greeter, or he can see that he is the point man for the team (rest of the church), ready to engage the unbelieving visitor who may that day be transformed from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. He is God's leading ambassador, the advance scout, the “doorkeeper in the house of the Lord.” This ministry of greeting could be the very instrument God uses to bring visitors back repeatedly to hear the gospel.

Or a greeter may be the first one to extend a warm greeting to a discouraged be-

liever or a returning backslider.

It is the leader's job to bespeak the importance of the various ministries to the mission of the church.

Communicate the goals. Make it clear what each particular ministry is to accomplish in tangible terms. For example, if you have greeters at the front door, what exactly are they to accomplish? Are they doing it simply because the church has always had greeters or because other assemblies do it? Clearly state what the goals are; for example, greeters are to make sure that every visitor is warmly welcomed, is shown where the coat rack, Sunday school classes and bathrooms are, and is given relevant literature helpful to him or her. The leader is always keeping the goals in front of those who are serving.

Redefine the culture. Culture is that set of perceived assumptions which control activity. The unstated rules often control people's behavior, despite the written or stated expectations. For example, one goal for greeters might be to be consistently stay at the front door of the building from 10 minutes before the start of meetings to 15 minutes after the start so as to make visitors feel welcome, whether they come early or arrive late. But the greeter might never show up on time or not stay all the way through, because the “culture” says something different. That may be because 3 out of 4 Sundays there are no visitors after the start of the meeting and, therefore, most may think it is really not important to stay at their post the whole time. The one who is enthusiastic about being an excellent greeter may soon get the idea that the “culture” says you don't need to stay that late. In the meanwhile, once every 3 or 4 weeks some visitors do show up late and leave the meeting early before anyone can talk with them. The greeter could have caught this and made personal contact by weathering the 3 out of 4 times when no one showed up. A leader brings this “culture” into the open, discusses it and encourages consistency, or leads the team in changing the goals.

Here are 12 practical specifics a leader can do to help volunteers serve well:

1. Give them the sense of importance they need to feel significant.

I learned years ago that one of the most important ministries in our church was bulletin-folding. What's so important about that? Well, there was a woman in our fellowship who was mentally challenged and confined to a wheel chair. She asked if she could help out in any way, suggesting that, even with her handicap, she could fold the bulletins if someone brought them to her. So we had the one who did the bulletin copying bring the unfolded bulletins to this dear sister in the Lord.

(Continued on page 3)

Part of being an elder's wife is interacting with people. There are times I look forward to meeting with my brothers and sisters in Christ and other times I think a vacation on a deserted island seems far more appealing. Why is it difficult to love others consistently and with the love of Christ. Jesus' "new" commandment is clear, we are to love one another. Peter reinforces this when he tells us to love one another deeply from the heart. I don't question that we are to love the believers but if the truth be known there are times when it is a real struggle. Personalities rub me the wrong way, things are said, e-mails fired off that get my defenses up, and before I know it tensions grow and loving them is far from my mind. Now that's a problem!

Paul had a special place in his heart for the Philippians. He recognized that they had a love for each other but he asks God that their "love would abound more and more" (Phil. 1:9-11 NIV). Love is something that grows. I have a friend who loves gardening. She knows all the names of the plants, what conditions they grow well in, how much sunlight they need—she is a wealth of information. She is always learning how to be a more effective gardener. The difference in her garden and mine ... well, there is no comparison, hers is a work of art, a thing of beauty, a reflection of her knowledge and desire to see things grow.

Our love for God's people is similar to my friend's garden. Her garden is a thing of

beauty because she has knowledge about each plant. Paul prays for the Philippians that their love would abound more and more "in knowledge and depth of insight" (NIV) or "real knowledge and all discernment" (NASB and NKJ). If my love and your love for God's people is going to be genuine and able to weather the difficulties that relationships bring, we must be growing in knowledge and discernment.

There are two ways this will happen. First, our knowledge of God must be continually growing. When we make the choice to be in the Word daily, our understanding of God and who He is will grow. As God's character is revealed to us it directly affects our love for

(Continued on page 4)

Volunteers *(cont. from page 2)*

In time, another individual took on the bulletin copying role, but felt the folding was easier to do as the bulletins came off the printer. She did not want to "bother" the handicapped woman with such a trivial thing. A few weeks went by and the dear sister asked me if we were upset with her for not folding the bulletins right. Why had we taken her ministry away from her? We quickly corrected the problem! Efficiency is not the highest priority. Rather, valuing highly the ministry of ever servant in the church was.

