

The Corinthian Christians were the best and most faithful financial givers in the New Testament. They were gifted by the Spirit above other churches. These were not people whose lives were dominated by the flesh. They were acting like immature children in ***one particular area***, namely, they were creating cliques and following men. This whole rebuke is built around this point. Paul asked the question in verse 3, “Are ye not carnal?” He then shows what he means by “carnal” and proves the Corinthians were indeed carnal according to that definition. They were causing internal strife by following men. Verse 4 plainly shows they were carnal in that they were forming parties and groups by exalting different leaders. Carnality in this context does not include sexual immorality, cursing, refusing to attend church, etc. Not at all. They were carnal in ***one*** aspect of their life. They were acting like immature children in ***one*** area of conduct. Paul specifically qualifies the meaning of carnal:

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

Childish behavior and ***ungodly*** behavior are two entirely different things. Acting like an immature child and acting like a non-Christian are not even close to the same thing. When Paul speaks of a “natural man” he means a lost man (*2:14*). When he says “carnal” in this passage he’s talking about acting like immature children. We must remember that a child has all of the marks or features of a man. He has eyes, ear, hands, feet, etc., but none of those things are developed. It is pitiful to see a grown man still acting like an immature child. However, I repeat, a grown man acting as a child is not the same as acting like a dog or some other animal. A babe in Christ has all the attributes of a man in Christ, but those attributes are not developed. An immature believer may be inconsistent and contradictory in some of his actions, but he will also demonstrate true spiritual marks in other areas. We could paraphrase Paul’s words like this:

Brethren, I address you as “brethren” because there is much evidence to believe you sincerely love Christ. However, in one area of your life you are acting like little kids without an ounce of spiritual sense. You are exalting your teachers above measure and forming into cliques.

I repeat, this is quite different than not praying, not reading one’s Bible, not fellowshiping with the saints, while living in sin. Suppose there were ten things that distinguished a true Christian from a lost man. If someone had eight or nine of those marks but was either weak or struggling in one or two areas, we would not say, “You cannot tell the difference between

him and a lost person who has no marks of being saved.” Paul was not describing two classes of Christians where one’s life (the Carnal Christian’s) was dominated by the flesh. He was describing Christians with a serious flaw in ***one area*** of their life.

From chapter 3, verse 5 through chapter 4, verse 15 Paul deals with the problem of following and exalting men. He clearly shows that their carnality was exhibited by some saying, “I am of Paul,” while others said, “I am of Apollos” (*β:4*). Paul had spoken of this same thing earlier in chapter 1 of this epistle. He said:

Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? ... (*1 Cor 1:12,13*).

Let’s look at Paul’s argument beginning at 3:5:

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire (*1 Cor 3:5-15*).

The popular teaching of this passage today is that Paul is talking about a ***Christian’s works*** after he is converted. They say the word “foundation” in the text means conversion or the beginning of the Christian life, and every Christian builds on that foundation with different kinds of works. If his works are good he will receive a reward and if his works are bad he will suffer loss. However, even if he has no good works and suffers loss of everything, he will still be saved by the skin of his teeth or “yet so as by fire.” They say Paul is describing “the judgment seat of Christ” where all Christians will give an account of their works after salvation. The “carnal” Christians will have no rewards and their whole life will be burned up but they themselves will still be saved. This is the popular view that is taught in many churches today, but it’s not at all what these verses are teaching.

The first key to understanding the passage is in verse 9. Notice the change of pronouns from “we” to “ye.” I remember hearing a famous Bible teacher using this section to prove the Carnal Christian doctrine. When he came to verse 9, he said, “We, that is, all Christians, are laborers together with God. Ye, that is, all Christians, are God’s husbandry.” But the text can not possibly mean that. “We” and “ye” are two different groups. The “we” in this context can only refer to those who ministered the Word of God to the Corinthians. The “ye” can only refer to the Corinthian Christians. Look at these verses individually.

The Corinthians were forming cliques and claiming different teachers as their leader. Paul asks the obvious question: “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?” (*ν5*). The “we” is Paul and Apollos, and the “ye” is the Corinthian church. God gives each “man” (or minister) different gifts. Paul’s ministry was planting, and Apollos’ ministry was watering, but both of these ministries together could not produce fruit. God alone could do that. “I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase” (*ν6*). The Corinthians, along with all Christians, owe everything to God! “So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase” (*ν7*).

