

THE FLESHLY CHRISTIAN

Every believer can, like Paul, be filled with the Holy Spirit at the time he believes and is baptized (Acts 9:17-18). However, many believers do not truly believe as an accomplished fact that Christ has died and been resurrected for them, nor do they sincerely apply in practice the principle of death and resurrection which they are called by the Holy Spirit to obey. Hence, they still remain subject to the control of the flesh, just like those who have not died and been resurrected, although in fact, they have died and been resurrected according to what has been accomplished by Christ, and they should die to themselves and live to God according to their duty as disciples. This type of believer may be said to be abnormal. But abnormal believers are not found only today; they were already in existence at the time of the apostles. The Corinthians are a case in point, as we may see from what Paul said to them:

"And I, brothers, was not able to speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to fleshly, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, for you were not yet able to receive it. But neither yet now are you able, for you are still fleshly. For if there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and do you not walk according to the manner of man?" (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

Here the apostle divides all Christians into two categories: the spiritual and the carnal or fleshly. Truly spiritual Christians are in no way extraordinary Christians; they are simply normal. It is rather that the fleshly Christians are the extraordinary ones for they are in reality abnormal. The Corinthians were already Christians, but they were not spiritual; rather, they were fleshly. Three times in this chapter of the Bible the apostle said they were fleshly. The apostle knew through the wisdom bestowed on him by the Holy Spirit that he should first know to which group they actually belonged before he could determine what the doctrinal truth was that should be ministered to them.

In the light of the Scriptures, regeneration is a birth. When one is regenerated, the spirit that lies hidden in the innermost part, the deepest part, of his being is renewed and indwelt by the Spirit of God. However, time is needed for the power of this new life to extend outward from the center to the circumference. Therefore, we cannot expect a babe in Christ to have the strength of the "young men" or the experience of the "fathers." In the case of a newly regenerated believer, even if he loves the Lord to the uttermost, is very fervent in his service, and goes on most faithfully with the Lord, time must still be given him so as to afford him the opportunities to better recognize the detestfulness of sin and self and to better understand God's will and way in the spiritual life. Of course, among these believers there are often some who really do love the Lord with exceeding fervor and greatly delight in the truth, but this still is nothing more than the operation of the emotion and the mind, untested by fire, and consequently not lasting. In any case, it is unavoidable for a newly regenerated believer to remain fleshly because he does not know the flesh even though he is filled with the Holy Spirit. One cannot eliminate the works of the flesh if he does not realize that these works are the products of the flesh. Hence, in reality many newly born believers are truly of the flesh.

The Bible does not expect a Christian who has just believed in the Lord to immediately become spiritual. However, if he makes no progress whatever for years,

or even for decades, and stays in the position of a babe, this is not proper, and his case is most pitiful. After speaking about babes in Christ being of the flesh, the apostle proceeds to state that those who have remained as babes for a long time are also of the flesh. Of course, this is so. Prior to that, Paul considered the Corinthian believers as being of the flesh, as being babes in Christ, but even at that time they were still of the flesh. By that time they should have grown into adulthood, but on the contrary they had withered away, so much so that they remained babes. Consequently, they were still fleshly believers.

The time required for a believer to progress from the state of being fleshly to the state of being spiritual is not so long as some imagine today. Although not many years had passed since the Corinthian believers had become Christians, the apostle already considered them to have been babes for too long, to have been of the flesh for too long. He expected them to have long since become spiritual! The purpose of Christ's redemption is to remove all hindrances that the Holy Spirit may take full control of one's entire being and make him spiritual. Such redemption can never fail, nor is the power of the Holy Spirit ordinary. As a fleshly sinner can become a regenerated believer, so can a regenerated believer who is still fleshly become spiritual. What is most pitiful is that among the present-day believers there are some who have remained as babes not merely for several years but have continued to remain in their old selves for decades without any progress whatever. Moreover, even though there are some who are able to progress into a spiritual life in a few years, they are very surprised, thinking that this is unusual. Little do they know that this is normal —nothing more than normal —regular growth.

