

## The Reality of Carnal Christians

Is there such a thing as carnal Christians, believers who persist in disobedience to God? Some say no. While conceding that Christians can and do sin, they deny that true believers will persist in sin until the end of their physical lives. They believe that God's work of salvation in a person guarantees perseverance in good works and obedience (see GraceNotes no. 49). Others who believe in the reality of carnal Christians are accused of giving unbelievers false assurance of salvation (though these accusers could also give false assurance if one's performance is the measure of salvation). Those who believe in the reality of carnal Christians are also accused of promoting license toward sin (though their accusers usually agree that they do not purposely promote sin). The word "carnal" (*sarkikos*, belonging to the realm of sinful flesh) is used here to denote persistent sinful behavior. What then does the Bible say about carnality and Christians?

### The reality of differences in Christian experience

No two believers have identical experiences of Christian maturity and holiness. There are many things that can influence a Christian's experience, such as age at salvation, exposure and receptivity to truth, past experience, personality, the world system, the flesh, and the devil. We see these different experiences in Scripture.

- Matthew 5:19 – Some are called "least in the kingdom of heaven" because they sin and cause others to sin, while others are called "great in the kingdom of heaven."
- Luke 8:11-15 - Some who believe do not grow because of the distractions of worldly temptations and pleasures (see GraceNotes no. 57).
- 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 –Paul affirms the Corinthians' salvation (1:2-9; 4:15; 6:11), but calls them "carnal" and "babes in Christ." They are in contrast to those called "spiritual" in 2:15.
- 1 Corinthians 3:11-15 – Some believers will have their good works rewarded and some their useless works burned at the end of their lives.
- 2 Timothy 2:20-21 – There are two kinds of vessels in God's house, some that bring honor and some that bring dishonor.
- Hebrews 5:11-14 - The readers, though definitely saved (see GraceNotes no. 15), are rebuked for being "dull of hearing" and "unskilled in the word of righteousness." They are like babies who can only eat milk, unlike mature believers who can eat the meat of the Word.

In the Bible and real life there is not a one-type-fits-all Christian experience, but a spectrum of growth, maturity, and obedience. At the low end of this spectrum are those who live carnally.

### The reality of persistent sin in Christians

A simple reading of the Scriptures demonstrates that Christians can struggle persistently with sin.

- Rom 7:7-8:17 – The apostle Paul describes his own experience of struggling with his sinful flesh and concludes that victory comes from the Holy Spirit's control.
- The Corinthians – This whole church is living in sin (pride, divisiveness, sexual immorality, lawsuits, etc.) though they are surely saved (1 Cor. 1:2-9; 4:15; 6:11). Four years after Paul visited them, he writes to confront and correct their on-going sins.
- The Galatians – This church is turning away from the true gospel of grace to a false gospel of legalism. Though saved (1:1, 3, 6), they are in danger of experiencing God's curse (1:8-9) and losing the benefits of grace (5:4).
- 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 - Some in the church were disorderly, lazy, and in need of admonishment.
- 1 John 1:8,10 –Christians who deny the reality of sin in themselves walk in darkness, make God a liar, and thus deny the need to practice confession (see GraceNotes nos. 37, 58).

In short, the fact that the Bible has exhortations against sin, warnings of consequences for sin, instructions for church discipline, and admonitions for confession and restoration is meaningless if persistent sin is not a possibility and a reality for Christians.

## Number 76

### The reality of sinning believers

Only one example of a believer persisting in sin until the end of life proves the reality of saved people who live carnally. Nevertheless, here are some of the many examples.

- Saul – Though anointed by God and though he prophesied (1 Sam. 10:1-13, 24) and exiled mediums and spiritists from Israel (1 Sam. 28:3), Saul died in sin (1 Chron. 10:13-14).
- The kings of Israel and Judah – Some like Asa (2 Chron. 14-16), Jehu (2 Kings 9-10), Joash (2 Kings 12:2; 2 Chron. 24), Amaziah (2 Kings 14:1-20; Chron. 25), and Uzziah (2 Chron. 26) were commended for aspects of their faith and obedience, yet died in disobedience.
- Solomon – This king of Israel and author of Scripture defected from God and worshipped idols in his old age. The Bible record does not indicate he repented before he died (1 Kings 11).
- Ezekiel 18:24 – A righteous man who sins seriously will die physically because of his sin.
- Ananias and Sapphira – These members of the early church died because they lied (Acts 5:1-10).
- The Corinthian believers at the Lord's Supper – Because they took the Lord's Supper in an unworthy way, some died (1 Cor. 11:30; "sleep" is a euphemism for physical death).

These biblical examples may remind us of present-day situations we observe among Christians.

### The reality of consequences for sinful Christians

The Scriptures recognize the reality of sin in believers, but do not excuse it. Sinning believers are held accountable for their behavior.

- Divine discipline – God chastens those He loves who need correction (Heb. 12:5-11).
- Church discipline – Churches are instructed to discipline and restore sinning believers (Matt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-15).
- Temporal discipline – Sinning and selfish believers can lose blessings and fullness of life (Pss. 32:3-5; 51:1-12; Matt. 16:24-26).
- Lost rewards – Sinning believers can lose rewards in this life and at the Judgment Seat of Christ at the end of life (Matt. 6:1; 1 Cor. 3:13-15; 13:3; James 2:12-13; 2 John 8).
- Loss of usefulness – Christians who do not progress in sanctification should not be teachers (Heb. 5:11-13) and can be useless in God's service (John 15:1-6; 2 Tim. 20-21).
- Loss of fellowship – Believers who live in sin walk in darkness and forfeit fellowship with God and with other believers (1 John 1:3-7).
- Physical death – Christians can commit sin that persists unto death (1 Cor. 5:4-5; James 5:19-20; 1 John 5:16).

These consequences, the process of discipline, and restoration are meaningless if those sinning are unbelievers. We see no exhortations to get these sinners saved.

### Conclusion

A single example of a believer who dies in a sinful condition proves the reality of carnal Christians. Yet the Bible has many examples along with teaching about how God exhorts, warns, and disciplines those who persist in sin. To deny the reality of carnal Christians ignores overwhelming biblical evidence in favor of a false theological construct that teaches salvation is obtained and proved by submission to God's will and that faith is a gift from God that cannot finally fail. This view cannot offer full assurance of salvation because it depends on one's performance until the last day of life, and no one can predict the future. Neither does it specify how long a person can sin without being called carnal. We wonder how such teachers deal with the reality of sin in their own lives and how they can finally judge another's salvation. Only God can Judge. The Bible, our observations of Christians, and self-examination show the continuing reality of the Christian's struggle with sin. We have the comfort of God's abundant grace in Romans 5:20 for good reason: "...*But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.*" No amount of sin can exhaust the amazing grace of God.