

Faith Pulpit

Ministering in the Spirit

Romans 8:4 "...who walk after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

1 Corinthians 3:3 "...are ye not carnal, and walk as men?"

2 Corinthians 10:3 "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh."

Galatians 5:17 "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would."

The New Testament etches a mark between the old nature and the new, between the flesh and the spirit (John 3:5,6). Indeed, it is not always easy to tell whether the word "spirit" refers to the believer's new nature or to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. But in any case, the two natures are at war with each other, and the believer's conduct involves that struggle. More than that, his service for Christ also reveals that struggle, and the serious church member may well wonder in all charity how much of what passes for worship is led according to the old nature. The point is worth attention, as we can hardly hope to please God or help men through the energy of the flesh. It appears that multitudes are impressed by religious carnality, and successful religious work seem now to require that sort of energy. Strangely, it appears to take no great sensitivity to discern when it is the flesh that is in control of the service.

The experience of Corinth is instructive here and shows how good the flesh can look. Corinth seems to have had both numbers and growth (Acts 18:10), yet Paul called the church there carnal. They came behind in no gift, but he called them carnal. They were close to being doctrinally orthodox. They had preaching, and they had knowledge. In their divisions they had zeal, but the zeal was not necessarily a mark of spirituality. Paul called them carnal and acting as men.

In a religious community it is possible for the flesh so to intrude itself in the public ministry that the saints begin to accept that pattern as somehow normal in the service of God. It has come to seem normal for worship to be led by those who give no impression of a conscience cleansed that morning in the Word of God. But when the old nature intrudes itself into the service, it calls attention to itself so much so that even those least sensitive can pick out its presence. The marks of carnality are there to be seen.

1. The Flesh Tolerates Sin (1 Cor. 2:14–3:4)

The divisions in the Corinthian church gave evidence of something more than just divisions. In their zeal to promote one or another position, they let love lose out to envy and strife, and the urgency of the situation made those sins somehow necessary, maybe even commendable. Nobody seemed to be grieving or repenting. Paul mentions here only the three sins of divisions, envy, and strife; but he gives the whole list of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19–21, and that list includes all these three.

Platform toleration of sin has all sorts of dangers, mainly in breaking down the consciences of the members. In times of spiritual warfare, however, such as denominational battles, some breaches begin to seem necessary for the sake of the cause. In battle conditions the warriors tend to allow themselves some slack in their defense of the truth.

The flesh may boast of sin, or minimize it, or joke about it. Christian graciousness goes by the board, and honesty may go with it, all in the name of truth and right. Men tolerate scoundrels for being separatists, or in other circles, for not being such. As to the situation in Corinth, the divisions indicated the presence of carnality, but not necessarily that every last member was in the flesh (11:19). In their case the approved ones showed up in contrast to the majority. When right and wrong are contending, neutrality does not prove spirituality; but those who truly walk with God will be tested, and severely.

2. The Flesh Accepts Energy Instead of Power (1 Corinthians 2:1–5)

Paul ministered in such a way that their faith might stand not in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. That implies that Christian work can be attempted either way, by means of human contrivance or by the power of the Holy Spirit. Later the Judaizers accused Paul himself of walking according to the flesh (2 Corinthians 10:1–4). He answered that while he still lived with human limitations, he did not war that way. The carnal opponents in Corinth had enough knowledge to see the distinction, even if they were themselves the prisoners of the flesh.

From the earliest days of the gospel, men have been bringing human contrivances into the services, after the manner of Nadab and Abihu bringing their strange fire to the altar. Sacramentalism opened the gates to all manner of pagan practices. Changing pastors into priests did more. The conflict with the Donatists brought the majority ruling that a valid sacrament did not require a pure administrator, only

one who was properly authorized. From there on came all manner of artificiality, contrivance, hypocrisy and human expedients. Our present entertainment churches are the current expression of the same impulse, with their dance, drama, music, feel-good discourses, and frank appeal to Adam's tastes.

