

PREFACE

In the second half of Chapter Two, Paul makes the argument that because followers of Christ have the Spirit of God, they possess the capacity to appraise the things of God. This is in contrast to the “natural man” who literally cannot appraise the things of God because he does not possess the Spirit of God. Thus, in Chapter Two, Paul contrasts those who are spiritual (*pneumatikos*) with those who remain natural (*psychikos*) and without the Spirit. In that setting the contrast is between those who are saved and those who are not saved by faith in Christ.

In Chapter Three there is a subtle shift in Paul's use of *pneumatikos*. Instead of contrasting believers to unbelievers, he now contrasts spiritual believers with *fleshly* or carnal (*sarkikos*) believers. This means that in this setting, “spiritual” no longer defines all Christians, simply because they are in possession of the Holy Spirit, but a *subset* of Christians—those who are spiritual. And “fleshly” does not define unbelievers, but Christians who possess the Spirit of God yet remain babes in Christ, and thus too much bound to the flesh and the world system that it so loves.

And so we must be sure to understand this use of *sarkikos* (flesh) and *sarkinoi* (fleshly). On the one hand, as we have discussed many times, everyone of us remains in flesh; the flesh, with its base proclivities, does not magically disappear when we receive the Spirit of God. Would that it did; life would be far simpler. So that cannot be how Paul means it here. In fact the apostle uses the same term to describe himself in the beginning of his lengthy lament in Romans 7.

**For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.
(Romans 7:14)**

Remember that the apostle Paul always uses the word “spiritual” in an upper case way: even though our grammatical rules dictate lower case, Paul always means upper case “Spiritual.” Also recall how, last week, Sigurd Grindheim defined those who are “spiritual.”

Grindheim: To be spiritual...is to have apprehended the word of the cross in such a way that it has transformed the entire existence of the believer into its image—to a cruciform life, a life characterized by self-sacrificing love, and where power is manifest through weakness.

As we will see when we dig into v1, Paul does not contrast those who are spiritual with those who are *in* flesh, for we are *all* in flesh. But the contrast is with men *of* flesh, or, as in the ESV, men *of the* flesh. This refers to those—men and women—who persistently, stubbornly cling to the ways of the flesh, instead of maturing into the ways of the Spirit. It describes individuals who, though believers with the Holy Spirit, tenaciously cling to the ways of the world.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-3.

There is a quotation from an unknown source that says, “The profane person cannot understand holiness, but the holy person can well understand the depths of evil.”

As we have learned, without the Holy Spirit it is impossible for the unbeliever to appraise God, but the opposite is, sadly, not true. The believer on earth has not lost his memories of, his knowledge of, nor his taste for evil. It is bad enough when a Christian is living in a carnal, fleshly fashion; it is even more tragic when this same person believes himself to be spiritual—a person of the Holy Spirit, living *by* the Spirit.

Many of those in the Corinthian church believed they were spiritual, but they were living fleshly (v3). This is the problem Paul addresses in this passage.

Sidebar: The NIV “worldly” (vv1, 3) is not the best. The words *sarkinoi* (v1) and *sarkikoi* (v3) “emphasize especially their humanness and the physical side of their existence as over against the spiritual” (Fee).

And I, brethren,

Paul makes it clear that he is addressing believers, and the Greek is clear that he is addressing the entire congregation. Not that all were guilty of this transgression, but the church as a whole was being defiled by it.

could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh,

Let’s be clear: Paul is *not* saying there were Christians in Corinth without the Holy Spirit; they were unspiritual “not because they lack[ed] the Spirit but because they [were] thinking and living just like those who live outside the household of faith, people who know nothing of the Holy Spirit” (Fee).

as to infants in Christ.

It is a common interpretation that Paul is accusing the Corinthians of being not far enough along in their understanding of their faith-walk in Christ. But that is not the case. Let’s compare this to the familiar passage in Hebrews, to better understand what Paul is saying here.

Read Hebrews 5:11-14.

The writer to the Hebrews is clearly shaming his audience into facing the truth—that they are far enough along in their Christian walk that they should be instructing others in the faith. But they have regressed; they’ve lost their chops.

That was the situation in the church this letter of Hebrews was addressed to. They should have been teachers, but they were out of practice, they had lost their chops for teaching and now required others to reteach them the basics of the faith.

