

THE CARNAL CHRISTIAN

The whole subject of carnal Christians has caused much controversy among evangelicals in our day. As with most controversial subjects, it is difficult to get opponents to objectively consider the subject in view of the biblical text. When the whole issue of the carnal Christian is raised, often there is more heat than light and more smoke than fire.

There are two extremes to avoid. One extreme teaches the carnal Christian doctrine in such a way that once a person is saved he can live in a habitual state of sin without yielding to the Lordship of Jesus Christ at any time. Carnal Christians, they say, are true believers but not true disciples. They say that if the carnal Christian would get spiritual (which is the filling of the Spirit) then he would begin to be a disciple. A carnal Christian will suffer only loss of rewards in heaven but will not suffer the loss of salvation.

This extreme viewpoint has some truth in it but it does not see experiential holiness and good works as in any way connected with the perseverance of the saints and eternal security. Holiness is not a necessity in the salvation process for those who hold this theology, it is merely optional. [See CHART #1]

The other extreme to avoid is the teaching that there are no carnal efforts by Christians in living the Christian life. The proponents of this view teach Lordship and discipleship in such a way that it almost means perfection from sin. This group sometimes denies that the Bible teaches a carnal Christian. They say that “carnal” and “Christian” are contradictory terms.

There is some truth in this view but often those who agree with it fail to take into consideration the sinfulness of the human heart even in the Christian. Every true Christian knows that at times he becomes rebellious to God and does not want to do God’s will. Yet, every true Christian also knows about the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, which makes a Christian miserable when he does sin. He also knows about God’s discipline that comes when he gets out of fellowship with God.

The scriptural truth seems to be somewhere between these two extremes, and the answer to this dilemma is found in a right understanding of First and Second Corinthians.

THE CORINTHIANS WERE TRUE BELIEVERS

The Corinthians were said to have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, sovereignly called by God to salvation, and those who had truly called upon the name of Christ to save them.

“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2).

The saints at Corinth were said to be “in Christ” and were called “brethren” (1 Cor. 3:1). They had made their profession of faith in Christ and Paul had accepted that profession as genuine.

These Corinthians were still faithful church members and had not left the Christian assembly.

“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19).

They obviously wanted to be in a local church and with other Christians.

This group of Christians at Corinth had many different types of spiritual gifts, and they were being exercised. *“Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed”* (1 Cor. 1:7). However from chapters 12-14, we conclude that they were abusing their spiritual gifts, especially the gift of tongues.

There were at least some in the Corinthian Church who had a great zeal for the ministry. *“You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints”* (1 Cor. 16:15).

There was obviously some spiritual fruit evident in these Christians at Corinth. They did show the marks of true grace in some areas of their lives. While there were spiritual good works evident, they were few and weak. It was these Christians that the Apostle Paul called “carnal.” We may conclude that even carnal Christians give some signs of spiritual life even though it may be overshadowed by babyhood or rebellion or both.

THE CORINTHIANS WERE CARNAL CHRISTIANS

Background

Before we begin to discover in what sense these Christians were carnal, we must make some general observations about this church. First, Corinth was a military town, and a huge naval port. It was called the “cesspool city” of Greece because of its vice and immorality and there were all kinds of temptations to sin. It was also the center of pagan religion and worship. Most of the believers at Corinth were saved out of this pagan environment, which would certainly have had an affect on them. Second, the church at Corinth was a unique church as this was the only assembly that Paul had to admonish for their carnality. The Corinthian situation was abnormal, for as far as we know, no other New Testament church had this problem. Remember that this was not a normal church but an abnormal one. [See CHART #2]

Carnal Babes (3:1-2)

“Brothers”

These to whom Paul addressed himself were Christians because they are called brothers. Paul assumed their profession of Christ to be genuine, and, in his mind, they did bear some marks of saving grace.

“. . . I could not address you as spiritual”

Paul could not acknowledge these Corinthians as mature in the things of Christ. A spiritual Christian is a mature Christian who has learned to walk in dependence upon the Holy Spirit over a long period of time.

In context, the Apostle Paul is referring to a message of wisdom among the mature (1 Cor. 2:6). The mature are spiritual people that have the mind of Christ and are able to make godly judgments. *“The spiritual man makes judgments about all things”* (1 Cor. 2:15). *“But we have the mind of Christ”* (1 Cor. 2:16).

A spiritual Christian is not a Christian filled with the Holy Spirit, but a mature Christian filled with the Holy Spirit. A babe in Christ can be filled with the Spirit and will be spiritually minded, but a babe in Christ cannot be spiritual. There is no way for a babe in Christ to gain instantaneous spirituality.

