

Faith Pulpit

Carnality and the Believer

Reformed theologians have consistently taught that there are only two kinds of people in the world the saved or unsaved or, to use their terminology, the “spiritual” and the “natural.” They hold dogmatically that believers are always classified as “spiritual” in the New Testament. They do admit that believers can be “carnal” in some aspects of their lives, but deny that there can be a state of “carnality” for a believer. Lately this view has been adopted by some within dispensationalism.

The question that needs to be addressed is whether or not this view encompasses a proper understanding of Scripture. Does it faithfully represent all of Scripture? In order to limit the consideration of this subject to a manageable level, I will use Ernest Regisinger’s booklet *What Should We Think of the Carnal Christian?* to represent the Reformed position. Reisinger believes that the teaching concerning a carnal believer is a grievous error that has disastrous effects on theology and the Christian life. He wrote his booklet “to show the dangerous implications and present-day results of this teaching.”¹ Reisinger concludes that the doctrine of the carnal Christian is “the mother of one of the most soul-destroying teachings of our day,”² that it “breeds Pharisaism,”³ and is “the consequence of a shallow man-centered evangelism in which decisions are sought at any price and with any methods.”⁴

The purpose of this article is to show, based on Scripture itself and careful exegesis of what it teaches, that the existence of the carnal Christian is indeed a correct theological conclusion.

The Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:1–3

One of the key passages involved in the discussion concerning carnality is this passage. Most of those holding to the Reformed view have little to say about this passage. At best they only mention it in passing. Reisinger attempts to de-emphasize the doctrinal significance of the book. To him, “1 Corinthians is not primarily a doctrinal epistle. . . . it was not written. . . to lay doctrinal foundations.”⁵ Where would a person go for doctrinal details about the believer’s physical resurrection if he did not

have 1 Corinthians 15?

Another error made by the Reformed position is to divorce chapter three of I Corinthians from chapter two. According to this interpretation, Paul describes two types of people in 1 Corinthians 2:14–16 and then moves on to a new subject in chapter three. Two things must be remembered at this point. First, chapter divisions were not in the original text of Scripture, and second, a new chapter does not necessarily introduce a new subject. Paul connects chapter three with chapter two by the use of the connective *kai* translated “and” in our English translations. According to Greek scholar Kermit Titrud, “One of the distinctive features of the conjunction *kai* when compared with other conjoining particles is that of union. *Kai* informs that the following is to be closely united with the preceding.”⁶ In chapter three, therefore, Paul contrasts the spiritual condition of the Corinthian believers with that of the spiritual believer he had just described in chapter two. The Corinthian believers were not spiritual but carnal. Note that he did not say they were somewhat carnal or had some aspects of carnality. The word carnal is used in the same way that the words natural (2:14) and spiritual (2:15) are used. If the words natural and spiritual refer to a spiritual state, then the word carnal must also refer to a spiritual state.

That this is the case is confirmed by what Paul states concerning these believers in 3:1–3. Paul uses two words in identifying these believers. In 3:1 he uses the word *sarkivos*. BDAG, the lexicon considered by most New Testament scholars to be the most authoritative for the New Testament, states that this use is opposed to or opposite of the use of spiritual in 2:14, and refers to “the state or condition of a human being with focus on being weak, sinful.”⁷ The second word found in 3:3 is *sarkikos*. Its basic idea is “belonging to the flesh,” and it refers to a level of behavior on the human level in contrast to the spiritual level.⁸ Paul’s statement, “Ye are yet carnal,” must refer to the spiritual condition in which they were then existing. That this is a reference to their general conduct or condition is supported as well by the use of the word *walk* in the last part of 3:3. This verb is used frequently by Paul in the sense of conduct, way of life, or lifestyle. One of many examples that illustrate this usage is Ephesians 5:8. It says, “For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light.” This verse and many others demonstrate that Paul refers to more than isolated acts when he uses the word *walk*. To him, this word designated a pattern of behavior for which we could use the term lifestyle. Applied to the Corinthians, it meant that their lifestyle was not spiritual in nature but fleshly or carnal.