[Back to our text.](#)

This was not the situation in Corinth. Paul uses the word translated infants or babes to describe them.

infants, babes = *nepios* (nay'-pee-os) = from an obsolete particle ne- (implying negation) and <G2031> (epos); **not speaking, i.e. an infant** (minor); figurative **a simple-minded person**, an immature Christian :- babe, child (+ -ish); "almost always has a pejorative sense, in contrast with being an adult, and refers to thinking of behavior that is not fitting for a 'grownup'" (Fee). <British "Nappies"!>

Why babies? Why does Paul refer to these fleshly Christians as infants? Spend much time watching babies or toddlers? They are not deep thinkers, and they certainly are not very "spiritual"—even in a worldly sense. The other day we were in Wal-Mart and I watched a toddler pick up a brightly colored bag from the shelf and carry it toward her mom's shopping cart. The mom took the bag from the child and returned it to the shelf. After a dramatic pause for effect, the child lifted her head and wailed her displeasure with tears flowing. Now, I doubt that little girl even knew what was in the bag, but she wanted it, and when she couldn't have it, she threw a fit.

That is the picture of the Corinthians in these verses. They were only concerned with what the flesh wanted, and if they couldn't have it, they were going to complain loudly. They were not moved by the spiritual things of God, but by the demands of the flesh. Babies indeed.

But, because they were literally, chronologically adults, the Corinthians were even worse than real babies. They saw themselves as spiritual, as wise, as mature—yet they were thinking and behaving as spoiled brats concerned only with what pleased their fleshly appetites. See his rebuke of their "wisdom" near the end of this chapter.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-21a.

v2A

I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it.

Note that in the first two sentences of this passage Paul is speaking in the past tense; he refers to the earlier time when he was in their midst. And I struggled with this: If he is referring to his first visit, the earliest days of the church when he had just arrived, preached the gospel and converted a number of souls, then of course (I thought) he would begin with milk rather than solid food. They were just babes in Christ! Cut 'em some slack!

But that is not what Paul is saying when he speaks of "milk" instead of "solid food." To understand what he means, it is helpful to compare it, again, to the Hebrews passage.

Read Hebrews 5:12-14.

The Hebrews passage is clear: "milk" equals "elementary principles," the basics. But in the Corinthian passage, the context, while seemingly the same, is different. Paul has already given us a picture of the message he delivered in Corinth, and it doesn't at all sound like a watered-down gospel.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:4-8, 10-13.

That doesn't sound like a simplified, bare-bones snack; it sounds like a twelve-course feast!

The key to this passage is not what Paul delivered, but *what the Corinthians were able to receive*. To my ears the KJVs and ESV say it best:

I fed you with milk and not with solid food...

That seems to point us in the right direction, emphasizing the recipient over the giver. Think of it like this: Paul came to Corinth with the same gospel he shared with everyone else—a banquet of spiritual food. But the Corinthians were more accustomed to a different sort of diet—the insipid, multicultural pap offered by the Hellenist mystics. Thus what was “meat” to the apostle became just “milk” to the Corinthians. So when Paul writes about this in his letter, for effect he uses *their* terms, turning them back on them.

This is, admittedly, a challenging passage and interpretation; it is one of those instances where it helps to read and re-read the explanation until it finally sinks in. For this I commend to you David Garland’s commentary, especially. Both Garland and Gordon Fee quote the British theologian and New Testament scholar, Morna Dorothy Hooker.

Hooker: Yet while he uses their language, the fundamental contrast in Paul’s mind is not between two quite different diets which he has to offer, but between the true food of the gospel with which he has fed them (whether milk or meat) and the synthetic substitutes which the Corinthians have preferred.

And Fee continues:

The problem, [Paul] insists, is not on his side, but on theirs. “I could not” [v1] (explain the cross as God’s wisdom in a mystery) “because you could not” [v2] (so understand it, given your “advancement” in the wrong direction). The problem, it turns out, is not with the message at all, but with those who had put themselves in a position so as not to be able to hear and understand what Christ through His apostle says to them.

Hooker again:

The Corinthians’ failure to understand the wisdom spoken in a mystery is not due to the fact that Paul is withholding it from them, but is the result of their own inability to digest what he is offering them.

When one has been on a liquid diet for an extended period, the first bite of steak may be not just foreign, but painful to the teeth, and we may spit it out.

Chapter Two Usage

<i>pneumatikos</i>	=	spiritual (with the Holy Spirit; i.e., a Christian)
<i>psychikos</i>	=	natural (without the Holy Spirit; i.e., not a Christian)

Chapter Three Usage

<i>pneumatikos</i>	=	spiritual (a Christian controlled by, living by the Spirit)
<i>sarkikos</i>	=	fleshly, carnal (a Christian not controlled by, living by the Spirit)

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Session 25

