

# CARNAL AND SPIRITUAL CHRISTIANS

by Ray C. Stedman

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The church at Corinth was full of problems, factions, divisions and splits largely because its members loved the wisdom of men. They were proud of their eloquent ability to explore and explain many fascinating subjects, although no one was being changed much by all this display of erudition and knowledge. And because, as always happens, human wisdom reflects various viewpoints, they had split and divided and they were full of boastings and glorying in the leadership of various men. As we have seen, Paul has spoken plainly and bluntly to them. He showed them the infinite difference between the wisdom of men and that secret and hidden wisdom of God which has been revealed to us by the Spirit.

These represent two very contradictory ways of life, as we have seen in Chapter 2. You cannot mix them; one excludes the other; there is no compromise possible between them. At the close of that chapter, the apostle has clearly distinguished them:

- There is the natural man, he says, and the natural thinking which is shared by the world around and which, therefore, is limited, confused and uncertain in its judgment.
- Then there is spiritual thinking. The spiritual man has been given by the Spirit the mind of Christ, and his thinking, therefore, is comprehensive; it takes in all things. It is authoritative; the spiritual man is not to be judged by anyone. It is realistic; it deals with life as it really is.

All this is in Chapter 2, and it applied to this church in Corinth in a very practical way. What is the trouble with this church? Well, as the apostle has told us, by now they should have been governed by spiritual thinking; they should have understood all that God had revealed to them in the Scriptures in such a profound way that their outlook would be controlled by this kind of thinking in everything they did. But instead, they are still operating on the natural philosophy of the world around, and they have brought all the thinking of the world into the church.

You will recognize, I think, if you have traveled around at all today, that this is probably the most common problem that exists in the church. Everywhere I go I find it true that people try to operate the church very much as though it were a kind of a religious country club, so they operate it like any other club -- for the benefit of its members. Little regard is given to what the church is as the instrument of God to reach a degraded, discouraged and defeated world. As a result, people are bringing all the thinking of the world into the church. We live in a democracy, therefore, people think of the church as a democracy, as though the final authority rested with the people. You get congregational government instead of what the Scriptures describe as a body of which there is a Head who is a living Being, present among us, who is the final authority and has the right of planning and programming within the church. And because the government is turn like a hierarchy with a president at the top, or a business is run like a hierarchy with a chairman of the board and all the other people in varying varied ranks of insecurity and insignificance below them, so the church is run that way. The pastor is exalted to be the head and all the others fall in the varied ranks below him. This reflects the thinking of the world, natural thinking, which is destructive to the church.

Because the world operates with the need for money, this becomes all-important in the church and you find churches that operate, as I said in an earlier message, as though the Scripture said, "Seek ye first the Lilly Foundation, and all these things will be added unto you." But the church should not be that way, and the trouble with this church at Corinth was that it was still thinking in these terms.

We think in terms of numbers as all-important, and people today are actually renting fleets of buses and going out and bribing people to come to church. It is going on right this morning. Many churches pride themselves on the number of buses they send out and they actually bribe children by candy and other things to come to church just to build up the numbers. So you can see how the thinking of the world has infiltrated the thinking

of the church.

Now, Paul says in plain language, here in Chapter 3, that this is all wrong,

**But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not 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 like ordinary men? For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," are you not merely men? {1 Cor 3:1-4 RSV}**

Notice that three times Paul uses the phrase "of the flesh." That phrase represents the problem here at Corinth. The apostle actually uses two different Greek words that are translated the same way in this version here, and, though they are closely related, there is a difference between them. The first one is the word, *sarkinos* which comes from the Greek word for "flesh," *sarks*. We could translate *sarkinos* into English by the word "fleshy." Paul is not putting them down when he uses this word, he is merely recognizing their nature -- they are fleshy people; they are of the flesh.

All of us here are fleshy people. Some have more flesh than others; I can see it very well from here! Some of us are trying to help ourselves in this problem of fleshiness.

And all Paul says is, "I could not speak to you as spiritual men because you are fleshy men." In other words, he began where they were. Everybody is there before he comes to Christ, and, as Paul came and preached to these Corinthians, he found them to be fleshy people, ordinary people, made of flesh and blood. He started there with them, and he preached Christ to them. And even after they came to Christ, he recognizes they still had not advanced very far beyond the normal, natural outlook of flesh and blood.

