Generational Curses

The Sins of Generational Curse

By W.E. Nunnally

Introduction

In recent years the generational curse teaching has become quite popular in Pentecostal and charismatic circles, and is promoted by some of the most visible leaders in these movements. The nature of absolute truth and proper interpretation of Scripture, however, cannot be determined by the number of people who embrace a teaching or by the popularity of those who promote it. Matters of faith (what we believe) and practice (how we live out our lives as Christians) can only be determined by a correct understanding of Scripture.

The Basis for Generational Curse Teaching

Most teachers of generational curse base their teaching on some combination of Exodus 20:5,6; 34:6,7; Numbers 14:18; and Deuteronomy 5:9,10. Each of these texts contain the words, “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children … to the third and the fourth generations” (KJV).

Those who teach generational curse interpret these verses to mean that a person’s guilt is genetically passed down to all his descendents. People not only inherit their ancestors’ sin nature (the tendency all have to rebel against God), but they also acquire the accumulated guilt of their ancestors. As a result, God sees them as guilty, not only for their own sins, but also for their ancestors’ sins as well. Furthermore, Satan has the right to continue to hold legal claim against Christians who have not effectively dealt with their generational curses, resulting in failure, violence, impotence, profanity, obesity, poverty, shame, sickness, grief, fear, and even physical death.

Generational curse proponents then take their teaching to its next logical step. They conclude that Jesus’ blood was shed for the sins of the individual, but an additional step must be taken to remove the guilt a person inherited from his ancestors. This additional step is required for a person to be set free from the bondage that holds him captive to the sins of his forefathers. This procedure involves an elaborate ceremony that consists of listing the sins of one’s ancestors up to four generations, confessing their sins for them, reciting the recommended prayers and declarations, and personally breaking these supposed curses.

In Their Own Words

One Web site devoted to generational curse states, “The kingdom of God and darkness operate totally on ‘legal rights.’ Jesus came to confirm the Old Testament, not to erase God’s laws. … The whole family pays for the sins that their forefathers committed.

“Satan comes before the throne and shows legal rights to attack your body or finances. It is decided on if the claims are valid … if he is allowed to do as petitioned against you/your family.
“Generational curse: I have seen many who were not healed from these diseases even after tons of prayer ... though they do have faith! Pastors don’t understand the reason and blame it on the sick person’s ‘lack of faith.’ ... After learning about breaking the generational curses ... I have seen most of those people healed totally. NEVER to return!!!! Teaching on this takes 2 weeks to deliver to a church and lead them through the prayers.

“God is raising up an army today to bring forth a powerful anointing to set the church free ... but it must have the knowledge.”

Based on Exodus 20:4,5, Neil Anderson teaches that demons are passed from generation to generation and these demons have a foothold in the lives of Christians because of generational sins. To get the demonic strongholds out of their lives, Christians need to find out what these strongholds are, and perform deliverance ceremonies to break them. Counselors with special knowledge of demonic strongholds are needed if the case is severe. A special diagnostic test is given and the words to be repeated are provided, such as, “I cancel out all demonic working that has been passed on to me from my ancestors.”

Derek Prince states, “There may be forces at work in our lives that have their origins in previous generations. Consequently, we may be confronted with recurrent situations or patterns of behavior that cannot be explained solely in terms of what happened in our lifetimes or personal experiences. The root cause may go back a long way in time, even thousands of years.” He continues, “Most Christians who should be enjoying blessings are actually enduring curses … they do not understand the basis upon which they can be released.”

Rebecca Brown explains, “I myself used to think Christians could not have a demon indwelling them. That was until God called me to this ministry.” She continues, “Jesus cleanses us from our sins. … But we must take up the power and authority that we now have through Jesus Christ and ‘cleanse ourselves’ of ‘filthiness’ or demons. As soon as we accept Christ, the demons are trespassers and have no right to remain in us unless we give them legal ground to do so through sin and/or ignorance.”6 Elsewhere she describes children who “had inherited demons through the parents,” noting that she counseled them to “ask the Lord to break the line of inheritance and seal their children from that source of demons.”

Teresa Castleman also provides detailed instructions for casting demons out of Christians: “Call forth those curses that have been allowed through the generations by way of a Familiar Spirit — we break the hold and command in the Name of Jesus that it flee. We command that it go to dry places and tell the curse it not [sic] be allowed to go into any future generations. Its power and hold is broken forever.”