“. . . but as worldly (fleshy, carnal) mere infants in Christ”

The word for worldly means “fleshy” or “carnal.” It is the Greek word *sarkinos* which denotes nature, substance or constitution and speaks of being made of flesh. It carries the idea of fleshy and connotes a weakness toward sin. The word “fleshy” (carnal) is made equivalent with babes. The Christians were called carnal (fleshy) because they were babes in Christ who had never grown up into spiritual maturity. We can say that they were carnal-babes. It is normal to be a carnal-babe, and all Christians have been, or are, in this state, but it is not normal to stay in this state.

“I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.”

When Paul was with them for 18 months, when there were new Christians, he fed them with the simple milk of the gospel. They were babes and could not take in the deep meat of the Word. But after almost four years, they still were not able to take in the meat of the Word.

What is the milk of the Word? (1 Cor. 2:8). Simple teachings, such as Christ’s gospel, the new birth, faith, repentance, confession, prayer, and witnessing are milk. All the book of First Corinthians must be milk, because the Corinthians were not able to take in strong teaching.

What is meat? Deeper teachings, such as the covenants, giving, election, predestination, church, detailed prophecy, union with Christ are meat. Therefore, books like Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians are meat.

Carnal-Rebellious (3:3-4) *“For you are still worldly (fleshy, carnal)”*

The word here for “carnal” is *sarkikos*, which means “according to the flesh,” “fleshy,” or “willfulness toward sin.” After four years, they were not only still babes in Christ, but they were also willfully babes and living according to the flesh. They were carnal-rebellious. Paul reprimanded them, for now their carnal condition was due to sin.

“For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly (fleshy)? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere men?”

This condition of carnal-rebelliousness brought a critical spirit and divisions in the local church and these Christians walked “as” or “like” unsaved men. They had moved so far from Christ and God’s law that they demonstrated many of the same outward characteristics of unsaved people. Their willful rebellion as babes made them barely distinguishable from the unsaved world. They were not totally carnal or they would have been unsaved, but they had many of the same characteristics as unsaved men. They were walking according to their natural inclinations rather than walking in dependence upon the person of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is not necessarily setting up a system to classify Christians. He is simply telling a group of believers that in one area of their lives they are acting as if they were not Christians. He was talking to people who were still attending church services faithfully. He had seen the marks of God’s grace in them in some areas of their lives. Yet, they were fleshy (carnal). However, they were not people dominated by the sin nature and in open and continual disobedience to God. (Rom. 8:6-8).

Were the Corinthians carnal (fleshy and fleshly)? Most assuredly. They were carnal in the same sense that every Christian, without exception, is carnal. They were not sinlessly perfect and much corruption still remained in them, and one specific area of their lives really proved it. Their rebellion was shown in their preacher-worship, the exalting of men above Christ, the forming into parties in the church and the causing of strife and division in the church. These were not only baby acts but they were also rebellious acts for they were contrary to God’s law for the true Christian.

However, these Corinthian Christians were not dominated by carnality, but like every true believer proved that other areas of their lives were being sanctified by the grace and power of Christ.

THE CORINTHIANS LIVED LIKE CARNAL CHRISTIANS

The specific problem for which the Corinthians were carnal-rebellious was preacher-worship and causing divisions in the local church. However, their babyhood, plus their rebellion, was the root of other problems as well. This carnal condition of being both fleshy and fleshly caused some general attitudes of spiritual indifference, carelessness toward sin and holiness of life, head knowledge but little heart for Christ, and a lack of a submissive spirit to Christ, one another and spiritual leadership.

A quick review of the book of First Corinthians will show us many of the marks of a carnal-rebellious Christian. These marks were sometimes gross immorality, but most of the time the sin was subtle and insidious.

They were exalting human leaders and set up opposing groups within the local church (1 Cor. 1:11-12). They were mere followers of men rather than followers of Christ. They exalted human wisdom above divine wisdom (1 Cor. 2). They had a human viewpoint and not a divine viewpoint and tried to run the local church by secular, human reasoning.

The church was filled with divisions, strife and envy (1 Cor. 3:4). They failed to judge those in the assembly who were in sin. A man was guilty of the sexual perversion of incest and they would not discipline him (1 Cor. 5:1-2, 13).

They were going to the secular law courts against one another instead of having the church help solve the problem (1 Cor. 6:1, 5-7).

They challenged Paul's right to be an apostle for they did not like his authority (1 Cor. 9). They were guilty of attempting to remove God's appointed leadership from the church.

The women in the local church were praying and prophesying without their heads covered (1 Cor. 11:1-15). Women were not in subjection to the church or to their husbands in spiritual matters.

Others were coming to the Lord's Table drunk, for they "made common what God made sacred" (1 Cor. 11:17ff).

They were misusing and abusing the spiritual gift of tongues so as to cause great confusion in the local church (1 Cor. 12, 14).

