

1 Corinthians 2 concludes with two categories of people: the “spiritual”, i.e., those with the Spirit, and the “natural” (NIV), i.e., those without the Spirit. The Corinthians should have been able to understand spiritual truth, since they had the Spirit. But why didn’t they? We may ask similar questions in our day. If believers have received the Spirit and the Spirit enables the believer to judge all things, why don’t we understand more? Why are there so many differences among Christians in their understanding of the Bible?

Paul had to create a third category for the Corinthians. He calls them “worldly” (NIV), “men of flesh” (RSV, ASV) or “carnal” (ASV, AV, NKJV) “Carnal” communicates both the idea of flesh (which is the literal term used) and the sinful nature which it figuratively represents in certain contexts. Paul accuses the Corinthians of acting carnally. Having explained that all believers, by having the Spirit, also have the mind of Christ, Paul had to clarify their true spiritual condition and enlighten them about the true level at which he needed to address them. The truths expressed about carnality will also help answer the questions we have about our times.

I. Carnality is abnormal and unhealthy.

1. Carnality is abnormal because Paul’s audience are believers who have the Spirit.
 - a. Paul treats the readers as believers by calling them “brothers” (3:1), “infants in Christ” (3:1), and “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1:2).
 - b. The “normal” Christian life is to live by the Spirit. The one who lives by the Spirit will not carry out the desires of the flesh, i.e., our sinful nature (Galatians 5:16). Carnality is not the norm.
2. Carnality is also abnormal and unhealthy because it is likened to still being a baby after time has passed.
 - a. In the physical world failure for a child to mature is considered abnormal development and points to health problems. The spiritual analogy makes it abnormal and unhealthy when a believer remains at the same level as when they first received Christ.
 - b. A healthy, growing relationship to Christ is considered the norm in the NT. Cf. 2 Peter 3:18, 1 Peter 2:2, Eph 4:15, Heb 5:12.

II. Carnality restricts what a believer can understand.

1. The Corinthians were acting carnal and it meant that Paul could not address them as spiritual.
 - a. In 3:1 Paul says that he had to speak to the Corinthian believers as if they were made of flesh, i.e. as if they did not have the Spirit and were wholly of their sinful nature. In 3:3 Paul says that they were “flesh-like.” They were acting like those who are wholly of the flesh and without the Spirit.
 - b. This meant that Paul could not go beyond a certain level of teaching with the Corinthians. Like with an infant he had to limit his teaching to milk and could not give solid food.
2. A similar analogy is in Hebrews 5:11–6:2. Milk is equated with the elementary truths of God’s word (5:12) which include “repentance from dead works,” etc. (6:1-2). Being limited to milk implies that a believer has not yet caught on to what it means to live a life of righteousness (5:13). To advance beyond milk to “solid food”, i.e., to mature, requires constant training in distinguishing good from evil (5:14).
3. The Corinthian believers had not yet mastered the fundamentals of the Christian life. Though Paul had been gone from Corinth 2 to 5 years, they were still spiritual infants and unable to grasp “solid food”.

→ If we live according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit, we will be restricted in what we can understand in the Bible. Rather than age, knowledge, or eloquent teaching, it is spiritual maturity, obedience to the Word, and response to God’s teaching that will influence our understanding of Scripture. If we live according to the flesh, i.e., carnally, we will not advance beyond milk.

III. Carnality is revealed in un-Christlike behavior.

1. The actions of the Corinthians revealed their carnality. Their jealousy and quarreling (1Co 3:3) and their factious spirit are among the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:20).
2. The works of the flesh reveal carnality in any believer. See Galatians 5:15-26.
 - a. We can see that which the flesh, i.e., our sinful behavior, produces, because “the acts of the sinful nature are obvious” or “are visible” (Gal. 5:19).
 - b. Within the broad range of the “acts of the sinful nature” it is not difficult to find some which may sound uncomfortably familiar, such as hatred, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, or envy.
 - c. If we live by the Spirit, He will produce His fruit in our lives: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” When these are absent, and their opposite are present it is further indication that we are living flesh-like or carnally.

The Corinthians were stuck at a beginner level of the Christian life because they had not applied the basic lessons which they had been taught. They had failed to choose to live righteously.

Christians today who feed week after week on baby food without moving on to solid food, who can’t or won’t handle “heavier” teaching, imply that they are living according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit. The complaint that teaching is “too heavy” may judge the teacher who needs to adapt to the level of the listener but it may also show that the listener has failed to put into practice what already had been taught.

Differences in beliefs may arise because they are not based upon “the truths of God’s word” (Hebr. 5:12). Differences in understanding Scripture may be due to a failure by the believer to obey what God has commanded. They are not able to understand “heavier food” even when they think they can (cf 1 Tim 4:1-7). Some passages are inherently difficult (2 Peter 3:16), but we need to be sure that that is the reason for the differences and not our carnality, i.e., our failure to live righteously.