

The Vertigo of Carnal Christianity

1 Cor. 3:1-4

Every parent thinks their baby is unique, but Stanley Thornton really is a very unusual baby. He does the normal things babies do: he wears diapers, sits in a high chair, and is spoon fed his nummy nums. What makes Stanley unusual is that he is 30 years old! Stanley Thornton was featured on a National Geographic show as a grown man who lives as an “adult baby”. After seeing the show Senator Tom Coburn demanded a probe into why a grown man who was able to design and build his own custom fit furniture like an oversized high chair, was receiving \$800 a month in disability checks. Social Security determined that his disability was valid and his checks would continue.

There are few things in the world that are cuter than a baby and there are few things more creepy than a healthy adult acting like a baby! God meant for babies to outgrow their “babyhood” and mature, and in the same way, God means for baby Christians to outgrow their spiritual babyhood and grow in their spiritual maturity.

Paul opens chapter 3 by remembering when he first came to Corinth and preached the gospel. It was a very pagan city and yet as Paul preached the gospel, many people came to a saving faith in Christ. They started their spiritual journey as babes in their faith – and that was appropriate.

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. (vs. 1-2)

Paul wasn't upset or disappointed that they began their spiritual journey as babes. None of us are spiritually mature when we first come to Christ. Jesus said that to enter the kingdom of God we must be born again and just as with our natural birth, we're born again as spiritual babes, not as spiritual adults.

The problem comes in with the second half of verse 2: *and even now you're not ready, for you are still of the flesh*. What bothers Paul is that they don't seem to be growing – which is even more troubling and ironic because how proud they are of their spiritual maturity! It's clear that the Corinthian believers are using a very different standard to measure their spiritual maturity than Paul is using.

I. Taking the measurement of a Christian's spiritual maturity

When the Corinthian's measured their spiritual wisdom and maturity they measured by things like how eloquent they were and how spiritually gifted they were. We still do this today. We hear a gifted and charismatic speaker and we tend to put him or her on a spiritual pedestal, thinking they are more spiritually mature because they are eloquent in communicating spiritual truths. When I ran in more charismatic circles, I remember we used to do this with people who had a pronounced spiritual gift. When someone had an advanced gift of prophecy and could really read your mail, we'd assume they were much more spiritually mature than we were based on their spiritual gift. That's how the Corinthian's were measuring their spiritual maturity and they're so impressed with themselves that they feel like they've outgrown Paul. They're ready to move on to deeper teachings, and greater spiritual experiences.

When Paul measured spiritual maturity, he measured it by Christian character: whether they were acting like Christ or like the flesh. And so in verse 3 he makes this assessment of the Corinthian church's maturity: *you are still of the flesh (carnal). For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?*

One of the consistent marks of the flesh is relational breakdown. In this case it's jealous – *ze/los* – which in this context means a kind of envious rivalry. We've already seen that the church has broken into different factions or schisms, and they are all competing for the top place of status and admiration and position in the church. And this jealous rivalry is causing strife. There is discord, there are arguments, there is tension. The Corinthian's could not have been more confused: by their measurement they're on the spiritual rise, and ascending quickly. Paul, measuring the relational breakdowns going on in the church, sees that they're descending quickly.

Spiritual vertigo

On July 16, 1999, John F. Kennedy Jr. along with his wife, Caroline, and sister-in-law, Lauren Bessette, flying a small plane on route to Martha's Vineyard for a family member's wedding the next day, crashed into the sea. Flying at night with almost no visibility, investigators believe that Kennedy had an attack of what pilots call "black hole vertigo" – when your senses are saying one thing and your instruments are saying another. A pilot in the grip of vertigo cannot tell the difference between banking and flying level or even between up and down. As an inexperienced pilot, Kennedy became confused as his instruments read one thing but his feelings screamed another.

At 9:34pm he was nose-diving at 4700ft per minute, heading into what's known as a graveyard spiral. To add to his disorientation, experts believe it's very possible that he was flying upside down while thinking he was flying right side up, and so as he was trying to pull up, he was actually pulling down and descending all the faster towards the ocean's surface.

