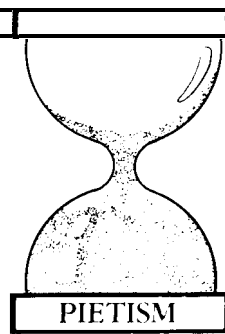


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. VI, No. 8

©Kenneth Gentry, 1993

August, 1993

THE CARNAL CHRISTIAN THEORY

by Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., Th. D.

We **continue** our consideration of the dispensationalist's disavowal of Lordship Salvation, which was begun in our last **issue**.¹ We are looking at a dangerous practical implication of this errant theological system. Put bluntly: **Dispensationalism obscures the very nature of salvation with this doctrine.**

Introduction to the Carnal Christian

Carnal Christian doctrine teaches that it is both theoretically possible and experientially common for a person to be a born-again Christian and never give any long-term evidence of that fact in one's life.

L. S. Chafer writes that the Christian has a "limitless" liberty "to do precisely as he chooses."² Ryrie says the believer has an "option": "as long as he is in a human body he may also choose to leave God out and live according to the old nature."³ Those who exercise this "liberty" or "option" become "carnal Christians." Indeed, there is a "great mass" of carnal Christians.⁴

Ryrie writes: "Perseverance, the term generally used in Calvinism, labels the fifth point in Calvin's theology, the 'final perseverance' of the saints... Sometimes those who approach this doctrine from the viewpoint of perseverance deny the possibility of a Christian's being carnal." Elsewhere he asks: "if only committed people are saved people, where is there room for carnal Christians?"⁵

Dispensationalists are prone to make a three-fold division among men. The highly popular *Four Spiritual Laws* tract is a case in point. Chafer comments: "Together with two other doctrines – that of the *natural man* and that of the *spiritual man* – the doctrine of the *carnal man* completes the threefold division of the human family in their relation to, or attitude toward, the Word of God." He goes on to declare that "the passage which directly declares who are fleshly [sc., carnal] and why is found in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4." In fact, he considers this passage one of Paul's "more important teachings on the subject." He underscores the importance of the carnal Christian doctrine, when he insists that "too much emphasis can hardly be given to the fact that the Christian may function in his life within either the realm of spiritual death or the realm of things related to the Holy Spirit."⁶

Zane Hodges interprets 1 Corinthians 3 so that it applies to the *individual believer's life*: "Even if his works are burned, he is still saved!" Ryrie concurs: "[I]ndividual believers will be judged for their works done as Christians (1 Cor. 3:11-15) Paul makes it quite clear in this passage that those believers whose works are of the character that they do not pass the test will nevertheless be saved (v. 15)."⁷

But does 1 Corinthians 3 teach a *third division* of men that contains born-again Christians living in antipathy to God and

who may be subject to a loss of rewards for wasted lives? This is an extremely common doctrine among dispensational churches. In fact, I still have the first Bible I received upon my conversion (August 9, 1966), an old *Scofield Reference Bible*. My uncle and pastor, Rev. John S. Lanham of Chattanooga, Tennessee, so heavily emphasized Carnal Christian Theory that he had me write in the top margin of p. 1214 over 1 Corinthians 3: "IMPORTANT CHAPTER." This passage is often considered "a key passage on this subject."⁸

But 1 Corinthians 3 is not about individual Christians who are wholly dominated by sin (i.e., whose whole lives are wood, hay, stubble) so that they lose rewards. What does it mean then?

Divide and Conquer

It is important to note at the outset that Paul has already divided men into two – and only two – categories just prior to 1 Corinthians 3. In 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 he writes: "But the *natural man* [unregenerate] does not receive the things of the Spirit of God But he who is *spiritual* [regenerate] judges all things."

Such a two-fold division is exceedingly common in Scripture. Men are divided into two groups: saved/lost, sheep/goats, righteous/sinners, wheat/tares, children of God/the devil, light/darkness, narrow gate/broad gate, and so forth. In 1 Corinthians 2 such is maintained: *spiritual* man vs. *natural* man. To adopt any other principle of division is Arminian: for then men are categorized on the basis of their works, rather than on God's saving action.

But what shall we make of 1 Corinthians 3:1, 3? "And 1, brethren, could *not* speak unto *you as unto spiritual*, but as *unto carnal*, even as unto babes in Christ... For ye are yet *carnal*: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not *carnal*, and walk as men?"

This passage does *not* offer a new division of men. Paul is frustrated with these bickering Christians, who are divided into camps in the church (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:3-6, 22). Some of them have been critical of Paul's "simplistic" preaching (1 Cor. 2:1-7; cp. 1:17-21, 25, 27-28; 2:13, 15; 3:18-20; 4:3-4, 15-20), apparently preferring Apollos's more elegant speech (cp. Acts 18:24; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4-6).

Because of this, Paul, having just divided men into two fundamental groups, complains to the bickering, divided Corinthians: "And 1, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1). He is *not* establishing a new category of man, a sub-class of Christians. His comments must be understood contextually.

They claim maturity, but Paul rebukes them for immaturity.

He chastises them with words of sore rebuke. He notes that though they are undoubtedly "spiritual men" (he calls them "brethren" and "babes in Christ"), yet he must speak to them as if they were "carnal" or natural men. That is, he must speak to them on a low level, as if in an initial gospel encounter. Note well: He does not say in verse 1 that they are "carnal"; he says he must "speak to them" as if they were *carnal*. There is a world of difference.

