

St. Paul's Classification of the Corinthian Church in Two Classes.

by Daniel Steele

Daniel Steele's sermon explores St. Paul's classification of the Corinthian church as carnal, highlighting the need for spiritual growth and maturity among believers.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:13-14, 1 Corinthians 3:3, Philippians 2:20, Hebrews 5:13

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Carnal Nature"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the distinction between the natural man, devoid of spiritual perception, and the spiritual man who has a clear understanding of divine realities. In 1 Corinthians, St. Paul encounters a challenge in classifying the Corinthian church, as they are described as babes in Christ with a low level of spiritual life yet sanctified in Jesus Christ. While the Corinthians show signs of transformation and enrichment in spiritual gifts, their spirituality is tainted with carnality, leading St. Paul to address them as 'carnal' due to lingering perversity and uncrucified works of the flesh.

Transcript

In 1 Cor. 2:14 St. Paul describes the natural man as utterly devoid of spiritual perception. Spiritual realities "are foolishness unto him"; and "he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged or examined" (R. V.). Christ foretold this state of things when he declared that "the world," the aggregate of natural men, "cannot receive the Spirit of truth, because they see him not." They have in exercise only sense-perception and reason, neither of which apprehends God and spiritual things. Spiritual intuition is an attribute of spiritual life; and spiritual life is absent, because unbelief bars out the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. Hence, St. Jude describes "natural or sensual [animal, R. V. margin] men as having not the Spirit." Just the opposite is the characteristic of spiritual men, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God." While the natural man is, by the perverse attitude of his will, an agnostic, the spiritual man is an epignostic, having a clear perception of divine realities, which he is enabled to speak of, not in the terms of groveling human philosophy, but in the words which the Spirit teacheth (1 Cor. 2:13, R. V., margin), "interpreting spiritual things to spiritual men."

Having clearly defined these two classes, the natural and the spiritual, the Apostle to the Gentiles encounters a difficulty in attempting to classify the Corinthian church. It will not do to call them natural,

because they have a low degree of spiritual life, they are babes in Christ. They are on the resurrection side of the unbridged chasm between death and life. The term "babes" implies life, and the words "in Christ" imply regeneration and vital union with Christ. Moreover, they are addressed as "sanctified in Jesus Christ."

These words import that the principle of holiness had been lodged in their hearts, indicating their calling "to be saints," when that principle should achieve the exclusion of every antagonistic principle, i.e., when they should be sanctified wholly, body, soul, and spirit. St. Paul sees such a transformation already begun in the Corinthian disciples that he thanks God always for the grace of God which was given them, and for their enrichment in all utterance and all knowledge, so that they came behind in no gift. After this description, there is no ground for impeaching their discipleship to Christ. Why, then, does the apostle hesitate to rank them as spiritual? Because their spirituality is soiled and tainted with carnality. Inbred sin is still active though not regnant. In the language of Joseph Cook, "they possess a predominant, rather than a perfect similarity to God in moral character, loving what he loves and hating what he hates." While the trend of their being is upward, there are strong downward proclivities which distract and endanger. Jealousy, strife, and schism are not fruits of the Spirit, but works of the flesh not yet crucified, although dethroned; the strong man being not yet cast out, though bound in chains.

In this perplexity St. Paul, unable to call the Corinthians either spiritual or natural, without flattery and void of fear, bluntly declares, 1 Cor. 3:3, "Ye are yet carnal" -- mere men of flesh. He charges their unchristian acts to an unholy state. He traces their perverse doing to a lingering perversity in their being, which must be rectified before they can be truthfully denominated perfectly spiritual.

We must not suppose for a moment that these babes in Christ were willfully transgressing the known law of God, for such sin would forfeit their adoption. Their fault was in not leaving the elementary principles and pressing on unto perfection, and in remaining chronic babes so long that they had taken on the unlovely characteristics of dwarfs. Babes as having least of earthly mould and freshest from the hand of God awaken our admiration; but protracted infancy awakens pity rather than delight. They are weak and sickly, unable to do a man's day's work in the Lord's vineyard. They are dyspeptic, turning away from those strong truths and high experiences which make gigantic believers who fight manfully the good fight of faith; while the dwarfs, equal in age to these stalwarts, linger in the nursery, and cry for the milk-bottle out of cradles which they have no ambition to outgrow. It is not strange that the spiritual forces become weak, and the old nature, which should have been moribund, becomes so fully developed as to threaten to unhinge the believer's right relation to God. Practically ciphers in the church, they are doctrinally weathercocks whirled about by every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men. They are "dull of hearing," and more dull of understanding the higher possibilities of grace attainable through the Holy Spirit appropriated by faith. What bungling teachers are these! Wherever they are found in the pulpit, they are "unskillful in the word of righteousness." Yet this very word, of whose deep significance they are experimentally ignorant, is the sword of the Spirit, which they know not how to wield effectively in the battle into which they have rushed unbidden and unprepared.

In a church of which I was pastor, the desire was publicly expressed for a revival in which many sinners should be converted. A wise woman, who sorrowed over the lack of spiritual development in the members of that church, arose and said, "What should we do with the converts? We have no place for them; the cradles are all full."

The Corinthian church is not the only church in which the nursery furniture is in greater demand than are the weapons of war -- not the only church to many of whom it might be said. "Are ye not carnal?" But if many who are truly regenerate have depravity still dwelling -- not reigning -- in them, does not this fact demonstrate the truth of "the residue theory"? It is certain that there was a residue of sinful proclivity marring the character, disturbing the peace, and threatening the unity of one apostolic church.

The same marked distinction between two kinds of disciples of Christ occurs in

Phil. 2:20, which is thus translated by Alford: "For I have none else like-minded with myself who will really care for your affairs; for all [my present companions] seek their own matters, not those of Jesus Christ." The only two wholly consecrated men in whom self had been crucified among the preachers in Rome, when Paul penned the epistle to Philippi, were himself and Timothy. Says Alford, "No weakening of the assertion must be thought of, as that of the 'all,' meaning many or most or care more about their own matters," as many annotators have tried to do. "The word 'all,' and the assertion that they seek their own, not the things of Jesus Christ, are absolute." -- Alford. Meyer and Ellicott indorse this view strongly. Says Wesley, "For all" but Timothy "seek their own -- ease, safety, pleasure. or profit. Amazing! In that golden age of the church could St. Paul thoroughly approve of one only among the laborers that were with him? And how many do we think can now approve themselves unto God?"

This sorting of Christians into two kinds, the self-crucified and those in whom self lives, the wholly and the partially sanctified, is a delicate business for which only an inspired apostle is competent. While we fallible mortals may wisely shrink from drawing the line we should remember that this line is clearly discerned by the eye of Omniscience. O Lord, to which class do I belong? In which is the greatest safety, happiness, and usefulness? There can be but one answer.

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