We all have varying capacities, but we have one Lord and one Spirit. And all are to be valued highly. Our role as leaders is to help everyone see their ministry as significant as that woman saw her bulletin-folding!

2. Give them a "ministry description" so they know what to do.

People want to know what they are getting themselves into and what is expected of them. Never underestimate what they are willing to do by watering down the expectations. When they catch the vision and significance of it, they will make great sacrifices.

3. Give them the training they need to serve well.

This may involve mentoring (on-the-job training), resources to read or sending them to a specialized conference.

4. Give them the permission they need to be confident.

Make sure they know they have the authority to serve confidently in their ministry role and to make appropriate decisions. This provides protection against the criticism which comes from serving they will invariably receive. It will also provide the responsibility they need to learn from their own mistakes. Volunteers need to know you stand behind them and their decisions, so long as those decisions are within the framework of their ministry.

5. Give them the freedom they need to be

creative.

People do much better when they have room for personal input in determining the goals. Affirm creative thinking, anything that goes beyond the "minimum" job description that helps accomplish the goals.

6. Give them the resources they need to do their job.

Explain how to handle expenses, what money and supplies are available, how to appeal for more resources and where they can go for help.

7. Give them the hearing they need to know their ideas are valued.

Invite feedback, listen and understand! Be willing to modify things when their good ideas fit within goals. Absolutely forbid yourself to mouth those mindless words, "We never did it that way before"—that is the ultimate de-motivator.

8. Give them the example they need to inspire them.

Demonstrate by your example excellence in service. Do they see you serving with that extra effort to move your ministry from being acceptable to being "well-done"?

9. Give them a sense of being part of a team so they don't feel alone.

Ministry team meetings to share struggles, joys, victories and prayer are encouraging to volunteers. These also give opportunity for group discussion and feedback which can generate helpful ideas.

10. Give them verbal and written appreciation to encourage them.

At a minimum, personally thank them in with some specifics about what they are doing well. Verbal encouragements go a long way. Everyone responds to a different "love language", so be sure to note the kind

of appreciation he or she responds to. Avoid the tendency to say, "My praise will only take away from their reward in heaven." That is not a Biblical perspective. Paul often expressed appreciation for his readers in their hearing! (See Phil 1:3-5, Eph 1:16).

11. Give them the accountability they need to ensure their success.

This is probably one of the most difficult to implement, but the most needed. You must first convince the individual you are "on their side" and fully committed to their success in service (see the previous 10 points). Accountability means someone is committed to their success. Without accountability, we convey that no one cares. This includes thoughtful feedback on how they can improve. Gently hold them to what they have agreed to: the vision, the goals, the job description. When done right, accountability gives the person confidence that they can grow in their ministry.

12. Give them spiritual support so they glorify God.

In other words, pray for them and pastor them so they are strengthened and use their service to enhance God's reputation among men.

This may seem like a long list...because it is! But volunteers are worth it. Let me encourage you to take just one or two items from the list and begin to work on them with a few "volunteers" in your fellowship. Share this list with all the leaders in your fellowship, so they can begin to do the same with people they lead in their various ministry areas. You just may find more people serving with joy as they sense the Holy Spirit working through you and other leaders to lead them. And they will keep coming back to serve—and to serve well. 

Forgiveness (cont. from page 1)

cherished or held onto is harmful. All too often, Christians have not dealt with problems in the past and have held on to resentments until they have become bitter. This is damaging to the health and destructive to any fellowship. Since our Lord commanded us to forgive if we would be forgiven, they reason, then why not just forgive all who have wronged us instantly and automatically, and “be free.”

Now it is true that the word “forgive” means to “let go” of something. So it seems

reasonable to “let go” of any possible cause of bitterness and resentment in the heart, that

is, to give it to God, which may be done without any concern for the response of the one who did the wrong. But if there is nothing more to forgiveness than this, we will find that although the short term effects may be enjoyable, the long term results can be devastating.

This understanding of forgiveness renders the many passages that teach us the conditions of forgiveness nearly meaningless. Can we be more “spiritual” than the Lord who gave these instructions and who requires our repentance before He forgives us? Is it a worthwhile trade to weaken the clear sense of many Scriptures so that one may seek “good mental health?” For another, this practice allows the wrongdoer to continue sinning and hurting others, yet being constantly “forgiven” by all the very spiritual people around him. Finally, it usually becomes apparent that the matter is not really resolved at all; cheap grace is no grace at all.

