

A CRITIQUE OF THE TRICHOTOMOUS VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE (1)

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In analysing and critiquing the error of a trichotomous view of man, I will, first, present the scriptural data relevant to the subject, that is, I will show that the Bible supports dichotomy and so does not support trichotomy. Second, I will answer supposed scriptural evidence for trichotomy. Third, I will investigate several of the inherent flaws and dangers of trichotomy.

The Scriptural Evidence for a Dichotomous Composition of Man

First, I should give some background and define my terms. It is an interesting phenomenon that virtually all theologians in all streams of the Christian tradition have believed and taught that man is comprised of two parts, one material part and one immaterial part. The material part is, of course, the body. The Bible variously calls the immaterial part the soul or spirit. This is known as dichotomy. Somehow though, the prevailing view in contemporary Christianity among non-theologians is that man is composed of three parts, body, soul *and* spirit (i.e., trichotomy). Let us reiterate, most theologians are dichotomists, but nearly all popular Christian literature and teaching is trichotomistic.

Charles Hodge, in his *Systematic Theology*, writes of trichotomy,

This doctrine of a threefold constitution of man being adopted by Plato, was introduced partially into the early Church, but soon came to be regarded as dangerous, if not heretical. It being held by the Gnostics that the πνεῦμα [spirit] in man was a part of the divine essence, and incapable of sin; and by the Apollinarians that Christ had only a human σῶμα [body] and ψυχή [soul], but not a human πνεῦμα [spirit], the Church rejected the doctrine that the ψυχή [soul] and πνεῦμα [spirit]

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were distinct substances, since upon it those heresies were founded. In later times the Semi-Pelagians taught that the soul and body, but not the spirit in man, were the subjects of original sin. All Protestants, Lutheran and Reformed were, therefore, the more zealous in maintaining that the soul and spirit, ψυχή and πνεῦμα, are one and the same substance and essence. And this, as before remarked, has been the common doctrine of the Church.¹

It is very tempting immediately to launch into a polemic against trichotomy. It would, indeed, be easy to fault it for all of the theological errors for which it is responsible. I will demonstrate its Gnostic tendencies, its proclivity for mysticism and its denigration of the mind. I will begin by presenting the biblical evidence for the dichotomist position. Let me insert a word of warning. Many will be tempted to think that Scripture is largely silent on the issue and that perhaps this is the reason for the differing opinions. I assure you that that is not true.

Before proceeding with the scriptural evidence, let me say something about the words “soul” and “spirit” in the biblical languages, which, if considered, would end much of the confusion.

First, the Hebrew word for soul is *nephesh*. It occurs 753 times in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, of which 475 times it is rendered “soul” and 117 times it is rendered “life.” The word itself means *breathing*. Scripture applies it to man, noting that God *breathed* into man’s nostrils the *breath of life* and he became a *living soul* (Gen. 2:7). Second, the Hebrew word for “spirit” is *ruach*. It occurs 378 times, of which 232 times it is rendered “spirit,” 92 times it is rendered “wind” and 27 times it is rendered “breath.” The similarities between breath and wind are obvious enough, especially when we consider the antiquity of Hebrew. But note that both words mean breath and are, therefore, interchangeable synonyms.

The Greek word for soul is ψυχή (*psuche*) and it occurs 105 times, of which 58 times it is rendered “soul” and 40 times it is rendered “life.” Like its Hebrew

¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, repr. 2008), p. 51.

counterpart, it means “breath.” Thus it is the immaterial part of our humanity. The Greek word for spirit is πνεῦμα (*pneuma*). Of its 385 occurrences in the New Testament, it is rendered “spirit” in all but 21 cases. It means “breath” or a “current of air” or, by implication, “the human soul.” As was noted above, if these definitions were simply considered, there would be no confusion on this subject.

I will now review the scriptural data. The following verse presents man as a dichotomous being comprised of body and soul:

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matt. 10:28).

Another passage switches the terms and presents man as a dichotomous being composed of body and spirit:

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it (Ecc. 12:7).

Scripture describes death as the separation of body and soul in the following passages:

And it came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died) that she called his name Benoni: but his father called him Benjamin (Gen. 35:18).

