

Two articles on the “Carnal” Christian:

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The Carnal Christian – a study of 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

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“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” (ESV)

Why is it, in view of the staggering claim of so many millions of people in America to having been born again, that so high a number are manifestly indistinguishable from their professedly non-Christian neighbors?

The answer that has come from traditional evangelical circles is that they are **carnal**. As carnal Christians they are truly born again, but have, are, and may well continue to live as if nothing spiritual had ever occurred in their lives. They are assured and thus they believe that heaven is their destiny, although their arrival may well be celebrated with less fanfare than the more successful Christian.

This answer to the question posed has elicited no small response among a number of concerned Christian men and women. Sensing that in reality these people are not carnal but unsaved, their concern is understandable. One such man has written:

“The Bible certainly teaches that to make men consider they are Christians when in reality they are not is a great evil, and insofar as the ‘carnal Christian theory allows for a whole category of ‘Christians’ whose hearts are not surrendered in obedience to Christ,

its tendency is to promote that very evil. Nothing could be more dangerous. Lost, self-deceived souls who should be crying out to God for that supernatural change which is made known to themselves and to the world by a changed heart and life are often found hiding comfortably behind this very theory” (Ernest C. Reisinger, **What Should We Think of “The Carnal Christian”?** [The Banner of Truth Trust], p. 17).

I share this man’s concern and his analysis of the situation may be more accurate than not, but I question the tendency among such people who, on account of the abuse to which the concept has been subjected, reject out of hand the doctrine and reality of the carnal Christian. Some have become so extreme in their reaction to what is truly a disheartening situation, that they now insist “carnal” and “Christian” are mutually exclusive terms, wholly contradictory one to the other. Such, I believe, is an over-reaction to a justified concern.

Therefore, my purpose is to ask and answer this question: “Is there such a thing as a carnal Christian?” If so, what exactly does it mean? Is it a condition in which a genuine Christian may persist throughout his/her earthly life? Is it one among several categories or classes into which Christians may be placed? Is it the answer to the inconsistency noted above, in which we see a massive profession of faith on the part of the American public together with equally massive spiritual impotence? The answer to these questions is found, at least in part, in 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

Some Important Distinctions

I’ll begin by noting what appears to be incontrovertible evidence that the apostle Paul recognized distinctions among Christians owing to the various stages of sanctification. For example, we read in 1 Cor. 2:6 – “Yet among the mature (**teleios**) we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.” Again in 1 Cor. 14:20 Paul writes of the “mature” (**teleios**) believer. So too in Philippians 3:15, where the idea is explicit, notwithstanding the inaccuracy of the NASB translation of **teleios** as “perfect”. The text reads – “Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.” Note that Paul writes “as many (**hosoi**) as are mature,” implying that not all are at the same level of Christian development. A clear distinction is drawn between those who are and those who are not “mature”.

Hebrews 5:13-14 confirms Paul’s point, for there we read that solid food is for the mature (**teleios**), who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Thus, at minimum there is a valid biblical distinction between mature and immature Christians.

This may be taken a step further by noting Paul’s words in 1 Cor. 2:14-15 – “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.” Here are contrasted the “natural” man and the “spiritual” man. All agree that the “natural” man is unsaved, but does the “spiritual” man refer to all Christians irrespective of their maturity in the faith, or is it synonymous with “mature” as found in 1 Cor. 2:6? The latter would seem to be the case, and for two reasons. First, Paul says that the “spiritual” man is characterized by profound perception and insight which he subsumes under the

idea of discernment or appraisal. A comparison with Hebrews 5:13-14 reveals that the author identifies the essence of maturity with discernment. Discernment and spiritual insight are the result of the exercise and use of spiritual faculties, such that can only come with time, growth, and experience. Second, in 1 Cor. 3:1, the babe in Christ is contrasted with the spiritual Christian, thus prohibiting their being identical.

One final text which confirms yet again the point at issue is Galatians 6:1 – “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual [here the word is **pneumatikoi**] should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.” Again, some believers are clearly “more spiritual”, i.e., more mature, than others.

To sum up: it seems best that we understand Paul to be saying that there are those in a Christian community who may be called, in distinction from others, “mature” or “spiritual”. Of course, in one sense all Christians are “spiritual” insofar as all are indwelt by the Spirit of God (cf. Romans 8:9). It appears, however, that Paul uses the word “spiritual” in 1 Cor. 2 and 3 in a more restrictive sense as descriptive of those Christians who manifest a decidedly higher degree of the Spirit’s working in their lives.

