

**Text:** 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

**Title:** Immature Christians

**Truth:** We learn the definition of carnality, the problems it raises, and the proofs of its presence in the church and life of the believer.

**Date/Location:** Sunday March 8, 2020 at FBC

## Introduction

Something was really wrong in the Corinthian church. We have already felt the issue in chapter 1 where Paul was critical of the factional mindset that had developed in the assembly.

### I. The Problem with Carnality, v. 1-2

A. Carnality limits spiritual communication, v. 1. Paul has received the Spirit of God and the truths of God, and in turn speaks those truths to others (1 Cor. 2:12-13). The next step in the process is for people to receive what he is saying. The natural person does not and cannot receive God's truth. The spiritual person can receive it, and welcomes it, and appraises it with the value that it really has, like rubies and gold (the wisdom of God, Prov. 3:15, the word of God, Psalm 19:10). But Paul found that when he spoke to the Corinthians, they were not exactly fitting this two-fold pattern. So Paul could not speak to them as those who were fully on board to discern ("judge" in 2:15) spiritual truth. So this hindered Paul's ministry. This is sort of like how Jesus' ministry was hindered by unbelief (Matt. 13:58, Mark 6:5). As a teacher, I can't take you to the next level of maturity if you are thinking and acting like the Corinthians.

B. Carnality limits the reception of sound doctrine, v. 2. How did the Corinthian church receive God's truth from Paul? That's the problem. They didn't. Paul was grilling up steaks, and they needed a baby bottle. What exactly is milk? It is the easy parts of Christian doctrine. To be sure, the Corinthians were grasping something in every doctrinal area—about the word of God, about God, Christ, the Spirit, man, sin, angels, demons, salvation, the church, and the future. But to go a bit deeper below the surface in any of these areas—this is the meat—would be difficult, if not impossible.

Note that carnality is not a mental problem. It is not due to cognitive inability. It is a moral problem. It is an ethical problem. It is a spiritual problem. The most intellectually brilliant people can be carnal in their thinking and behavior.

C. They began the Christian life this way. But they are *still* carnal. Not good.

## II. The Issue of Carnality and the so-called “Carnal Christian”

- A. **Key idea:** The way Paul uses the word *carnal* refers to a bad level of Christian maturity out of which the person needs to grow quickly. The way that some popular theology (unfortunately, often dispensationalists) teaches about *carnal* is that it refers to an entire category of people “in between” the natural and the spiritual state. They are saved, but their behavior is virtually indistinguishable from that of unbelievers.
- B. Personal testimony. I worked this over in my mind for quite a while years ago because I was taught both in favor of the carnal Christian doctrine and against the carnal Christian doctrine. I have come to the conclusion that the carnal doctrine is false, for a number of very important reasons. These reasons are interconnected theologically with the larger doctrine of soteriology. Important among these reasons is the concern of false assurance. Those who live carnally full-time have no right or authority to call themselves children of God in the redemptive sense. Yet there are many teachers who rush to give assurance to those who have merely indicated head-knowledge about Christ, but evidence no life transformation. Yet, I concluded, at the same time we understand that true Christians struggle with sins of all sorts. But therein lies the difference: there is a *struggle*. Those who live in sin and don’t care demonstrate that they don’t actually have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in them.
- C. So then, what is the popular—but wrong—idea of the “carnal Christian”? The teaching of some is that there is a third class of people besides believers and unbelievers, who are carnal. They are characterized by:
1. Little to no visible fruit of salvation.
  2. Doctrinally unaware of anything but the most basic Biblical truths (1 Cor. 3:2). Little to no interest in learning the things of God.
  3. Knowledge of the facts of the gospel, primarily the deity of Christ and the fact that He died and rose again for sinners.
  4. “Belief,” but only in terms of mental assent to those facts. There is no level of consecration, commitment, discipleship, or repentance.
  5. Believing that discipleship is optional and that receiving Christ as Lord is optional.
  6. Potentially remaining in this state for their entire lives.

