

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Three Types Of Christians I Corinthians 3:1-4

Whenever we observe any local church or groups of Christians, we will always find some who are eager to learn the Word of God and apply it; others who show a few signs of wanting to grow up spiritually but who are very erratic and sometimes exasperating; still others who profess faith in Christ but show no real desire for the Word and generally display a negative, critical and divisive spirit in spiritual matters. How can we account for these attitudes and actions? The answer is found in I Corinthians 3:14.

By way of background, the Corinthian church was full of problems, factions, divisions and splits, largely because its members were exalting human wisdom and human leaders.

"My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ" (I Cor. 1:11-12).

The Corinthians had become men followers, and there was a great need for them to repent and honestly deal with their sin of preacher-worship. They were quite worldly in their thinking because they were impressed with worldly wisdom, so in I Corinthians 1:13-2-16 Paul explained the difference between divine wisdom and human wisdom. His point was that there is an infinite difference between man's wisdom and God's wisdom which has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Christians are to live by God's wisdom (the Bible) and are to reject the wisdom of the world totally. Yet what happened in Corinth was that these Christians in so many things thought like worldings rather than with the mind of Christ. They should have been governed by spiritual thinking; they should have been operating on God's wisdom in scripture, but instead they were governed by the human reasoning, wisdom and philosophy of the world. They had brought much of their worldly thinking into the church. In fact, they were trying to run their lives and their local church after worldly wisdom and with a worldly mentality.

THE SPIRITUAL CHRISTIAN (Mature Believer) 3:1a

Brothers. Paul addresses them as "brothers", assuming they were saved. They had made their professions of faith in Christ and Paul accepted that profession at face value. It is interesting to note they were still inside the church and active church members, They were fleshly (carnal) but were within the visible, local church. The New Testament knows of no

Christians who are not associated with a fellowship of believers; that is, they are connected with a local church. Often it is said that people who make a profession of faith in Christ but drop away from the church are just carnal Christians. I do not think this is what Paul meant by carnal Christian.

I could not address you as spiritual. Paul could not address these Corinthians as mature Christians, as spiritual people. Ironically, they thought they were very spiritually mature because they had a lot of human knowledge and had experienced supernatural phenomena like speaking in tongues. Yet, at that moment, the vast majority of them were anything but spiritually mature. According to the Apostle Paul, a spiritual Christian is a mature Christian who has learned to walk in dependence upon the Holy Spirit over a long period of time. He is not just a Christian filled with the Holy Spirit, but a spiritually mature Christian filled with the Holy Spirit. A mature Christian is one who knows the Bible and practices it over a long period of time so as to discern good from evil on a regular, consistent basis. A babe in Christ can be filled with the Holy Spirit and can even be spiritually minded, but a babe in Christ cannot be spiritual. There is no way for a babe in Christ to gain instantaneous spirituality.

“In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:12-14).

What are the marks of a spiritual Christian? First, he can take in strong doctrine (teaching). Those who are mature love the Bible and are open to new truth when the Holy Spirit reveals it. The spiritually mature know that God’s Word is authoritative and open their minds to it. Second, the mature person is able to teach the Bible either publicly or one on one. He knows the Bible enough to defend it to others. Third, the spiritual man can discern good and evil. He has a keen sense of ethics and morality. He is always misunderstood by the non-Christian and is often misunderstood by babes in Christ. Fourth, the mature man is constantly discerning, judging, examining, evaluating all things. He has spiritual insight and is constantly checking all things with the Word of God, his only rule of faith and practice. Fifth, the mature man knows how to deal effectively with the brethren. “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Gal. 6:1). Only one who is spiritually mature should rebuke another brother in Christ, for he has the wisdom of God to handle the situation. Sixth, a mature person has great wisdom and operates on divine, biblical principles, displaying the mind of Christ. He views life from a divine viewpoint. He knows how to rest in God and has a certain calm about life, for he relates everything to God’s sovereign plan. He lives by faith and not by experiences. He does not push the panic button every time something goes wrong. He trusts in God in spite of adverse circumstances.

THE FLESHY BABY CHRISTIANS (Carnal-Babes) 3:1b-2a

But as worldly. A better translation of "worldly" is "fleshy" or as the KJV translates it "carnal." The Greek word is sarkinoi. It denotes nature, substance or constitution and speaks of being "made of flesh." It carries the idea of fleshy and connotes a weakness towards sin. This is not speaking of sinfulness per se but of a babe in Christ who has not grown into maturity. These were carnal-babes or fleshy-babes. They were undeveloped and in a state of spiritual infancy. Every Christian is or has been in this state of babyhood. It is absolutely necessary and perfectly normal for all Christians to go through a baby stage, but it is quite abnormal for them to stay in this state.

An immature Christian has a limited capacity for God's wisdom. He can handle the milk of the Word but chokes on meat or solid food. The fleshy man or carnal-babe has a spiritual capacity but it is undeveloped.

