

A CRITIQUE OF THE TRICHOTOMOUS VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE (2)

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D. Anti-Intellectualism

We have argued already that Scripture teaches that cognitive understanding is in one's spirit, thus further demonstrating the proposition we already made, that the Bible uses the terms "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably. This is an important fact to remember as we proceed.

Let us begin with a couple of questions: (1) How does trichotomy breed anti-intellectualism? and (2) If it does, is this wrong?

First, we must answer that it is wrong, because Christ explicitly commands us to love God with all our mind (Matt. 22:37). A love for God which neglects the mind is disobedient at best. But how is trichotomy responsible for this? Popular Pentecostal teaching provides the best example of how this happens.

When I was a Pentecostal, I was taught that by praying in "tongues" I could nurture my spirit and grow. I remember explicitly an occasion when a woman testified to me how she had experienced a period of prodigious spiritual growth, when she made a point of praying in tongues daily for an extended period of time. Never mind how she knew that she had grown spiritually and that the Scriptures teach that we grow in grace through growing in knowledge (II Pet. 3:18), let us merely ask how this is supposed to have worked. According to this theory, while one is praying in tongues, one's spirit is saying things and asking God for things of which the mind is unaware. Thus God, in answering these prayers, grants phenomenal spiritual growth to someone who does not know what he/she has requested in prayer. A strange idea indeed.

Where does such a strange notion come from? It comes from a trichotomist interpretation of I Corinthians 14:14, which reads, "For if I pray in an unknown tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful." The

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trichotomist understands by this that the believer utters things which his mind does not understand. So the trichotomist claims that his spirit speaks in a heavenly language, which completely bypasses the mental understanding of his soul. Furthermore, he assumes that in verse two of the same chapter, when Paul speaks of “mysteries,” he is referring to these deep secrets which he utters unintelligibly in tongues.

This teaching is objectionable. “Mystery” is used in Scripture in a way that is completely different from contemporary trichotomist usage. Throughout the New Testament, the word *μυστήριον* (mystery) refers to the gospel of Christ which was hidden in ages past, but which is now clearly revealed to the church, through the cross of Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit and the preaching of the gospel (Matt. 13:11; Rom. 16:25-27; I Cor. 2:7; 15:51; Eph. 3:2-11; Col. 1:25-27). Jesus and Paul invariably use the term in reference to truth which, although hidden in the past, is now revealed and understood. This is diametrically opposed to the way in which trichotomists use the word.

The result of all of this is that the mind is disregarded and devalued. Our spirit is fed and strengthened by circumventing the mind. Therefore, to be truly spiritual one must be anti-intellectual and anti-doctrinal. It is not uncommon for Pentecostals to be told that they need to spend less time reading and studying, and more time learning to “operate in the spirit.” Anti-intellectualism runs rampant through the Pentecostal and Charismatic world as a direct result of their trichotomist anthropology. Authors like Andrew Murray and Watchman Nee, who are popular among Pentecostals and Charismatics, have promoted trichotomy in the evangelical world and have corrupted Christian piety by contrasting “soul” with “spirit,” thus affirming that the intellect hinders true spirituality. Thus the only way to grow spiritually is to “crucify” the life of the soul or understanding or mind.

How has this manifested itself in Pentecostal and Charismatic churches? The creeds, confessions and catechisms, for which our forefathers laboured so vigorously and for the doctrines of which they gave their lives, are virtually unknown in both name and content. Doctrinal teaching, intended to educate Christians on the content of their faith, has been ousted in favour of “practical teaching.”

Warfield rightly criticized the “coterie” of Keswick teachers for this very reason. Although many of these men were professing Calvinists, their tri-

chotomist anthropology led them into the Arminian doctrine of sanctification. As one who was once a Pentecostal, I cannot count how many times I have heard the validity of doctrinal study questioned, because the student might not put it into practice. Being unsure of how to put the doctrine of the Trinity into practice, they assume that it is a mere piece of speculation that is not practically important for Christian living. Countless other biblical doctrines are treated with the same disdain.

I do not want to poison myself. I know that Lysol is poisonous. Therefore, I do not drink Lysol. That is how it works. Life is affected by what we believe. Hence it is important that we believe aright. Idolatry is a damnable sin. Idolaters will be cast into the lake of fire. Entertaining false ideas about God is idolatry. Therefore, it is important to engage one's mind when reading Scripture, so that Scripture correctly informs our minds about God.