Promoters of Generational Curse Provide a Step-By-Step Procedure for Deliverance

Promoters of this teaching usually provide their readers with elaborate diagnostic tests and checklists, and even the exact words to utter during the deliverance ceremony. One
Web site suggests: “Make a detailed list of all the sins your family members have made as far as four generations back. If family members continue to sin in the present, their sins should be confessed each day. … It is important to be repentant on behalf of your family. After you have confessed all sins on each list, renounce any claims of Satan upon your life in the name of Jesus Christ. … Then spend a time of worship and praise to the Lord. … The Lord will unfold to you new freedoms in the days that follow.”

A representative example of the wording of such prayers can be found on the same Web site: “Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, I come before You and humble myself to confess the sin of _________. I ask forgiveness of this sin for myself, and any family members on both sides of my bloodline going back 4 generations. I loose the precious blood of Jesus on this sin and it will be washed from me. Please forgive me Father so I may be loosed from the bondages of Satan that have been placed upon me from this sin. I ask this in the name of Jesus.”

Another prayer recommended for Christians to recite reads: “Jesus, I ask You first to forgive me for my sins and cleanse me from any area where I have allowed Satan and evil spirits into my life. … I now cancel every curse and demons that have been assigned to destroy me. … I cancel every evil that was spoken against me.”

What Should Be Our Response?

Examine the biblical texts on which this teaching is based

First, we need to consider the Ancient Near Eastern context of the biblical texts used to teach generational curses. In Exodus 20 and 34, Moses was addressing the children of God who were surrounded by paganism. Pagans believed that those who committed cultic infractions, forgot their god’s birthday, offered the wrong sacrifice, or paid allegiance to another god who offered assistance in some special area (rain, fertility, or war), would die. (Notice that in paganism, the issue is never doctrine or morality.) The main god a person worshipped would issue a death warrant against the offerer and against his entire family until they were completely wiped out.

Like much of the Pentateuch, Moses is writing correctively. He is declaring to the superstitious Israelites that their God is different. He is interested in obedience from the heart, not merely one’s touching the correct cultic bases. Those whose lives are a constant offense to Him will be judged accordingly. Furthermore, if they persist in rebellion against God and His Word, they risk negatively affecting their immediate descendents—not by any perceived collective, biologically transferred guilt, but by their poor role modeling (see next point).

Second, we need to consider Moses’ point of reference. The children who were being judged were exhibiting learned behavior, not inherited guilt and the curses that come with it.

The results/effects of sin are not handed down to descendents genetically or legally. The negative effects of sin are handed down as learned behavior. The phrase “to the fourth generation” refers back to the great-grandfather and indicates that the influence a man has
on his son, grandson, and great-grandson only extends as long as he is living. His ability to transmit his ungodly ways to his descendents ceases when he dies. During his life, however, his descendents can choose whether they follow in his wicked ways or turn to the Lord. Therefore, we are neither responsible for our forefathers’ sins nor are we doomed to repeat them. Also, we do not have the legal guilt or the genetic tendency that proponents of generational curse teach.

Third, we need to read the texts used to support generational curse in their entirety. Numerous Bible-believing Old Testament scholars have noted that the judgment of God falls only on members of the second, third, and fourth generations “who hate me” (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9; compare also Deuteronomy 7:10; 32:41). These specialists note that these words (which appear at the end of the passages cited by proponents of generational curse) further identify those on whom the judgment falls — people who have willingly followed their older, rebellious role models. These words of Scripture explain that God’s judgment is reserved for individuals who persist in rebellion against God by choosing to perpetuate the sins of their ancestors.

**Point out the lack of biblical evidence for generational curse**

The phrase generational curse never appears in Scripture. The phrase generational curse or any other such phrase cannot be found in either Testament. This in itself is not sufficient to dismiss the teaching as unbiblical. The word Trinity does not appear in Scripture, but accurately reflects the teaching of the Bible. The fact the phrase generational curse is not found in Scripture, however, should alert discerning Christians that care needs to be exercised in this area. Conclusive proof should be forthcoming when the full counsel of God is surveyed.

The concept of generational curse is foreign to Scripture. When Exodus 20:5 and 34:6,7, etc., are read in their Ancient Near Eastern context and properly interpreted, the possibility that these texts support the teaching of generational curse is completely removed.

