



## A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

### Lesson 4...Not Spiritual but Worldly... 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

Now last time I made the point that Paul had turned in his epistle to the Corinthians to address the question about whether Paul was crucified on their behalf. I made the point as I tried to show the chiasmic structure of the first four chapters. I hope you'll remember the structure we talked about. If you don't remember it went like this...

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You see Paul had asked three rhetorical questions and was answering them in reverse order. The first question concerned whether or not any of them had been baptized in Paul's name...of course, they had not.

The second question...the one we talked about last week...concerned whether or not Paul had been crucified for any of the Corinthians...and, of course, his answer was that he had not been. In fact, his answer was that he had only had one message while among the Corinthians had concerned Christ and Him crucified.

And that it seems was the root of the problem that had sprung up between them. You see the Corinthians had come to the conclusion that Paul had only given the basics...that he had withheld from them the deeper, esoteric truths of the Christian faith. They believed and had complained that other teachers were more eloquent...and more spiritual. That is, they had come to believe that Paul had been too simplistic with them...that they were more spiritual than Paul had recognized and as a result they broken into factions behind other teachers that they favored more than Paul.

Now we saw last week that Paul had responded to that criticism by saying that he had indeed only preached Christ crucified while in their midst...that he had avoided the worldly wisdom that they had now come to long for...that he had, in fact, preached wisdom while in their midst but that the wisdom he had preached was the wisdom of the cross.

He even goes on to say that he had given them wisdom...that he had given them the deep stuff and that if they had been actually spiritual...they would have recognized what he had given them for what it was...the true wisdom of God.

Now some scholars think that the principal conflict here was the conflict between Paul's followers and those of Apollos.<sup>1</sup> But whether that is true or not, one thing is certain...the Corinthians had chosen up sides...had broken into factions...and had done so because they thought that Paul and other ministers of the gospel like Apollos were just like the various Greek philosophers they knew so well in Corinth.

So Paul is going to turn finally to address the question of how they should view him and Apollos and Peter and any other minister they come in contact with...and what he is going to say is that they are not divided at all but are simply servants and that the Corinthian preoccupation with following one servant or another is simply a preoccupation with underlings of the kingdom rather than with the Lord of the kingdom.

Now, 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 forms a transition between Paul's answers to the second and third questions that he has raised.

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Now I bring that point up because this morning we are going to pursue a bit of a rabbit trail...that is we are going to deviate from a strict exposition of the text to discuss a concern that Paul did not have in addressing the Corinthians...but that has become quite important in our day.

Now with all that said, let's look at 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:1**...But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, <sup>3</sup> for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

There is a rule in biblical interpretation that is very important to remember. The rule is that we should let the context of the passage determine the meaning of the various phrases and words in the passage. First Corinthians chapter 3 provides a

perfect illustration of this point. For many evangelicals, 1 Corinthians 3 has been the formative passage behind their concept of **the “carnal Christian”**.

They say, and it is easy to see how they get the idea, that 1 Corinthians teaches an idea of three classes of people. Those three classes are: natural men, spiritual men, and carnal Christians. I want to take a few minutes and explain the concept of the **“carnal Christian”**. Then I want to explain why historically the idea has been rejected by reformed believers. I don't intend to caricature the concept of the **“carnal Christian”**. If I do that, I hope you will take me to task. But I do want to explain what some of the inherent dangers of the concept are.

First, let me discuss a little history. The concept of the **“carnal Christian”** was first made popular by the notes included in the Scofield Study Bible. Dr. Scofield wrote, and Dr. Walvoord included in its revision the following quote:

Paul divides men into three classes: (2:14) Paul divides men into three classes: (1) *psuchikos*, meaning of the senses, sensuous, (Jas.3:15; Jude 19), *natural*, i.e. the Adamic man, unrenewed through the new birth (Jn.3:3,5); (2) *pneumatikos*, meaning *spiritual*, i.e. the renewed man as Spirit-filled and walking in the Spirit in full communion with God (Eph.5:18–20) and (3) *sarkikos*, meaning *carnal, fleshly*, i.e. the renewed man who, walking “after the flesh,” remains a babe in Christ (1 Cor.3:1–4). The natural man may be learned, gentle, eloquent, fascinating, but the spiritual content of Scripture is absolutely hidden from him; and the fleshly or carnal Christian is able to comprehend only its simplest truths, “milk” (1 Cor.3:2).<sup>2</sup>

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So, if I could summarize Dr. Walvoord and Dr. Scofield here. I would go something like this. There are really three groups of people in the world. Those three groups include: (1) the natural man, (2) the spiritual man, and (3) the

**“carnal Christian”**, who could be called, and I am not trying to caricature the position here, the carnal spiritual man.

