

Can a Christian Be Carnal?

1 Corinthians 3:1-4

"And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, **but as unto carnal**, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet **carnal**: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, **are ye not carnal**, and walk as men?" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)



I have heard Bible teachers say, especially those embracing Reformed Theology, that there is no such thing as a carnal Christian. Reformed men have written booklets arguing that it is unbiblical to speak of a carnal Christian. However, this position does not make Biblical sense because Paul's statements in the above passage (1 Cor. 3:1-3) clearly speak of Christians as being carnal. Paul asserts this three times:

1) "And I brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ." (1 Cor. 3:1)

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3, gives three categories which describe a person's spiritual state (**natural, spiritual carnal**). He refers to **the natural man** or the "soulish" man (1 Cor. 2:14). This is the unsaved man. The same word is used in Jude 19 where it is translated "sensual," describing one who does not have the Spirit. This is the unregenerate man who has never been born again. The word "**carnal**" (1 Cor. 3:1,3) simply means "fleshly, one who is walking in the flesh and controlled by his Adamic sin nature." Obviously the unsaved are carnal. Walking in the flesh and being controlled by their sin nature is descriptive of their lives. They cannot live in any other way. The unsaved man cannot walk in the Spirit because he does not have the Spirit indwelling him. In this passage the unsaved man is described as "the natural man" (1 Cor. 2:14).

Paul says, "I could not speak unto you as unto **spiritual**, but as unto carnal." **The spiritual man** is the believer who is walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16) and controlled by the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). The Corinthians were not walking in the Spirit, but they were walking in the flesh, as evidenced by their envying, their strife and their divisions (1 Cor. 3:3). They were spiritual babies. There is nothing wrong with being a baby and feeding on milk, but it is very abnormal to stay on the baby bottle for years and not move on to more solid foods. These Corinthians were not experiencing healthy growth. They were spiritually sick and malnourished. They were babes, but notice that Paul describes them as "babes in Christ." They were in Christ which means they were true Christians. Earlier Paul had described them as "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor. 1:2; see also 1 Cor. 1:30). As to their position in Christ, these Corinthians were washed, sanctified and justified (1 Cor. 6:11). They were saved and they were Christians, even though they had a major problem with carnality and fleshly living.

2) "For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions." (1 Cor. 3:3)

Paul was saying, "You are still carnal (fleshly)." This does mean that they would always be carnal, but Paul was describing their present state. Paul did not want them to continue in that state. They were controlled by their flesh resulting in envying and strife and divisions. In this passage Paul is clearly teaching that it is possible for true Christians to be carnal and operate according to the flesh. In Galatians 5:16 Paul gave the command, "Walk in the Spirit and ye shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh." This implies that if you do not obey this command and if you do not walk in the Spirit, then you will walk in the flesh (be carnal) and you will fulfill the strong desires of the flesh. Believers are commanded not to be carnal, but they can disobey the command, and carnality will be the result.

3) "Are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (1 Cor. 3:3)

This is the third time Paul describes the Corinthians as being carnal. The Greek construction here demands a "yes" answer to the question. It could be translated, "Certainly you are carnal, are you not?" "Certainly you walk as (unsaved) men, do you not?" Reformed men teach the exact opposite, "Certainly you are not carnal." They deny that there is such a thing as a carnal Christian. And yet Paul taught that saved people who are in Christ can be carnal (fleshly) and can walk as unregenerate men, men who walk according to the flesh. It's a shameful thing for a new creature in Christ to walk just like an unsaved man, but it can happen. Saints can live in an unsaintly manner. Sadly, a child of the King can live as a pauper. Our condition should match our position, but this does not always happen. Our repulsive and ugly fleshly nature can manifest itself at any time.

Position and Practice

It is important to understand the difference between the believer's **standing** and his **state**. There is a difference between our **position** in Christ and our actual **practice** as we live day by day. Reformed men do not always make this important distinction.

For example, there are times when John MacArthur presents this distinction very clearly. Here is one example from his commentary on 1 Corinthians: "Paul begins his letter by calling them saints. In practice they were gross sinners, but in position they were pure saints...It is important for every Christian to keep in mind the great difference between his position and his practice, his standing and his state...Presidents do not always act presidentially, diplomats do not always act diplomatically, kings do not always act kingly--but they are still presidents, diplomats and kings...Remembering our position can compel us to improve our practice." (1 Corinthians, pp. 6-7)

MacArthur is to be commended for these excellent statements. We fully agree with these words. But in another place MacArthur contradicts what he has just said. Note carefully these words: "New creatures act like new creatures. God is not progressively making new creations out of believers" (*Ephesians*, p. 181). This is not consistent with his statements given above concerning position and practice. Saints **do not** always act saintly, presidents do not always act presidentially, etc., but here he says that **new creatures act like new creatures!** He should have said, "new creatures do not always act as new creatures." Anyone who is a new creature knows that this is true! When Paul said, "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature," he was writing to the Corinthians! Did the Corinthians act as new creatures? Paul said concerning their actual state and practice that they were carnal, walking as (unregenerate) men, full of envying, strife and divisions. (1 Cor. 3:3)

As to our position in Christ, we would agree with Reformed men that there is no such thing as a carnal Christian. As far as our position in Christ is concerned, **we are not in the flesh** (we are not carnal), but in the Spirit (Rom. 8:9). It is the unsaved man who is in the flesh: "So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God, but ye are not in the flesh but in the Spirit" (Rom. 8:8-9). Our position is one thing; our practice is another. In this same epistle to the Romans Paul writes, "But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof" (Rom. 13:14). This verse implies that if we as Christians do not put on the Lord Jesus Christ, then we will be making provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts.

How Far Will God Allow Carnality to Go?

Just as a good human father seeks to discipline and correct his wayward son, so our Heavenly Father is proactive in dealing with His carnal and sinful children. Here are three words beginning with the letter "C" which remind us of this process:

Confession: The child of God is able to remedy his fleshly condition by means of confession: "If we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We can fully admit and acknowledge our wrongdoing to the God we have sinned against, and He can faithfully and mercifully restore us to a right relationship with Himself.

Conviction: What happens if we do not confess our sins and if we choose to continue in our carnal state? "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4:30). The God who indwells us makes His grieved presence felt. The sinning child of God is convicted, bothered and in a terrible state. He is like Lot whose righteous soul was vexed (2 Pet. 3:7-8). A true child of God cannot be comfortable walking in the flesh and living in sin. Thank God that this is so.

Chastening: What happens if we do not confess our sins, and even though the Spirit of God convicts us of our wrongdoing, we continue walking in the flesh anyway? The Heavenly Father will then discipline and chasten His disobedient child (see Hebrews 12:5-13). And if the carnal Christian spurns such chastening, then it is possible that God could use maximum chastisement, even physical death (the "sin unto death"--1 John 5:16-17). Indeed, some of the carnal Corinthians succumbed to this very fate: "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged, but when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world" (1 Cor. 11:30-32). Carnal Christians are chastened of (by) the Lord; carnal unsaved people are condemned with the world.



~Galatians 5:16 *NKJV*

*I say then:
Walk in the
Spirit, and
you shall not
fulfill the lust
of the flesh.*