In verse 8 Paul drives home his major point. Paul and Apollos both labor for God in the same cause. They have different ministries; one is a planting ministry and the other is a watering ministry, and each one will receive a reward according to his own ministry.

Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour (*ν8*).

The words “he that planteth” and the words “every man” cannot possibly refer to ***every Christian***. This has to refer to Paul and Apollos as ministers of the gospel. The reward for their labor is a reward for faithfulness to the truth in consistently carrying out their ministries. This passage is talking about the judgment of any and all who teach God’s truth. The test is how faithful they were in preaching that truth.

It is true that a Christian’s life will be judged, but that is not the subject in 1 Corinthians 3. That truth is clearly taught in 2 Corinthians 5:10. The truth being taught in 1 Corinthians 3 is the same as that in James: “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment” (*β:1 NKJV*). This is the judgment that Paul is speaking about in 1 Corinthians 3. It is the judgment of teachers.

When you misinterpret a verse of Scripture, you make two mistakes and not just one. You first make the text say something it is not saying. This may not be too dangerous in that the particular doctrine you are teaching may be clearly taught in another passage of Scripture. That would mean that you are not teaching false doctrine, you are just using the wrong text to prove your point. The second mistake is usually the most serious. You lose the truth that the particular text is teaching by making it teach something else. The particular text you are using may be the only, or the major, text in the Bible that teaches that particular truth. That means that even if the doctrine you are teaching is correct, because it is taught in other texts, you have badly mutilated the Bible by losing an important aspect of truth. Oftentimes the very truth needed to correct a bad doctrine is lost by the very people promoting the bad doctrine in the first place. This is surely true with the Carnal Christian doctrine.

The very people who count “nickels and noses” as the only test of success and build mega-churches by using every carnal gimmick and fleshly attraction possible are the very people who desperately need the true message of 1 Corinthians 3. However, they cannot receive it because they have distorted and lost the true message being taught. These leaders are the very people that Paul is talking about. It is their ministries that are envisioned as being tested by the fire of God’s truth. What a bonfire will follow that judgment!

Verse 9 clearly shows that the “any man” in all of these verses refers to ministers, or teachers, as represented by Paul and Apollos. The church is spoken of as a “husbandry,” meaning a garden or a field. Paul and Apollos sow the seed, water the plants, and pull the weeds, etc. This is not intended to mean apostles only. This same principle also applies to a teacher in Sunday school. It means that every person who has any form of ministry representing God and His truth will be judged one day as to how faithful he or she was in teaching that truth. Carefully notice verse 10:

According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.

I repeat, the popular interpretation of this makes the “foundation” equal to being saved. This cannot possibly be true. First of all, this is a foundation that Paul is able to lay and Paul cannot save people. He cannot lay a foundation of salvation in anyone’s life, but he can declare the foundational truths that are essential for any true conversion. Paul is the wise masterbuilder

who lays this foundation and another builds thereon. Again, the context forces us to understand that “*another*” means *another builder*, or *another minister*, involved in laboring together with God. The exhortation to “every man” to take careful heed as to how he builds on the foundation laid can only be an exhortation to those who teach to be sure that they teach the truth.

Paul speaks of this same “foundation” in another place: “Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, *lest I should build upon another man’s foundation*” (Rom 15:20). To “build upon another man’s foundation” cannot refer to a Christian’s works built on the foundation of salvation. “Another man’s foundation” refers to another church or ministry by a fellow-laborer in the gospel. Apollos, Timothy, Titus, and others built on the foundation that Paul had laid when he founded new churches. The foundation is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. He is the chief cornerstone. A church that is not established on what the Scriptures say about the person and work of Christ is not worthy of being called a Christian church. True church planters teach theology! True church planters begin and end with “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (2:2). Those who follow and come as pastors and teachers must be careful how they build on that foundation. Verse 12 begins the application:

Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

As in this entire context, the “any man” must refer to any minister or teacher. There are six materials mentioned. Three are valuable and three are not. Three are purified by fire and the other three are destroyed by fire. What is Paul saying? The different materials represent one, or possibly two things. They either refer to the content of our message, that is, the doctrines we preach as they represent God and His sovereign grace, or they refer to the converts that we take into the church as part of God’s building.

