



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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### *Is There a “Carnal Christian”?*

#### 1 Corinthians 3:1–4

**T**O INTRODUCE THIS MONTH’S TOUGH TEXT, is there anything wrong with the following scenario? A certain Christian fellow (we’ll call him Rupert, since there aren’t many of those around) shares this testimony of his salvation: “Well, I asked Jesus into my heart when I was young, but backslid and lived the sinful life of the carnal Christian for 20 years but then rededicated my life and now live for God.”

Does such a testimony have the ring of a person who was truly converted, one who actually became a “new creature” (see TOTT #41, December 2008)? Does Rupert sound like a guy who was truly born again at the young age he claims? Does the term “carnal Christian” refer to a person who “backslides” and then “rededicates” himself later on? Is this a pure theology of salvation and sanctification? We would submit that it is not. Sadly, however, Rupert’s story has been told and retold many times.

Such teaching is, in fact, common in our day, and much of it is centered in the term “carnal Christian,” a term which, as we’ll see, is nowhere found in the New Testament. Yes, “carnal” is there and “Christian” is certainly there, but melding the two together to refer to a new “category” of Christian is an invention.

Worse, there are actually two problems with Rupert’s statement before we even address the main issue of “carnal.” One is the idea of “rededication.” Where on earth did we get even this *idea*, much less the *term* itself? Neither the principle nor the term appears anywhere in the New Testament, yet “rededication” has become one of the most common expressions in Christianity. I have heard some people say that they have rededicated their life several times. In the final analysis, this term is not only mislead-

ing but ultimately meaningless.

The other troublesome term is “backslide,” a term used exclusively in the Old Testament and one that is extremely interesting and enlightening.

Jeremiah 3:6—4:2 recounts Jeremiah’s second message of his book (the first is in 2:1—3:5). He tells the story of two sisters, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern Kingdom). Israel had committed spiritual adultery against God, that is, the worship of idols, specifically, the fertility cult of the ancient world. God waited for her to return, but she refused to do so, so He gave “her a bill of divorce” and sent her away (v. 8), a clear reference to the destruction of Israel and her Assyrian captivity in 722 BC. Despite the object lesson this provided Judah as she watched this scene, she did not learn from it, would not turn away from idolatry, becoming even worse than Israel, and was also taken into captivity, this time by the Babylonians beginning in 605 BC.

The word “backsliding[s],” which appears seven times (vs. 6, 8, 11, 12, 14, 22 [twice]), translates two separate Hebrew words. Most often used is *meshûbâ*. Coming from the root *shûb*, “to return or go back, bring back,” the literal idea is “back-turning, backsliding,” and so figuratively speaks of disloyalty, and faithlessness. Most of its twelve occurrences are here in Jeremiah, but its two appearances in Hosea are most significant, where the people were “bent to backsliding” (11:7); that is, *apostasy had become the way of life*, although it is still possible for them to be healed (14:4).

The other word for “backsliding” in Jeremiah is *shôbâb* (vs. 14, 22), which is again from the root *shûb*. In this form it is an adjective, appearing only one other place

(Isa. 57:17, “forwardly”), to picture a continual unfaithfulness to God.

Now, while this passage is, of course, Jewish, it certainly provides a picture for the church to consider. Prior to the Protestant Reformation, for example, the Church had drifted far from God and His revelation in Scripture. It had become thoroughly pagan in worshipping idols, relics, and saints, and “salvation” was simply a matter of doing certain works (called “sacraments”) to obtain God’s grace. Disastrously, the church today is drifting back to those days, and she desperately needs to return to the truth.

That said, however, the picture ends there. Backsliding is a term used exclusively for the nation of Israel to indicate her apostasy. It is *not* used, and *should not* be used, for a New Testament Christian. It must not be construed to refer to a Christian who has “fallen away” (see TOTT #29), one who needs to “rededicate” their life, or any other such unbiblical concept.

This is further confirmed by the fact that the only place *meshûbâ* is used of an individual is an isolated appearance in Proverbs 1:32, where it is translated “turning away,” indicating the destruction that comes to those who turn away from the truth.

Sadly, then, in spite of the fact that this word appears not once in the New Testament, rather only a few times in the Old Testament in reference to Israel’s apostasy, and one isolated instance of an individual, it is commonly used today in much the same way the term “carnal Christian” is used, as well as for one who needs to “rededicate” his life.

