



R E M E D I A L
Christianity

Correcting Deficiencies in Popular Christianity

#9 – Carnal and Spiritual Christians

With Study Questions

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7/6/2003

Carnal and Spiritual Christians

The Nature of the Relationship Between Man and God

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ² I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; ³ for you are still carnal. For where *there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men* (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)?

Introduction

Let God Do It

Having just finished a semester at seminary I was preparing to embark upon my respective ministry with a para-church organization. Good-byes were being said with tears and enthusiasm. One young lady wished me well and I responded by saying I'd do my best.

With eyes rolling and frustration in her voice (as if I'd learned nothing in class) she admonishingly said, "Paaauuul, let God do it." To this day I am not exactly sure what that means. Does it mean I shouldn't do my best? Does it mean I should do my best at not doing my best? (Wouldn't I still be trying my best?) Does it mean I should do my best at letting God do it? Should I just go away?

Stratifying the Church

What actually seems to be going on among the vast majority of Christians today is a sort of stratification of the church. Some Christians are among the phylum of those who have made a great discovery, the discovery of the Spirit-filled life. Others are relegated to the lower stratum of carnal Christian. This Christian caste¹ system is an unbiblical and unhealthy method of dividing the church between the haves and have-nots.

What Christian would not wish to avail himself of the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit? And since our culture is laden with remedial Christians, we become easy targets for those with this great formula whereby we move up the Christian social order.

The Christian Experience

The real question before us is what should we expect in terms of the power of the Holy Spirit? Is there really a formula or method where the normal, weak, failing Christian can tap into increased energy and become a living, vital Christian? What does it feel like to be a believer in Christ? And what should I expect my life to look like? Let's begin by examining the predominant view which we must all unlearn. This is the view which stratifies the church.

¹ Caste – a social class separated from others by hereditary, professional, or financial differences.

The Spirit-filled Life

The Spirit-filled life, in its most popular presentation, can be found in a tract put out by a para-church organization which has influenced millions, if not tens of millions, of Christians in the past fifty years. It is entitled *Have You Made the Wonderful Discovery of the Spirit-filled Life?*

An Exciting Adventure

The struggling Christian, wallowing in the mire of his own mediocrity and wretchedness is handed a short, simple tract which tells him that every day can be “an exciting adventure.” If you know “the reality of being filled with the Holy Spirit... and live[s] constantly, moment by moment, under His gracious direction” you will be transformed from the mundane to something exciting. This of course begs the question, “Why would a carnal person desire the direction of God?” Is not this itself something the Spirit does?

Nonetheless, what genuine Christian wouldn't wish to live “moment by moment” under the gracious direction of God? Is the fact that I fail to do this relegating me to carnal Christianity? Am I to suppose that the remainder of this tract will actually yield in me such moment-by-moment obedience and acquiescence to God that I can move to the front of the class and have the scarlet “C” rent from my family crest?

I generally avoid questioning motives, but I have a strong suspicion that this tract was merely designed to get people within the para-church organization to be more productive – to obtain the prestige that comes with being the higher level Christian! Keep in mind that it is not a matter of seeking to be more obedient with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength as Jesus teaches (Mark 12:29). It is actually becoming a Christian of a different kind.

Three Kinds of People

The tract goes on to classify people into three categories – categories, strictly speaking, unjustified by Scripture. There is the *natural man* – one who has not received Christ. This person is not a Christian at all. Certainly this is a type of person – a legitimate category.

Secondly we have the spiritual man – one who is directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is the man we all wish to be. He has the mind of Christ and is capable of spiritually appraising all things (1 Corinthians 2:15). His life is “Christ-centered, empowered by the Holy Spirit.” He “introduces others to Christ” has “an effective prayer life, understands God's word, trusts God, obeys God” and exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. At a certain level we see this person in the Bible as well.

Finally, there is the carnal man (or carnal Christian) – one who has received Christ, but “who lives in defeat because he is trying to live the Christian life in his own strength.” Remember, “Let God do it.” The carnal Christian is described as “ignorant of his spiritual heritage.” He is marked by “unbelief, disobedience, loss of love for God and others, poor prayer life, no desire for Bible study, legalistic attitude, impure thoughts, jealousy, guilt, worry, discouragement, a critical spirit, frustration, aimlessness.

About now you must be feeling a little schizophrenic. I find myself bouncing between spirit-filled Christian and carnal Christian from moment to moment. But to be classified as a carnal Christian might be pushing the issue too far. Studying the passages used to divide Christians into these categories might prove beneficial.

1 Corinthians 2:9-3:4

Spiritual Men Being Carnal

What we will find is that the spiritual man is synonymous with being a Christian man. What we will also find is that the spiritual man must continually be aware of and repent of carnal thoughts and actions. To the Scriptures!