The **“natural man”** would be a man that has no interest in spiritual things. He is unregenerate and the idea of Christ and Him crucified is foolishness to him.

The Spirit of God, on the other hand, leads the **“spiritual man”**. He does see the wisdom of the cross and because he is filled with the Spirit of God lives in light of its implications.

Finally, the **“carnal Christian”** is understood to be a justified man. He is redeemed from his sins but he has little or no interest in spiritual things. He is glad to be on his way to heaven, but he is consumed by the affairs of this world. He is saved but really he is saved by the **“skin of his teeth”**. He will be in heaven, but he will be without rewards or crowns. If you sniff his garments they may have the lingering scent of his works, which were consumed with fire.

Now, I think you can see where this doctrine led logically to a whole doctrine of the **“Higher Christian Life”**. You can see, I think, where Christians would be concerned to move up a level so that they could have works of righteousness that would endure. There would be a concern about avoiding embarrassment in future judgment. There would be a concern about being in heaven as an embarrassed, tearful, empty-handed participant. There would be a concern to be filled with the Spirit of God, that is, there would be a concern to be a spirit-filled Christian.

Connected logically to that, I think, is the whole idea of a second work of grace. This work of grace, which would be something the carnal Christian would have to strive for, would catapult the **“carnal Christian”** into being a **“spiritual man”**. This second work of grace might be called **“the baptism of the Spirit”**, or **“becoming spirit-filled”** or even a **“spiritual breakthrough”**, but it would almost always have to be an identifiable crisis event. It would be a turning point; it would be a point, which marked a change in the kind, and quality of life the person experienced.

Naturally, there are underlying theological presuppositions that determine the direction of this crisis event. For the charismatic, the event would most likely be **“a baptism of the Spirit”** with the accompanying evidence of speaking in tongues. For the **“higher life advocate”**, the event might be marked by the deliverance from some sort of vice, or habit or a breakthrough in some spiritual discipline. For the fundamentalist, the event might be characterized by a newly found power related to evangelism. For the Calvinist, the event might lead to a renewed commitment to wade through John Owen’s *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*. But for virtually every Christian who holds to the idea of the **“carnal Christian”** there will almost certainly be some observable threshold over which they passed or would need to pass in order to move into the category of a **“spiritual Christian”**.

In recent days, and in our circles, the debate has surfaced in terms of a **“Lordship-No Lordship”** debate. The question is framed, **“Do you believe that it is necessary to make Christ Lord of your life in order to be a Christian?”** I think, when the **“Lordship Salvation”** issue is considered from a historical perspective, it can be seen to just be a continuation of the carnal Christian debate.

Those who hold that it is possible to be a believer and not make Jesus Lord of your life would usually make the same three-fold distinction made by Dr. Scofield. Those who say that you cannot be a Christian without making Jesus Lord of your life would usually say that there is no such thing as a carnal Christian.

This debate really broke out into a full-blown brawl when in 1988 John MacArthur, a popular southern California pastor and bible-teacher wrote a book called *The Gospel According to Jesus*. In it Dr. MacArthur stated that no person could be a Christian without making Jesus Lord of his life.<sup>3</sup> What he was understood to be saying was that no person could be a Christian without displaying continued, prolonged, consistent obedience. Obviously he rejected the idea of a “**carnal Christian**”.

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A Dallas Seminary professor named Zane Hodges, a man I studied under while in seminary, responded with a in 1989 with a book called *Absolutely Free*, in which he stated that a person could be a Christian without making Christ Lord. What he was heard to be saying, and what he did in fact say, was that it was absolutely irrelevant whether a person demonstrated any obedience to Christ at all. For Hodges the only thing necessary to be a Christian was a profession of faith.

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Of course, our faith in Christ should continue. But the claim that it absolutely must, or necessarily does, has no support at all in the Bible...<sup>4</sup>

According to those who hold this view, effective Christian living is virtually an inevitable result of new birth. But this view is as remote from the Bible as the east is from the west...<sup>5</sup>

What Paul's words do describe is the astounding enigma of Christian experience. The believer in Jesus is alive in spirit, while still inhabiting a physical house which is as dead to God's life as it can possibly be...<sup>6</sup>

The simple fact is that the New Testament never takes it for granted that believers will see discipleship through to the end. And it never makes this kind of perseverance either a condition or a proof of final salvation from hell...<sup>7</sup>

But if anyone supposes that no true Christian could quit, or would quit, they have not paying attention to the Bible. They need to reread their New Testament. This time, with their eyes open...<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, discipleship is neither a condition nor a proof of actual regeneration...<sup>9</sup>

But on the other hand, we must not certainly assume that a person who has "dropped out" of the process is necessarily unsaved. They may have found their spiritual education more taxing than expected; they may have failed to count the cost correctly...<sup>10</sup>

Salvation is absolutely free; discipleship most certainly is not...<sup>11</sup>

So, you get sense of what Hodge's view is. There are people who never grow. They never really become disciples. They may even recant of their faith, but they are saved because they have made a confession of faith. God may justify the person through grace but after that their growth is entirely up to them. They can make a decision to ruggedly pursue discipleship or not, either way their salvation is secure even if they stop believing in Christ.