And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again (I Kings 17:21).

Men that have hazarded their lives [ψυχὰς] for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 15:26).

The following passages refer to the soul as the immaterial part of man which survives death:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held (Rev. 6:9).

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment

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was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years (Rev. 20:4).

Scripture describes death as the separation of body and spirit in these passages:

Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me,
O LORD God of truth (Ps. 31:5).

And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost (Luke 23:46).

And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit (Acts 7:59).

The following passage refers to the spirit as the immaterial part of man which survives death:

To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb. 12:23).

The following passages tell us that it is our soul which communes with God in the reception of the gift of salvation:

Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls (James 1:21).

Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil (Heb. 6:19).

These passages tell us that it is our spirit which communes with God:

The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16).

For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's (I Cor. 6:20).

Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind [διδανοιῶν—from the root νοῦς]; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others (Eph. 2:3).

Here we are told that our soul, i.e., mind, has been affected by sin:

Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (II Cor. 7:1).

This passage informs us that our spirit has been affected by sin. The body is said to be dead without the spirit. This is stated and/or implied in Matthew 27:50, Luke 23:46, John 19:30, Acts 7:59 and James 2:26. But Scripture just as clearly tells us that the soul is the life of the body (Matt. 6:25; 10:39; 16:25-26; 20:28; Luke 14:26; John 10:11-18; Acts 15:26; 20:10; Phil. 2:30; I John 3:16). You will recall that earlier I noted that sometimes the Greek and Hebrew words are translated “life.” This is why in some of the references quoted above you will find the word “life” instead of “soul” or “spirit” in our English text.

The *mind* is the cognitive function of the soul, the seat of reason and rationality. Yet, while this is true, Scripture also states, either explicitly or by implication, that thoughts and cognitive understanding occur in one's *spirit* (Matt. 26:41; Mark 2:8; Luke 1:46-47; Acts 17:16; I Cor. 2:11; I Pet. 3:4). Indeed, whenever spirit (πνεῦμα) is used of man, it refers either to the immaterial part of man's being or to his mental disposition (e.g., a spirit of fear, a spirit of meekness, etc.). Hence, it is clear that it is equivalent to soul (ψυχή). The trichotomists, especially the Charismatic ones, place the spirit over the soul, hence the mind must be neglected for the sake of the spirit. But Scripture frequently uses spirit (πνεῦμα) to refer to a state of the mind (νοῦς).

Scripture most definitely uses the words soul and spirit interchangeably (Gen. 2:7; Job 32:8; 33:4; Ecc. 12:7; Isa. 10:18). Anyone who is interested in testing my assertion is urged to compare the several hundred other occurrences of these words in Scripture and see that the passages which I have cited are certainly representative of all the others.

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If Scripture has any authority with us, this should be enough to silence the claims of trichotomy. Scripture does not teach a trichotomous nature of man, nor is it silent on the issue. Scripture presents man as a dichotomous being composed of an immaterial part (the soul or spirit), and a material part (the body).

Answering the Appeal to Two Texts

Having presented the relevant biblical data, I now address the supposed biblical support for trichotomy. There are, in fact, only two texts to which trichotomists appeal in support of their theory. These are I Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12. While this section may be short, I do not wish to appear as treating these passages glibly. Nevertheless, let us be clear: the simple fact is that trying to get trichotomy out of these passages is like trying to get blood out of a stone. The supposed support is not there.

I Thessalonians 5:23 states, “And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

About this text, Anthony Hoekema writes,

When Paul prays for the Thessalonians that the spirit, soul, and body of each of them may be preserved or kept, he is obviously not trying to split man into three parts, any more than Jesus intended to split man into four parts when he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27). This passage therefore also provides no ground for the trichotomic view of the constitution of man.²

In other words, in light of the rest of Scripture, which overwhelmingly presents man as a dichotomous being, it is irresponsible and cavalier exegesis to make this one verse militate against hundreds of others. If this passage teaches trichotomy, then we are equally justified in affirming tetrachotomy

² Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 208-209.

based on Luke 10:27 or Mark 12:30. Scripture sometimes calls our body “flesh and blood.” Are we therefore to assume that this teaches that man’s nature has two material parts, that “flesh and blood” are not the same things as “body”? The nonsense and error which this sort of hermeneutic creates are easily seen.

