

Counseling Carnal Christians

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Among the many "hats" the local pastor wears, the counselor's hat is one that must be donned with confidence, compassion and capability. The "ministry of counseling" is one that the pastor can ill afford to neglect. Most of his counseling is not clinical in nature, nor does it require a deep knowledge of pharmacology. At times there are cases that require a clinical expert and he must refer these sporadic cases to competent Christian psychologists, psychiatrists, or counseling centers. But for the most part, the pastor is faced daily with the problems that plague the progressing Christian. However, much of his strength, stamina, and schedule is monopolized by dealing with what the apostle Paul has labeled the "carnal Christian". How is the pastor to deal with believers who have not only stopped growing and have become stagnant, but also have begun to indulge in seriously sinful behavior?

A Present Pastoral Predicament

The problem lies in the fact that Christians, born again by the Spirit of God, still struggle in "trusting and obeying", as sung about in that great hymn of the faith. The theology of this great hymn is Biblical to the core, but there is the human factor called "the flesh" that we believers find a great hindrance. It is the "Traitor in the Gate", the old self, which exists within us, that often stifles and sabotages us from maturity in Christ.

The result often is carnal, sinful, behavior that not only astonishes the Christian community but also the Christian who is committing the act. The solution that is often employed in the church is two-fold depending on the severity of the sin. If it is sin that is seen as part of growing up, or maturing, one that has little community hindrance, the remedy is often a "Christian coddling" or mild "talking to." If, however, the sin is of a more serious nature such as adultery, immorality, homosexuality, or idolatry, then often the questioning of the sinner's salvation comes into play. This process of dangling a person over hell by calling his salvation into question seems to be a reflex reaction that finds its roots in Puritan theology.

It must be granted that there are many people in the pew who believe they are Christians who are not. However, the problem of validation has to do with the content of their belief not the consistency of their behavior. As evangelicals, who affirm the inerrancy of the scriptures and believe that the Bible is to govern in all matters in regard to faith and practice in the church, let us look at a case study recorded for us by the apostle Paul dealing with just such a pastoral predicament.

A Proposed Biblical Pattern

It is a well documented fact of history that the church at Corinth in the mid fifties of the first century was shot through with serious issues of divisions, a spirit of selfishness, and immorality.

To navigate the twisted estuary of issues that existed at Corinth required all the skill the apostle Paul had gained and an abundance of the grace of God to the church. Paul approaches his task with a clear strategy which reveals a Biblical pattern for counseling.

Affirms Their Position

The apostle Paul begins by affirming their position in Jesus Christ. He begins at the outset of his first epistle by reminding them of their true position and personhood by God's grace. In *I Corinthians 1:2-9* he states:

"...to the church of God which is at Corinth to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

There is no question in Paul's mind that these are his brothers, redeemed by Christ, destined to spend eternity with Paul in fellowship with the Father.

Denounces Their Practice

Having quickly and powerfully affirmed their position, Paul, without raising the quill from the paper, launches into a firm, unrelenting, yet loving, disdain for their personal and sinful practices.

He clarifies his audience as the same ones he has so lovingly and powerfully affirmed in *vs.3-9*. It is to his "brothers" that his exhortation is addressed in *1:10-11*:

"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you."

Again in *chapter 3:1*, Paul, referring to his brothers, regards them as fleshly, carnal, babies in the faith.

"And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes 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. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?"

Moving from his denunciation of their divisions, he moves to their participation and seemingly "careless" attitude toward immorality. In *chapter 5* Paul is astonished at their tolerance of immorality by a church member with his stepmother. (5:1-2)

"It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst."

The list of problems and turmoil within the church goes on to include lawsuits against brothers, *chapter 6*, selfishness and perhaps drunkenness at the Lord's supper, *ch.11*, and the selfish and showy use of spiritual gifts, *chapters 12-14*. Nevertheless, in all the sin and spiritual failure of these brothers, Paul never hints that they are anything but the justified saints he began to address in *chapter one*.

If ever there was a case to question the salvation of professing Christians based on their behavior, this church provided the opportunity. But Paul does not question their conversion. However, he does present a question to them. It is not a questioning of their past belief or their present behavior, but it is in regard to their future role as a beneficiary in the kingdom. It is this questioning and the following exhortation that provides us with a Biblical pattern of how to deal with believers who are besieged with carnality.

Questioning The Future

In the midst of his denunciation of the Corinthians' divisions and divisive behavior, Paul focuses on Christ being the unity of the ministry. It is upon the foundation of Christ that all of God's servants must build: *3:6-11*

"I planted, Apollo watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it, for no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."

However, each of the individual members of the church of Jesus Christ has the distinct right and risk of building upon the foundation. It is at the Bema seat, the judgment seat of Christ, that Christ Himself will evaluate each man's motives, methods, and manifestation of ministry. *3:12-15*

"Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work, which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire." 4:5 " Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."

The connection of *3:1-9* and *10-13* is clearly a cause-effect relationship. Because of their carnality their spiritual life is anemic. The only possible result is an evaluation by Christ that is less than desirable. Why does Paul introduce this future reality? Clearly it is meant to stimulate these babes and snap them out of their lethargic "Christian" walk. It is the same theology and methodology used by the apostle in *2 Corinthians 5:9-10*, writing to the same audience. In this instance Paul reveals that it is his driving ambition to be pleasing to his Lord. His reason in part is that he knows one day he will give an account of his life and ministry. *2 Corinthians 5:9-11*

"Therefore also we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad., Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences."

