

# “Spiritual” or “Carnal?”

## 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

Both of these terms are referring to born-again believers; those saved by their faith in the redemptive work of Christ. At issue is what they mean, and which one are you.

The term “spiritual” is one that points to being under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit of God; one that has grown in their faith, and one that is considered “perfect” (mature, grown-up Christians), as brought to light from 1 Cor. 2:6.

The term “carnal” is considered to be the opposite of “spiritual,” in literal terms. As opposed to being under the influence and control of the Spirit of God, they are under the influence of the spirit of this world – not necessarily demonic spirits, but the influence of worldliness and a desire for things the world has to offer.

With that said, the point that Paul is making to the believers in Corinth is a point that can be made, and needs to be made, in churches today: **the maturity of the believer is paramount to the growth of the church.** A church may grow without it, as many do today, but it will not be the growth that is needed to sustain the cause of Christ in the next generation.

Several centuries ago one of the popes, an avid patron of the arts, is said to have surveyed the vast artistic riches he had amassed and to have gloated: “No longer can the church of Jesus Christ say, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” And a subordinate replied, “But then neither can she now say, ‘Rise up and walk.’” David Barrett

—James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 374.

In the title, the question is asked, are you spiritual or carnal? We dealt with spiritual in the last few messages from chapter two, so a basis of comparison for carnal has been given. This text will demonstrate the carnality of those believers in the church at Corinth: it is discovered as being a problem; it is described; and it is demonstrated by example.

The reason, it would seem, that this issue is dealt with first in this letter is it was because of the believer's carnality that they had so many other serious problems in the church, and why they needed so much help in getting past them.

## **I. CARNALITY DISCOVERED – vs. 1-2**

### ***A. Discovered to not be spiritual – vs. 1 – “could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but...unto babes in Christ”***

1. This shows Paul is writing to believers – “brethren...in Christ”
2. “And I...could not speak unto you”
  - a) And this text says why – the reason he did not teach them the “deep things of God” as much as he did the simple doctrines is because they demonstrated, while he was there that they were not ready
  - b) When the church began, he was with them for a year and a half, and this letter to them was written some five years later, and they were still babes in Christ when it comes to the knowledge of the Word of God, and still carnal in their living. So, for 6 ½ years, at least, they had not grown in spiritual maturity.

c) “As unto spiritual, but as unto carnal” –

how sad it is for a believer in Christ to not only be immature in their faith after so many years of salvation, but to be so worldly minded, and so controlled by the flesh and its desires that they cannot grow spiritually!

- d) As was found last week from 2:14, those “deep things of God” that are needed to live a full, spiritual life, are only knowable to the “spiritual” believer – even the “carnal” believer will not know them. He can, he just does not.

### 3. “Unto babes in Christ”

- a) Vs. 2 describes the term “babes” – “for hitherto ye were not able to bear it” – when he was with them, teaching them personally – “neither yet now are ye able” – they had not grown in the five years since
- b) This is a term used to indicate where the believers, as a whole, the overwhelming number of them, in Corinth were in their spiritual growth
- c) The word for “babes” (νήπιος – nepios) comes from a word for speaking with a negation at the beginning – in other words, one without the ability to speak – an infant, baby
- d) This is in direct contrast to 2:6 – “Howbeit we speak [impart] wisdom among them that are perfect” – with babies, they have to be taught to speak before they can be taught anything of value
- e) “It is one of the tragedies of the minister’s life that he has to keep on speaking to the church members “as unto babes in Christ” (ὡς νηπίοις ἐν Χριστῷ), who actually glory in their long babyhood whereas they

ought to be teachers of the gospel instead of belonging to the cradle roll.” (Robertson)

f) I believe this is a major issue in modern churches. Churches that put a great deal on teaching, as they should, and have as their goal the maturity of the believer, struggle to get people engaged in the service and keep them. It is just a lot easier today for Christians to stay babies in their faith, and just be entertained and made to feel good, like a parent would do with a baby, than it is to have to “go to school” in the Word of God and actually learn something.

#### 1 Corinthians 14:20

(20) Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men.

#### Ephesians 4:13-14

(13) Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:

(14) That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;

#### Hebrews 5:11-14

(11) Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.

(12) For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which *be* the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

(13) For every one that useth milk *is* unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

(14) But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, *even* those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

***B. Discovered to not care – vs. 2 – “neither yet are ye able”***

1. One of the more difficult things of being a pastor/teacher is preaching to a combination of the mature believer, the carnal believer, and the lost. It is our goal to bring a new convert through the stages of growth to be a mature Christian. What frustrates the goal are those believers that do not really care to get out of the carnal stage.
2. As the illustration given last week demonstrated, we are in the most biblically illiterate generation of modern history, at least, if not of all of history. The burden of that falls both on the pastor/teacher and the hearer. To be honest, it would be a lot less stressful, humanly speaking, and a lot more profitable, worldly speaking, to just preach to make people feel good; and that is exactly what has happened today. So, now there is a generation of believers that simply do not care to be anything more than they are, and they will flock to churches, and/or call pastors that will preach that way.
3. The words “are ye able” are from one word in the Greek, and it is a word we have seen before in recent studies

- a) The word δύνανται, dunamai, from the root dunamos, which is where we get our word dynamite from – power residing in itself
- b) Paul was telling the Corinthian believers that they should have been demonstrating the power of the Spirit in their lives (which he covers later in the letter, in ch. 12-14), but, because of their obvious desire to stay babes, they were not yet able, empowered, as they should be
- c) This was to demonstrate that they did not care to be more than they were
- d) And here is the point – because of this desire to stay “babes in Christ” that turned into a simple carnality, a simple worldliness where, instead of being empowered by the Spirit, they were empowered by the cares and influence of the World.