7. Believing that they may be saved in the end, yet not receive any rewards. Or, that they may enter the kingdom but not “inherit” the kingdom.
8. Teachers of this doctrine believe that it is a heresy to require *repentant* faith or discipleship in the life of a believer. That, they say, optionally comes later in the believer’s life.

D. What is the Biblical idea of a “carnal person”? It cannot be denied that Paul uses the phrase to describe the disobedient and doctrinally ignorant Corinthians. I contend that he doesn’t create a third category of people, but rather uses the term to describe the sinful and immature behavior of individual Christians in order to rebuke them and demand repentance.

1. There are only **two classes of people**: Christians and non-Christians (Romans 8:8-9; Matthew 7:13-14, 24-27). And among Christians, there is an entire range of various levels of maturity. All Christians are like trees or plants producing some level of good fruit (Matt. 13:23). If there is essentially no fruit, that indicates the person is *unsaved* (Matthew 13:19-22). But we know there are different sizes of plants and different amounts of fruit among people; that is, we experience different maturity levels in our walks with Christ.

Paul’s point is neither to establish a third class of people nor to prove the fact of different levels of maturity. It is a rebuke, not some huge theological teaching point. His point is that the believers in Corinth are **thinking and acting like the people of the world**—that is carnality. And there is no excuse for it. They are acting like babies in the Christian life. The accusation of carnality (which we will see in section III is manifestly true) is a heavy charge meant to shake the Corinthians to reality and get them to repent. Carnality is not a state that you want to be in for any length of time. It is *disobedient*. It is sinful. Consequently, it is *dangerous*. It opens one to God’s corrective *discipline*. Yet all of us can fall into this at any time. It is more often a failing of the life of a newer believer. But sometimes it is a problem in the life of older believers.

2. **Repentance**. The Bible is clear from cover to cover that repentance is an essential description of true Biblical faith (1 Kings 8:47; Rev. 16:11; Acts 26:20). Anyone who attempts to remove this essential characteristic of true faith is preaching a different gospel.
3. **Transformation**. The grace of God transforms a person so that they are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). If there is no new creation, there is no transformation. If there is no transformation, there is no salvation.

It is that simple. Let me illustrate. The Bible allows us to use church membership and corresponding attendance as a proxy for transformation. This is because true believers gather together to worship and receive instruction and love one another (Heb. 10:24-25). That is an integral part of our transformation. Let us suppose that a gospel revival meeting comes to town, and 500 people make professions of faith in Christ. Total church regular attendance in the town 6 months later has increased by 25. How many were truly saved? It may be more or less than 25, but it is nowhere near 500.

4. **Discipleship.** Every true believer is a disciple of Jesus Christ (Matt 16:24-25). Note the power of the words in the verse: If anyone desires to come after Me, he **must** deny himself, and he **must** take up his cross, and he **must** follow me.”<sup>1</sup> All three are imperatives, not options. The Great Commission tells us to make *disciples*, not merely believers. To be a believer means to be a follower of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

### III. The Proof of Carnality, v. 3-4

If the Corinthians demand Paul to back up his analysis of their spiritual condition, he can:

- A. There is envy among you. James 4:1 tells us that if there are wars and fights, they come from prideful lust, things like envy and jealousy.
- B. There is strife. Envy and strife appear together several places: Romans 1:29 about the unbelieving; Romans 13:13 about how we are supposed to live; Philippians 1:15 about how some were preaching Christ; and 1 Tim. 6:3-4 about the conduct of false teachers.
- C. There are divisions (not in ESV, NASB, NIV). “I am of Paul” and “I am of Apollos” is the proof in their own words.

This all is proof enough. They were behaving like mere men, that is, like their unbelieving neighbors. That is unacceptable.

### Conclusion

The gospel doesn't leave us carnal. It changes us into new people. While we will experience struggles with sin, we must overcome them.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation is similar to the NIV and CSB. The NKJV, ESV, and NASB all use “let him deny himself.” I don't prefer “let” because it doesn't convey the force of *imperative*.

<sup>2</sup> I wrote a very brief article on this subject here:

<https://www.fbcaa.org/MattPostiffBlog/2013/02/Is-Every-True-Believer-a-Disciple>