This motive was introduced in *1 Corinthians 9:27* where Paul describes the diligent discipline he exacted upon himself so that he might be found to be a faithful apostle qualified to serve Christ. *1 Corinthians 9:24-27*

"Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way as not without aim; I box in such a way as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."

Paul certainly is not in jeopardy of losing his salvation. (See *1 Cor.3:15b*). But he is keenly aware that through a slothful and undisciplined life he could not only forfeit the present qualification to serve Christ, *9:27*, but also future rewards to be bestowed by Christ in His kingdom (*1 Cor.3, 2 Cor. 5*).

It is this theme, the loss and gain of reward by Christ, that Paul uses as a motivational method to move the carnal Corinthians to a more obedient and profitable Christian lifestyle.

In *I Corinthians 6:1-11* Paul is rebuking his brothers because of their selfish and greedy behavior toward one another. They were evidently taking each other to civil court in hopes of winning a lawsuit. The apostle appeals to their sense of logic and shame. *I Cor. 6:2-6*

"Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?
And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life? If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?"

If we as believers will judge the world and the angels in the kingdom of Christ, certainly we can handle such simple matters here on earth between brothers. Paul admonishes them that it would be better to "suffer wrong" and be defrauded (:7-8). But Paul concedes that instead they "do wrong" 6:7-8:

"Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that your brethren."

Paul goes on to remind his brothers that those who do wrong shall not inherit the kingdom of God. 6:9-10:

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God."

The severity and the possibility is real for these believers. Paul, in the original text, utilizes the same word in both verse 8 and 9. To "do wrong" is to "do unrighteousness". The term is the same and the result for those who do wrong, such as stated in :9-10, is that they are assured of a loss of reward (3:15 and 2 Cor.5:9-10). In fact, some of the vices listed in :9-10 are the very maladies that beguiled the Corinthian church (compare 3:3, 5:1-2, 8:1-9. 11:17ff). In fact, Paul rebukes brothers who are involved in these sins. It is these vices committed by Christians that Paul demands must be judged in 5:11.

"But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler-not even to eat with such a one."

The concept of inheritance has both a passive and an active force. All believers have a positional inheritance, which Paul describes in *I Cor. 1:1-3* as well as in most of his

writings (*Eph. 1, Col. 1, Rom. 8*). This inheritance is based solely on the perfect and completed work of Christ. It is our right to enter into heaven with the passport of Christ's death and resurrection as our official and legal document of our inheritance.

However, there is also active force to an inheritance. This concept is seen in the historical use of the word to reflect the concept of acquiring or possessing something. Often this concept has a conditional element involved. It is this active and conditional force that is clearly seen in Paul's argument. He completes his argument by reminding the Corinthians that they formerly acted like that, but now they have been washed, sanctified, and justified. That behavior may have been justifiable before their conversion, but certainly not now, subsequent to their conversion. The apostle utilizes the same argument to another group of believers who are struggling in a similar spiritual battle. In *Galatians 5:16* Paul reveals to them that they have two choices. They can either walk by the flesh and its deeds, or by the Spirit and produce its fruit. *Galatians 5:16-23*:

"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, drunkenness, carousings, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

The warning is clear. If these brothers refuse to walk by the Spirit the only course remaining is to walk by the flesh. The result is that they who practice these things shall not inherit the kingdom. Paul finishes his exhortation to his brothers by re-enforcing his plea for them not to commit two sins, which he just listed as those which exclude inheriting the kingdom. *Galatians 5:25-26*:

"If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another."

In Paul's epistles to the Corinthians and Galatians his concern is to exhort and educate Christians who are behaving in an inconsistent manner with their lofty position in Christ. To the Corinthians Paul had earlier introduced the possibility of losing reward and suffering loss (*Chapter 3*). In *chapter 6* he personalizes this possibility for the Corinthians in the context of their carnal activity. If they continue in this practice, they may win the lawsuit before the temporal judges on earth, but they shall suffer loss before the Eternal Judge of heaven and earth.

A Practical Biblical Proposal

In following the principles and practice of the apostle Paul it seems that a two-fold methodology follows. First, Paul in most of his epistles clearly and carefully desires to educate the leaders of the churches in the realities of the future world and the effect one's present behavior can have on that future. If we are to be faithful to teach the whole counsel of God to the body of Christ, this theme of the future realities and the conditional nature of rewards must find a place in that teaching. It is only when an individual or church is able to clearly understand and believe in the future realities that he will then adjust his present behavior. The author of Hebrews clearly reveals this principle and practice in regard to Moses. *Hebrews 11:24-26*:

"By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward."

The people of God must be educated in these realities. Only then will they be able to resist and reject the enticements the world has to offer.

Second, not only must the body of Christ be educated, but also the church must be committed to exhorting those believers who are in a carnal condition. This is clearly the apostle Paul's practice in *I Corinthians 5 & 6* and *Galatians 6:1*. (See also *James 5:20*).

"Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted."

Today it is fashionable and often presented as a state of hyper spirituality to resist all judgement. Although the scriptures teach us to be careful in judging our brother, as in the Sermon on the Mount (*Matt. 7:1, Luke 6:37*), it is also clear that to carry out the command of the apostle Paul, demands one to Biblically evaluate and then lovingly exhort a brother trapped in sin (*Gal. 6, I Cor. 5, James 5, Heb. 13*). To discern heresy and resist sin involves judgments. With the Scriptures as our guide the church must boldly, yet sensitively, be involved in education, evaluation, and exhortation so as to feed, lead, and protect the body of Christ. Although this may cut across the latest psychological methodology, it clearly cuts straight with the Word of God.