If we may interject here, it should deeply grieve all Christians, *especially* pastors, expositors, and all other leaders who desire to be discerning, that terms having no biblical foundation whatsoever continue to be added to our “Christian vocabulary.” We could almost fill a whole issue of TOTT just listing them. Words mean things, and our words must be exact. We need to take great care to not add to, subtract from, or simply misapply Scripture (cf. Rev. 22:18–19)?

That brings us to our “tough text” and our main issue. First Corinthians 3:1–4 declares:

**And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. 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. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?**

As if this issue does not raise enough questions, the very first problem we encounter is actually with the Greek text itself. The *Textus Receptus*, as well as the more modern Majority Text, uses a single Greek word for **carnal** four times in these verses. The word is *sarkikos*, an adjecti-

ve meaning “fleshly, pertaining to the flesh or body, having the nature of flesh, i.e. under the control of the animal appetites.”

In stark contrast, based on only five so-called “older manuscripts” (instead of hundreds in the Majority), the Critical Text, on which is based almost all modern English translations, uses another adjective, *sarkinos*, instead of *sarkikos* for **carnal** in verse 1 (rendered “men of flesh” in NASB). So what’s the difference? Generally, Greek words ending in *-inos* mean “consisting of,” while words ending in *-ikos* mean “characterized by.” That is, while *sarkinos* speaks of being *made* of flesh (“fleshy”), *sarkikos* speaks of something having the *nature* of flesh (“fleshly”).

But how does all that help? Why would Paul make the point that they are *made* of flesh? Why change terms in the middle of his argument? In fact, the only occurrence of *sarkinos* in the *Textus Receptus* and Majority Text is in 2 Corinthians 3:3, where Paul declares that God not only wrote His law on “tables of stone” but also on “fleshy tables of the heart.” To further confuse the issue, the NIV renders both *sarkinos* and *sarkikos* as “worldly,” with which no lexicon agrees; “worldly” would demand the Greek *kosmikos* (e.g., “worldly lusts” in Titus 2:12).

Making the muddy water even thicker, the Critical Text uses neither of these words for **carnal** in verse 4. Instead, it has *anthropos*, a generic term for “man” which the NASB, for example, here renders “are you not mere men?”

In fact, a headache begins to develop when one reads expositors and exegetes who, because they defend this reading, go on for several paragraphs trying to sort it all out and then apply it.

While it is not our intent here to open up the whole textual/translation “can of worms” (and we know that some readers might disagree), we would humbly ask, Does not the Critical Text actually confuse more than clarify? Does it not make far more sense that Paul uses one word consistently to get across his point?<sup>1</sup>

We would also submit, as we’ll see in a moment, the use of the adjective form *psuchikos* for the “natural” man in 2:14 and then *pneumatikos* in 2:15 further supports the use of *sarkikos* alone in our text. The repetition of the ending *-ikos* in all three terms seems to us to clearly indicate that *sarkinos* is out of place and incorrect.

So what *is* Paul’s point? Let us now turn to an exposition of the passage. In a sense, the “chapter break” at 3:1 is unfortunate, for the thoughts here continue those of 2:14–16. As stated a moment ago, verse 14 speaks of the “natural man,” which is *psuchikos anthropos*. The adjective *psuchikos* is derived from the noun *psuchē*, meaning “soul, that immaterial part of man held in common with animals.”<sup>2</sup> This is the sensual, unregenerate man. Because he is driven solely by his senses, he simply cannot in any way understand or accept the things of God. No one has put it better than the beloved Vance Havner:

The wise Christian wastes no time trying to explain God's program to unregenerate men; it would be casting pearls before swine. He might as well try to describe a sunset to a blind man or discuss nuclear physics with a monument in the city park. The natural man cannot receive such things. One might as well try to catch sunbeams with a fishhook as to lay hold of God's revelation unassisted by the Holy Spirit. Unless one is born of the Spirit and taught by Him, all this is utterly foreign to him. Being a Ph.D. does not help, for in this realm it could mean "Phenomenal Dud!"<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, there is then the one who is "spiritual" in verse 15. The Greek adjective *pneumatikos* derives from *pneuma*, "breath or spirit," and therefore refers to that which pertains to or is dominated by the Holy Spirit. Here, in fact, is a person who can "judge" and "discern" truth from error, while the natural man cannot. Both "discerned" in verse 14 and "judged" in verse 15 translate the same Greek word, *anakrino*. From about 400 BC onwards, it expressed "the questioning process which leads to a judgment: to examine, cross-examine, interrogate, enquire, and investigate." Other concepts in the word are "scrutinize" and "sift."<sup>4</sup>