What then may we take spiritual power to mean? It is that which God uses to produce the life of Christ in a sinner. The fruit of the Spirit stands in contrast to the works of the flesh. It is the pattern of the virtues revealed in Christ, not just one or two of them, but altogether. The virtues are not automatic; somewhere the New Testament commands each one of them. We may take the fruit in the sense in which Jesus spoke of it, as the evidence of spiritual reality. "...by their fruits ye shall know them"—(Matthew 7:20), not by their works, nor by their testimony, nor by their gifts. To produce much fruit, or more fruit, in oneself and then in others, takes the power of God. All the king's horses and all the king's men cannot do it, nor can any energy of the flesh, nor can spectacular performances. It requires spiritual power. Power is not the same thing as emotional intensity, although power and emotional intensity may appear together. The Corinthians had zeal and emotion in their services, as many professing Christians have now. However, the power of the Spirit is less common.

3. The Flesh Exalts Self (1 Corinthians 1:29, 5:2)

"That no flesh should glory in his presence" tells just what the old nature wants to do. It yearns for applause, for recognition. It loves to show off, which is to say, it loves platform ego-trips. Love vaunteth not itself; but the flesh does. The carnal preacher loves to talk about himself, and at length. He finds ways to recount his triumphs, his clever sayings, his travels, his learning, his possessions.

A pastor asked a neighborhood friend of his to hear the taped sermon of a guest preacher he had had. At the end of it, the pastor asked, "Well, what do you think of it?" Without pause the friend said, "He sure does highly recommend himself, doesn't he?"

The same observation applies to many religious musicians. Musical quality is surely compatible with devotion to the Lord, but outside the concert hall virtuoso performances are suspect, and showing off has no place in the throne room of God. Nor does it belong in church, as it has no ministry to the saints beyond giving them a chance to exercise forbearance and charity. Of the elders in Revelation 4, can we imagine any of them having something to applaud about?—Only to the extent that we have come to take the holy place so casually.

When Paul was refitting the Judaizers who had stolen the church at Corinth, he got to his most telling argument—and told it as if it had happened to someone else (2 Corinthians 12:1–10). Was he being honest? Yes, and modest, too, thus giving a right model for any Christian worker tempted to exalt himself.

4. The Flesh Indulges Self (Gal. 5:24)

“And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.” A leading desire of the old nature is for the creature comforts. Many have remarked that the temptations of Eve and of Christ follow the pattern of 1 John 2:16, “...the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...” In both events the lust of the flesh involved food. Carnality includes both indulging the flesh and inviting others to do the same. The life of the Spirit involves both being abased and abounding (Philippians 4), the latter with gratitude and without presumption. The life of the Spirit, like charity, does not behave itself unseemly.

Granted, a spiritual ministry will make spiritual demands. A demanding ministry does not necessarily reveal the Spirit; a church dictator proves that ever Sunday (1 Peter 5:3). However, when the Spirit is at work He will cause internal conflict, “...so that ye cannot do the things that ye would” (Galatians 5:17). Those who love God will accept the discipline of the cross (5:24); others will probably call that legalism.

But what then is the ministry in the Spirit? How are we to recognize it? As a Christian woman remarked, “Housework shows only when you don’t do it.” The spiritual ministry does not call attention to itself. During the service it conveys a certain quiet sense of appropriateness. What happened in church would somehow be in place in the throne room of God. In saying that, all comes under the discipline of Scripture (Deuteronomy 8:3); man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God. Those who serve rightly would give the impression that they love the Word. Furthermore, it would be no surprise to learn that each one on the platform had met God in prayer that morning.

A second mark of spiritual service is the fruit of the Spirit, the virtues of the Lord Jesus. Nothing in the service is inconsistent with His love, or joy, or peace. All is in harmony with longsuffering, gentleness and goodness. Everything that happens is consistent with faithfulness, meekness and self-discipline. Yet these things do not parade themselves; it is only in afterthought we realize that they were there.

It may be that the saints have become so toughened that they can accept the smell of the flesh as though it were the savor of life unto life. But do we not owe it to them, as well as to our Lord, so to live in the Word and in fellowship with Him, that we give the Spirit the greatest possible control of our ministry, and that we mortify the flesh? Any other sort of Christian service is a disservice.

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