Making it Clear

It would be helpful to make clear the difference between two legitimate concepts: 1) that which we might call the release of a matter that is surrendered to God so that there will be no resentfulness or bitterness taking root in

our own hearts, and 2) the forgiveness granted to a sinning brother upon repentance that restores broken fellowship. Note that the motivation for the latter is love for the offending brother. True restoration between believers is possible, because it is founded on the simple fact that fellowship with God has first been restored

Genuine concern for the good of the other person contrasts sharply with that concern which is simply for self; “I have peace,

Can we be more “spiritual” than the Lord who requires our repentance before He forgives?

that’s all that matters.” In a “me – centered” world, filled with hurting and broken hearts,

quick fixes are welcomed by the masses. But the fruit can bring bitterness because the sinning brother is not helped and restored, so he continues on injuring others and ruining the fellowship in the church or family. In the meantime, if anyone waits to grant forgiveness that is genuine, he may be viewed as “harsh,” “unforgiving,” even “legalistic.” We must be very clear that there is a wide difference between an unforgiving spirit, and a heart that is longing to extend genuine and heartfelt forgiveness, the kind described by that words in the Scriptures.

As elders oversee the spiritual climate of the flock, they must be watching that no one becomes soured by resentment and bitterness, and “by it many be defiled” (drawn out of fellowship) Heb. 12:15. Every believer must be taught clearly in this matter. Wrongs are not to be held onto, and nursed along in the heart (lit. “cherished” as in Psalm 66:18). Rather, let there be an attitude of love and a willingness to forgive and restore (Gal. 6:1) at the very moment a brother turns from sin, and having received forgiveness from the Lord, seeks forgiveness from his brother. 

Wives (cont. from page 3)

others. One example would be, God is forgiving. If we confess our sins He is faithful and just and will forgive us of our sins, every time. That is amazing! We could not count the number of times that God has faithfully forgiven us. If this is God’s character, then what right do we have to hold grudges and refuse to lovingly forgive others? Our knowledge and discernment of God’s character will affect our ability to love the saints.

The second area is gaining knowledge about the people God has given into our care. Often we write people off as not worth our time. Maybe we perceive them as being stubborn and impatient and having behavior uncalled for. We make quick assumptions with little information. The people in your fellowship have a history, do you know what it is? What kind of families did they grow up in, how do they get along with family members, have they lived through any tragedies or illness, what is their work, do they have hobbies? These are just a few areas in gaining knowledge that will help us love them. One of my favorite questions to ask is, “Tell me about your spiritual journey.” Find out what the person believed before she came to Christ and how she became a Christian. This information will give us insight and help us understand why people behave the way they do. Understanding gives us an added ability to truly love.

There are times we love because we are commanded to love; but if this is the only basis of our love, it will not grow deep and will quickly wear thin. On the other hand, if we love as the Scripture encourages us to do by developing knowledge and discernment of God and of people, Christ’s love will be alive and growing in us. 

ELDERS’ SHOPNOTES

Editor: Chuck Gianotti
Editorial Assistance:
Ruth Rodger

HOW TO REACH US

Elders’ SHOPNOTES
c/o 27 Watchman Court
Rochester, N.Y. 14624 U.S.A.
E-mail: elderssn@rochester.rr.com
Voice: 585.429.5435
Web site: www.bible-equip.com/esn

CONTRIBUTORS

Jack Spender
Bible teacher

Mary Gianotti
Elder’s wife, Women’s ministry

Chuck Gianotti
Bible teacher

Scripture versions are noted in the first reference in each article.

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Elders’ SHOPNOTES is published bi-monthly as the Lord provides. To subscribe, write us at the address to the left and ESN will be delivered by regular mail. Or you can visit our web site at: www.bible-equip.com/esn to subscribe for either the snail-mail version or the e-mail version. ESN is also available in Spanish—see our website. ESN is mailed only to those who request a subscription. If you are receiving ESN in error, please contact us.

There is no subscription fee, but if you find ESN to be helpful and would like to support this ministry, please mail your gifts payable to: C.R. Gianotti. \$12 covers the material & postage cost for one year.

Feedback & comments are welcomed along with suggestions for future articles.