

*Rethinking a Much Abused Text:  
1 Corinthians 3:1-15*



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**1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-15 ABUSED**

**The Carnal Christian Teaching (3:1-4)**

The founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary (originally The Evangelical Theological College), Lewis Sperry Chafer (D.D.), published *He That Is Spiritual*<sup>1</sup> in 1918. In that work, now dubbed in its reprinted subtitle, "A Classic Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Spirituality," he gave full exposition to the "carnal Christian" teaching, which had been briefly articulated in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, just one year before.<sup>2</sup>

In Chafer's work, he opens up the first chapter with "Three Classes of Men." Chafer based his teaching on 1 Corinthians. 2:9-3:4. He states:

The Apostle Paul, by the Spirit, has divided the whole human family into three groups: (1) The "natural man," who is unregenerate, or unchanged spiritually; (2) the "carnal man," who is a "babe in Christ," and walks "as a man"; and (3) the "spiritual" man.<sup>3</sup>

In that opening chapter, Chafer describes the "carnal Christian" in the following terms:

Though saved, the carnal Christians are walking "according to the course of this world." They are "carnal" because the flesh is dominating them (see Romans 7:14). . . . The objectives and affections are centered in the same unspiritual sphere as that of the "natural" man.<sup>4</sup>

According to Chafer, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, is teaching that a saved person can be under the dominion of sin. Amazingly he uses Romans 7:14 to support this idea! Further, he asserts that a regenerate man may have his objectives and affections completely untouched by the regenerating grace of the Spirit! Finally, he summarizes, "There are two great spiritual changes which are possible to human experience—the change from the 'natural' man to the saved man, and the change from the 'carnal' man to the 'spiritual' man."<sup>5</sup>

Lewis Sperry Chafer had claimed to be "strictly Calvinistic."<sup>6</sup> Yet, his teaching in *He That Is Spiritual* departed from a traditional Reformed understanding of the work of salvation, and, as B. B. Warfield rightly stated, Chafer's teaching comes from the "laboratory of John Wesley" and is "incurably Arminian."<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Chafer's "carnal Christian" teaching from 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, gained widespread acceptance, and has been given new life time and again. One of the most popular heirs of the Chaferian interpretation of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 is Charles Ryrie. Ryrie even marshals Herman Bavinck and John Calvin in support of making a distinction between the carnal believer and the spiritual believer.<sup>8</sup>

What is important to notice is that Chafer, and those who have followed him, have taken 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 and used it to justify that there are actually three classes or kinds of people: natural, spiritual, and carnal. In Chafer's scheme, there are two types or kinds of Christians, those who are spiritual and those who are carnal.

Furthermore, what characterizes this "carnal" Christian is that his life can be completely unchanged; his objectives and affections can remain untransformed. There is no observable difference between him and the natural man. He can be walking according to the course of this world. In fact, he can even

be completely indifferent to the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Certainly there are other related problems with Chafer's teaching—for instance, regarding the nature of man, the nature of regeneration and sanctification. However, for our purpose we are simply focusing on his use of 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 to justify the "carnal Christian" doctrine.

### The Bema Seat and Rewards (3:10-15)

This teaching on three classes of men is often coupled with the next passage, 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. What is often asserted within the carnal Christian teaching is that there will be a separate judgment for believers, where their works are evaluated and they will receive rewards. The usual assumption is that those who were spiritual will receive a reward, those who were carnal will be saved "as by fire."

Joe Wall, president of Colorado Christian University, wrote a popular level book titled, *Going for the Gold, Reward and Loss at the Judgment of Believers* (Moody, 1991). The entire book is devoted to this idea that believers will have their own judgment and should live life motivated by reward.

Because of Christ's perfect payment for sin at the cross, the only other judgment facing the Christian is the judgment seat of Christ, or the bema. The issue of our eternal salvation is already settled. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Our entrance into His eternal kingdom is secure, without a doubt!<sup>10</sup>

Wall goes on to describe the judgment process using 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. The Christian's works are simply a matter of reward.<sup>11</sup> This follows the teaching of Lewis Sperry Chafer. Chafer dealt with this section of Scripture in two places in his *magnum opus*, *Systematic Theology*.<sup>12</sup> Note how Chafer uses the text directly for believers:

Reference is thus made, not to salvation, but to the works in which the Christian engages. It is not character building, but Christian service. There are, again, two general classes of super-

structure being built upon Christ the Rock, and these are likened to gold, silver, and precious stone, on the one hand, and to wood, hay and stubble, on the other hand. . . It is declared, however, that the believer who suffers loss in respect to his reward for service will himself be saved, though passing through that fire which destroys his unworthy service.<sup>13</sup>

This interpretation has gained widespread acceptance through Chafer and others who have followed in this school of thought. It has been popularized by books, such as Wall's, and through the *Ryrie Study Bible*. Ryrie notes, "This passage refers to the judgment seat of Christ. The works discussed here have nothing to do with earning or losing salvation. The rewards (or loss of them) pertain to Christians only."<sup>14</sup>

It is important to summarize the major points that emerge from this teaching on 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. (1) It is a unique judgment for Christians; (2) It focuses only on Christian service or good works; (3) It is only a matter of reward or loss of reward. This teaching fits in neatly with the carnal Christian teaching. The idea is that a person could live life with little or no works, and at this special Christian judgment would still get to heaven, without any rewards.