The only other passage in the whole of Scripture where the words “soul” and “spirit” occur together with the word “and” in between them (claimed by some to suggest trichotomy) is Hebrews 4:12, which reads, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

There is really no reason to think that the words *soul and spirit* necessarily imply that man has two immaterial parts. The text itself gives us reason to doubt this exegesis. The passage also refers to *joints and marrow* and *thoughts and intentions*. No one reasonably infers from this that man has two hearts or two material parts of his total being. Joints and marrow are used synonymously in reference to aspects of man’s material part (the body). Heart, soul and spirit are three synonyms for that immaterial part of man. Therefore, if this verse gives support for making a distinction between soul and spirit as two different entities, it actually goes further and proposes *three* immaterial entities. Thought and intentionality are the domain of the mind, which means that this text uses the word “heart” as a synonym for “mind.”

John Murray asserts that the verb translated as “piercing” in the English is never used elsewhere in Scripture in the sense of distinguishing between two *different* things. Rather it is always used when distributing and dividing up various aspects of the *same* thing.³ So this passage is not saying that the Word separates two distinct things, soul from spirit. Rather the Word of God judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The Word does not divide soul from spirit, as if they were two distinct entities. The Word divides soul and spirit in the sense of penetrating into our innermost parts.

Whenever one passage of Scripture is used to support a doctrine against the entirety of the biblical data on that subject, the outcome can only be error.

³ John Murray, “The Nature of Man” in *The Collected Works of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner, 1977), p. 14.

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No one Scripture should ever be interpreted in isolation from the rest of the Bible. Jeremiah 36:23 says that Jehudi used a penknife to cut up the scroll of the Word of God. Would it be correct then to conclude that penknives are instruments of evil? As ridiculous as that sounds, this very interpretation has been made, and a host of others a thousand times worse are made every day by men who hold one verse in isolation from the rest of Scripture.

The Dangers of a Trichotomous Understanding of Human Nature

A. Modalism

At the beginning of this article, I said that it was very tempting to launch into polemics. But it seemed a wiser approach to deal with the subject by starting with what the Scriptures actually teach. After all, this is what matters, not opinions or theories.

Many of us have heard someone wax eloquent on the doctrine of the Trinity using man's supposed trichotomous nature as an illustration. There are many flaws in this analogy. First, it does not come from Scripture. Nowhere does Scripture present man as a three-part being mirroring the Trinity. And there is good reason why Scripture does not use this analogy: it is false. Imagine for the moment that I am composed of three parts. How does this mirror the Trinity? I am not three persons! This is a dreadful analogy. And if more people were familiar with church history, they would know that that very analogy was proposed by heretics in the first few centuries of the church and condemned as heretical the first time it was suggested.

Instead of being an analogy for the Trinity, this convoluted illustration actually *denies* the Trinity. If I am body, soul and spirit, I am still me. I am not three persons. The Trinity is not one person with three parts. This is the heresy known as Sabellianism, also known as Modalism. It asserts that the Father, Son and Spirit are all really just one Person who reveals Himself in three different modes. The "body, soul and spirit" illustration of the Trinity is blatantly heretical. If a person believes this about God, he cannot possibly be a Christian. He is an idolater who has substituted for the Triune God of the Bible a fiction of his own weak and sinful imagination.

Another variation of this modalistic version of the Trinity goes like this: I am a father, I am a son and I am also a husband. Again, this is a horrendously false illustration because I am not three *persons* but one person. Moreover, I am also a neighbour, grandson, uncle, nephew, brother and a second cousin twice removed. Does this therefore mean that Benny Hinn's blasphemous nine-person "Trinity" is viable?

A couple of years ago in another connection, I noted that Charles Hodge vociferously condemned trichotomy as a heresy. The objection was raised that none of the heretical views which Hodge tied to trichotomy were held by anyone today. The insinuation was that maybe in Hodge's day trichotomy led to heresy, but no one today holds those particular heretical views. This objection completely misses the point. For one, all of these heretical views are widely espoused today, just under different names and forms. There is nothing new under the sun. Ancient errors are constantly being recycled under new names. Moreover, it misses the point by failing to see that Hodge's inferences were valid, even if his examples were straw men (which they were not).