Readers, how many years have you believed in the Lord? And have you become spiritual? We should not become aged babes, thereby causing grief to the Holy Spirit and bringing loss to ourselves. As regenerated believers we should yearn for a completely spiritual life, and in everything we should let the Holy Spirit be the Lord and Master so that He may in the least possible time lead us into what God has prepared for us. On no account should we waste our time, making no progress at all. We can trace the reasons that a person remains a babe so long without any growth. Generally speaking, there are two reasons. One reason is that those who watch over the believers only pay attention to the grace of God and the position of the believers in Christ without encouraging them to pursue spiritual experience, or these overseers, not knowing the life in the Holy Spirit, are unable to lead those whom they watch over into a more abundant life. The other reason is that the believers themselves show little interest in the things of the Spirit, thinking that it is good enough merely to be saved; or they do not hunger and thirst after the things of the Spirit; or, after knowing the prerequisites, they are unwilling to pay the price because it is too high. Due to these causes, there are many such old babes in the church.

What are the characteristics of a fleshly person? The first is remaining as a babe for a long time (Heb. 5:11-14). The period of babyhood should not exceed a few years at the very most. A person is regenerated because he believes in the redemption accomplished for him by the Son of God on the cross. When he so believes, he should also believe that he has been crucified with the Savior and thus allow the Holy Spirit to release and deliver him from the power of the flesh. Ignorant of this principle, he will inevitably remain fleshly for many years.

The second characteristic of a fleshly person is the inability to receive spiritual teachings. "Brothers...I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, for you were not yet able to receive it. But neither yet now are you able." The Corinthians boasted of their great and lofty knowledge and wisdom. So far as we know, the church at Corinth was possibly the most knowledgeable of all the churches at the time. They were "enriched in...all knowledge" (1:5), and on that account Paul gave thanks to God for them. If Paul had then spoken to them the spiritual truths, they would have been able to understand every word. But all that they had would have only been in the mind! Although they had knowledge of all things, they did not have the power to express what they knew in their practical lives. Perhaps today there are many fleshly believers who know quite a few doctrines and may be able to impart spiritual truths to others, but they themselves are still not spiritual. True spiritual knowledge consists not of wonderful and profound thoughts but of such practical experience as may be gained in the spirit as a result of a union of the believer's life with truth. Intelligence is of no avail, nor is it enough to have a fervent desire for the truth. Rather, one must have a life that is completely obedient to the Holy Spirit before he can hope to be taught by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, it is merely a case of conveying thoughts from one mind to another. Knowledge of this kind cannot make a fleshly person spiritual. On the contrary, his fleshly life will cause his knowledge to also become fleshly. What is lacking in this kind of person is not more spiritual teaching (the apostle felt that this hardly needed to be mentioned), but an obedient heart that is willing to submit one's life to the Holy Spirit, obey His command, and take the way of the cross. To such a person, spiritual knowledge only strengthens his carnality and helps him to deceive himself into thinking that he is spiritual. "Otherwise, how could I know so many spiritual things?" "But how many of the things you know are things you have learned from your daily life, and how many are just things you thought of in your mind?" May God be gracious to us!

There is another strong evidence of being fleshly. "For you are still fleshly." What is the reason? "For if there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and do you not walk according to the manner of man?" (1 Cor. 3:3). The sins of envy and strife are evidences of being carnal. There was strife within the church at Corinth, and the believers variously claimed, "I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ" (1:12). Although there were some who contended for Christ, saying, "I [am] of Christ," this also was the work of the flesh. The disposition of the flesh is that of envy and contention. To exalt Christ in this kind of disposition is also of the flesh. Hence, any sectarian boasting is, at its very best, merely the babbling of babies. The divisions within the church are due to no other reasons except the lack of love and the walking according to the flesh, as what God has said here. Contending for the truth is only a pretext.

Sinners of the world are men of the flesh. Since they are not regenerated, they have their soul and body as their masters. Hence, they are of the flesh. If a believer is also of the flesh, then he is walking after the manner of men. Men of the world are naturally fleshly, and therefore, it may be excusable for a newly regenerated person to be of the flesh. But since according to the years you have believed in the Lord you ought to have long since been spiritual, why are you still walking after the manner of men?