The diagnostic tests, rituals, and prayers recommended by those who teach generational curse cannot be found in Scripture. No such steps exist in the Bible, which is our only rule for matters of faith and practice. If generational curses were a reality, God would have given appropriate instructions in Scripture regarding how to deal with this problem. Consider what the rest of Scripture says

Considering all biblical evidence is always an appropriate step to take before concluding any matter of Bible interpretation. Like many other issues, when all of Scripture is considered, little doubt remains regarding the proper conclusion. Look again at the words of Moses, whose words are often used to support the doctrine of generational curse. Moses also wrote that “the fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16, KJV). The inspiration and noncontradictory nature of Scripture, along with the time-tested principle of Scripture interprets Scripture, requires
that we interpret Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 5:9,10 in light of Moses’ clear statement in chapter 24.

Second Kings 14:6 and 2 Chronicles 25:4 are parallel passages: “But the children of the murderers he slew not: according unto that which is written in the book of the law of Moses, wherein the Lord commanded, saying, The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor the children be put to death for the fathers; but every man shall be put to death for his own sin” (2 Kings 14:6, KJV). These Scriptures indicate that the teaching of Moses in Deuteronomy 24 was clearly understood and practiced in ancient Israel.

By the time of the prophets, the Israelites had forgotten Moses’ correction of paganistic ideas. The prophets found themselves confronting the same issue. During the Babylonian Exile, Ezekiel records, “The word of the Lord came to me: ‘What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: “The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son — both alike belong to me. The soul who sins is the one who will die’” (Ezekiel 18:1–4).

Ezekiel continues, “But suppose this son has a son who sees all the sins his father commits, and though he sees them, he does not do such things: He does not eat at the mountain shrines or look to the idols of the house of Israel. ... He does not oppress anyone. ... He does not commit robbery, but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. ... He will not die for his father’s sin; he will surely live. But his father will die for his own sin, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother, and did what was wrong among his people. Yet you ask, ‘Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?’ Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. The soul who sins is the one who will die [playing off Deuteronomy 24]. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him” (Ezekiel 18:14–20).

Jeremiah, a contemporary of Ezekiel, spoke to the Jews in Jerusalem: “In those days people will no longer say, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes — his own teeth will be set on edge” (Jeremiah 31:29,30).

These passages are clear. In fact, this is the Scripture-interprets-Scripture principle: Difficult passages should be interpreted in light of clearer passages, such as these from Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

It is instructive to note that not all Jews at this time were attempting to pass the buck. Though faced with the same trials of the Babylonian captivity, the prophet Daniel exhibited the opposite attitude of his contemporaries in Judah and Babylon. Instead of blaming his fate on his ancestors, as did the audiences of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he accepted his own personal responsibility and that of his contemporaries for the judgment
that had befallen them. He wrote: “And I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed and said, ‘Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly, and rebelled, even turning aside from Thy commandments and ordinances. … Righteousness belongs to Thee, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day — to the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are nearby and those who are far away in all the countries to which Thou hast driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against Thee. Open shame belongs to us, O Lord, to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, because we have sinned against Thee. To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him’ ” (Daniel 9:4,5,7–9, NASB).13

In Daniel’s prayer, there is no mention of the reason for the exile being the sins of the fathers. This is even more amazing when we remember that Daniel was aware that for generations God had sent prophets to warn Israel of such a judgment if they did not repent.

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had again forgotten the corrections of paganism expressed by Moses and the prophets. Jesus confronted the same issues. In John 9:1–3 we read, “And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was neither that this man sinned nor his parents; but … that the works of God might be displayed in him’ ” (NASB). While the disciples were fixated on the old paganistic worldview that sin-guilt could be inherited, Jesus was intent on emphasizing the glory and grace of God.

Jesus also stated, “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). Jesus’ words suggest that the forgiveness of God is sufficient to accomplish a degree of spiritual transformation sufficient to produce a changed life. Jesus believed that the woman He had just forgiven was free to choose whether she would remain in sin or depart from it. No reference is made to an additional prayer, ceremony, or formulaic renunciation needed to supplement God’s gracious offer of forgiveness.

Paul’s words, “God will render to every man according to his deeds” (Romans 2:5,6, KJV) and “For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God … and every one of us shall give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:10–12, KJV, emphasis added) clearly assert the New Testament’s priority on individual responsibility. These passages should be seen as reflecting the unified teaching of Scripture beginning with Moses (Deuteronomy 24:16), continuing in the prophets (Jeremiah 31:29,30; Ezekiel 18:1–4,14–16,18–20; Daniel 9:4,5,7–9), and culminating in the teachings of Jesus (John 8:11; 9:1–3).