Sabellianism is not some bizarre teaching from the early days of the church. It survives in the theology of T. D. Jakes and his fellow Oneness Pentecostals.

B. Christological Heresies

Think of the impact trichotomy would have, if consistently held, on our Christology. Orthodox Christianity has always affirmed the hypostatic or personal union of Christ. This means that Christ is fully God and fully man—two distinct natures, not intermingled—by a mystery of divine wisdom in the hypostatic union of the one Person. Christ is not a human person and a divine person sharing a body; He is one Person in two distinct natures.

Try to reconcile this with trichotomy and you fall into blasphemous heresy. You will end up trying to divide Christ along the lines of Apollinarianism. Apollinaris (d. 390 AD) taught that Christ was a human body and soul with the Second Person of the Trinity (the Logos) replacing a human spirit. To teach Apollinarianism you must postulate two immaterial natures in Christ—with disastrous results for your Christology. A human nature without a human spirit is a nonentity. It is semantic nonsense. If Christ was not fully human, He

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could not have died for humans. His death is efficacious for the elect, precisely because He is one of us. A human without a human spirit is a fictional being. Christ had to be fully human to atone for humans.⁴ It is not possible to square trichotomy with biblical Christology. Either you end up denying or downplaying Christ's deity or His humanity, or you create a chimera, a schizophrenic Christ. Each option is as heretical and blasphemous as the other.

The “*soul*” of Jesus Christ was troubled in Matthew 26:38. In John 11:33 and 13:21 we read that His “*spirit*” was troubled. The same emotion is described in these three texts, again reaffirming what we claimed before about the interchangeable nature of these words. But try dealing with any of those passages from a trichotomist view point and you will end up in confusion or heresy. It is impossible to interpret those passages from a trichotomist view-point without ending up in one of the Christological heresies of the first four centuries of church history.

C. Split-Level Christianity

Earlier we asserted that the early church rejected trichotomy because it was a piece of speculative Greek philosophy, not a biblical teaching. I will now demonstrate its roots in speculative philosophy.

The trichotomous concept of man dates back at least to Plato (c. 428-347 BC), but the form most familiar to us comes from Plotinus (c. 204-270 AD). Before we illustrate this, we need to lay a little bit of groundwork. Trichotomy is the default position in much popular evangelical teaching and literature on the Christian life. Although nearly all theologians reject this understanding of man, it is nonetheless the most prominent view among evangelicals. This teaching has led to many theological errors, some of which we have already exposed. One error in particular has gained widespread acceptance and has caused great harm to many Christians' understanding of personal piety. I speak, of course, of the wretched doctrine of the *Carnal Christian*.

⁴ *Heidelberg Catechism* Q. & A. 14: “Can there be found anywhere one who is a mere creature, able to satisfy for us? None; for, first, God will not punish any other creature for the sin which man hath committed; and further, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin, so as to deliver others from it.”

Where did such an idea come from and what does it have to do with trichotomy? Let us look at how a classic trichotomist, Chuck Smith (1927-2013), an advocate of the Carnal Christian teaching, interprets I Thessalonians 5:23, one of the two trichotomist proof texts. He writes, “We meet God in the realm of our spirit.”⁵

Then when handling I Corinthians 2-3, the proof text of the Carnal Christian teaching, he writes,

Many of the Corinthian Christians hadn’t entered the spiritual dimension yet ... the Holy Spirit gives us knowledge beyond our experience ... Our problem arises from living as redeemed spirits in unredeemed bodies. We desire to be delivered from these bodies of flesh so that we can enjoy the full, rich, overflowing life in the spirit.⁶

Historically, Christians have always affirmed that God meets us through His divinely appointed means—Word and sacrament. But Smith affirms that God meets us immediately “in the realm of our spirit.” Since he affirms this, it follows for him that not all Christians have “entered into the spiritual.” This posits two categories of Christians, the “carnal” and the “spiritual.” You will search in vain for this distinction in Scripture.