Now in case you might think I am caricaturing Dr. Hodge's view, I want you to listen to a review he wrote about Dr. Charles Stanley's book *Eternal Security*.

Among the most impressive sections in the book is the chapter entitled, "For Those Who Stop Believing" (chapter 8). Here Stanley clearly says some things which should have often been said before. For example, he writes: "**The Bible clearly teaches that God's love for His people is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand**" (p. 74). This is beautifully put. Equally lucid is the striking paragraph: "**Faith is simply the way we say yes to God's free gift of eternal life. Faith and salvation are not one and the same anymore than a gift and the hand that receives it are the same. Salvation or justification or adoption- whatever you wish to call it-stands independently of faith. Consequently, God does not require a constant attitude of faith in order to be saved-only an act of faith**" (p. 80). A little later, Stanley also writes: "**You and I are not saved because we have an enduring faith. We are saved because at a moment in time we expressed faith in our enduring Lord**" (p. 80).<sup>12</sup>

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I hope you get the point and some of the implications. He is affirming the "**carnal Christian**" position and stating clearly that it really makes no difference how you live. Once you in, you are in to stay, even if you cease believing.

Now, on the other hand Dr. MacArthur seems to be saying that in *The Gospel According to Jesus* that a person's salvation is dependent upon his obedience. Hodge's and others make the charge on more than one occasion. It is a serious charge and I think in the early editions of the book that is what MacArthur seemed to be saying. But it is not MacArthur's final position on the subject and it is not the position of the reformers, they argued that discipleship or repentance or even sanctification were the fruit of being justified. They were not the cause of justification, but the inevitable result of justification. No reformer ever argued that we should look to the fruit of our works to vindicate our justification. They argued instead that we should always look to Christ. Calvin called Christ the

mirror of our election. Listen to the way Calvin puts it concerning repentance and you will get a sense of the whole argument.

However, our immediate transition will be from faith to repentance. For when this topic is rightly understood it will better appear how man is justified by faith alone, and simple pardon; nevertheless actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness. Now it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith. For since pardon and forgiveness are offered through the preaching of the gospel in order that the sinner, freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices, may cross over into the Kingdom of God, surely no one can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance. There are some, however, who suppose that repentance precedes faith, rather than flows from it, or is produced by it as fruit from a tree. Such persons have never known the power of repentance, and are moved to feel this way by an unduly slight argument.<sup>13</sup>

So, the truth is that assurance of salvation is based not on our confession or even the fruit of our lives but on the atoning work of Christ. The historical reformed position is that there are only two groups of people in the world: natural men and spiritual men. Now that is not to say that when people become Christians they don't need time to mature. Of course, they do. In fact, I think it could be argued from this very text that there may even be varying degrees of babyhood. It is also not to say that they won't fall into sin. Of course, they will. It is not say that all Christians don't have some measure of carnality in some secret recess of their hearts. All any of us have to do to know the truth of that is look at our own hearts. Calvin recognized the problem of looking to your works for assurance:

Let even the most perfect man descend into his conscience and call his deeds to account, what then will be the outcome for him? Will he sweetly rest as if all things were well composed between him and God and not, rather, be torn by dire torments, since if he be judged by works, he will feel grounds for

condemnation within himself? The conscience, if it looks to God, must either have sure peace with his judgment or be besieged by the terrors of hell.<sup>14</sup>

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Therefore we profit nothing in discussing righteousness unless we establish a righteousness so steadfast that it can support our soul in the judgment of God. When our souls possess that by which they may present themselves fearless before God's face and receive his judgment undismayed, then only may we know that we have found no counterfeit righteousness.<sup>15</sup>

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Hence Christ is called "King of peace" [Isaiah 9:6] and "our peace" [Ephesians 2:14] because he quiets all agitations of conscience. If we ask the means, we must come to the sacrifice by which God has been appeased. For anyone unconvinced that God is appeased by that one atonement in which Christ endured his wrath will never cease to tremble. In short, we must seek peace for ourselves solely in the anguish of Christ our Redeemer.<sup>16</sup>

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But at the beginning of this talk, I said there is a rule that the context of a passage must be the final guide in interpreting the passage. I want to go back to that thought. Paul was not engaged in a discussion on the three types of people in the world. He was being infinitely practical, intensely pastoral. The Corinthians had been reported to be divided over personalities; they had dissolved into factions. Paul had received a letter from them apparently asking why he had not imparted unto them the higher content of Christianity. They were asking why he had not given them the good stuff. He reminded them that he only had one message and that that message actually contained the height of the wisdom of God. I think you will remember how we talked about that last week.

