



From carnal to spiritual

(edited transcript)

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The apostle Paul so completely received and preached the gospel of Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2) that he called it 'his gospel' (Romans 2:16; 16:25; 2 Timothy 2:8).

Many people are born again of the Spirit of God but are never able get much further than that because they descend into some form of carnal behaviour. There is much written in the New Testament letters about the problem of carnality, calling for believers to be spiritual and not carnal. When we are carnal, we think and act as if we are the authority, commentating on our own and other peoples' situations. But we are not authorities on *anything*, and that carnal mode is not how God asks us to live.

Do we know the Scriptures but not Christ?

When Jesus came, He came to His own people. They knew the Old Testament Scriptures, yet they didn't know *Him* (John 1:11). They expected someone stronger, someone who would conquer the Romans and restore their nation. We can sometimes make the same mistake.

Jesus comes to us, who are His own, yet sometimes we do not know Him because the way He comes seems too weak to us. That is what Paul faced among those whom he had birthed in the gospel. He had come to them in the weakness of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:2-5) and as a result, they regressed from receiving and heeding him to disregarding him and his authority (1 Corinthians 4:11-14).

Carnality causes people to trust in their own flesh and to assess all manner of things from the perspective of what they know or think they know. When the Jewish leader Nicodemus came to speak with Jesus, he came by night because he didn't want anyone to see him (John 3:1-2). He was a teacher in Israel, and he came to question Jesus, having somehow twigged to the fact that He did seem to know *something*. Nicodemus had spent his whole life studying the Scriptures, attending Rabbinical schools, reciting the Torah and so on. He had all the information in his head, but he recognised that to some degree he didn't really *know* it.

So, Nicodemus came to Christ, calling Him Rabbi and acknowledging Him as a Teacher who had come from God. He didn't quite know who Jesus was, but at least he knew that *something* in Jesus was from God. He certainly did not know that Jesus *is* God and the Word of God made flesh. Neither have *we* really known that Jesus is the Word made flesh. He was not sent *into* flesh. He was an entirely

new creation, just as anyone who is in Him is also a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). If we really understood this, we would not be so carnal!

Nicodemus knew that no one could do the miracles Jesus was doing and show the signs He was showing unless God was with Him (John 3:2). Nicodemus was *looking* for signs, as Paul wrote that Jews do, whereas Greeks look for wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22). *Our* natural inclination will be to seek for either one or the other. We look for signs and testimony of the miraculous (which none can deny), or towards a wisdom of theological study (against which none can argue).

Unless we are born of the Spirit

Before Nicodemus had even asked a question, Jesus answered him:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3).

Nicodemus didn't know what Jesus was talking about, so Jesus clarified it for him:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (John 3:5-6)

To understand what it is to be born of the Spirit, consider Adam. The Scriptures tell us that when God formed Adam, He breathed into him the breath of lives and Adam became a living soul (Genesis 2:7). In the seed of Adam were all the identities of humanity. Every person ever born by procreation is born a living soul. At the time of procreation, at the very moment of human biological existence, a new living soul, a new identity that has a spirit, is brought into being.

However, although Adam was a living soul containing the seed of all living souls, he was not a life-giving spirit (1 Corinthians 15:45). It is Christ who is the life-giving Spirit, and the eternal name of every person, foreknown by God¹, is in Him. We gain our identity at the point of procreation, for we are not pre-existent, but the name and person whom God predestined each one to be was foreknown² by Him well before we came into being!

Jesus did not gain *His* identity through procreation, for procreation is not involved in His existence. He is from the beginning, but by a new creative act He was *made* flesh (John 1:1, 14). ‘Incarnation’ is the word we use to describe Christ being made flesh, but it is probably an inadequate descriptor. The Latin word ‘caro’, from which our English word ‘incarnation’ is derived, is the word for flesh. Translated literally, ‘incarnation’ means ‘into flesh’. But the Word didn't come into flesh, He was *made* flesh, and that is how we have to understand it.

As for us, we *did* gain our identity at procreation, when we became living souls who have a spirit. However, because of the separation of mankind from God through Adam and Eve's fall, our spirit is completely dead to God. Unless in Christ we are made spiritually alive to God, by being born of the Spirit of God into the Covenant of God, we remain dead in our spirit.