Paul assures us that every man’s “work” shall be tested by fire (v13). Notice he did not say *works*, plural, but *work*, singular. Paul means the same thing here by the word “work” as he did when he said later in this same epistle, “Are not ye my *work* in the Lord?” (1 Cor 9:1). The Corinthians themselves were his “work.” One of the first things a preacher asks another preacher is, “How is the work going?” Both of them know they are

not talking about their personal deeds, or Christian life, but they are talking about the congregation. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul envisioned his work, and the work of every other minister or teacher being tested and “tried by fire.” The “work” in this passage is not the works (plural) of a Christian’s life after conversion, it is the Corinthian Christians themselves being tested as examples or fruit of Paul’s ministry. This test is of what “*sort*” the work is, not what *size* it is.

The man’s ministry, his sermons, his converts, his methods, and everything connected with building a congregation are going to be tested by God’s truth. The only question a preacher or teacher must worry about is whether he was faithful to God’s truth in all that he did. Paul then speaks of gaining and losing rewards:

If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire (vv 14,15).

Paul is clearly not teaching here that a man can live a worldly life and gratify the flesh as a *Carnal Christian* and then make it to heaven by the skin of his teeth! The “any man” means any minister or teacher. What Paul is saying is that it is possible for a preacher or teacher who is truly saved to either knowingly or unknowingly shape his message to fit a situation. He may sacrifice full truth for false success. He may use methods that really get results when clear truth is not popular. If you were sent out with a pick-up truck and told to find a load of gold, silver, and precious stones and another man was told to go find some wood, hay, and stubble, who would come back first? If you send a man out to build a church and tell him to preach nothing but what is laid down in Scripture and send another man out allowing him to use any method that attracts people and will draw a crowd, which one will build the biggest church in the shortest time? That is what Paul is talking about.

There are many churches and mega-ministries in our day that have been built following the teachings of today’s popular seminars – “How to Double Your Congregation in Two Years.” What a flaming bonfire will result at the judgment when these are tried by the fire of God’s truth!

This entire chapter along with part of chapter 4 is talking about ministers and teachers being tried. The church is God’s temple and woe to the man who defiles that temple with “wood, hay and stubble.” Let those wise in the things of this world become fools for Christ’s sake (v18). We need not worry about either man’s approval or his ridicule (4:1-7). The one thing

needful is that we be faithful servants of Christ and faithful stewards of the truth of His amazing grace.

The apostle Paul did not teach the “*Carnal Christian*” doctrine of today – that as long as you have “accepted Christ” you are bound for heaven regardless of your carnal and sinful lifestyle. In fact, he taught just the opposite – “**To be carnally minded is death...If ye live after the flesh ye shall die**” (Rom 8:6,13). How dare anyone say that what Paul really meant was: “To be carnally minded is to lose all your rewards and still be saved yet so as by fire.” God speaks plain in His Word about all of those who are called by His grace, born of His Spirit, washed in the blood of Christ, and bound for glory. Let the Scriptures speak for themselves, and you judge – *Will today’s Carnal Christians be saved?*

- “**He became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him**” Hebrews 5:9
- “**But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me**” Luke 19:27
- “**They that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts**” Galatians 5:24
- “**He that saith, I know Him, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him**” 1 John 2:4
- “**Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven**” Matthew 7:21
- “**Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure**” 1 John 3:3
- “**As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God**” Romans 8:14
- “**My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish**” John 10:27,28
- “**Follow...holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord**” Hebrews 12:14

— Adapted from the writings of John G. Reisinger



“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.” — 1 Corinthians 3:11-15

Large numbers in and out of churches today are known as “Carnal Christians.” This is due to a popular teaching that *two classes* of Christians exist – *Carnal Christians* and *Spiritual Christians*. It is taught that both of these are saved, although their lifestyles are radically different. While the Spiritual Christian walks with God living a life of holiness, the Carnal Christian walks after the flesh living a life of carnality and sin. These Carnal Christians are assured they are going to heaven because they have “accepted Jesus as their personal Savior,” but because of their self-centered and worldly lifestyles they will suffer the loss of rewards at the judgment, yet they themselves will be saved “yet so as by fire.”

This Carnal Christian doctrine is supposedly taught in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 3 where Paul refers to the Corinthian believers as “carnal” (see vv 1-4). The question is not whether Paul uses the word carnal in reference to true Christians, but what does he mean by the word “carnal”? Paul is basically saying to these Corinthians, “You people are not acting in a true Christian manner. Your response and attitude is more like a non-Christian than a Christian.” Paul is not talking about the *totality of their life*. He is not saying that the lifestyle of these people is characterized by the flesh, carnality, and sin. He is saying that in *one particular area* of their life they are acting very wrong.