What Paul is doing here is reminding them of their continued immaturity. Look at verse one:

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:1**...But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

You see they had been arguing that they were spiritual and deep and that Paul's instruction to them had been too rudimentary and that they were ready for...more than ready for the deep stuff...and Paul here then addresses them as worldly and infantile.

Now he does change the word here...it is not the same word used in 1 Corinthians 2:14...

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:14**...The natural person (ψυχικὸς) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Rather the word is σαρκίνοις...“fleshly” and in order to define the word he attached another word...the word νηπίοις which means infantile or childish. You see he is turning their own words against them.

He continues in verse 2...

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:2**...I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready,

Now Paul's point here is not that there are two separate tracks in the Christian life...it is not the cross as milk and then eschatology or prophecy or

pneumatology as the meat. No the gospel is both milk and meat and is always the central message of the Christian life. It is rather that he was not able to contemplate in the presence the fullness of the message of the cross because they had been so worldly. In fact he continues in verse three...they are still worldly...and the reason he knows that is because there are still divisions among them and they are completely self-absorbed.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:3**...for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

You see it is a rebuke. Paul is wrapping up this section of his argument. It is the section in which he reminds them about what it was that he preached. He is trying to remind them that they have been redeemed and have experienced both the power and wisdom of God. He is not viewing them as second class Christians; he wants them rather to act like what they, in fact, are. When he says they are "**fleshly**", he is not so much saying that they are second class Christians as much as he is saying they are acting just like the world and that they should stop it and stop it right now.

He had started out in 1 Corinthians by reminding them of who they were:

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Corinthians 1:4**...I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge-- <sup>6</sup> even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you-- <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup> who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. <sup>10</sup> ¶ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you

agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

And now he is reminding them that it is time for them to lay aside the behavior of the world and to act like who they are.

I suppose that if I were to try to make an application for this passage it would be along the same lines. The place of our unity is in the crucified Christ. We can be united only in Him, but we must ever avoid breaking into factions or forming along personalities in our church. We are not to look down on each other or act in any sort of condescending way to each other but constantly remind each other of what are we are in Christ.

Lastly, after all of that is said and done, we are to view each other and men and women for whom Christ died. I do not know how it is that any two believers could ever despise each other in light of the sufferings of Christ. Even when we disagree with each other over specific issues we ought to be able to keep this important point in mind.

I also want to make one other point of application and it is more indirect. Paul was writing to the Corinthians probably eighteen to twenty-four months after he had left them. They were wanting special knowledge and wisdom and Paul was disappointed that they had not grown up more in their behavior. He was reminding them of what they were and how they should have been behaving and that it had been long enough for them display some maturity. He did not think that it ought to take twenty or thirty years for the Corinthians to develop some spiritual maturity. He though a year or two was long enough. Still, he was

not content to leave them where they were. He was prodding them along. Many of us need to hear that message. Some of us need to begin to act with wisdom and maturity.

Are you advancing in your Christian life? Are you growing in your understanding of the grace of God towards you as demonstrated in Christ's atoning work? Are you viewing other believers in light of Christ's death on their behalf? If you are not...you think I is about time to start?

You see that is Paul's point. We can talk about maturity...we can talk about wisdom...we can even strive for wisdom but the wisdom of God is found in the cross and the love and affection that we develop for one another is deferential love and service to each other will reflect just how mature we are.

I think the wonderful quote from C.S. Lewis from his sermon *Weight of Glory* is worth hearing here.

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Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>17</sup>

Let's cease to be pleased. Let's pray.

<sup>1</sup> Joop F. Smith, "What is Apollos? What is Paul? A Search for the Coherence in First Corinthians 1:10-4:21" in *Novum Testamentum* 44.03, 234.

<sup>2</sup> C.I. Scofield, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1234.

<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Zane Clark Hodges, *Absolutely Free!: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 63.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> Zane Hodges, "Book Review of Charles Stanley's 'Eternal Security'" in *Journal of Grace Evangelical Society* 4:1 Spring, 1991, 69.

<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* ((Battles' Translation) 3.3.1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 3.13.3

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 3.13.3

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 3.13.4

<sup>17</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*.