To become spiritual, to be made alive in our spirit, we must be born of the Spirit of God. Hopefully, that is our faith and our experience. But this only brings us to the starting point of being spiritual. Let me ask you, does being born of the Spirit make all your subsequent

¹ Judges 13:5; Psalm 22:10; Psalm 139:13; Isaiah 49:1,5; Jeremiah 1:5; Luke 10:20; Galatians 1:5

² Ephesians 1:3-6, 2:10; Romans 8:28-29

actions spiritual? Does it make *any* of your actions spiritual? Some of the worst people in history have been people who have been genuinely and powerfully born again of the Spirit. How could that be so? Because spiritual birth, although absolutely fundamental to being spiritual, does not necessarily result in a way of life that is spiritual.

Why would all the New Testament letters teach and exhort us to live and walk by the Spirit if walking by the Spirit was an automatic result of being born of the Spirit? If that were so, there would be no need for the Scriptures to exhort us to set our minds on the Spirit and not on the flesh; to be led by the Spirit instead of by the flesh; or to walk by the Spirit and not by the flesh (Romans 8:5, 12-14; Galatians 5:16-26).

Now, if we are to walk by the Spirit, we need to be led by the Spirit. But even when we are led by the Spirit, we are not necessarily being spiritual! Paul knew this when he wrote:

“For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am carnal...” (Romans 7:14)

The law is spiritual, but we are carnal

Many of us were taught in our various church traditions that the law is *not* spiritual but terribly legalistic. Why were we taught that? Because the carnal mind looks at the law of God and thinks it is all rules and regulations that must be followed down to the dot point. Looking at the law through the forensic lens of our own perspective, we do not see the love of God in His Commandments or in His giving of them. We think ‘spiritual’ is something other than God’s law; something intangible that can’t be held down.

But Paul tells us that the law *is* spiritual:

“...the Law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold into bondage to sin.” (Romans 7:14)

Paul, as a Christian writing to Christians, was telling us that the problem is *not* the Law but that we are carnal, sold under sin. The only way carnal eyes can see God’s law is as technical, exacting legislation. Sold under sin, we cannot see that Christ is the fulfilment of the law; we cannot see His love, the full expression of the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, offering His life in the consuming fire of God’s presence.

We *cannot* see this when we look at the law through carnal eyes. We look at the law, try to keep it, and find, like Paul, that we can’t.

“...when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;” (Romans 7:9)

We *can’t* keep the commandment, but the answer is not a theology that tells us we don’t *have* to keep it because Jesus died for us, and we’ve been born again, so now our best will do. Believing *that* produces carnality - whole congregations of people trying to be religious; people who apply the law to others and refuse its application to themselves.

Jesus came to His own people who, having been born under the law, were at best carnal. They had diligently studied the Scriptures (John 5:39-40). They had the Covenant of God and thought they were living it but did not *know* what they were talking about. They could not find it out. They didn’t know the One of whom the Scriptures spoke, and when He came to them, they revolted at His teaching that they could *only* have life if they would eat His flesh and drink His blood (John 6:54,60-61).

They claimed that they were keeping the law but could not see that stumbling at just one point of the law, even by thought alone, broke the entire law (Galatians 5:2). Jesus taught that even looking at someone the wrong way,

thinking the wrong thing, desiring what belonged to another were the same as the doing or taking of those things. That is what Paul was saying to the Roman Christians: 'I look at the law and think I can keep it, and I try as hard as I can, but I can't keep it. I'm blown to smithereens.' (Romans 7:7-24).

When we finally recognise our utter incapacity to keep the law, we are recognising that we are poor in spirit. The law is *meant* to bring us to this point so we can be saved, for it is the poor in spirit who are blessed (Matthew 5:3; Galatians 3:24). As our vain way and self-determining heart are broken, the Lord finds us, saves us, and begins to fulfil His law in us *His* way. He establishes and writes His law in our heart.

In God's love, He cuts us to the heart

Jesus took our sin. All our reproaches against God were laid upon Christ and broke His heart (Psalm 69:9; Romans 15:3). When we see that the sin and reproach that was laid on Him was our own, and we see what we, personally, have done to Him, we are cut to the heart, and a breach is made on our carnal ways.

On the Day of Pentecost, when Peter preached this, people were cut to the heart:

"This [Jesus whom] ...you nailed to a cross... know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ - this Jesus whom you crucified. Now when [the people] heard this, they were cut to the heart..." (Acts 2:23,36-37)

That they were 'cut to the heart' is not just a figure of speech. God was breaking in on their hearts with His word, with His love and with His Spirit. He was making a breach on their religious ways of living so they could be converted to Him. He has to do this with every one of us so that we are converted. Most people think that conversion is changing

from being a hell-bound sinner to being a good Christian, but Peter's conversion took place when he was *already* a Christian. He was converted from his carnal opposition to the cross and from his misguided attempts to keep the law, all of which led him to deny Christ. That's what *our* unconverted Christian heart does!