He is careful, however, to indicate they were not unregenerate after he had brought them to Christ. He calls them "brethren," and he says they are "babes in Christ." They are "in Christ," but they are babies. That is the problem. Paul was in Corinth a year and a half and he preached to them and taught them, but in all that time they never advanced very far beyond babyhood. They were still governed by the thinking of the flesh. So, in the second part of this section, where he refers to the flesh again twice, he uses a slightly different word. It is not *sarkinos* here, but *sarkikos*, which comes from the same root but it means, "dominated by the flesh." The Latin word for flesh is *carne* and that is why in some versions this is called "carnal." "You are carnal; you are dominated by the flesh; your thinking is fleshly, not fleshy, but fleshly," and this is the way it should be translated here,

**... for you are still fleshly. While there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and behaving like ordinary men? {1 Cor 3:3 RCS Version}**

Someone who is still fleshly, or carnal, after he has become possessed by the Spirit is one who is still thinking like a natural man. We see the same divisions in Romans 8 where Paul speaks of those who are no longer *of the flesh*, i.e., they are not unregenerate but they walk *according to the flesh* instead of according to the Spirit. Paul is using the same terminology in each case.

What is this like, this condition of carnality or fleshliness? Well, Paul describes it first as "spiritual babyhood." Now there is nothing wrong with babies; everyone starts out that way. Babies are delightful little creatures, up to a point, but they require a lot of care. They are messy; they burp, and they spill over in various ways.

Someone has described a baby as an alimentary canal with a mouth at one end and no responsibility at the other!

That is what a baby is. No one minds that when babies are little; we all have to have that kind of care, and even a young father will learn to change diapers. But when that condition goes on and on and on and the baby becomes 5, 10, 15, 20 years of age and it still requires the same amount of care, and you are still changing diapers, it is a disgusting condition. That is what Paul is talking about here -- spiritual babyhood that continues

too long and that requires milk instead of meat.

That is a very important distinction.

In chapters five and six of the letter to the Hebrews (the section is unfortunately broken by the chapter division there), you have a very helpful explanation of what these terms mean, {cf, Heb 5:11-6:8}. This was the problem with the Hebrews too. They were spiritual babies; they had not grown up; they had a case of arrested development. That passage uses the word "milk" as well. It says, "You need milk," {Heb 5:12b RSV}. Well, what is milk? Hebrews 6 tells us that it is the elementary doctrines of Christ, and it goes on to list them for us:

The first one consists of evangelistic preaching, i.e., telling people how to become Christians. One of the most dangerous and, I think, deadly things in the church is the habit that thousands of churches have gotten into of preaching the gospel over and over every Sunday morning. People never grow up; they never get out of spiritual babyhood because all they hear is how to become a Christian. Now that is all right for babies; that is what helps them become Christians and leads them to Christ and established them, but evangelistic preaching is milk.

Hebrews goes on to say that teaching concerning rituals like baptism and laying on of hands (probably for healing), and all this emphasis on physical healing, rituals and ceremonies are part of the milk that babies need. It is not yet meat, the strong food that is required for maturity.

Hebrews 6 tells us also that truth about the resurrection and the last judgments, about prophesy and eschatology, all this is milk. It is designed to get them started in the Christian life, but it is no way to build maturity as a Christian. Yet, across America there are thousands and thousands of churches that spend their whole teaching period, year after year, in investigating more about rituals, ceremonies, baptisms, prophecy and prophetic matters, and evangelizing. That is milk.

What is meat?

Meat is preaching that unfolds the full riches and magnificence of the gospel so that people grow up. They stop being children, as Paul says in Ephesians 4, "...no longer to be children, tossed to and fro and carried about every wind of doctrine," {Eph 4:14 RSV}. That requires the meat of the word.

Christ died for my sins; that is milk. We died with Christ to sin: that is meat. That is what will free me from habits and attitudes that are irritating to others and that make me difficult to live with.

The knowledge of the gifts of the Spirit -- that is milk. These Corinthians had that knowledge. Paul says right at the very beginning that they had all the gifts present among them so that "you are not lacking in any spiritual gift," he says {1 Cor 1:7 RSV}. They knew all that, but that is milk. What they did not understand was how to produce the fruit of the Spirit, which is love. That is meat. Later on Paul will point that out to them. He will discuss the gifts of the Spirit, and then he will say, "and I will show you a still more excellent way," {1 Cor 12:31b RSV}. That is love.

