DANGER OF CONTINUAL CARNALITY
By Dan Trygg

What is carnality? - I Cor. 3:1-3. The word “carnal” means “fleshly”. Paul uses this to describe life lived according to the self-principle rather than according to the Holy Spirit.

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Marks of Carnality

1. Spiritual infancy or immaturity - I Cor. 3:1 “babes in Christ”. Cf. Heb. 5:12,13; Eph. 4:14.

2. Spiritual dullness - inability to understand spiritual truth. I Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:11; cf. I Cor. 2:14-16.

3. The milk diet - inability to digest spiritual meat. I Cor. 3:3; Heb. 5:12-14; cf. I Pet. 2:2.

   “Digest” implies more than mere knowledge. There is an inability to receive or withdraw spiritual strength and sustenance from the deeper truths. This is either an inability to see the practical implications (cf. #2 above), or an unwillingness, through rebellion or carelessness, to act upon what is revealed. Thus the Word becomes unprofitable, and is eventually lost. Cf. Jas. 1:21-25.

   Why this inability? Heb. 5:13-14 - the carnal Christian is “not accustomed to the word of righteousness”.

   Vs. 13 - The phrase “not accustomed” means:
   1.) Unacquainted with the word, i.e., ignorance.
   2.) Inexperienced in the reality of it, i.e., the word is untested in obedience or by faith. Thus the word of God is not a custom in one’s life in thought or action. It is foreign to one’s mind and lifestyle.

   Vs. 14 - The carnal Christian has not followed the mature, who because of their continual using of the word have exercised, disciplined, and trained their senses to discern truth in both thought and life. (We derive the words “gymnasium” and “gymnastics” from the Greek word translated as “train” here. It implies “working out”, spiritually.) You can sense how much the word is a custom in the lives of these mature believers. Cf. Jas. 1:25.

4. A divisive spirit - Jealousy, strife, comparison, competition, personality cults, pride, and division mark the lives of those walking in the flesh (I Cor. 3:3 [cf. 1:11-13; 3:4-7, 21-23]; Jas. 3:14-16). This divisive spirit is manifested as an attitude, and often is revealed in our speech with others of our particular group.

5. Sin in the life - Sin is a work of the flesh. The Holy Spirit will not lead us into sin. Cf. Gal. 5:16-21. A very telltale sign of carnality is a focus on sensuality. Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:17-19. Some “acceptable sins” in our society such as materialism, overeating, drunkenness, and the emphasis upon heightening the sensual in dress, advertisements, etc., are rooted in this work of the flesh.

and a servant heart.

7. A non-supernatural life - A Christian’s life should have the mark of the presence of God upon it:
in power - I Cor. 2:4,5; 4:19,20; Jn. 14:12; Acts 1:8
in character - Rom. 14:17; Jn. 13:34,35; Phil. 4:6,7; II Cor. 4:6,7.
Paul’s word of rebuke and reproach to the Corinthian church was a statement of this very fact - “are
you not walking like mere men?” (I Cor. 3:3,4).

8. Susceptibility to doctrinal error - Eph. 4:14; of. II Tim. 3:6,7; II Cor. 11:2-4; Gal. 1:6-9.

9. A tendency toward legalism or antinomianism -

**Legalism** - Attempting to conform one’s life to an outward standard of righteousness (e.g., the law of
the Scriptures, or even a particular lifestyle idealized by one’s religious peers) resulting in an outward
Pharisaical righteousness produced by discipline and self effort. This was the heresy in the
Galatian church that Paul addressed in such angry terms. Casuistic ethics.

**Antinomianism** - An ethical position that believes that there are no moral standards.
We can do as we desire, since grace is covering our sin. The Nicolaitans in Rev. 2:6,15 and the
“Jezebel” of Rev. 2:20, apparently were of this tendency. A more subtle form can be seen in
the widespread complacency of sleepy-eyed Christians who *suppose* themselves to be under
God’s grace and thus relax into a selfish, worldly existence with occasional appropriate
religious overtones. Such a lifestyle is not true Christianity, and is soundly condemned in

10. A tendency not only to *misunderstand*, but, in the extreme, to even *oppose* those who are led by the
Spirit. I Cor. 2:15-3:3; Gal. 4:29; 5:16,17.

11. Tendency to walk by sight rather than by faith. This is caused by skepticism, doubt, or fear to trust
God. Heb. 11:1; II Cor. 4:16-18; Mt. 14:28-31; 16:5-12.

12. Tendency to seek spiritual mediators rather than a personal relationship with God. Ex. 20:19; I Sam.
8:4-7.

Cf. I Cor. 3:1,2 where the milk diet for spiritual babes implies someone to supply the
milk. There is an unhealthy comfort in giving responsibility to another for your spiritual
growth.

You do not have to be concerned for your life then. Further, when things are not working out
you can blame your leader. Unfortunately, God does not see it that way. “The soul who sins
will die”, declares the Lord (Ezk. 18:4). Christianity was never designed to be a ritualistic
spectator experience, it requires individual relationship to God. The Body of Christ will never
be what it was intended to be as long as the members refuse to be personally responsible for
their
own walk with God, and His calling to ministry for them. Cf. Eph. 4:11-16.

The Scriptures themselves can be abused this way. Instead of leading us into a living,
communicating relationship with God Himself, the Bible can become the “answer book” which
we use to justify our truncated experience. Instead of needing to be ready at any time to
respond to the voice of God within us, we can control this book and listen to it at the times, and to
the extent, that we choose.

In summary then, the carnal Christian is a person who is born of God, but is not living in the
moment-by-moment leading, life, and power of the Holy Spirit. Instead, he or she often lives by the
limits of his or her own resources, i.e., by his or her own understanding of what God’s will is, his or her
own self-manufactured imitation of God’s love and goodness, and by the power of his or her own self-
discipline and self-effort. Whether sincere but unequipped, …or whether willfully choosing the world in
areas of his or her life…, the common mark of carnality is a restriction of the experience and expression
of the life of Jesus within one’s own life.