It could be said that the Corinthian's had spiritual vertigo. They "felt" like they were wise, mature, spiritual people. Paul looked at the objective measurement of God's word and saw that they were fleshly, carnal, mere babes in Christ. He's bringing objective truth to them so they can get a read on reality. Paul loves them enough to tell them the truth, based on the accurate gauges of God's word.

Two types of vertigo

I want to share two different ways that all believers can experience a kind of spiritual vertigo – often without even knowing it. All of us will be susceptible at points in our lives to one or both of these versions of spiritual vertigo and it takes the objective truth of God's word and the inner work of the Holy Spirit to help us regain our situational awareness and truly grow in spiritual maturity.

Vertigo #1: Thinking we're spiritually mature when we're really carnal

The first type of vertigo is exactly what the Corinthian's were experiencing: thinking we're spiritually mature Christians when we're really carnal Christians. Churches are torn apart by the kind of spiritual pride that creates rivalry and dissension and arguing and judgmentalism and schisms. But it's not just a problem for churches: this kind of deception tears individual relationships apart as well. Here are a few questions to ask ourselves:

Do I gauge my spiritual maturity on how much I know about the Bible, about God, about Jesus? Do I pride myself on things like having greater insights than the average Christian, or being more serious about my walk than the guy next to me? Do I feel superior because I pray more or fast more or witness more than other Christians I know?

It's not that doing any of these things are wrong of themselves, just like it wasn't wrong for the Corinthians to be influenced by the teachings of Paul or Apollos or Peter. The wrong is in taking spiritual pride in them. The wrong is boasting in these things – whether out loud or inwardly, whether by letting people know we do them, or by talking judgmentally about those who don't.

The other spiritual gauge Paul has us look at is this: does strife seem to follow us wherever we go? Do we leave a trail of broken relationships behind us? One of the most consistent fruits of the flesh is broken relationships. Broken friendships. Broken marriages. Broken families. Broken churches. In Galatians 5 when Paul lists the works of the flesh, he devotes a whole section to works of the flesh that are destructive to relationships:

...enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, (Gal. 5:20-21)

Paul says, it's obvious that you're carnal and fleshly because there is jealousy and strife among you. You might feel like you're spiritually mature, but the gauges are reading carnal. This isn't so much about our people skills, this is about what powers our hearts: our flesh or the Spirit. When we envy others, whether it be for their popularity or gifts or position or whatever, it's the flesh. When we go from one argument to another, or if there's a wake of broken relationships in our trail, Paul would say, it doesn't matter how spiritual you feel, you are carnal. That's the work of the flesh!

- Are you easily offended? Do you feel personally attacked when someone disagrees with you? When someone speaks uncharitably about you, does something rise up within that wants to cut them off at the knees? To get back at them and make them pay?
- Do you experience fits of anger – rage that causes you to pour gasoline and light a match in the middle of a conflict? Do you get angry when you don't get what you wanted/expected/deserved? Are you inclined to lash out in passive anger by withdrawing from people you're angry with?
- Are you judgmental/critical about others? Do you start arguments a lot and do you need to win every argument? Do you always think you're right? Patterns in these areas are an indication of the flesh at work.

I've seen many of these tendencies in my own heart and I know how easy it is to fall into these things over and over again. The good news is that as believers we can ask the Holy Spirit to change us deep within. Paul isn't writing this to discourage the Corinthians or peg them as hopeless failures. He's writing these things because they have the Holy Spirit who can help them change, not just on the surface, but deep within the heart where all this stuff originates. The gospel has power to change us so we don't act like mere humans living life out of the flesh, but rather that we might act like Christ.

Vertigo #2: *Thinking that it's okay to be a carnal Christian*

The second form of spiritual vertigo is thinking that there is a legitimate category of Christian called the carnal Christian, and we can choose that as the level of Christianity we want to live at. This is the believer who admits they're not spiritually mature...and they're ok with that. They're kinda like Stanley Thornton, wanting to live in perpetual "babyhood" and collect heavenly disability checks.