When you rejoice in hope of sharing the glory of God, that is milk, that is looking forward to the glory coming at the end of life, but when you learn to rejoice in your sufferings because you know that God is working out something in your life that nothing else could do, that is meat. That is growing up as a Christian.

Now the mark of spiritual babyhood, Paul says, is "jealousy and strife." Where you have Christians who are still baby Christians and who are all too long in that condition, you will always have divisions, factions, strife, and breaking into little cliques and groups in the Church. This arises out of a sense of competition. That is what Paul says here:

**"For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men?" [still unchanged in your thinking] For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apollos," [there you get the competitiveness of it] are you not merely men? {1 Cor 3:3b-4 RSV}**

Most of you people work in some kind of job out in the world. You know the whole world functions on the basis of competition. Out there you are up against the sharp, dog-eat-dog type of aggression and the competition that exists for jobs and the in-fighting that goes on in the office to see who is going to get the next promotion and how to cut one another out (we have all become skilled at that), but that is not to be carried over into the church. Nor is it, among Christians, to be indulged in the world. The whole purpose of the Spirit of God is to change your way of thinking so that you are no longer operating out of competition that says, "I belong to him, or, "I belong to him," but of cooperation. That is the picture.

In this next passage Paul brings out beautifully what the spiritual view of relationships is. I know pastors who live in fear that some layman will have a ministry that will outshine theirs so they are afraid to let people meet in homes, or discover their spiritual gifts, and go to work for the Lord because they feel put down or threatened. There is a sense of rivalry and competition in the church. I know of Christians, some even in this congregation, who are unwilling to use their spiritual gifts unless they can do so in large meetings or at the center of attention somehow. They are not interested in small, obscure places. Some time ago I ran across this little poem that I thought expressed this very well.

Father, Where shall I work today?  
And my love flowed warm and free.  
Then He pointed me out a tiny spot and said,  
"Tend that for me."  
I answered quickly, "Oh, no, not that.  
Why, no one would ever see  
No matter how well my work was done.  
Not that little place for me."  
And the word He spoke, it was not stern.  
He answered me tenderly,  
"Ah, little one, search that heart of thine.  
Art thou working for them or me?  
Nazareth was a little place,  
and so was Galilee."

How much the spirit of carnality has invaded the church and made us rivals one of another, but how truly the spiritual-minded person lays that all aside and begins to operate, no longer in competition with anybody, knowing that he or she is unique, with uniquely chosen gifts that no one else has exactly in the same combination. Therefore, you do not need to be in competition with anybody at all. You have something unique to do that only you can do.

That is what Paul goes on to describe in Verses 5-9:

**What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his reward according to his labor. For we are fellow workers for God; you are God's field, God's building. {1 Cor 3:5-9 RSV}**

Paul is looking now on the true view of ministry and ministers, and he does not mean by ministers only the apostles, or only a select group called the clergy, the pastors. This is a devilish, demonic idea that has possessed the church. It sees the clergy as different people, with a special pipeline to God. That idea is never found in Scripture. No, in Scripture all Christians are in the ministry, everyone without exception. All are given gifts by the Spirit. All are expected to have a function, a service that God uses. It does not have to be in the meeting of the church. It is out in the world, anywhere you are.

But how are we to view one another? As big shots striving to see who can get the most recognition, as dignitaries with special dress to indicate our rank and style of life? Are we to be the "heavies," the bosses, the brass? No, Paul says we are servants; that is all. Everyone, servants of Christ. That is the highest rank possible in the church, and everybody has it to start with. Therefore, there is no need for competition or rivalry

in any sense at all. We are all servants of Christ.

Jesus himself told us what our attitude is to be: "The Son of Man," he said, "came not to be ministered unto but to minister, and give himself a ransom for many," {Matt 20:28, Mark 10:45 KJV}. Now that is serving, it is not being ministered unto.