Furthermore, think of some of the strange things which have come out of the Charismatic movement. Benny Hinn claims that Adam could fly and that he actually flew in outer space and even went to the moon. Morris Cerullo and Creflo Dollar claim to be "little gods." Kenneth Copeland claims that Christians have the same creative power as God to speak things into existence. This is why "confession" is so important to Word of Faith advocates. We remember Benny Hinn claiming that the Trinity was actually composed of nine Persons. John Hagee teaches that Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah. All of this and much more is sheer and utter foolishness! What else are we to expect when we leave our brains at the church door? I heard a preacher once point out a man in the audience and tell him that God had revealed to him that that man was to give the preacher \$50. The man complied without hesitation. Tammy Faye talked a diamond ring off a lady's finger. Ironically, the Pentecostals and Charismatics pride themselves on their "gift of discernment!"

I recently watched again the video clip in which Mark Driscoll was describing his "gift of discernment." He described having a screen in his head (figuratively speaking) on which he "saw" things. Where in Scripture is discernment described this way? What foolishness! The word for discern means to "distinguish" or "decide," but also has, by implication, the meanings of "think, judge, and question," all of which are mental activities. Here we see more ridiculous consequences of trichotomy: discernment is placed in the "spirit," completely

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divorced from any action of the mind. But the mind is precisely where Scripture places discernment. How can you think about something, ponder its ramifications, weigh its evidence, question its reasonableness, distinguish among its aspects and decide in favour of it or against it without your mind?

If you try to correct the doctrine of one of these people, you will get a crash course in anti-intellectualism. More than likely, you will be met with a response such as, “I hear what you are saying. I will go home and pray about this, and see what the Holy Spirit tells me about these verses.” It sounds humble but in fact it is rank pride. Trichotomy gives men an excuse to reject the time-honoured stance of the church on doctrinal issues as affirmed in the creeds and confessions. It breeds individualism (just me and the Bible), and ignores the covenantal and corporate aspects of the Spirit’s work. It substitutes an indefinable “impression in one’s spirit” for the authoritative statements of Scripture. We are to form our beliefs based on what the Scripture says, not on what the Spirit supposedly impresses upon us.

E. Gnosticism

For those who are unfamiliar with church history, trichotomy was suggested by thinkers around the fringes of Christianity in the second and third centuries. It was rejected by orthodox theologians as a speculative Greek philosophical notion rather than a biblical teaching. It was the Gnostics who adhered to this trichotomous division of man into body, soul and spirit. Gnostics were heretics who claimed to have access to secret knowledge which only those who were initiated into their “mysteries” could learn. Gnosticism is generally defined as the belief and/or practice of attaining “secret knowledge.” The word is derived from the Greek *gnosis* which means knowledge. More specifically, Gnosticism is communion with God *without means*.

The Plotinian philosophy from which much of trichotomy is derived is inherently Gnostic. Many of the bizarre teachings we described in the previous section are gnostic. They are not derived from Scripture but, so claim the purveyors of these teachings, from a personal, private, secret revelation from God. This is what is meant by “communion with God *without means*.” It is an attempt to deal directly with God without Christ the Mediator and without

the Word and sacrament. We must not confuse piety and pietism. Mysticism is not compatible with Reformed piety (nor is it even Christian).

It may be objected, “Did people in the Bible not commune with God without means?” On the whole, no, they did not. There were instances of this, but they were few and far between. Moreover, these people were called prophets and apostles. The direct, unmediated revelation which they received was intended by God to be added to the canon of Scripture. Once this revelation was completed, such direct, unmediated communication with God is no longer possible, because God Himself places a curse on anyone who would add to the canon. Gnosticism places recipients above the prophets and apostles, since their revelations are intended not to be added to the canon but for personal, private edification. Gnosticism claims to receive revelation intended only for the recipient. This makes the Gnostic greater than the apostles and prophets, and it makes Scripture superfluous.

Benny Hinn, as well as many other Charismatics, teaches (or at least he taught at one time) that Christ underwent spiritual death. Kenneth Copeland adds that, when Christ bore our sins, He died spiritually and was born again in hell. I refrain from refuting this idiocy here, but let me note something important relating to our subject. Hinn did not come by this teaching through a serious study of Scripture. Nobody could. Nor did he arrive at his nine-person “Trinity” from meditating on the Word. Nobody could. These insights were direct revelations to him from God, so he claims. He has since backpedalled on some of his more egregious heretical teachings. But that is not enough. If I once believed something because I misunderstood Scripture and now I no longer believe it, well and good. This is growth. But this is not true in Hinn’s case. He did not, according to his own claims, misunderstand Scripture. Instead, he claims to have received these blasphemous teachings directly from God Himself. A *mea culpa* is not really an option for him, especially since he still claims to receive doctrine in this manner. For Hinn to repent, he must, among other things, repent of ever teaching that God spoke directly to him.