True spirituality, then, along with discernment and maturity (as noted in TOTT #10, "Where Has Our Discernment Gone? [3]"), mean that we examine everything, that we investigate, question, scrutinize, and sift through every aspect of what is being taught and practiced, not from the perspective of natural inclination, but by the domination of the Holy Spirit and God's Word. Most people are, just like the Corinthians, anything but *spiritual*; they are, in fact, the very opposite, looking at everything from a sensual perspective. The truly spiritual person does not accept everything that comes along; rather he or she first examines it biblically to see if it's right or wrong.

It is this backdrop that sets the stage for 3:1-4. It is here that Paul adds the third term, *sarkikos*, one who is fleshly, one who is *characterized* by fleshly behavior (again, not *sarkinos*, one who is *made* of flesh). The chief misunderstanding about **carnal** (*sarkikos*), then, is the false notion that it refers to a supposed separate category of Christian and can refer to any sin that indicates "carnality." Those ideas, however, are not in the text.

In his wonderful book, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?* (a highly recommended read), James Montgomery Boice writes one of the best statements I have ever read on this issue:

"Carnal" is not a biblical category for weak Christians. Where the term appears in Paul's writings, it means an unregenerate person, an unbeliever (see Rom. 8:5-11). Even in 1 Corinthians 3, where Christians are said to be acting in a "worldly" (carnal) way, the point is only that they are acting as if they were

not Christians, which must not be. They need to stop that and begin to behave as what they really are.<sup>5</sup>

What makes Boice's statement doubly important is the modern trend he outlines *before* that statement. He mentions the Bible teachers who insist that repentance, commitment of life, obedience, and behavioral change are involved in salvation. "In fact," Boice writes, "one of the reasons this teaching eliminates obedience from the essence of saving faith is to include as Christians professing believers whose lives are filled with sin."<sup>6</sup> He goes on to quote one such a teacher who insists, "If only committed people are saved people, then where is there room for carnal Christians?"<sup>7</sup> How sad it is that much of today's church no longer knows what being a Christian means!

While such teaching was not widely popularized until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is not without earlier precedent. Some 200 years before, Scottish nonconformist theologian Robert Sandeman (1718-1771) rejected the doctrine of imputed righteousness and taught that only the barest assent to the work of Christ was necessary for salvation, a view now known as Sandemanianism. Not surprisingly, like our own day, many churches sprang up, undoubtedly populated by many unbelievers.

Such teaching is a wholesale denial of the most basic truths of salvation, namely, a deliverance from sin that results in a change of life. As we have studied before in this publication, in fact, the Greek *pisteuō* ("faith") implicitly and indisputably carries the idea "to obey" (see TOTT #41 again). How we need to review the statement of doctrine in Chapter 18, Section 1 of both the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) and the *London Baptist Confession* (1689):

Although hypocrites, and other unregenerate men, may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions: of being in the favor of God and estate of salvation; which hope of theirs shall perish: yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God: which hope shall never make them ashamed.

So, as Boice observes, it is essential to recognize that "carnal" is actually used in Scripture to refer to an unregenerate person. The phrase "to be carnally minded is death" in Romans 8:6 clearly speaks of the lost person under God's wrath, while the words "to be spiritually minded is life and peace" refer to the true believer. Further, "the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (v. 7).

We must conclude, therefore, that "carnal" is not a *category* of *Christian*, rather it is a *characteristic* of the *non-Christian*. It does not refer to a "new convert," "the backslidden Christian," or any other such category. It re-

fers to a Christian who is acting like a non-Christian in some very specific ways and who needs to stop such behavior and who will, in fact, do so if a true believer.

That immediately brings us to the question: what kind of non-Christian behavior is characteristic of such carnality? Some teachers insist that it can be anything, but again, the text does not say that. The text clearly shows that carnality is not a *moral* problem. In other words, in this context the Corinthians were not guilty of habitual drunkenness, fornication, or other moral sin, things that unarguably demonstrate an unregenerate life. In fact, to say that the “carnal Christian” is one who can continue to live immorally like an unregenerate person is to violate the very thing that Paul also wrote to the same group of believers, namely, that a Christian is a “new creature” (2 Cor. 5:17; again, TOTT #41).