As we look more closely at 1 Cor. 3:1-3 several factors are to be noted.

(1) As is his usual practice Paul introduces his words of rebuke with the affectionate “brothers”.

(2) The phrase, “But I . . . could not address you as spiritual [the same Greek word as found in Gal. 6:1] people,” most likely refers to the days of his mission in Corinth when Paul first preached the gospel and remained to instruct the newly saved.

(3) He says that during the early stages of their Christian life he could not speak to them as to spiritual or mature Christians but as to “men of flesh” or “carnal” or “fleshy ones”. Note well that he does not say as to “natural” men, as if to suggest they were not saved, but as to “fleshy” men. But even the word “fleshy” or “carnal” might inadvertently seem harsh. So Paul wisely qualifies it by the phrase “babes in Christ.” As Godet put it, “The Spirit is there, but He has not yet taken a decided preponderance over the instincts of the flesh” (**Commentary on 1 Corinthians**, p. 165). Calvin concurs and points out that Paul “does not mean that they were completely carnal, without even a spark of the Spirit of God, but that they were still much too full of the mind of the flesh, so that the flesh prevailed over the spirit, and, as it were, extinguished His light” (**The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians**, p. 65).

A closer look at Paul’s terminology is in order. In v. 1 and again in v. 3 he speaks of the Corinthians as “of the flesh” or “carnal”, but the words are different. In v. 1 “men of flesh” (NASB), “carnal” (KJV), “worldly” (NIV), “people of the flesh” (ESV) is the Greek word **sarkinos**. The word in v. 3 translated “fleshly” (NASB), “carnal” (KJV), “worldly” (NIV), “of the flesh” (ESV) is **sarkikos**. One can readily see that whereas the former ends in **-inos** the latter ends in **-ikos**. This may well be only a stylistic variation, on which no significant theological conclusions should be based.

Others, however, are quick to argue that something significant is in view (see Gordon Fee, **The First Epistle to the Corinthians**, n. 1, p. 121; also pp. 122-27; Anthony Thiselton, **The First Epistle to the Corinthians**, pp. 292-93; see also the discussion by Garland, p. 109). They point out that words ending in **-inos** generally denote a material relation, i.e., they denote the stuff of which anything is made. Thus in 2 Cor. 3:3 Paul contrasts “tablets made of stone” with “tablets made of flesh” (**sarkinos**), a reference to the heart. They suggest that we translate this word “fleshy” or “fleshen”. On the other hand, if words ending in **-inos** denote a material relation, words ending in **-ikos** denote an ethical relation and mean characterized by the flesh, actuated by low motives, and may be translated “fleshly”. If there is significance in this change of words (and I’m more than a little suspicious that there is), it is that in 3:1 Paul does not rebuke them for being “of flesh”, for as new Christians little more could be expected. But he does blame them in 3:3 for allowing the “flesh” to work actively in them as a ruling principle.

(4) It would appear that in 3:1 Paul is not finding anything amiss in the Corinthians at that stage of their Christian lives. It is normal for those who only recently converted to Christ to be “babes”. They cannot as yet be mature or spiritual. They must be carnal. There is, then, a sense in which a Christian can be called “carnal” and it not be a bad thing. It simply refers to the condition of a newly converted soul. Furthermore, it is apparent that Paul, in using the phrase “babes in Christ”, intended to teach us something from the analogy with physical growth and development, namely, that spiritual immaturity in a new believer is no more to be blamed or faulted than physical immaturity in a newly born infant. But both should grow.

This helps in understanding the statement in v. 2 concerning “milk” and “meat”. Some see here a reference to the **matter**, or substance, of preaching while others focus on the **manner**, or style, of preaching. Probably both are in view. A baby is human, but we do not converse with it as we do with a college graduate. A new born (and hence, by necessity, carnal) Christian is a Christian, but Paul did not converse with him/her in the same way he would with a mature believer. What is clear is that through the first half of v. 2 Paul is not rebuking the Corinthians. This will soon change.