Hinn, of course, is an extreme example, but that is precisely my point. Evangelicals like Richard Foster, Dallas Willard and Scott Hodge are now advocating the unscriptural, mystic, pantheist “contemplative prayer” of medieval Roman Catholic mystics. The numbers of men advocating or at least courting these

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practices is steadily growing. At its core, this is Eastern mysticism, which, as I have repeatedly asserted, is inherently pantheistic. It has more in common with the Star Wars Jedi religion or Hinduism than with Christianity. One is encouraged to quiet the soul and clear the mind of all thought. This is Satanic. Nowhere in Scripture are we taught to empty our minds of all thought so that we can commune with God. Scripture commands us to fill our minds by meditating on the Word day and night (Josh. 1:8).

F. Various Other Errors

As if the aforementioned points were insufficient to expose trichotomy as false doctrine, we conclude by looking at a few other miscellaneous, theological consequences of trichotomy.

First, let us consider what trichotomy means for regeneration. According to the trichotomist scheme, regeneration is the miracle which occurs when God gives us a new spirit, since we are spiritually dead. Christians have a new life, which unbelievers do not possess. God has given us a new spirit or, as some prefer to put it, God has created in us a new spirit. Warfield clearly saw the inherent theological flaw in the trichotomist scheme. He writes,

Thus the man is not saved after all; a different newly created man is substituted for him. When the old man is got rid of—and that the old man has to be ultimately got rid of [we do] not doubt—the saved man that is left is not at all the old man that was to be saved, but a new man that has never needed any saving.¹

Warfield's point, while perhaps somewhat obtuse, is actually a very valid objection. If regeneration means that the "old man" who was me is no more and has been replaced by a "new man" by God's miraculous act of creating a new spirit, then I am no longer me. If I replace an apple tree with a cherry tree, it is no longer the same tree. In other words, I was not saved; a new man was created who did not need to be saved.

¹ B. B. Warfield, "A Review of Lewis Sperry Chafer's *He That Is Spiritual*" (www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/warfield/warfield_chaferreview.html).

Second, trichotomy allows for the false doctrine of free will. The body, since it is flesh, tends toward evil. We are said to be spiritually dead, but the soul remains unaffected by the fall into sin. Therefore, the soul is able, when properly induced, to make a decision to accept Christ and savingly to believe on Him. Trichotomist anthropology lets its adherents appear to take seriously the passages of Scripture which speak of men as dead in their fallen sinful condition, while at the same time teaching the heresy of free will. In the final analysis, this makes man's will, and not God's grace, the determining factor of each man's eternal destiny. If we reject trichotomy, we are left with a man who is composed of two elements, a body and a soul, both of which are ruined by sin. Thus any hope of salvation must reside in God's good pleasure and not in man's pretended abilities to do that which is diametrically opposed to his fallen nature. Fish are unable to fly; neither can dead sinners resurrect themselves.

Third, trichotomy is responsible for many of the more flagrant errors of Pentecostalism and Charismaticism. Let us revisit the issue of tongues for a moment. If I edify myself by speaking in a language which my mind does not understand, why is an interpreter required when I do this in church? If I can edify myself by hearing my babbling of unintelligible syllables, why cannot the rest of the church be edified by hearing the same things (without interpretation) which edify me (without my understanding them)? This alone is sufficient to demolish the whole modern tongues-speaking movement. It is obvious from I Corinthians that the speaker understood what he was saying in a language he knew, but which the rest of his hearers had never learned. This is why his understanding was unfruitful—he knew what he was saying, but no one else did. I speak Tagalog fluently. If I were to stand up in a small country church in rural America and speak in Tagalog, I may edify myself by the wondrous truths I was proclaiming, but *my* understanding would be unfruitful, because no one else in the room would benefit from my understanding without an interpreter.

Fourth, trichotomy tends to dualism. By elevating the “realm of the spirit” over the body, i.e., by understanding the spirit to be higher than the body and soul, one creates an unscriptural dichotomy between the material and immaterial. This is Greek dualism. It unjustifiably pits spirit against soul and body. Matter is not evil. God proved this (1) by creating it in the first place,

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(2) by the incarnation of the Son of God and (3) by the promise of our bodily resurrection.