If carnality is not a *moral* problem, then what is it? We would submit that it is rather a *maturity* problem, for Paul goes on to specify exactly what he means. He doesn’t list *moral* issues rather *maturity* issues.

To illustrate, the third most wonderful day of my life (my conversion being the first and my marriage the second) was the birth of my son Paul. What utter joy it was to hear his first infant sounds and then the laughter that came to his mom and me when he mispronounced various words as he grew and began to talk. We even wrote down a list of them as a keepsake (although I would be in deep trouble if I shared any here). At almost 21, however, if he still made the same sounds and mispronounced the same words, it would no longer be cute or humorous. It would, of course, be cause for great alarm. It would indicate arrested development, perhaps even mental deficiency.

That was the situation, in a spiritual way, among the Corinthian believers. Instead of acting like spiritual adults, they were acting like fleshly children. How? Through **envying . . . strife, and divisions**.

**Envying** is *zelos* (English “zeal” and “zealous”) is derived from the verb *zeō*, “to be hot.” It can be used positively (e.g., Rom. 10:2; Col. 4:13), but here it is clearly negative, meaning jealousy, envy and anger (Act 5:17, “indignation”; 13:45; Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:20; Phil. 3:6; Heb. 10:27, “fiery indignation”; Jas. 3:14, 16).

**Strife** is *eris*, meaning strife, contention, and wrangling (Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 1:11; 2 Cor. 12:20, “debates”; Gal. 5:20, “variance”; 1 Tim. 6:4; Titus 3:9).

Finally, **divisions**, is *dichostasia*, which speaks of dissension and separation into factions (Rom. 16:17; Gal. 5:20, “seditions”), which Paul goes on to detail in verses 4–8.

All three of those words underscore the childish behavior every parent has observed. From fights over a toy, to sibling rivalry, to schoolyard jealousies, such is the behavior of those driven by fleshly impulse. Likewise, pettiness, partiality, and prejudice ruled in Corinth.

As if all this were not bad enough, they were also characterized by another sign of an infant, namely, choking on solid food. Unlike the spirituality, maturity, and discernment that characterize “he that is spiritual,” one who can *feast* on **meat**, these childish, juvenile Christians could merely *feed* on **milk**. Instead of being able to chew and swallow the deeper things of Christian truth, they could only drink the simplest, most elementary doctrines of the faith.

So appropriate was this metaphor that Paul used it again in Hebrews 5:12–14.<sup>8</sup> If there is one thing that is true of the church today, it is shallowness and even outright ignorance of much biblical truth. We need to examine our churches carefully to discern whether this is a temporary state of carnality or the permanent state of the natural man.

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#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the technical reader, what is described here is actually a prime example of the modern, rationalistic textual criticism that follows one of the seven arbitrary “rules” of choosing the “correct” reading of any given text. Starting with Johann A. Bengel (1687–1752) and continuing to our day, second only to the first “rule” that “the older reading is to be preferred,” another chief rule is that “the more difficult reading is to be preferred.” In other words, when there is a choice between a reading that is hard to understand and a reading that is easy to understand, the hard reading must be the genuine one because orthodox scribes always changed the hard readings to make them easy. Such an approach is not only totally arbitrary—and this can easily be proved historically—but it is also thoroughly rationalistic, discounts the sovereignty of God in preserving the text, and even accuses orthodox Christians of lying by deliberately corrupted their own New Testament text by making readings easier.
- <sup>2</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG Publishers, 1993), electronic edition, #5590.
- <sup>3</sup> *Pepper and Salt* (reprinted by Baker Book House, 1983), p. 27.
- <sup>4</sup> Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1971), Vol. 2, p. 362.
- <sup>5</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?* (Crossway Books, 2001), p. 143.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, quoting Charles Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Moody Press, 1969), p. 170.
- <sup>8</sup> See TOTT 11 & 12 for a discussion of Pauline authorship of Hebrews.

***Speaking Engagement: Pastor Watson will be preaching a six-night Bible Conference on “The Five Solas of the Reformation” at Entrican Bible Church (Entrican, MI) on June 21–26. See the website for details and directions.***