To fail and sin frequently after the manner of men is an indication that a man is of the flesh. If a believer still cannot overcome his temper and his peculiar temperament and is still selfish, contentious, vainly emulative, unforgiving of others' trespasses, and short of love in speaking, then he is truly still of the flesh, regardless of how many spiritual truths he knows, how much spiritual experience he thinks he has gained, or how fervently and effectively he has worked.

Being carnal or fleshly means nothing other than to "walk according to the manner of men." We should ask ourselves if we have completely ceased to walk after the manner of men. If there are still many things in our life that bear the semblance of the worldly people, then we are still of the flesh. We should not dispute over a term as to whether we are spiritual or fleshly. If we are not governed by the Holy Spirit, what profit is there even if we are called spiritual? This is a question of life, not of name.

SINS OF THE FLESH

The apostle's struggle in Romans 7 was a struggle against the sin that dwells within the body. He said, "For sin, seizing the opportunity...deceived me...killed me...I am...sold under sin...It is no longer I that work it out, but sin that dwells in me" (vv. 11, 14, 17, 20). When believers are still fleshly, they are usually overcome by the sin dwelling within, so that they have many battles and they commit sins.

The requirements of our body may generally be classified under three categories: nourishment, procreation, and defense. Before man's fall, these three matters were legitimate and without the contamination of sins. But after man fell and inherited the sinful nature, these matters became the media for the committing of sins. Since we need nourishment, the world makes use of eating and drinking to entice us. The first temptation that ever confronted mankind was in this very matter of food. Just as the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ensnared Eve then, so the pleasures of eating and drinking have become sins of the flesh today. We should not take the matter of food lightly, for too often many carnal believers have stumbled in this point. It was also because of the matter of eating and drinking that the Corinthian believers caused many of the brothers to stumble (1 Cor. 8). Hence, deacons and elders of the church at that time had to overcome in the matter of food (1 Tim. 3:3, 8). Only a spiritual man knows how unprofitable it is for one to be given to eating and drinking. So, whether one eats or drinks or whatever he does, he should do it all to the glory of God.

Second, after man's fall, procreation became the lust of man. In the Scriptures, lust and the flesh are particularly linked together. Even in the garden of Eden the sin of greediness gave rise to lust and shame. Paul in his first Epistle to the Corinthians also linked these two together (6:13, 15). He also considered drunkenness as being related to uncleanness (vv. 9-10).

Finally, there is the matter of self-defense. When sin is in control, the body begins to show forth its strength in an attempt to preserve itself. Anything that threatens to destroy our peace, happiness, and comfort is to be opposed. Such fruits are anger and strife borne of man's so-called temper which have their origin in the flesh and are therefore sins of the flesh. Many sins have been produced directly and indirectly

out of self-defense because sin is the motivating power within. It is for the preservation of one's personal interest, his personal existence, his personal reputation, his personal opinion, and a hundred and one things personal to himself, that many of the darkest sins of the world are produced.

If we analyze the numerous sins of the world one by one, we shall see that they are generally related to the three categories mentioned above. A fleshly Christian is one who is controlled by any or all of these three categories. Invariably, men of the world are all subject to the control of the sins of the body, but this is not surprising for they are not yet regenerated, but are still of the flesh. However, if a regenerated Christian incessantly vacillates between victory and defeat, is unable to deliver himself from the power of sin, and remains too long in the flesh, then he is abnormal. A believer should allow the Holy Spirit to search his heart so that he may be enlightened by God to know what things are forbidden by the law of the Holy Spirit and the law of nature, what things are obstructing him from the exercise of temperance and self-control, and what things are restricting him from serving God freely in the spirit. Unless these sins are removed, there is no possibility for him to enter into spiritual life.

THINGS OF THE FLESH

The flesh has many outlets. On God's side, we have seen how it is at enmity with God and how it cannot possibly please Him. Nevertheless, unless it is revealed to him by the Holy Spirit, neither the believer nor the sinner can know that the flesh is so worthless, so hateful, and so defiled in the eyes of God. It is only when God, by His Spirit, reveals the true condition of the flesh to man that man can deal with the flesh according to God's view.

On man's side, the manifestations of the flesh are known by all. If one is not self-justifying and does not fulfill "the lusts of our flesh" (Eph. 2:3), he will surely see how defiled the manifestations of the flesh are on man's side. In Galatians 5:19-21 the sins of the flesh are compiled in a list so that there is no possibility for anyone to misunderstand. "And the works of the flesh are manifest, which are such things as fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, divisions, sects, envyings, bouts of drunkenness, carousings, and things like these."