Their carnal lifestyle marked them as infants in Christ who were unable to handle the more developed aspects of their Christian life. The word infant marks these believers as immature Christians.⁹ This phraseology connects the 1 Corinthians passage with Hebrews 5:11–14. Both passages refer to infants and milk. It is interesting that in addition to treating 1 Corinthians 3 superficially, those who hold to the Reformed position on carnality usually ignore the Hebrews passage. The recipients of the book of Hebrews were dull of hearing, or more literally “[had] become dull of hearing” (v. 11). Although these believers had been saved long enough to have become teachers in the assembly, they still did not have

an adequate grasp of the elementary teachings of the Christian faith. Instead, their need for a milk diet of spiritual truth signified that their spiritual development was on the infant level. Note that neither Hebrews nor 1 Corinthians denies that they were true believers. In fact, in 1 Corinthians, Paul emphatically states that they were “babes in Christ.” In Paul’s writings it is clear that only true believers are “in Christ.”

Confusion of Positional and Experiential Truth

Another interpretive error that Reisinger makes is confusing positional truth with the experience of the believer. For example, he uses 1 Corinthians 1:2 as proof that the believers in Corinth were already sanctified and therefore could not be in a carnal state. He writes, “We must bear in mind the designation he (Paul) gives to them in chapter 1. He says they are ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus.’”¹⁰ It is correct to say that all believers are completely sanctified and seated in the heavenly places with Christ. Yet no believer is experientially seated with Christ in the heavenly places, and no believer is completely sanctified experientially while on earth. Even Reformed interpreters see this truth in some areas. D.M. Lloyd-Jones, discussing the concept of the heavenly places in his commentary on Ephesians, comments,

A day is coming when I shall be in the heavenly places not only in spirit but in my body also. . . . We are still in the flesh, in the body, still struggling, still groaning . . . [although] we are seated together spiritually in the heavenly places with them [the Christian people who have gone on], and with Christ at this very moment.¹¹

Although all agree that all believers are fully sanctified in regard to their position before God the Father, this is not the actual experience of believers here on earth. Some believers have developed so little in this area that Paul calls them carnal and babes in Christ. Those holding the Reformed view claim that those who believe that Christians can be carnal are separating justification from sanctification, as though one could be justified and then later in life start the process of sanctification. This is an unfair representation of the carnal Christian view. Both views believe that sanctification begins at the time of salvation. The carnal view simply recognizes the Scriptural teaching that some believers do not progress as they should, and that others regress into an inferior spiritual condition.

Conclusion

Many other issues must be pursued if a complete examination of the Reformed view is to be undertaken. Among these would be the concept of Lordship salvation and a consideration of the Reformed interpretation of Romans chapters six and eight and other related passages. A careful study of these subjects and passages would further illustrate the inadequacies of the Reformed view. Unfortunately space limitations do not allow for a discussion of these subjects and passages.

The conclusion that must be drawn when all the Scripture is examined is that Scripture clearly teaches that there is such a thing as a believer who can be classified as carnal. This is not a desirable condition, because it not only destroys the testimony for Christ of that believer but also places him under the disciplinary hand of God. As Paul says concerning the members of the Corinthian church, “For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world” (1Corinthians 11:30, 32).

Works Cited

1. Ernest C. Resinger, What Should We Think of ‘The Carnal Christian’. Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 4.
2. Ibid., 19.
3. Ibid., 21.
4. Ibid., 22.
5. Ibid., 10.
6. Kermit Titrud, “The Function of kai in the Greek New Testament,” chapter 12 in Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation, ed. by David Allen Black, 255.
7. Sarkivos, in A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 914. This same meaning is found in the second edition, 750.
8. BDAG, 914.
9. BDAG, 671.
10. Resinger, 11.
11. D.M. Lloyd-Jones, God’s Ultimate Purpose, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 76, 77.

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*In recognition of his impact, a festschrift titled *Dispensationalism Revisited: A Twenty-First Century Restatement* was published in his honor, featuring essays by former students and colleagues.*