(5) Whereas it was very well for the Corinthians to have been in the position of babes when they actually were babes, they ought by now to have made progress. The phrase “and even now you are not yet ready” (v. 2b) is quite emphatic and changes the tone of the paragraph. Now rebuke **is** warranted, for they had ample time and opportunity to develop and progress out of Christian infancy and carnality but had failed to do so. That Paul still had to feed them with milk, mere baby food, is indicative of arrested development: **they had failed to advance beyond a state of spiritual infancy.**

An illustration might help. Most churches have tiny chairs suitable for young children. Often people stop and comment on how cute it is for the little ones to be sitting in their miniature chairs at their equally miniature tables. But for adults to be caught sitting in such chairs would be singularly inappropriate. The Corinthians were just such a people. The time has long since passed for such behavior. Paul’s point, then, is that it is understandable for new Christians, babes in Christ, to be **sarkinos** or fleshy. But **sarkikos**, or characterized and actuated by the flesh, when predicated of those who had been Christians for some time, is blameworthy and inexcusable. The mature believer is “spiritual” (**pneumatikos**), characterized and actuated by the

Spirit. To be characterized by the flesh, as the Corinthians were, is the very opposite of what a Christian should be. Carnality, when present in a Christian of years, is indescribably offensive and unacceptable in the eyes of God.

The specific nature of their carnality, or the visible evidence that they were truly **sarkikos**, was the persistent problem of envy and strife in their congregation. Paul has in view their tendency to align themselves with one teacher or leader in a spirit of arrogance and exclusivity. This point should not be overlooked, for Paul speaks well of the Corinthians in 1:4-9. In other words, we are not to think of the Corinthians as wholly indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors, as if their lives were entirely “fleshly”. Rather, the problem of carnality focused on one specific transgression: “For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human?” (vv. 3-4).

Concluding Observations

From what has been seen, we may now draw four conclusions.

First, there are two senses in which a Christian can be spoken of as “carnal”. (1) As new converts, all Christians are to varying degrees carnal. (2) Among long-time Christians, some may be. The former is expected. The latter is not. However, insofar as the word “carnal” has come to have such negative connotations, it would be wise for us to forego calling new Christians “carnal”, and do as Paul: refer to them as “babes” in Christ.

We are still left with the fact that Paul refers to the Corinthians, by way of rebuke, as carnal. The use to which Paul puts the word in v. 3 should not be rejected, for it is clearly biblical and appropriate as a descriptive term for those Christians who fall into a similar pattern of behavior. So I see no reason to be disturbed that someone would distinguish between “carnal” Christians and “spiritual” Christians, especially in view of the obvious distinction between “mature” and “immature” found elsewhere in the NT.

Second, I caution against referring to “carnal” and “spiritual” as rigid categories or classes of Christians. The idea of a distinctive class or category implies a strict line of demarcation between one group of believers and another. It suggests there are readily identifiable stages in the Christian life into which one may enter if certain things are done or out of which one may fall if other things are done. Sanctification, however, is far too fluid for such strict categorization. In other words, sanctification is a process which, because of its constantly dynamic and progressive nature, defies rigid classifications. There are “babes” in Christ, as Paul indicates, but no two Christians are ever at the same stage of spiritual infancy. There are “carnal” Christians, but again in varying degree. No two Christians manifest the same depth or degree of carnality. There are “spiritual” or “mature” believers, but all the marks or fruits of spirituality are not apparent in all Christians at the same time and to the same extent. No individual’s spiritual growth is wholly constant and undisturbed and you will rarely, if ever, find any two Christians at precisely the same stage of sanctification. There are countless hills and valleys, stumblings, falls, moments of victory and defeat in the process of our growth in grace.

Carnality, then, although ideally a condition to be found only in the newly saved, is such that may raise its ugly head at any and every stage of the Christian life. Thus, it may be more accurate to say that there are as many categories and classes of Christians as there are individual believers. The principle which bears repeating is this: **carnality and spirituality, rather than being categories or classes into which one enters in the Christian life, are characteristics or moral tendencies which one manifests in varying degree throughout the course of the Christian life.** The ideal as set forth in Scripture is, of course, a progression that is always upward – away from manifestations of carnality and toward manifestations of maturity.

Third, carnality in the Christian, whenever and in whatever way it manifests itself, is a temporary condition. There is no basis in Scripture for the teaching that genuinely born again and justified Christians can persist, without great discomfort, in their sin (a discomfort, I might add, due to the promptings of the Holy Spirit or the chastisement of the Father, such as lead to repentance). Samuel Bolton put it well:

“We still have the presence of sin, nay, the stirrings and workings of corruptions. These make us to have many a sad heart and wet eye. Yet Christ has thus far freed us from sin; it shall not have dominion. There may be the turbulence, but not the prevalence of sin. There may be the stirrings of corruption. It was said of Carthage that Rome was more troubled with it when half destroyed than when whole. So a godly man may be more troubled with sin when it is conquered than when it reigned. Sin will still work, but it is checked in its workings. They are rather workings for life than from life. They are not such uncontrolled workings as formerly. Sin is under command. Indeed, it may get advantage, and may have a tyranny in the soul, but it will never more be sovereign. I say, it may get into the throne of the heart and play the tyrant in this or that particular act of sin, but shall never more be as a king there. Its reign is over; you will never yield a voluntary obedience to sin. Sin is conquered, though it still has a being within you” (**The True Bounds of Christian Freedom** [Banner of Truth], p. 26).