Peter could preach the sermon he did on the Day of Pentecost because he had by then been converted by Jesus' ministry to him, by the lake shore, of the word that broke in upon him³. We need to be converted from our carnality to the cross of Christ; to knowing only Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). How? As the Scriptures tell us - by suffering with Christ and being *made* spiritual by God in the process (Romans 8:12-17; 2 Timothy 2:12-13).

Let me illustrate. Let's say we encounter something difficult and have a carnal response, or, knowing God's command not to covet, we find ourselves coveting. Seeing our carnality, we feel some degree of suffering or shame. Who will deliver us from our own carnality that leads us to have these bad reactions? Who will deliver us from our audacious questioning of God's care for us in whatever is happening to us?

Doesn't our initial carnal response indicate we have a problem? Don't our complaints about our circumstances only highlight the problem? Our carnal responses flag the state of our heart to us. We don't need any more information than this: that we are carnal, and our carnality is not the result of other people's treatment of us. The fact is, we are carnal. Whether people at home, in church or anywhere else are loving or unkind to us has no bearing on the fact that we are carnal. Others do not make us behave carnally - we

³ John 13:37-38; Luke 22:54-62; John 21:15-19

do this ourselves. When we accept this, understanding will begin to come to us.

When Paul and Timothy wrote to the church at Colossae, they gave thanks for the brethren there, saying:

“We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints;” (Colossians 1:3-4)

This was a good church! They were born again; they had received the gospel; they were doing well. The apostles commended them for this, and for the testimony, fruit and life that their faith in Christ was producing:

“...just as in all the world also [the gospel] is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth... Epaphras also informed us of your love in the Spirit.” (Colossians 1:5-8)

However, they still needed to grow.

“For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,” (Colossians 1:9)

The Colossians needed to keep growing up, just as we do. But did you know that you can hinder or altogether stop your growth to maturity whenever you kick against what is happening in your life? When you give up or give in to bad reactions? When you resort to sophisticated tantrums? You can resist the Lord's hand in any number of ways, but if you do, you will remain carnal, blind, and immature. However, if you submit yourself in faith to the chastening hand of the Lord, you will begin to gain wisdom from above and spiritual understanding.

For peaceable fruit of righteousness

If we truly are sons of God the Father, He will chasten us (Hebrews 12:7-8).

“All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” (Hebrews 12:11)

The peaceful fruit of righteousness is yielded by those who are trained by the Lord's discipline. There is no such fruit for those He disciplines but who will not be trained by it. If you don't seek to gain any spiritual wisdom or understanding when you're being chastened, but only seek to get through whatever's happening, you won't understand what's happening and you won't be changed.

Now, may I lean a little on this point? I think there has been too much of this fruitless kind of chastening where we haven't listened to the Lord as we could have; where we haven't sought a fellowship in His word to gain understanding in the situations in which the Lord has placed us. In the Western world we are very carnal, and the Lord is praying for us that we might gain spiritual understanding and fruitfulness.

Let me give you an example of spiritual fruitfulness. Paul wrote to the Galatians:

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness;” (Galatians 6:1)

Leaning a little harder on the point, let me ask this question: When you see something wrong in church life, or find someone overtaken in a trespass, do you know how to restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness? Or, do you commentate on the matter or on the person, reacting and gossiping? Spiritual people are

able to do the former and do not indulge in the latter.

If you're *not* spiritual, you'll respond to such a person by pointing to the letter of the law, the ways they've transgressed it and the ways they need to keep it. You may be correct, but you will only bring death to this overtaken and over-burdened person as you broadcast your own opinion. It is those who are spiritual who know how to help and *can* help such a person.

Now, do you think that those who are pastors and teachers are the only 'spiritual people' who are called and equipped to help those caught in a trespass? Aren't *you* called to be spiritual? Don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting we all call ourselves spiritual and run around trying to restore people. We will all need to find fellowship to understand what is needed, and what the ministry to those in need will involve.

When hurting people come to us, what will we do? The church will *really* need to be the church. People will come with all kinds of issues and matters, and if all we have to offer them is assessments, spiritual laws, and opinionated directives, we're just going to kill them.

Thank God for His patience with us! He is giving us grace to learn and understand, to accept the righteousness of God that is formed in us through the difficulties and sufferings He brings to our life, so that we can become spiritual people who are able to restore others. Joining Christ's sufferings, we accept that although we are born again, we still need to grow to maturity as the sons of God He wants us to be. To grow up in Christ, we need discipline through suffering with Him. As we join Him, we stop complaining about whatever is going on and submit ourselves to be led in our circumstances by the Spirit.