By such a list of sins, the apostle says that "the works of the flesh are manifest." These works are clearly evident to those who care to see. Anyone who would like to know whether or not he is of the flesh needs only to ask himself if he has done any work of the flesh. One who is of the flesh need not commit all the works enumerated in this list before he is reckoned as being of the flesh. If he does only one of them, it is more than enough to determine that he is of the flesh, for if the flesh were no longer in authority, from whence could this one have come? The presence of any work of the flesh is evidence of the existence of the flesh.

The sins listed here may be roughly divided into five categories: (1) sins of the body that are extremely defiling, such as fornication, uncleanness, and lasciviousness; (2) sins of association with Satan and supernatural communications with him, such as idolatry and sorcery; (3) sins of temper and the temperament, such as enmities,

strife, jealousy, and outbursts of anger; (4) sins of religious schisms or divisions, such as factions, divisions, sects, and envyings; and (5) sins of indulgence or intemperance, such as drunkenness and carousings. All these sins can easily be seen, and anyone who does any of these is of the flesh.

After we have divided these sins into five categories, we can see that some of the sins appear to be more respectable than others, and some more defiling. However, no matter how man may look at them, in God's view these sins all stem from the same root —the flesh —whether it be the defiled flesh or the civilized flesh. Believers who have constantly committed the most defiling sins will naturally realize that they are of the flesh. It is much more difficult with those who can overcome the comparatively more defiling sins. Most of them think they are better than others, and hence do not readily admit that they are still fleshly. They think that since they do not have the more defiling sins, they are no longer walking according to the flesh. Little do they realize that "the flesh is the flesh," no matter how civilized it may appear to be. Although "enmities...factions, divisions, sects" may appear to be cleaner in comparison with "fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,...carousings," they all are, nonetheless, fruits borne of the same tree. May we pray over these three verses one by one before God at this time, so that our eyes may be opened by the Lord to know ourselves. May we humble ourselves through such a prayer. May we pray until we weep and mourn for our sins, until we realize that we have merely assumed the name of a Christian, even the name of a spiritual Christian, when in reality our life is still filled with works of the flesh. May we pray until we are rekindled in our hearts and willing to cast off everything that is of the flesh so that His grace may be bestowed upon us.

The first step in the work of the Holy Spirit is to move one to convict himself concerning sin (John 16:8). Unless an awareness of sin is instilled in him by the Holy Spirit, a sinner will not be able to see the wickedness of his sins and flee from the future wrath unto obedience of Christ. But such a person must have an awareness of sin a second time; as a Christian, he must also convict himself concerning sin. If we do not realize the hatefulness and wickedness of the specific condition of our flesh, resulting in a sense of self-conviction, we shall never become a spiritual man. The sins committed by us may differ from person to person, but we are all of the flesh just the same. Oh, now is the time that we should humble ourselves in prostration before God and willingly allow the Holy Spirit to again cause us to convict ourselves of our sins.

THE NECESSITY OF DEATH

The more a believer is enlightened by the Holy Spirit, the more will he see the pitiful state of the flesh, and the fiercer will his battles against the flesh be, but all the more frequent and evident will his failures become. Whenever he suffers a defeat, the Holy Spirit will further reveal to him the sin and weakness of his flesh and generate in him a deeper sense of self-reproach and a determination to battle against the sin of the flesh. This chain reaction of misery may last a fairly long time, and one will ultimately be delivered only when he comes to understand the deeper works of the cross.

That the Holy Spirit leads a believer in this way through defeats and reproaches is deeply meaningful. Before the cross can perform any deeper work, man must first go through a process of preparation, to the end that he may accept the work of the cross without hindrance of any kind. The purpose of the Holy Spirit in leading the believer in this way is to prepare him.

From the experience of the believer, it can be seen that although God condemns the flesh as being corrupt beyond remedy, the believer himself thinks otherwise. He may in his mind be conscious that such is the evaluation of God, but he lacks the kind of spiritual insight to recognize that the flesh is truly defiled and corrupt. He may have supposed that what God says is true, but he still does not know that God's perception is never wrong. For this reason, the believer frequently attempts to mend the flesh. Such is the fact, although he does not openly say so.