The proof text for this third type of person (this mythical carnal Christian) is 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. ² I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able; ³ for you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere men* (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)?

At first glance this seems plausible. He tells them they're still carnal. But if we wish to speak of categories (and I believe in the present context there are only two – the natural and the spiritual), let us examine the category in which Paul places his readers by backing up to the end of chapter two.

But as it is written: "*Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.*" ¹⁰ But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. ¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. ¹³ These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the ⁴Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. ¹⁴ But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is *rightly* judged by no one. ¹⁶ For "*who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?*" But we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:9-16).

The categories in which Paul's readers are placed are people to whom God has revealed great things (vs. 10) through His Spirit. They have received the Spirit who is from God that they might know the things given to them from God (vs. 12). They have

the mind of Christ (vs. 16). Do we dare categorized these people as carnal? Is Paul categorizing them as carnal? I think not.

What then do we do with Paul's subsequent chastisement and accusation of carnality? In the tract, 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 is quoted. The issue becomes muddled because verse four is left out. It states, "**For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal" (1 Corinthians 3:4)?** Paul is addressing a specific behavior – unnecessary factionalism. Certainly there are times when Christians engage in carnal thoughts and actions – all Christians and quite often. In this particular case Paul is addressing a behavior which was prevalent and gaining momentum in the church. But Paul is not putting them in this third category of carnal Christian. He is exhorting spiritual men to acknowledge and repent of a specific carnal practice.

Can you see the difference here? It is one thing to be told to stop gossiping or bitterly arguing or being lazy, etc. It is quite another thing to be told that you must enter into a different genus of Christian.

The Christian Life

False Promises

It is both dark and disheartening to hold some spiritual carrot before brothers and sisters in the Lord which promises them Jedi-like powers. When they hit the atmosphere they burn like anybody else, then, back to NASA for the latest technique. The fact is all Christians have the Spirit of God. If not they would not believe in Jesus, nor would they seek to obey His law. It is just those things which assure us that we are in Christ – trust in Him as Savior and Lord – trust in His word.

Back to the Real Question

Beyond that you are in for the fight of your lives. Let's go back to the real question before us. What should we expect in terms of the power of the Holy Spirit? Is there really a formula or method where the normal, weak, failing Christian can tap into increased energy and become a living, vital Christian? What does it feel like to be a believer in Christ? And what should I expect my life to look like?

It amounts to this. Good and bad habits will come and go. Contending with being a lustful young man will be replaced by contending with being a grumpy old man. Times of good works and a sense of great intimacy with God (like that of young David) will be followed by seasons of feeling distant and estranged (like old David).

By the grace of God and by the Spirit of God you will fight the world, the devil, and your own flesh till God brings you home. The actual weapons of this warfare (which include truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation, the word, prayer, watchfulness, perseverance, etc.) we will discuss at a later time (although we have already discussed the major arsenal of word, sacrament, and church discipline) but it is a fight. Have you ever been in a fight? Fights hurt! Sometimes you feel like you're losing! Sometimes you get tired! Anyone promoting a formula suggesting ease in this is grossly unacquainted with the formidable foe of their own depraved heart.

Bad News, Good News

Fret not, beloved, for it is just this battle which continually brings God's people to thirst for His word and sacrament. You see there's bad news and good news. The bad news is that you will never be the victorious Christian that these church-stratifiers promise with all their man-made laws and recipes. The bad news is, like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Paul, Peter, Timothy et al, you will ever be at odds with your own weakness, lethargy, ignorance, and sinfulness.

The good news is that you *are* at odds with your own weakness, lethargy, ignorance, and sinfulness. The good news is that you do not immerse yourself in your own depraved nature. The good news is that, by the grace of God, you have not resigned yourself to abject carnality. And because of this, great blessings come to home, church and nation.

But over and above this, the good news is the gospel. The good news is the loaf and the cup. The good news is the battle is the Lord's. The good news is though we are weak, he is strong. The good news is that **"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him"** (2 Corinthians 5:21). May this, above all other things, be our comfort!

Questions for Study

1. What are some of the qualities promised for those who discover the so-called "Spirit-filled" life (page 2)?
2. Discuss the theory that the Bible talks about three kinds of people. Is this true (page 2)?
3. Examine 1 Corinthians 2:9-3:4. What is problematic with using this passage to categorize someone as a carnal Christian (pages 3, 4)?
4. What are the dangers in promising Christians this sort of super spiritual life (page 4)?
5. What does the Christian life actually look like (page 4)?
6. Discuss the bad news and the good news for the Christian (page 5).