This doctrine did not originate with Chuck Smith. He derives it from his beloved Scofield Reference Bible, which has numerous notes advocating a trichotomist view of man. For instance, on I Corinthians 2:14, the Scofield notes read,

Paul divides men into three classes: (1) *psuchikos*, meaning of the *senses*, *sensous* (Jas 3:15; Jude 19), *natural*, i.e., the Adamic man, unrenewed through the new-birth (Jn 3:3, 5); (2) *pneumatikos*, meaning *spiritual*, i.e., the renewed man as Spirit-filled and walking in the Spirit in full communion with God (Eph 5:18-20); and (3) *sarkikos*, meaning *carnal*, *fleshly*, i.e., the renewed man who, walking “after the flesh,”

⁵ Chuck Smith, *New Testament Study Guide* (Costa Mesa, CA: The Word for Today, 1982), p. 113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 113, 193.

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remains a babe in Christ (1 Cor 3:1-4). The natural man may be learned, gentle, eloquent, fascinating, but the spiritual content of Scripture is absolutely hidden from him; and the fleshly or carnal Christian is able to comprehend only its simplest truths, “milk” (1 Cor 3:2).

Earlier, we asserted that this trichotomist view of man was not a scriptural doctrine, but rather a Plotinian view of man. Let me give you Plotinus’ exact words so that a comparison can be made:

All men, from birth onward, live more by sensation than by thought, forced as they are by necessity to give heed to sense impressions. Some stay in the *sensate* their whole life long. For them, sense is the beginning and the end of everything. Good and evil are the pleasures of sense and the pains of sense; it is enough to chase the one and flee the other. Those of them who philosophize say that therein wisdom lies ... Others do lift themselves, a little above the earth. Their higher part transports them out of the pleasurable into the honorable. But, unable to perceive anything higher and with nowhere to set themselves, they fall back in virtue’s name—on the activities and “options” of that lower realm they had thought to escape. But there is another, a third class of men—men godlike in the greatness of their strength and the acuity of their perceptions. They see clearly the splendors that shine out from on high. Thither, out of the mist and fogs of the earth, they lift themselves. There they stay, seeing from above what is here below, taking their pleasure in truth.⁷

Does the reader notice the similarities? On the one hand are Plotinus’ categories of “sensate,” “above the earth,” and “godlike.” And on the other hand you have Scofield’s “natural man,” “carnal Christian,” and “Spirit-filled Christian.” Plotinus’ first level corresponds to the “natural man” in Scofield’s system. Plotinus’ second level corresponds to Scofield’s “carnal Christian,”

⁷ Plotinus, “The Intelligence, the Ideas and Being,” in Elmer O’ Brien (trans.), *The Essential Plotinus* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publications, 1964), pp. 46-47.

who can only handle “the milk of the Word.” Scofield’s “Spirit-filled Christian” mirrors Plotinus’ third level.

Plotinus’ system is to blame for many of the mystery religions and the New Age movement. But it is not necessary to adopt extreme ideas like these to be influenced by such a gnostic philosophy. Merely by adopting trichotomist anthropology, you can attain to the same structure of belief. The same belief system behind the New Age movement has infiltrated evangelicalism through trichotomy or the Carnal Christian view of sanctification and the Keswick or “higher-life” teachings which have become central to fundamentalist theology.

This is where the danger emerges for Reformed believers. Warfield criticized the Keswick teachers because, while many of the teachers were ostensibly Reformed in their soteriology, the higher life view of the doctrine of sanctification was inherently Arminian. We must never confuse *piety* for *pietism*.

Marsden explains,

The essence of Warfield’s criticism was, as he put it in a review of a work by young Lewis Sperry Chafer, that the Keswick teacher was plagued by “two inconsistent systems of religion struggling together in his mind.” One was Calvinist, so that he and his “coterie” (one of Warfield’s favorite words) of evangelists and Bible teachers often spoke of God’s grace doing all; but behind this Calvinist exterior lurked the spectres of Pelagius, Arminius, and Wesley, all of whom made God’s gracious working subject to human determination. The resulting synthesis, Warfield said, was “at once curiously pretentious and curiously shallow.”⁸

to be continued (DV)

⁸ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 98.