How do you think of yourself when you come to church? What is your reason for coming to church? Is it to be ministered unto? Do you judge the purpose of our assembly together in order that you might have a blessing, or is it that you might be a blessing? The attitude of a servant is always, "What can I do for another?" In the process you find yourself abundantly ministered unto. But we hear so much of this cult of the self-life today that insists that everything has to "meet my needs." That is pre-eminent. Now that is the world's thinking, isn't it? The apostle is telling us that this will be nothing but trouble in the church; it creates divisions and factions. We must come to see each other as servants of Christ, mutually living and ministering to one another as God gives opportunity to do. This is what the Lord Himself demonstrated for us.

Are we in competition? "No," says Paul, "we're in cooperation. I planted; Apollos watered; but God gave the growth. We are doing different things, but we need both of them."

One of the glories of the church is that nobody does the same thing. I have spoken of this before. Churches that try to turn out people that all look alike, dress alike, carry the same kind of notebook, speak the same kind of language, use the same version of the Bible are missing what God has in mind, because we are all to be different, yet working together and needing one another. Paul will develop this much further in Chapter 12.

The evangelist plants, the Bible teacher waters. Well, which is more important, Bible teaching or evangelizing? Paul's answer is: "Neither!" God can do away with both of those. The important thing is not what either can do, but what God alone can do -- take that truth and change lives with it. Evangelists cannot do that. Bible teachers cannot do that. Only God gives increase. Only God opens the mind, changes the heart, and makes people different. That is the thing that ought to be emphasized then, instead of putting all this emphasis upon our methods, and our abilities to do this and that, and all the educational demands that some people want to make for training, etc. That is all emphasizing the people, not the God who gives the increase.

You know how God can dispense with both the planter and the waterer in nature. God can do both in this whole, natural, beautiful world out in the wilderness. He planted, he watered and he gave the increase. God can do it all, so Paul is putting us in our proper place as regards people. When we ask, who is more important, Paul or Apollos, Bill Gothard or Billy Graham, Dick Halverson or Derek Prince? The answer is, "None of them." It is like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more important, the upper or the lower. It is like saying, "Which of my pant legs is more important? The right or the left?" Well, I need both. So it is not the people who are important, it is the God who works through the people. Therefore, to give glory to men as though they were all-in-all (honor is one thing that is right to give to those to whom honor is due), but to give glory to men and to exalt one as more important than another is wrong. Paul says we are equal. He says, "He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor," i.e.. they are equally in need of the grace and the power of God.

Finally, his view is that all of us share the same high privilege. He says, "We are God's fellow workers." Isn't that amazing? Nothing is more important in all of life than that. Think of the privilege of your being a fellow-worker with God in this day and age. When at last it is all over, and we stand before the King, the greatest honor that ever will have been accorded us is the honor that we have of bearing his name and being an instrument of his grace where we live, where we work, in our family.

"You are God's field," Paul says. "You are God's building." Here are two equally valid views of the church.

In the field, Paul is thinking of evangelism, of the increase. As a farmer plants his crop year after year, it increases as he plants, so each year he is able to plant more because of the seed he gets. So the church spreads and increases numerically as we work within it, building one another up and teaching the truth of God. That, in turn, is imparted to others who are reached by neighbors and friends and thus the church increases.

You are God's field, but is also God's building, which Paul says in Ephesians 2, "...grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit," {Eph 2:21b-22 RSV}. As we minister according to our gifts, where we are, we are learning something. We are being changed, brick by brick. We are being shaped and fashioned and chiseled off a little here, and put in the right spot there, until the whole temple grows to be a manifestation of the wholeness of God. That is why, as the church functions in the way the Bible outlines, we become more and more like Christ. We manifest his qualities; we become a wholesome, healed people, a community that has learned to live together in forgiveness, friendship, compassion, love and mercy toward one another. As that becomes visibly manifest, the whole world begins to prick up its ears and watch and listen, for it discovers that God is there. God is dwelling among his people, and we are built up into God's building. That is going to be Paul's theme as he goes on in this chapter.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus we stand before you and ask you to take our lives this week and use us where we work, where we live, in our homes, in our families. We know this is what you love to do, and we ask that you will grant us the grace to understand how to do this, and yield ourselves to you to say the thing that you have taught us by your Word. And we expect you, Lord, to bless it and multiply it unto a world's blessing. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Title: Carnal and Spiritual Christians

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Series: Studies in First Corinthians

Scripture: 1 Cor 3:1-9

Message No: 8

Catalog No: 3578

Date: May 28, 1978

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