Since many believers do not understand God's way of salvation, they try to overcome the flesh by making war against it. They think that victory or defeat is decided by the measure of strength available. Therefore, they hope with all their heart that God would grant them greater spiritual power to enable them to overcome their flesh. This kind of warfare may last a long time. However, there are always more defeats than victories without any prospect of a total conquest of the flesh in sight.

At this juncture, the believer proceeds, on the one hand, to fight his war and, on the other hand, tries to mend and improve the flesh, or to train and tame it. He prays; he reads the Bible; he institutes a number of rules and regulations in the hope that he will be able to subdue, change, and control the flesh. He lays down many ordinances, such as touch not, taste not, handle not, and the like, unconsciously thinking that corruption of the flesh is due to the lack of set rules, culture, and education, and that since he has put it through such spiritual training, it will give no trouble in the end. Little does he know that as to the subduing of the lusts of the flesh, these rules and regulations are absolutely ineffective (Col. 2:21-23).

While the believer is, on the one hand, seemingly trying to eradicate the flesh, he appears by his conduct, on the other hand, to wish to improve it instead. So under these circumstances, the Holy Spirit can only allow him to carry on with his war, to suffer defeat, to feel remorseful, and to engage in self-reproach, leading him through such situations a few times, even a score of times, until he realizes that the flesh is beyond remedy, that his own method is of no avail, and that there must be another saving way. What he knew in his mind of the corruption of the flesh, he has only now come to realize in his experience.

If the believer faithfully and sincerely believes the words of God and in all sincerity beseeches the Holy Spirit to reveal to him God's holiness so that he may, in the light of God's holiness, be able to see the true condition of the flesh, the Holy Spirit will certainly do so. In this way, he may be spared some of the agonies of the war he has gone through. However, such believers are few indeed! Man always desires to use his own methods and simply cannot bring himself to believe that he is really so corrupt. However, the lesson must be learned, so the Holy Spirit patiently allows him to learn of his self little by little through experience.

We have now seen that we cannot obey the flesh, nor can we mend or educate the flesh. No matter what spiritual method is employed, it simply cannot change the nature of the flesh one bit. Then what is to be done? The flesh must die. This is the way appointed by God. It must be through death and not in any other way. We want to wage war, to change, to make resolutions, and to use innumerable other methods to overcome the flesh, but God says that the flesh must die. If the flesh is dead, everything will be in order. It is not a matter of victory, but a matter of death.

This is very reasonable. The reason that we are fleshly is that we were born of the flesh. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." From where it comes in, to there it will go out. The way of gain is the way of loss. Since we are born of the flesh, we are of the flesh. If we die, we are delivered from the flesh. Death is the one and only way. "For he who has died is justified from sin" (Rom. 6:7). Anything short of death will not do. Death is the only way of salvation.

Since the flesh is so defiled (2 Pet. 2:10), even God cannot change it. Apart from putting it to death, there is no other way. Even the precious blood of the Lord Jesus cannot cleanse the "flesh" of man. Thus in the Scriptures we find that the blood of the Lord Jesus only cleanses us from our sins, trespasses, and iniquities, and no mention is made of the cleansing of the flesh by the precious blood. The flesh has to be crucified (Gal. 5:24). Even the Holy Spirit cannot improve the flesh. That is why He does not dwell in the sinner, who is of the flesh (Gen. 6:3). Even when He dwells in the believers, His intention is not to help in the improvement of the flesh but to war against it (Gal. 5:17). "Upon man's flesh shall it [that is, the holy anointing oil as a type of the Holy Spirit] not be poured" (Exo. 30:32). With this in view, is it not a fact that many of our prayers are meaningless, those beseeching the Lord to enable us to change for the better, to progress, to be loving, and to better serve Him? And is it not a fact that so much of our hope is vain, the hope that we may subsequently attain sanctification, experience the Lord every day, and glorify His name in all things? Truly we should not try to mend the flesh so as to make it cooperate with the Spirit of God. The predestined end of the flesh is death. Only by committing the flesh to death can we have salvation. Otherwise, we shall forever remain as its bondservants.