Moses had tried to correct the paganism of his day, but by the time of the prophets, the people had lapsed back into their pagan ways. The prophets tried to correct the paganism of their day, but by the time of Jesus, the people had lapsed backed into paganistic thinking.
Today’s church has the witness of Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and the apostles, along with the New Testament, the fullness of the Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit — including the gift of discernment — and yet a percentage of the Pentecostal/charismatic church has lapsed into paganism.

Because we have not listened to Jesus nor consulted all of Scripture, we are again afflicted with a magical view of God’s world. In this world God’s ultimate sacrifice has limited power and effects, and must be supplemented by our own exorcistic formulas and human efforts. In fact, if you Google the phrase generational curse, you will find that this teaching is even more popular with the psychic network and occult crowd than it is in Christianity. Strange bedfellows, to say the least. This almost begs the question: Who is following whom?

Affirm the sufficiency of the Cross
The 21st-century church must assert the sufficiency of Jesus’ sacrifice as unequivocally as did the Early Church. Paul declared without fear of contradiction: “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display [the reference is to the Roman spectacle where conquering emperors and generals would parade the spoils of war and vanquished prisoners through the streets of Rome to demonstrate to citizen and enemy alike the power of the empire] of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Colossians 2:13–15, NASB).

Paul’s words clearly show that whatever sin-debt we had accrued was effectively canceled as a result of Jesus’ substitutionary death. Further, Paul asserts that the powers and principalities that held us in bondage to sin were not only defeated and disarmed, they were also totally humiliated in the process. The death of Jesus accomplished both forgiveness of sin and deliverance from demonic oppression and possession for those who appropriate that sacrifice to themselves.

Hymnist Horatio Spafford experienced this personally, and in his hymn, “It Is Well With My Soul,” even glossed the metaphor Paul used when writing to the Colossians.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

Similarly, Charles Wesley expressed in “O For a Thousand Tongues To Sing” the same message communicated by the apostle two millennia ago:

Jesus! The name that charms our fears,  
That bids our sorrows cease;  
’Tis music in the sinner’s ears,  
’Tis life, and health, and peace.
He breaks the power of canceled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.

Conclusion
So what is the end of the matter? When Jesus said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed,” (John 8:36, italics added). He meant it.


The Sins of Generational Curse Teaching
What is the harm in playing a little fast and loose with Scripture and saying a few extra prayers? Here is an incomplete list of the detrimental effects of generational curse. It:

1. denies the sufficiency of Scripture and requires that human-generated tests, rites, and formulas be added to the Word of God (compare 2 Timothy 3:15–17; 2 Peter 1:3–8).
2. denies the completed work of Christ on the cross.
3. creates a Jesus-plus gospel (see Galatians 1:6–9).
4. denies the biblical teaching of personal responsibility.
5. moves us a step closer to the paganism out of which we were called.
6. puts undue emphasis on the works of men, thus flirting again with a works-based relationship with God.

What Can We Learn From This Brush With Heresy?

1. The Scriptures are the only trustworthy lamp to our feet and light to our path.
2. The words of man can only bring us back into bondage: for example, fear. We must follow the full counsel of God in Scripture rather than the latest theological fad.
3. Fallen man is always looking for a quick fix. Most problems addressed by the ceremonies of generational curse cannot be cast out or bound. Behavioral problems need to be addressed in our discipleship walk. We need to daily take up our cross, reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, bring our bodies under subjection, take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and renew our minds by the word of God. A drive-by exorcism of our character flaws will leave us sorely disappointed when we awake the next day to find our flaws still with us. Jesus did not call us to a short-cut version of Christianity. He called us to discipleship — daily following the Master, submitting to His lordship, learning from Him, and becoming more like Him.
4. It serves to remind us of the power and sufficiency of Jesus’ blood.
5. Because generational curse has caused us to return to the Bible to re-evaluate its message, we are again reminded that our actions do have consequences, and our lives do have a powerful impact on our children, either for good or evil. By the way some believers live, they are indeed “sowing the wind and will indeed reap the whirlwind” (Hosea 8:7). Many people in our churches are in need of true biblical repentance, transformation, and empowerment so we can live the exemplary lives God calls us to live.