Fourth, our consideration of this issue must never result in an unbiblical separation of sanctification from justification. Holiness and a progressively changed life are not optional. “By this we know that we have come to know him,” says John, “if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3). Mere profession of faith, unattended by good works, does not guarantee the reality of faith. We would do well to remember the rebuke of Jesus to those who professed their loyalty and cited their miraculous deeds: “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Mt. 7:23).

The following "Question" was asked by a member of the congregation at Grace Community Church in Panorama City, California, and "Answered" by their pastor, John MacArthur Jr. It was transcribed from the tape, GC 70-9, titled "Questions and Answers" -- A copy of the tape can be obtained by writing, Word of Grace, P.O. Box 4000, Panorama City, CA 91412 or by dialing toll free 1-800-55-GRACE. Copyright 2001 by John MacArthur Jr., All Rights Reserved.

Question

"Is there such a thing as a Carnal Christian?"

John MacArthur

<http://www.biblebb.com/files/macqa/70-9-8.htm>

Answer

Yes, in fact, there is no such thing as a Christian who is not at times carnal. Did you get that? And if you're saying to yourself, "I have never been carnal," then, "God have mercy on you."

But let me tell you what people mean by that. There was a definition of a Christian as a Carnal Christian, as if that was a permanent condition. The people in the Church used to teach that there were three kinds of people, Natural, Carnal, and Spiritual. And they would define the Natural person as unregenerate, unsaved, self on the throne, life in chaos, and sin everywhere.

Then there is the Carnal person. What's that? That's the Christian who still has self on the throne. Christ is still in there somewhere, running around, but He is not in charge, and the life is still in chaos. So the only difference between a natural and a carnal person is that Christ is in there somewhere, but the life hasn't changed.

And then thirdly, there is the Spiritual Christian. Self is off the throne, Christ is on it, and the life is all in order. And so people came up with the idea that you could be either a Carnal Christian or a Spiritual Christian. You know, once you are saved you could say, "Well, I am going to stay a Carnal Christian, I like it better."

And that brings in this whole idea of Lordship, because those are the people who accepted Jesus as Savior, but not as Lord. Those are the people who said, "I don't want to go to Hell, and I want you to save me from Hell and I want you to forgive my sins, but I just don't want you to run my life."

And the old definition of a Carnal Christian was a person who believed in Jesus for salvation, but didn't let Him be Lord, and didn't let Him run his life. That's not what a Carnal Christian is. That isn't at all what Paul had in mind in 1Corinthians 3, not at all. Let me show you what it is.

There is only two kinds of people in the world. My grandfather use to say the "saints" and the "ain'ts," that's it, Christians and Non-Christians, Believers and Unbelievers. Now listen, the Natural man is the unregenerate. The Spiritual man is the regenerate man. Read Romans 8, the Spiritual man is the regenerate. But the Spiritual man can act in a fleshly way. Anytime you disobey the Lord, you are carnal. Anytime you obey the Lord, you are Spiritual. Anytime you do what you ought not to do, you are carnal. That means fleshy, you're operating off the principle of sin. Anytime you do what the Lord wants you to do, you honor the Word.

So carnality is not a permanent state of Christians who have not given Christ Lordship. Carnality is simply a momentary experience of the Believer who is disobedient to God. So it is

not a state, it is simply a kind of behavior. And all Christians at any given moment, right now, this moment here, are either Carnal or Spiritual, depending on whether you functioning in the Spirit or in the flesh. If you are sitting there and the Spirit of God is teaching you, and you are enjoying what's happening, then the Spirit of God is at work, you're a Spiritual person.

If you're sitting there saying, "I don't like what he is saying, I don't buy any of this stuff. I reject all this stuff. This stuff isn't true." And you have hostility in your heart, and you may be dealing with sin, and you don't like what I said, I don't know. Your flesh is reacting, that's Carnality. Understand?