The Greek word translated "carnal" here in verse 1 is *sarkinos*, which means "made of flesh." He must speak to these divided Christians much the same as he would to the natural man, made of flesh, i.e., his words must be brought to a lower level of understanding for them.

In verse 3, however, he uses a different term when he speaks directly of the Corinthian brethren themselves: "For you are still *carnal*. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not *carnal* and behaving like mere men?" Now he moves from *speaking to them* as if *carnal* to actually *calling them carnal*. But here the Greek word is slightly, but significantly, different: both instances of "carnal" in verse 3 are translations of *sarkikos*, which means "fleshlike." They themselves were not *sarkinos* ("men of flesh," i.e. lost); but they did behave similarly in their being *sarkikos* ("fleshlike"). They were Christians who were behaving carnally; they were not "carnal Christians." Again: there is a difference. Let us look a little further into the matter.

Contained Carnality

Notice that Paul does not accuse them of wholesale, wanton living after the flesh in wild abandonment. He does not accuse them of living lives wholly indistinguishable from the world. He does not accuse them of exercising any irrevocable liberty to live precisely as they choose in gross sin. There is no suggestion that they have no interest whatsoever in the things of God. Their carnal-likeness is *contained*; it is not a wide-ranging, life-dominating immorality.

His charge of carnality — *at this juncture where he specifically points out that carnality* — has to do with their carnal-likeness in *one area of Christian living*. It is an important area, to be sure,... It is an area worthy of public chastening and severe rebuke It is an area not to be diminished as sin needing to be repented of. Nevertheless it is one area: division and bickering in the fellowship of believers. "You are still carnal-like. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal-like and behaving like mere men?" (1 Cor. 3:3; cp. 1:10).

The Subject of Rewards

This passage dealing with rewards (w. 14-15) is wrongly interpreted when it is applied to the everyday Christian life of each believer, so that the rewards are of individual Christians regarding their whole lifestyles. Though it is true Christians will give an account on Judgment Day (2 Cor. 5:10; Rem. 14:10), this passage does not deal with that generic matter.

The context is very specific: The church is divided into party factions over Apollos and Paul (and Peter): "For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal?" (1 Cor. 4:4; cp. 1:12-13). Paul is confronting that specific problem. And in so doing he has to discuss the role of the *pastoral ministry*, over which the Corinthians are divided: "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?"

(v. 5). All ministers are engaged in *one labor* which *God alone blesses*: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase" (vv. 6-7).

Paul employs two analogies illustrating the pastoral ministry (v. 9): (1) planting and watering (w. 6-9a) and (2) laying a foundation and building upon that foundation (w. 9b-17). Each is picturing the same truths. Each analogy speaks of the *ministerial labor of gospel proclamation*. And each speaks of the results of that faithful labor: a "reward" (w. 8, 14-15).

The construction-analogy reward is more fully discussed by Paul and is the one so misunderstood by Carnal Christian theorists. The *minister* (here Paul or Apollos) has one foundation to lay in his preaching: Jesus Christ (w. 10-11). The *minister* is to be careful how *he* builds upon that foundation. What the minister builds in preaching the gospel is the church of believers (v. 9b). Paul informs the Corinthians of the concern of the minister in building: "Let each one take heed how he builds on it" (v. 10c). Using the two analogies, Paul planted (v. 6a) and laid the foundation (v. 10b); Apollos watered (v. 6b) and (apparently) built upon that foundation (v. 10c). That which was the result of the watering and building is the church, i.e. people (w. 16-17).

What is to happen at Corinth? Not only is the church torn, but there are some there who are not saved and who are but "so-called brothers" (1 Cor. 5:1, 9, 11-13). That being the case, Paul is concerned. The ministry in a particular setting can be profitable, producing true converts. But it is also true that a minister's labor could be spent where there are no true converts, only false, "so-called" brethren. If that were the case, then the labor of the minister (Paul, Apollos, me, or any minister) would issue forth in wood, hay, and stubble, whereas the other **would produce** gold, silver, and precious stones (v. 12). On Judgment Day each of these *ministries* would be scrutinized. The *ministers* are themselves saved, but — their life *work* could go up in smoke (vv. 13-15). Thus, 1 Corinthians 3 has to do with Paul's concern as a *minister*, not with the judgment of *all believers*. The Carnal Christian Theory misapplies its most important text!

ANNOUNCEMENT: I will be speaking at eschatology conferences in Elkton, Maryland, on September 17-18 (info: 302-764-3988) and in Sacramento, California, on October 30-31 (info: 916-451-1190).

¹ For a fuller treatment see my book: *Lord of the Saved* (\$7.50). Or see my three tape series (#20): "Evangelical Responses: Faith, Repentance, Works" (\$12). Order either from me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.

² L. S. Chafer, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1922, 1950), 345.

³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 35.

⁴ Chafer, *Grace*, 246.

⁵ Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1982), 328. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, 170.

⁶ L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 7 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 68, 69, 70.

⁷ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free!* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 217. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 178, 179.

⁸ Theodore Epp, *Present Labor and Future Rewards* (Lincoln, Neb.: Back to the Bible, 1960), 14.

Dispensationalism in Transition is published monthly by the Institute for Christian Economics, P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. The right to reprint a single issue of this newsletter in any dated periodical is hereby authorized, under these conditions: it must be reprinted in full, and the source, including its current mailing address, must be included at the beginning or the end of the reprinted article. No authorization is hereby given to reprint any issue in a book.