

Identification of the “Natural,” “Spiritual,” and “Carnal” Man Categories of Mankind in I Corinthians 2:14-3:4.

The letter of 1st Corinthians was written by Paul to the church which he had established there during his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17 - ca. A.D. 49-52). The church was largely composed of Gentiles (12:2) and had different problems than the primarily Jewish churches had been experiencing. The problems were not related to Jewish legalism or even primarily to heretical doctrine. The Corinthian believers were carnal; or motivated by their “fleshly” desires (1 Cor. 3:3). There was no lack of spiritual gifts; the gifts were being misused (I Cor. 1:7; 14:1-40). The epistle’s main thrust is “Christian conduct,” or exhortation to “act like what you are.” They were to be examples *to* the world, not *of* the world. The church was to go into the world, not the world into the church. See also Eph.4:1; Phil. 1:27; Col. 1:10-16, Titus 3:8.

The Bible, in some contexts, divides mankind into *two* groups; believers and unbelievers (I John 5:12). Here and in some other passages, God further divides the believing group into those who are obedient believers and those who are disobedient believers.

I Corinthians 2:

14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

15 But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.

16 For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ.

2 I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.

3 For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?

4 For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?

Definitions:

Natural, ($\psi\upsilon\chi\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ - *psoo-khee-kos'*) pertaining to the soul or life, of the senses. cf. I Corinthians 15:44, 46; ...sown a natural body.

Spiritual, ($\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\iota\kappa\acute{o}\varsigma$ - *pnyc-mat-ik-os'*) pertaining to the spirit, (or wind or breath).

Carnal, ($\sigma\alpha\rho\kappa\iota\acute{o}\varsigma$ - *sar-kee-kos'*) belonging to or composed of flesh.¹

These three words encompass not only the motivating factors in the Christian’s service to God (Gal. 5:16,17), but also the triune nature of man; body, soul, and spirit (I Thessalonians 5:23).

Observations from the text:

The Natural Man

¹ "Flesh" ($\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\kappa\iota\varsigma$ - *sarx*) can refer to "mankind," "humanity" or the "body;" "meat as opposed to bones of man or animal;" or frequently to "our carnal human nature," "the old man," "our bent to sin." This is determined by the context.

The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God.
for they are foolishness to him
nor can he know them
because they are spiritually discerned. (2:14).

The Spiritual Man

He who is spiritual judges all things
yet he himself is [rightly] judged by no one (2:15).

The spiritual man is implied to have the mind of Christ (2:16). Cf. Philippians 2:3 where the mind of Christ is manifested in humility, service and obedience.

The spiritual man is contrasted to the natural man in 2:14 and to the carnal man in 3:1.

The Carnal Man

The carnal man is described as:

a babe in Christ, (although he has been born) (3:1), brethren (3:1),
unable to receive solid food (3:2),
showing a behavior of envy, strife, divisions (3:3),
having a party spirit, looking to certain men, not Jesus (3:4).

Conclusions:

The natural man, by definition, has “soul” or “life” but is unsaved as v.14 implies that he does not have the Spirit of God (Rom.8:9; James 3:14,15; Jude 18,19). He may be educated, kind, and even religious but the spiritual content of Scripture is absolutely hidden from him (I Cor. 2:14; II Cor. 4:4). This fact should cause us to evaluate our evangelistic methods.

The spiritual man appears to be saved and obedient to God’s Holy Spirit. He would probably be walking in the Spirit and manifesting the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 22, 23),(Rom. 8:16; 9:1).

The carnal man has been born again (John 3:5, 7, 16) but is not responsive to or obedient to God’s Holy Spirit. He is heeding the desires of the flesh (Rom. 8:5, 7, 8; Gal. 6:8) and, in that state, cannot please God. He will be reaping the unpleasant result of his sowing (Gal. 6:7) and he will be receiving otherwise unnecessary discipline from his loving father (Heb. 12:5-11; 1 Cor. 11:31, 32). He is a believer who, walking “after the flesh” (Gal. 3:10), remains a babe in Christ (I Cor. 3:1-4). He has experienced retarded or arrested growth because of a lack of spiritual exercise, and can comprehend only simple Bible truths (milk not meat, Heb. 5:11-14). It is not a sin to begin life as a baby but it is a sin to remain one. (I Pet. 2:2). Milk is essential in order for an infant to grow (1 Peter 2:2), but the infant is intended to grow and then be able to assimilate meat and gain the resources to be fruitful for our Savior. The “works of the flesh” are listed in Galatians 5:19-21. The believer who is under control of the flesh and not the Holy Spirit is capable of these sins and will reap accordingly (e.g. the Corinthian church), (v21, cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11). As one Bible teacher puts it, “We should grow from infancy into the infantry.”

The Bible gives us two basic categories of mankind; The believer who has everlasting life and the unbeliever who does not have life and is condemned already (1 John 5:12; John 3:18, 36). Elsewhere, as in the considered passage, the believer group is sub-categorized based upon his obedience or faithfulness. (e.g. Mark 4:1-20, thirty, sixty, and a hundred-fold fruit-bearing; Luke 12:42-48, the faithful and wise steward contrasted with if he (v. 45) chose to be a disobedient

steward who would suffer loss; also the many exhortations in the New Testament for believers to be obedient presupposes that some are being disobedient).

The Bible also speaks of the “perfect” (mature or complete) believer (I Cor. 2:6; II Tim. 3:17; Heb. 5:14, “of full age;” Heb. 13:21; James 1:4, 3:2). This seems to refer to the spiritual man who is consistently Spirit-controlled over a period of time. Hence the term, spiritual maturity. He, through repeated obedience, has allowed God to “grow” him and make him a more useable tool for God’s glory.

Please see Hebrews 5:

11 Of whom (Messiah vs. 5-10) we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.

12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

13 For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Our society has created a mentality that says, “Entertain me, but don’t make me think and don’t compel me to grow.” These Christians who never graduate from spiritual kindergarten must be the heartbreak of every dedicated Pastor. There is more than a passing similarity between the believer who refuses to grow and the lukewarm believer of Revelation 3:14-22; the ones who makes God want to vomit (v. 16).

We are exhorted to be **filled** (passive voice: lit. be being filled) with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and to **walk** in the spirit (Gal. 5:16-18).

Filled: (πληρώω - play-ro’-o) “fulfull,” “complete,” “imbue,” or “influence” as in:

Luke 2:42, filled with wisdom

John 12:6, sorrow has filled your heart

Acts 5:3, Satan has filled thine heart to lie

Acts 5:17, filled with indignation

Acts 13:45, filled with envy

Acts 13:52, filled with joy

Walk: (περιπατέω - per-ee-pat-eh’-o) Lit. “walk about,” “to live” or “deport oneself” according to the Spirit.

Eternal life is a free gift (Rom. 6:23) received by believing in Jesus to save us (John 3:16). Then as we choose to *obey* God’s Holy Spirit He will bear the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (Gal. 5:22, 23). We decide whom we will serve (Rom. 6:16) and will reap the results of our decision (Gal. 6:7-9) both in this life and in eternity (Luke 16:29, 30).