### Exegetical and Pastoral Observations

My personal evaluation of these two teachings, derived from 1 Corinthians 3:1-15, is that they are not only exegetically indefensible, but also pernicious doctrines. The exegetical observation will be dealt with in the next section, where we will closely examine the text in its context. The other observation, that these are both pernicious doctrines, comes from a theological and pastoral perspective. These doctrines have been used to instill in people the notion that they can have true faith and yet be carnal and fruitless. The worst thing that can happen to such people is that they lose out on millennial rewards. This is not a hypothetical observation, it is one that I have heard many times over the years. A presumptuous laziness can creep in, making people comfortable with their carnality and fruitlessness. What makes this so danger-

ous is that it gives ground for people to think they are converted, when in fact they may well be unregenerate and hell-bound.

My contention is that 1 Corinthians 3:1-15 has been abused by Chafer and others. The abuse of this passage has been tragic and remains with us to this day. It is my purpose in the next section to lay out a clear exegetical exposition of the text, and then conclude with some doctrinal and practical implications.

### AN EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-17<sup>15</sup>

#### 1. Introduction

Paul's initial concern regarding the Corinthian church was an arrogant party spirit (1:10-17). Fee is certainly right when he observes,

The great issue for Paul is not the division itself; that is merely a symptom. The greater issue is the threat posed to the gospel; and along with that to the nature of the church and its apostolic ministry. Thus, in a more profound way than is usually recognized, this opening issue is the most crucial factor in the letter, not because their 'quarrels' were the most significant error in the church, but because the nature of this particular strife had as its root cause their false theology, which had exchanged the theology of the cross for a false triumphalism that went beyond, or excluded the cross.<sup>16</sup>

This divisiveness, based on their "infantile status seeking" and "preacher worship," is attacked head on by Paul with the gospel itself (1:18-2:5). Paul extols the glory of the cross as the wisdom and power of God (1:18-25). It was the power of the gospel which came to them through the foolish medium of preaching and it has made them what they are (1:26-31). If there is to be any boast, it should not be in themselves or their favorite preacher, it should be in the Lord, by whose sovereign grace they were in Christ (1:30-31). Paul then gives a wonderful summary of this argument by reminding the Corinthians,

who loved to glory in the human instruments, that he came simply preaching Christ and him crucified (2:1-2). Paul only brought weakness and fear and trembling (2:3). What happened in Corinth was the demonstration of the Spirit and power (2:4-5).

Paul's second attack on the arrogant party spirit of the Corinthians is to show them how contrary such attitudes are not only to the gospel but to divine wisdom and spirituality (2:6-16). The words Paul uses are no doubt Corinthian catchwords: "wisdom" (*sophia*), "the mature" (*teleiois*), "the spiritual" (*pneumatikois*). Thiselton observes:

Paul takes up the major catchwords which had become embedded in the life of the church at Corinth, and his most urgent task at this point is neither to reject their validity nor to bypass what was important for readers, but to reclaim the terms for the gospel by redefining them in light of the nature of God and the gospel.<sup>17</sup>

Paul's argument wonderfully undermines the Corinthians' arrogance concerning how wise, mature and spiritual they were. Real wisdom is found in the gospel. This wisdom is truly for the "mature." It is Christ-centered, gospel truth which the "spiritual" really understand. Paul defines these terms in such a way as to demonstrate that real wisdom, maturity and spirituality is in discernment and having the mind of Christ (2:14-16).

The next section (3:1-17) also fits into Paul's frontal attack on the Corinthians' false theology. Paul now unfolds how unspiritual, indeed carnal, it is to be divided (3:1-4). He then sketches the image of a field and the laborers, in order to re-focus the Corinthian perspective on the ministry and ministers (3:6-9). From there he proceeds to the imagery of the church as a building and the necessity of careful workmanship in light of future judgment (3:10-15). Finally he concludes with a solemn warning (3:16-17).

Fee brings into focus the unity of Paul's argument:

The argument that began as a directive against quarrels and division (1:10-13) appears at first glance to have gone astray in what followed in 1:17-2:16. As we noted, however, the long discussion of wisdom and the cross is not a digression, but almost certainly the real issue. The church is indeed at stake, but even more so is the gospel itself. The wisdom that they are now pursuing strips the gospel of its real power; at the same time, their very pursuit of it has led to the divisions. With this paragraph, therefore, Paul makes the transition from the one argument (over the nature of the gospel and the meaning of true "wisdom") to the other (about division in the name of leaders).<sup>18</sup>

## 2. The Incompatibility of True Spirituality and Division (3:1-4)

This brief paragraph is pointed application. Division is contrary to the message of the gospel (1:18-2:5). Division is contrary to true maturity and spirituality (2:6-16). The Corinthians claim to be mature and spiritual; the fact is they are not (3:1-4). Paul begins the paragraph with "And I" (*kago*), which probably has the force of "as for my part."<sup>19</sup> Paul is calling to attention his own personal ministry among the Corinthians (2:1-5) in order to drive home the Corinthians' immaturity. This is further emphasized by the aorist verbs in the paragraph.