Mere infants in Christ. Paul equates "worldly" or "fleshy" with infants in Christ. All babes in Christ are fleshy in that many of the old habits from the unsaved life and a lack of discipline are still in the life. There is nothing inherently evil with spiritual babyhood; every Christian starts out that way. Babies are delightful little creatures up to a point, but they require a lot of care. They are messy; they spit up and spill things. We all expect that kind of action when babies are little, but if these actions continue for five, ten, fifteen, twenty years and the person still demands the same kind of care, then there is a problem; there has been an abnormal growth. Babies can do many weird and frustrating acts until they begin to develop some spiritual habits. All we can do is pray and wait for a baby Christian to pass through this awkward state of spiritual growth.

When I was an infant I sucked my big toe and everybody thought it was cute, but if I did this same thing today, I would be a freak. Why? I never grew up.

The Corinthians were babies in Christ and were not taking in and living by God's wisdom, the Bible. For a person to understand divine truth, he must be born again, but once a person becomes a child of God, this does not automatically qualify him immediately for all spiritual truth. He must grow in spiritual understanding and obedience to the truth. When a person is first saved, he is a babe in Christ and is qualified only to receive the milk of the Word. He may have great zeal but it is zeal without knowledge.

Some marks of a babe in Christ are: 1) he chokes on strong doctrine; 2) he is always getting off the subject because his attention span is short; 3) he must be amused or you lose him; 4) he wants to talk about the fascinating and the spectacular; 5) he follows men rather than Christ; 6) he has a difficult time learning to speak out for Christ; 7) he gets his feelings hurt easily; 8) he wants to talk rather than listen; 9) he wants to quit rather than persevere through difficulty; 10) he tends to compromise the truth when the chips are down, and 11) he throws temper tantrums when he does not get what he wants.

I gave you milk, not solid food (meat). In context, Paul was speaking historically when he was first with the Corinthians, those eighteen months he was at Corinth when he came into that great city preaching the gospel. Notice he did not reprimand them for babyhood because this is a stage all Christians must pass through to become mature. Milk is essential nourishment for babies and strong meat is for the mature. The mature will starve on milk and babies will gag on meat.

In Paul's mind, it took at least eighteen months to two years for a man to reach any degree of spiritual maturity and perhaps even longer. The milk of the Word seems to be what Paul taught the Corinthians when he was with them those first eighteen months. He taught them the truth of Christ and Him crucified and the basics which relate to the Cross -- new life in Christ, repentance, faith, confession of sin, prayer, witnessing, etc. Surely Paul must have touched briefly or lightly on all doctrines of the Christian faith because all doctrines are related to Christ and Him crucified. Yet, his emphasis was on the basics of Christianity.

What then is the meat of the Word? It is the deep truths as they relate to the Cross the covenants, grace, election, predestination, the church, detailed prophecy and union with Christ which need much study, thought and prayer before becoming practical in the life.

Christians often say, "All we need in our church is the gospel. We need to get off all this heavy doctrine and preach the simple gospel." This was not Paul's reasoning at all. Yet it is where many evangelicals are today. There are multiple thousands of churches who have the simple gospel preached Sunday after Sunday. People get saved but the Christians never grow up; they never get out of spiritual babyhood because all they hear is how to become a Christian. To reach maturity, Christians need to see how the Cross, the gospel, relates to the deeper truths of the Word of God. Or to put it another way, they must go deeper into the full implications of the gospel. Christians need to push on in the faith, so they may become mature and serve Christ with effectiveness.

For you were not yet ready for it. In their baby stage of growth, the Corinthians were not able to receive the full impact of God's hidden wisdom, God's truth, the deep things of God, the things that God prepared for them. They could only enter into this as they would grow up spiritually. Babies have an undeveloped spiritual capacity for divine truth.

An immature Christian often goes from one church to another or one Bible study to another looking for some new truth or some new experience. This is a complete misunderstanding. What he needs to recognize is that he has only skimmed the surface of the truth he does know and he needs to get into the depths of the doctrine he does intellectually grasp. Maturity comes as we clearly understand and appreciate the truth that we do have.

A baby Christian ought not to get frustrated when he cannot comprehend all areas of spiritual truth. He ought not to feel inferior, nor should he reject a doctrine just because he cannot understand it. Just because a baby in Christ cannot put it all together or tie everything up in a neat little theological package, does not mean he should throw in the towel. If a person is a babe in Christ, he should recognize his limitations; take in what truth he can, pigeonhole what truth he does not understand and move out for Jesus Christ in faith and obedience. Spiritual maturity comes through a progressive process.

THE FLESHY CHRISTIAN (Carnal-Rebellious) 3:2b-4

Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. Paul charged the Corinthians with the fact they still could not take in deep spiritual food. The word "worldly" should be translated "fleshly" and the KJV translates it "carnal." The Greek word here is sarkikoi which means "according to the flesh." It is one who is fleshly and has a willfulness toward sin. This was a much more serious condition. They were carnal-rebellious. They were characterized by the flesh; that is, they were demonstrating certain manifestations of the sin nature. The flesh is that lower part of man's being which is in rebellion to God, and a fleshly man is a person under the influence of the flesh (sin nature). It had been four years since Paul instructed these Corinthians in the milk of the Word. It was all very well for the Corinthians to have been in a position of babes in Christ when they were supposed to be babes. But they should have grown out of that stage long before this time. After four years they were still babes, and this was now by choice because of the rebellion of their hearts. They were carnal-rebellious. Paul strongly reprimanded them for their carnal, fleshly condition which was due to sin. They were in sad shape spiritually, for they were not only babes but they also willingly did not want to grow. Their rebellion led to sin in their own lives and in the life of the local church.