Is there such a thing as "carnal Christians"? Is that a legitimate category - Christians who are saved but living life as if they weren't, living according to the flesh? And is it ok for us to choose that as an option? Paul does seem to speak of three categories here:

- The first category is what Paul calls the spiritually mature person. The spiritual person to whom they can impart wisdom from God (2:6)
- The second category Paul speaks of are what he calls the “natural” person. The unspiritual person. To them the gospel is foolishness. They have no interest in it, no desire for it, because to their natural wisdom it is utter nonsense.
- The third category is found here in these verses. I’ve heard some teachers say there is no biblical support for the idea of a “carnal Christian” but as far as I can see, that support is right here. But I think we need to be careful that we don’t use this passage to do something Paul never meant to do here, and that is to encourage and legitimize a spiritual complacency as a legitimate “third option” that is held out to us.

Here, in these first verses, Paul definitely describes them as Christians: he calls them brothers (and that word means *brothers and sisters*), and as infants in Christ. And he also describes them as people of the flesh, as unspiritual and “merely human” which sounds a lot like the category of those who are natural and have no spiritual understanding of the gospel.

When Paul says they are of the flesh and not spiritual people, he’s not saying that they don’t have the Holy Spirit. He addresses them as believers and the Bible clearly tells us that every believer possesses the Holy Spirit. Rom. 8:9: *Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.* So Paul is not saying they don’t have the Spirit living within them – he’s saying they’re acting like they don’t have the Spirit living within them! They’re acting as though they are ruled by their flesh. They’re acting like they don’t belong to Christ. But they do! And throughout this letter, Paul’s message is, *act like what you are! Be what you are!* He’s not trying to classify them as carnal Christians...he’s trying to urge them to grow!!

A couple weeks ago I was talking to Jed Estrada, and he and his wife Emily are expecting their first child. As I was sharing with him about how fast it goes and urging him to treasure every moment, I think I got a little intense about it as I had this poor guy, whose baby hasn’t even been born yet, writing out college tuition checks and booking a reception hall for his child’s wedding. He looked a little stunned as he thanked me for my words of advice and hurried off to talk to someone who wasn’t a nut job!

The truth is, I loved every stage of our children’s growth, and we love the stages they are in right now. I loved it when our kids were little kids doing the things that little kids do, but I wouldn’t want them to be in that stage now. Healthy children mature and grow. Healthy believers do as well. God loves us at every stage, and He is with us in every stage to help us grow and mature. But there is something spiritually unhealthy about no-growth.

Stanley Thornton’s main concern shouldn’t be whether he can get a disability check from the government for being an adult baby. His main concern should be putting away the diapers and binkies and acting his age. To try to carve out a category of Christian that is “perpetual babe in Christ” or perpetually carnal but saved, is to miss Paul’s point (he’s not trying to comfort them in their carnality) and to ignore the Bible’s warnings that if there is no sign of spiritual life, there is a possibility that there is no spiritual life.

Conclusion:

- So if you’re struggling with the slowness of spiritual growth, know that God loves you right where you are and He is patient with you. He doesn’t get angry when you stumble. He doesn’t get frustrated with you because you mess up. Don’t get discouraged, don’t feel condemned. Draw

near to Father and ask Him to help you grow. The Spirit will identify one small step towards spiritual growth and He will help you take that step.

- If you are, as John Piper puts it, a careless drifter, not really caring about spiritual growth, God's loving voice to you would be the warning of 1 Peter: make your calling and election sure by actively trusting in Christ and following him in the obedience of faith.
- Finally if you're not a follower of Christ, God offers you to promise that you can become His son or daughter, forgiven of every sin, and adopted into His eternal family by placing your trust and faith in Jesus Christ. As we close in prayer, if that is the cry of your heart, pray with me.