"I was not able to speak to you as spiritual (*pneumatikois*) but as carnal (*sarkinois*), as babes (*napiois*) in Christ." The use of "flesh" and "spirit" words is fundamental to Paul's soteriological structure. As Ridderbos has noted, "Rather, 'flesh' and 'Spirit' represent two modes of existence, on the one hand that of the old aeon which is characterized and determined by the flesh, on the other that of the new creation which is of the Spirit of God."<sup>20</sup> Paul is not denying that the Corinthians have the Spirit, he is simply pointing out that when he was with them and tried to teach them, he was not able to address them as "spiritual people," that is, people who are living in the light of the new creation, illumined by the Spirit, liberated from blinding effects of the flesh and the world.

Paul describes the Corinthians' problem of not being able

· speak to them as spiritual in terms of being "as carnal" and "as babes" in Christ. Although some of the lexicons and commentaries make no distinction between *sarkinos* (3:1) and *sarkikos* (3:3), it does seem best to see a nuanced difference based on the "as carnal" in 3:1 and the double "you are fleshly" in 3:3. The nuanced difference is brought out by Moulton, "The distinction in meaning between adjectives in *-ikos* and those in *-inos* is generally maintained, the former connoting . . . *-like*, and the latter *made of* . . . It corresponds to that found in the English suffixes *-y* and *-en*: e.g., *leathery*, *leathern*, *earthy*, *earthen*."<sup>21</sup> Kistemaker also maintains the nuance, "Thus the expression fleshly (*sarkinos*) refers to the essence or substance of flesh, while the term fleshly (*sarkikos*) describes the appearance and characteristics. The first term states an unchangeable substance; the second a characteristic that can be altered."<sup>22</sup>

The Apostle's criticism of the Corinthians is that although they claimed to be spiritual, they were not acting like it. In fact, they were acting "as carnal" people, that is, people of the flesh, people of this world. Their behavior was not only worldly, it was infantile. This is brought out by the derogatory "as babes in Christ." They claimed to be "mature" but the hard fact was that they were infantile, childish. In our vernacular, they were "acting like babies."

The next verse explains Paul's criticism. "I gave you milk, not food. For you were not yet able. But neither yet now are you able." This verse has often been construed along these lines: Paul wanted to go deeper with the Corinthians, he had given them the milk of the gospel, and wanted to give the meaty doctrine, but they were unable to digest it.<sup>23</sup> However, this misses the point, especially in light of the context (1:18-2:16).

Fee identifies the issue when he says,

The argument of 2:6-16 implies that for Paul the gospel of the crucified one is both "milk" and "solid food." As milk it is the good news of salvation; as solid food it is understanding that the entire Christian life is predicated on the same reality- and those who have the Spirit should so understand the "mystery."

Thus the Corinthians do not need a change of diet but a change in perspective. As Morna Hooker nicely puts it: "Yet while he uses their language, the fundamental contrast in Paul's mind is not between two quite different diets which he has to offer, but between the true food of the Gospel with which he has fed them (whether milk or meat) and the synthetic substitutes which the Corinthians have preferred."<sup>24</sup>

Paul is not chastising the Corinthians because they were babes in the faith and had not progressed like they should. He chastises them because their attitudes were childish, completely incompatible with the fact that they were people who had the Spirit of God. "The Corinthians are involved in a lot of unchristian behavior; in that sense they are 'unspiritual,' not because they lack the Spirit but because they are thinking and living just like those who do."<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, Paul does not imply that their carnality is universal, but rather localized to one serious and destructive area, their arrogant party-spirit. Paul is not saying that they are completely carnal, he is pointing out that in this area they are acting like normal men (3:3b-4). He is telling them that they have the characteristics of the flesh. He then points out that this is the source of their jealousy and rivalry. In acting like this Paul could ask, "*are you not being only too human?*" (3:4b, NJB).

Thiselton summarizes the problem as it is described in 3:1-4.

However, claims to be Christ-like cannot be sustained among those whose desire for status and self-esteem leads them to rivalries. Where envy and strife are in evidence, Paul is reluctant to use the word "spiritual." He does not deny that committed Christians may behave in infantile ways. The church is a school for sinners, not a museum for saints. . . . To be sure, in many instances an incongruous gap appears between what God has made the Christian's status as a new creation in Christ and the Christian's lifestyle which may lag behind it.<sup>26</sup>