## **II. CARNALITY DESCRIBED – VS. 3 – “FOR YE ARE YET CARNAL”**

**A. *“For whereas there is,” or, since there is – this philosophy of spiritualness already existed, and because of it Paul is saying they are carnal***

**B. *Described as “envying” – thought***

1. Ζηλος, envying refers to the state of their souls; they had inward grudgings and disaffection towards each other (Clarke)
2. The good use of this word zelos “may degenerated into a jealousy which makes war upon the good it sees in another, thus troubling that good and diminishing it” (Zodhiates).

3. Too much has been written in the Bible about this subject than can be covered in a single topic, and it is something that has come up in the teaching ministry of the pulpit here on numerous occasions – the issue of being “like-minded”

### ***C. Described as "strife" – word***

1. Ερις, strife or contention, refers to their words; they were continually disputing and contending whose party was the best, each endeavoring to prove that he and his party were alone in the right (Clarke)
2. If our thoughts are not right towards others, then our speech will betray that thought – it cannot be held in indefinitely

### ***D. Described as "divisions" – deed***

1. Some versions of the Bible, based on a different set of manuscripts, omits this word entirely – it shouldn't be omitted but it is
2. ἰχοστασῖαι, divisions, refers to their conduct; as they could not agree, they contended till they separated from each other, and thus rent the Church of Christ. (Clarke)
3. Once the thought is off, and the words follow, then the actions we take toward others will be divisive – and there will be nothing more destructive to the cause of the gospel than that
4. In Rom. 16:17-18, the church is instructed to break fellowship with those that cause divisions

### Romans 16:17-18

(17) Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.

(18) For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.

## **III. CARNALITY DEMONSTRATED – VS. 4**

***A. Demonstrating ignorance – “while one saith...and another...are you not carnal?”***

***B. Demonstrating arrogance – “I am of Paul...I am of Apollos”***

1. Paul – the Apostle that had the responsibility over the church in Corinth as God had ordained, and was the one given to teach them
2. Apollos – “one of John's disciples, born at Alexandria, Egypt, of Jewish parents, and described as an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures (Act\_18:24). He had been instructed in the elements of the Christian faith, but coming to Ephesus in A.D. 54, during the temporary absence of Paul, he was more fully taught the doctrines of the Gospel by Aquila and Priscilla. They had themselves been favored with the company and instruction of Paul at Corinth and on a voyage from that city to Ephesus. Apollos afterwards preached with great success in Achaia and Corinth. Paul had already been instrumental in establishing a church there, to the care of which Apollos succeeded (1 Cor. 3:6). The members of

the church in Corinth were divided into parties, some being particularly partial to Paul, others to Apollos, and still others to Cephas or Peter. When Paul wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians, probably at Ephesus in A.D. 57, it is likely Apollos was either with him or near him. From 1 Cor. 16:12 we learn that in consequence of these dissensions, Apollos absolutely declined to go to Corinth. The contentions between the friends and admirers of Paul and those of Apollos had no effect on the two men's love and respect for each other. They both refrained from visiting the church while it was distracted with such prejudices and partialities, though a worldly ambition might have selected it as the field and the season of self-aggrandizement. Apollos is last mentioned very affectionately by Paul in Titus 3:13. Since Apollos was an extremely brilliant individual, some scholars attribute the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews to him." (Zodhiates)

Conclusion: Where do you stand in your walk with the Lord? Are you "spiritual" or "carnal?" You might ask, "How do I know?" When faced with a question of whether to go to church or go to an event, or a ball game, or choose to work when you don't have to instead of honoring the Lord on the Lord's Day – there may be an issue with the "spiritual." When asked to do something that is clearly against Scripture in order to keep peace with family and friends, or to keep a job, and you choose the path of least resistance, there may be an issue with the "spiritual." When one chooses a church based on its entertainment value rather than on its teaching ministry, there is clearly a problem with the

"spiritual." When one chooses political correctness over biblical correctness, there is clearly a problem with the "spiritual."

Where are you?

Brazil is home to a plant which forest-dwellers call the "matador," or "murderer." At first its slender stem creeps along the ground. But once it meets a vigorous tree, the matador cleaves to the tree and climbs it. As it climbs it sends out arm-like tendrils that continue to grow larger and clasp tighter. The matador climbs the tree until, as if in triumph, it shoots a huge, flowery head above the strangled tree's summit. From there this "murderer" scatters its seeds to repeat their work of death.

Like that vine, worldliness will choke the spiritual life of any believer who allows it to grow and send out its tentacles.

(Bible Illustrator for Windows v. 3.0c, 1998, topic "Carnality," index number 645)