CARNAL CHRISTIANS. NO SUCH THING?



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First Corinthians 3:1-4 is a passage that has ironically been a source of contention between Christians with different views. Lewis Sperry Chafer had a dictionary of theological cuss words and guilt-by-association arguments hurled at him for publishing his view that 1 Cor 2:14-3:4 does indeed teach the existence of carnal Christians. That First Corinthians was written to Christians is not in doubt (see 1:2, 26, 30; 3:16; 6:19-20). And even in the passage in question, Paul compares them to "babes in Christ" (3:1), which is a poor comparison if they are not *in Christ*. For this reason, the disagreement about this passage is not on whether these carnal people are truly Christians, but whether these Christians are rightly characterized as carnal in general.

For example, Brian Borgman writes from the Reformed perspective:

> **Nevertheless, Paul does not imply that their carnality is universal, but rather localized to one serious and destructive area, their arrogant party-spirit. Paul is not saying that they are completely carnal, he is pointing out that in this area they are acting like normal men (3:3b-4). He is telling them that they have the characteristics of the flesh. He then points out that this is the source of their jealousy and rivalry. In acting like this Paul could ask, "are you not being only too human?" (3:4b, NJB).**1

THE CORINTHIANS' CARNALITY

But was their carnality truly "localized to one serious and destructive area"? Or was their carnality indeed "the rule in their lives"? Sadly, it seems to be the latter. Of course, in the immediate context Paul is addressing only their sectarian attitudes, "...for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal?" (1 Cor 3:3-4).

But the rest of First Corinthians was also written to the same people at the same time. These same brothers were tolerating, and even puffed up over, sexual sin within the congregation (5:1-8). One of them was sexually involved with his stepmother (5:1).2 These brothers were suing one another in the unbelievers' courts (6:1-7). They were doing wrong and cheating their brothers (6:8). It is likely that they were involved in sexual immorality (6:12-20). They were fighting over food and wine and getting drunk at the Lord's Supper (11:17-22). They were lobbying for position and attention "you are zealously desiring the best gifts," (12:31, literal translation) and were taking their spiritual gifts as an opportunity to edify themselves rather than the church (compare 12:7; 14:4; and Eph 4:11-16). All of these issues show that they were selfish and generally living without love for one another. The famous "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13, was not written to give pastors something to read at weddings; it was given to show these brothers a better way to live amongst each other. How can we look at the book as a whole and claim that these Corinthian Christians were living in anything but pervasive carnality?

And what do sectarian attitudes really say about their walk with Christ? Jesus wanted nothing more than for His disciples to "love one another" (John 13:34), and said it was by loving one another that others would know that they are His disciples (John 13:35). Likewise, John tells us that if we hate our brothers we are in darkness (1 John 2:9, 11), and that if we don't love our brother we are "not of God" (1 John 3:10).3 And every bit of the fruit of the Spirit from Gal 5:22-23 shuts down sectarianism in its tracks. How can a community living in "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" be sectarian in the way that these Corinthian believers were? It simply isn't possible to be generally spiritual and living divisively at the same time. In fact, in Galatians, Paul describes "hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies" (Gal 5:20)-all the makings of party-spirit-as "the works of the flesh" (5:19).

WHAT IS A CARNAL CHRISTIAN?

We need to be careful not to redefine carnal to mean that they don't care at all about spiritual things. A carnal Christian may or may not care about spiritual things. That just simply isn't the point. A carnal Christian is a Christian who lives according to the flesh (carnal means "of flesh"). It is a Christian who is living like a mere man (1 Cor 3:4), as if he were not the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19), as if Christ did not live in him (John 14:20; Gal 2:20), as if he had not died with Christ and been risen with Him (Rom 6:1-14).

A carnal Christian may very well care about spiritual things. We have clear examples of believers who did indeed care about spiritual things (even very much), who were still carnal. For example, in Romans 7 Paul describes himself as carnal while living as if under the law. He was struggling, living in the flesh (see especially vv 5, 14, 23); yet no one would say that he was not concerned for spiritual things. In fact, he desired very much to obey God's law (7:14-19), but while living under law (in the flesh, 7:5, 14) he was unable to obey. He was living as a mere man trying to live up to a supernatural standard. That is why he said, "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin" (Rom 7:14), and "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find" (7:18). It isn't that he didn't want to obey, but that while living as a mere man he didn't have the means.

Likewise, the Galatian Christians were warned against pursuing spiritual maturity in the flesh: "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect [mature] by the flesh?" (Gal 3:1-3). This passage, as clearly as any other, shows us that to live legalistically is to live fleshly (carnally).

Even the Corinthian Christians were concerned with spiritual things (1 Cor 1:4-9). This is clear from their repentant response to Paul's letter (2 Cor 7:2-12) and the fact that the tenor of Second Corinthians showed that there was marked improvement since the writing of First Corinthians (pastoral care like that of Paul tends to have that effect). It is likely from 2 Cor 2:3-11 that the brother who was sexually involved with his stepmother even responded positively to church discipline. Yet at the time First Corinthians was written, carnality invaded seemingly every area of their life together.

CONCLUSION

Are there believers who through tragic circumstances, neglect from spiritual leaders, and/or bad choices become completely hardened and unresponsive to spiritual things? Experience would argue that there are (see also Solomon in First Kings 11). And we know that if there are any such people, they are eternally secure (John 6:39-40; Rom 11:29). But that simply isn't the point of the passages in the Bible about carnal Christians. These passages are about living "like mere men."

But being like mere men is far from who we are in Christ. We are called to a Divine standard (John 15:12) and given Divine enablement (John 14:12-14; 15:5). Sometimes it's easier to simply say "you must not really be a Christian" than to bear the burdens of our brothers who are living like mere men. But we are called to bear their burdens nonetheless (Gal 6:2).

Carnal Christians exist. And until we recognize that fact we will never be able to offer the kind of pastoral care that Paul did toward the Corinthians. We will never be able to help carnal Christians lay carnality aside and walk worthy of their calling. But those who are themselves spiritual must correctly assess the situation and "restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (Gal 6:1). **Our brothers in Christ—even the carnal ones—are worth it.**

1 Brian Borgman, "Rethinking a Much Abused Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1-15," Reformation and Revival Journal (Winter 2002), 79.
2 The NASB rendering, "so-called brother" in 5:11 is troublesome because it implies that the brother is not really a brother. But this translation is not supported by the Greek text. The phrase in the Greek is, *tis adelphos onomazomenos,* literally, "anyone named a brother" as in the NKJV. In fact, nowhere in the New Testament or the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) is onomaz? used to imply that something is not genuine. This is reading modern jargon back into the New Testament. When this verse is put in context, it is even more obvious that a believer is intended. Paul wrote, "I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extoritoner-not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person'" (1 Cor 5:9-13). They should not keep company with this immoral person specifically because he is a brother. The entire passage loses its meaning if this person were not Christian brother.
3 These verses are about fellowship with God, not about testing whether we are born again or not.

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