They were failing to exercise genuine love in the church, for they were thinking about themselves and not about others (1 Cor. 13).

There were some who were denying some of the basic fundamentals of the Christian faith, namely, the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12).

They had some financial problems because the people were not giving as they should. They promised to give to the needy saints in Jerusalem but had failed to make their promise good (1 Cor. 16:1-3).

THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

How Does One Become Carnal?

Carnality is a condition as well as an act. Each time we sin we have done a carnal act. If we fail to confess that sin, then we will do more sin and move into a condition of carnality. When a person does an act of sin, this breaks temporal fellowship with Christ and sets up the possibility of a condition of carnality. If this sin is not confessed, then the rebellious Christian can go backward in the Christian life and come to a condition of being a carnal-rebellious Christian (backsliding).

The Christian is either going forward or backward in his Christian life but he is never neutral or stationary. Just as a Christian moves into a condition of carnality, so, when he confesses his sin, he is immediately forgiven and fellowship is restored, but it takes time, to work out of the carnal condition into a comfortable attitude with Christ. We may confess our sins and still feel bad, but in a day or so, we usually get back into a close feeling with Christ. [See CHART #3]

There are different expressions used by Christians to express this carnal-rebellious state—sin, breaking God’s law, rebellion, getting out of fellowship, backsliding, etc.

How Long Can a Person Stay in a Carnal Condition? [See CHART #4]

A carnal condition is always a temporary condition. A true Christian will deal with his carnal-rebellious attitude sooner or later, for a true Christian cannot stay in a carnal state for this is contrary to the whole teaching of progressive sanctification.

Apparently, it is possible to be in a carnal-rebellious condition for a fairly long time. King David was carnal in one sense for a whole year before he confessed his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. The Corinthians had declined to a state of carnality and were in this condition for at least two years.

The Christian in a condition of carnality cannot be happy or experience the blessing of God. Carnal Christians will experience the convicting of the Holy Spirit and may become insensitive to it for a while. They will also experience the disciplinary hand of God. This, plus the fact that they are suffering the historical effects of their sin, will make them very miserable. The most miserable person in all the world is the carnal Christian who is not in fellowship with Christ.

A person who is a fleshly, carnal-rebellious Christian, refusing to grow in grace, can expect four things to happen to him:

1. He will experience the convicting work of the Spirit.
2. He will receive divine discipline.
3. He will have personal problems because he is not operating on divine power.
4. He will have no assurance of salvation if the situation persists over a long period of time.

How Do We Deal with Carnal Christians ?

The first step is to help the carnal Christian see his sin and encourage him to confess it to God. If he does not, then we must warn him of God’s discipline, which is certain if he is a true child of God.

We must always begin with the person’s profession of faith and assume he is a Christian, seeking to bring the rebellious Christian to repentance. However, one thing we must never do is give assurance to a Christian who is carnal-rebellious, for assurance will drive him further into sin, causing him not to face it and repent of it.

If this person continues in a habitual pattern of rebellion with no signs of repentance, then we must take him back to the cross. We must treat him as an unsaved man until he comes back into fellowship.

As long as a professing Christian is in the state of carnality, no pastor, no Christian friend, has the slightest ground for holding that this carnal person has ever been regenerated. We are not to judge in the sense of pronouncing eternal destiny. God’s judgments are inscrutable. Nevertheless, it is a pastor’s duty to counsel such a person, “You do not give evidence of being in a regenerate state. You must remember Paul’s warning, ‘Examine yourselves whether you are in the faith; prove yourselves. Do you not know yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you? You are not reprobate are you?’” (J. Oliver Buswell, *Systematic Theology*)

Paul himself referred to the Corinthians as “like” unsaved men. Carnal-rebellious professing Christians who walk as men should be treated as unsaved men until they give evidence of genuine faith in Jesus Christ. God knows the heart, but we can only go by the fruit we see.

It is difficult to admit that a person might be lost after we think he has been saved. This is especially true when we are emotionally involved with the person. This is true of parents and their children. Parents often do a great injustice to their children by telling them they are saved when they give no outward evidence of salvation. Parents want their children saved so much that they will do anything to get them to make a decision for Christ. If a child later goes astray from his initial profession, the parents

often try to deal with the child as a carnal Christian when their child might be unsaved. The parents cannot face up to the fact that their children might be lost. If they really love that child, they will dare to confront him with the truth, hoping that the Holy Spirit will put him under conviction and the child will repent and believe in Christ.

The last step in dealing with a carnal-rebellious Christian is to have the carnal Christian challenge his own faith as to whether it is real. After Paul had dealt with the carnal Corinthians, he challenged them as to the reality of their faith. He undoubtedly felt that a few of them had not been genuinely saved.

“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? (are reprobate, rejected)” 2 Cor. 13:5.