For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly (fleshly)? This condition of carnal-rebelliousness brought a critical and divisive spirit to the church at Corinth. The evidence of their carnality was clearly manifested in jealousy and strife as they gathered together in little cliques and groups in the church. This is the work of the flesh or sin nature.

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious; sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I had before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19-21).

The carnal-rebellious Christian is one who is so assertive, so aggressive, so envious, so divisive he is out of step with God, out of step with himself, and out of step with everyone about him. There is a lack of harmony with God, others and self; and the result is always strife, division and jealousy.

The Corinthians had a unique situation. They were babes and willfully so. They intellectually knew the Word but they refused to use it or practice it. Their willful rebellion in not doing God's will was tearing up the Corinthian church. Their lives were tragic and a great disappointment to God. A Christian who willfully chooses not to grow spiritually pains the heart of a holy God and the result is an unhappy person who is filled with jealousy and strife.

The specific problem for which the Corinthians were carnal-rebellious was preacher-worship and this caused divisions in the church. However, their babyhood plus their rebellion was the root of other problems as well. Their carnal condition of being both fleshy and fleshly caused some general attitudes of spiritual indifference, laxity towards sin and holiness of life, head knowledge but little heart for Christ, and a lack of a submissive spirit to Christ, to one another and to the local church leadership. It manifested itself in lawsuits, sexual immorality, lack of submission, defiling the Lord's Table, abuse of Christian liberty, abuse of the gift of tongues, lack of love and a denial of basic doctrine.

Christians often say, "Let's go back to the New Testament church!" I agree, but deliver us from the Corinthian first century church. This was an abnormal church. Yet in our day there are more churches like Corinth -- a sad commentary on twentieth century Christianity in America.

Are you not acting like mere men? These Corinthians had moved so far from God's holy law and from Christlikeness they bore many of the outward signs or characteristics of unsaved people. Let's face it, these Corinthians were behaving like spoiled brats. They were thinking and acting on worldly wisdom and not God's wisdom. They were trying to run their own lives and the local church by worldly wisdom which will always bring failure into the Christian's church and personal life.

For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men? To be followers of men, preacher worshipers, is the height of carnality. Why did this happen? Because the Corinthians were thinking like the world and not operating on divine wisdom as found in the Bible. The world had invaded the church.

CONCLUSION

If you have been following closely during this message, you probably have some questions which I will now try to answer.

How long can a person stay in a carnal-rebellious condition? A carnal condition is always temporary. It may take awhile but a Christian will deal with his carnal-rebellious attitude, for a Christian cannot stay in a permanent carnal condition because this is contrary to the whole teaching of the perseverance of the saints. King David was in a carnal condition for about one year before he confessed his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. The Corinthians had deteriorated into a condition of carnal-rebelliousness and were in it for at least two years.

What happens to a carnal-rebellious Christian? No carnal-rebellious Christian can ever really be happy in sin. He may cover the sin but inwardly he is miserable. He will experience: 1) the convicting work of the Holy Spirit; 2) the discipline of God; 3) personal problems because he is not operating on the power of God; 4) lack of assurance of salvation if persisted in over a long period of time. The most miserable person in the world is the carnal-rebellious Christian who is not in fellowship with Christ.

How should a carnal-rebellious Christian be handled? The first step is to help the carnal rebellious Christian to see his sin and encourage him to confess it and repent of it. The second step is to warn him of God's discipline if he does not confess and repent. The third step is to

never give assurance to a Christian who is carnal-rebellious, for assurance will drive him further into sin. The fourth step is to take the carnal-rebellious person back to the Cross if there are no signs of repentance, treating him as an unsaved person. Unrepentant professors of Christ should be treated as unsaved until they give evidence of genuine faith in Christ. God alone knows the heart but we can only go by the fruit we see.

But a person who seems never to submit to God's will is more likely the "natural" person of 2:14 than a carnal Christian regardless of what professions he or she has made at some time in the past (Craig Blomberg, First Corinthians).

The fifth step is to have the unrepentant, carnal, fleshly Christian challenge his own faith as to whether it is genuine or false. After the Apostle Paul had encouraged, exhorted and even threatened the carnal Corinthians, he finally asked them to test the reality of their faith.

"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you —unless, of course, you fail the test" (II Cor. 13:5)?

God has a word for each person hearing this message. If you are an immature, baby Christian, God says to you, "Let us go on to maturity." If you are a mature, spiritual Christian, God says to you, "Press on to take hold of Christ more." If you are a carnal-rebellious Christian, God says to you, "Repent and confess your sins, for He is faithful and just to forgive you for your sins." If you are a soulless, natural, unsaved man or woman, God has a word for you. He says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."