

What is the difference between an infant of Christ and the carnal Christian?

1. Read the first two chapters of Paul's first letter to the church of Corinth (1 Cor 1:1-31; 2:1-16). What is the background to this letter? What is Paul addressing up to chapter 3?

The city of Corinth was an important city of commerce between the center of Roman power (Italy) and Asia. Its strategic geographical location and commercial prominence gave rise to this multicultural city; however, its pagan culture and lewd worship of the goddess Aphrodite gave rise to its renown sexual immorality.

Paul's first letter to the church of Corinth is a reply to two letters that he received from Corinthian Christians. Most of 1 Corinthians is addressing the issues brought up with the first letter from the household of Chloe, which is a report detailing the divisions and immorality within the church and the failure to protect the church from the the evil influences of the local culture.

In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul begins with thanksgiving and praises God for His grace in working through the Corinthian believer (despite their failings!). Then he acknowledges divisions within the church and asks rhetorically, "Is Christ divided?" "Was Paul crucified for you?" "Were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

Paul's primary focus is examining the causes of division, and he recognizes the root cause of the problem; the church misunderstood the gospel and did not fully comprehend the implications of Christ's death and atonement for mankind's sin.

For those who are self centered and exalt themselves, the gospel's message is "foolish." Christianity recognizes the grace provided by Jesus' death for which Christians bow humbly and exalt God.

For those who take pride in their knowledge and logic, the gospel's message is "foolish." Christianity recognizes that salvation cannot be achieved by any human effort.

For those who take pride in their achievements, the gospel's message is "foolish." Christianity recognizes that salvation is more important and valuable than wealth and fame.

In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul continues his discussion on the implications of the gospel by elaborating on the power and strength of Christ's atonement.

Paul's effective witness is not by his eloquence and rhetoric but by the power within the gospel message; the gospel has the power to call and touch the heart of man. Faith in God is not founded on the wisdom of man but on the power of God Who forgives sin through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual wisdom is only available for those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. The Holy Spirit teaches Christians the spiritual meaning of spiritual truths, and applying the meaning to one's life.

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2. The Greek terms “sarkinos” and “sarkikos” are translated in English as “flesh” and “fleshly” respectively. Grab a Bible dictionary and look up those two Greek terms. The Greek terms can be seen in the passage as follows:

“And I, bretheren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh (sarkinos), as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly (sarkikos). For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly (sarkikos), and are you not walking like mere men?” (1 Cor 3:1-3)

Both terms come from the root Greek term “sarks” which means “flesh”.

The “inos” ending in “Sarkinos” places a material context to the root term, and it means “made of flesh.”

The “ikos” ending in “Sarkikos” places an ethical or moral context to the root term; thus, with an implication of motive, the term means “controlled by the flesh”.

When the Greek term “sarks” is translated into Latin, it becomes “carne”, which is where the term “carnal” comes from.

3. Examine 1 Corinthians 3:1-2. What does Paul recognize here? Is Paul upset at this point?

In addressing his audience as “bretheren”, Paul is recognizes his audience as Believers, specifically as young Believers, who are unable to understand deeper spiritual truths. They are “men of the flesh”, which is the normal and expected beginning for all Christians as they begin their journey of sanctification and develop towards holiness.

4. Examine 1 Corinthians 3:3. What is Paul rebuking? What is “sanctification”? What does Paul’s rebuke tell you about the process of sanctification?

Paul is rebuking the church of Corinth for their failure to grow in faith and demonstrate a moral change as exemplified by the existence of jealousy and strife.

Sanctification is the continuous process of God and man which makes man sin less and be more Christ like. Both God and man play a role in this process, though not equal, towards the same objective; thus, God and man work together cooperatively in sanctification.

Sanctification is primarily the work of God which was earned through the work of Christ (1 Cor 1:30; 6:11).

The first step in sanctification was a change in attitude caused by the recognition of grace and its implications of freedom from sin (Rom 6:11-14). A moral change takes place because Believers become aware of a new moral standard and the reason for it.

The process of sanctification can only continue by the efforts of a Believer. Moral change only occurs when one’s motives changes, from selfishness to serving God. There are two components to the Believer’s efforts:

Passive – Christians are dependent on God for sanctification. For example, Paul tells the church of Philippi, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13)

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Active – The biblical evidence is very clear that Christians actively have a role in their sanctification. For example, Paul tells the Romans, "...; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.' (Rom 8:13b). While Christians are enabled by the Holy Spirit, they must still consciously choose to act. Other examples of commands for intentional action can be found at 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 12:14; 1 John 3:3.

Paul was rebuking the Corinthian Christians because: a) they have not been doing their part in the process of sanctification and b) they were living as non-Believers motivated by selfish desires and living by worldly morals. This is what Paul meant when he used the Greek term "sarkikos" as a reference to "controlled by the flesh" or in the Roman translation as "carnal".

5. What is the difference between an "infant" Christian and the "carnal" Christian?

Both "infant" Christian and "carnal" Christian share similar motives and morals namely selfish and worldly. However, while the "infant" has yet to learn of his role in the process of sanctification, the "carnal" Christian has either forgotten, willingly prefers ignorance, or willingly rejects his active and conscious responsibility towards holiness. From this perspective, the "carnal" condition is seen as a temporary state until the Holy Spirit intercedes and impacts the wayward Christian's immoral tendencies.

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