Those who are spiritual can gently restore

If someone is overtaken in a trespass, or is suffering in some way, and we reach out to them in our own wisdom, even our best wisdom that we think is right on the mark, we will only minister our own carnality. At best, we will bring no life to them. At worst, we will cause great harm. We *must* learn what God is patiently teaching us about proceeding as spiritual people in relation to all matters of life; He wants *all* of us to be 'you who are spiritual' (Galatians 6:1)!

The believers at Corinth were the group Paul most often warned about carnality. They had been born again, they had received the Spirit of God, and they were amazingly gifted - but they were carnal and had no idea of spiritual living (1 Corinthians 3:1-3). They had come to hold Paul in low regard and had few fathers in the faith. They considered the apostles to be inferior and not worth following (1 Corinthians 4:8-15). Paul urged the Corinthians to submit themselves to spiritual men, like Stephanas in Achaia who was devoted to the service of the saints (1 Corinthians 16:15), instead of to self-styled 'super-apostles' who had come in among them, producing *nothing* spiritual and allowing out-of-control carnality and gross immorality in the church.

If Paul had been carnal, knowing what was happening he could well have written the Corinthians off. He could have walked away from them, but he didn't. He was spiritual, and he persevered with them. The entire church was overtaken in a fault, but Paul worked to restore the whole group through the grace of Christ that was working through him. He came to them in love and gentleness as a patient father, not wanting to wield a stick over them (1 Corinthians 4:21). Yet even though Paul came to them as a father to sons, they thought they were instructors. Full of legal assessments,

they did not know how to birth *anyone* in the gospel, so Paul sought to teach them about sonship and exhorted them to *let* him teach them.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul's teaching focus was more the nature and ministry of the gospel. His testimony was that the ministry of the gospel comes out of the consolation we ourselves have found in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-11). In Paul's sufferings with Christ, he had touched resurrection life in his mortal body and been quickened by the power of God. Coming from the life of Christ in Him, His teaching was testimony, not legal directive or assessment.

Paul knew that the legal righteousness he had formerly pursued and excelled in was rubbish (Philippians 3:4-11). He taught that those who desire righteousness by keeping the law are obliged to keep the whole law, but cannot do so (Galatians 5:2-4). With the faith of a father, Paul exhorted the churches to put off all such rubbish and become 'you who are spiritual'.

In *this* day, God wants to give men and women faith to become spiritual fathers and mothers in the body of Christ. Training and a lot of fellowship in the word will be needed. There is a need for more people to join the work that God has for us to do so that we can multiply His life.

Our traditions taught us a positional gospel that we thought was spiritual. We thought that by receiving the Holy Spirit we became spiritual. Of course, we *do* need to receive and be baptised in the Holy Spirit, which the Scriptures proclaim and urge, but then we need to mature as spiritual people who are obedient to the Spirit, not remain as carnal people who obey another voice that agrees with, or is, their own. Spiritual people are obedient to the Spirit!

If you are feeling convicted by the Spirit, don't allow yourself to come under condemnation. You can receive His word without condemnation, and because you believe, you can speak. You will need to talk, not so you can be assessed and validated but to find a fellowship. You can share what your faith commitment is in hearing the word that God is speaking to you. You can share about giving yourself to the work that He has for you. In this way you can join the fellowship of God's word and become a labourer in His harvest!

We've all spent enough time defining our own obedience. It is time to join the Lord properly, learn to be a disciple, and have a load placed upon us. Much will open up to us as God works by His Spirit through us. There is much work to be done. As pressure rises in the world around us, and as strife escalates and things become increasingly difficult, people will come asking us what we have. We have the gospel, and those who come to us need us to know what the gospel is and to truly testify to its living power within us. God so loved the world that He gave His Son (John 3:16). His love is not just for those who are now saved - He desires *all* men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4).

Thank the Lord for His word to us! Let's seek Him for His spiritual wisdom and understanding and allow Him to open our eyes. We may have been content in some of our carnal ways, but that is not the Lord's desire for us or the desire He has placed within our hearts. Let our confession of faith today be that we are turning to the Lord to be converted from being carnal to being spiritual; that we are looking to Him to demolish our reliance on ourselves, our religious history or anything else our carnal thinking considers spiritual; and we are seeking *Him*, to be led by the Spirit of God and proceed in faith as He leads.