If matter is inherently evil, how can we maintain that a good God created it? This is exactly what the ancient dualistic heretics, such as the Docetists, denied. If the body, as matter, is inherently bad, how can we maintain that Christ took on human flesh? If Christ did not take on human flesh, we are still in our sins, because a hologram cannot die. If our bodies, as matter, are inherently evil, how can we hope for their resurrection?

Let me anticipate a question here. Why is the soul considered with the body as part of the lower nature of man and not with the spirit in the higher nature? Berkhof explains,

The most familiar, but also the crudest form of trichotomy is that which takes the body for the material part of man's nature, the soul as the principle of animal life, and the spirit as the God-related rational and immortal element in man.²

One might imagine that no professing Christian holds to such false views of the body. Even if trichotomists denied belief in such propositions, this would not make them invalid consequences of their system. Once you divide man into superior and inferior parts—and you put soul and body down into the inferior category—you have nowhere to go logically but to dualism. If you pit the spirit against the soul as the animal life of the body, soul and body must be viewed, and accordingly treated, as inherently bad. This has been proven repeatedly by church history. Monasticism is a case in point. Why did men and women deprive themselves of sleep and food? Why did Simeon Stylites (c. AD 390-459) sit on the top of a pole for thirty-seven years? Why did countless monks sleep on the ground and not in beds? Why did they wear hair shirts? Because they saw their bodies as part of a lower nature with the soul, which they had to suppress in order to nourish and nurture their higher, that is, spiritual, nature. Animals eat, drink, bathe, breed, sleep, etc. If we are higher than animals, and the soul is the animal life of the body, then these impulses must be subdued if one wishes to be spiritual. Why was poverty considered such a noble state? To read some of the medieval mystics, or John Wesley for

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner, repr. 2003), p. 191.

that matter, you might think that being poor was already a deeply spiritual accomplishment on its own. If one had to choose between poverty and even sufficient provisions, there was no doubt in these people's minds that poverty was the more spiritual option. This foolishness is also behind the whole celibacy movement. How could a person who enjoys the bodily pleasures associated with the marriage bed be as spiritual as one who has deprived himself of such? Again, nothing in Scripture even remotely suggests that we should ask this question.

Fifth, there is another error inherent in trichotomy which affects our belief in the Trinity. Earlier we quoted Chuck Smith, an advocate of the carnal Christianity teaching, who wrote, "We meet God in the realm of our spirit." Many people have misunderstood John's phrase "in the Spirit" (Rev. 1:10) to be describing a different realm or dimension of reality. This is an extremely dangerous idea, which depersonalizes the Holy Spirit, making Him a "force" or a "dimension." Think of Frank Peretti's novels, in which there is a physical realm and a spiritual realm in which are mirrored all the events of the physical realm. This kind of teaching has spawned all the strange ideas current in our day regarding "spiritual warfare." Christians, through mind-denigrating spiritual exercises, can somehow influence unseen things in this spiritual realm, which, in turn, impact events in the physical realm. There is nothing new under the sun. The Manicheans of old held the same view.

By referring to the Spirit as a realm, the Trinity is denied. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God is one divine essence subsisting in three Persons. Person is the operative word. A realm is not a person. To teach that the Spirit is a realm is latently pantheistic. Pantheism is the belief that God is the sum total of all existence or that everything is God and God is everything. If my spirit and your spirit and God's Spirit are a realm, they are all by definition one common realm of common experience for us all, which means that my spirit and God's are essentially the same thing. How can I distinguish my own spirit from God's? This is pantheism. If my spirit is a dimension or realm for experiencing the divine and your spirit is an entirely different realm, we cannot speak of a "realm of the spirit," but we must posit an innumerable multitude of these "realms." No one speaks this way. Trichotomists constantly and consistently speak of one "realm of the spirit." This has, at least, a tinge of pantheism in it. Therefore, it is no surprise when the spiritual exercises

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proposed to nurture the spirit are identical, whether they be “Christian” or pantheist. It also explains why their form of the spiritual gift of “words of knowledge” looks suspiciously like mind-reading or a Vulcan mind-meld. We reiterate: the Holy Spirit is not a realm, a force or a dimension of experience, but a divine Person.

Let us all be warned. Incautiousness in speech begets wrong ideas; wrong ideas beget false doctrine; false doctrine begets more false doctrine; and false doctrine damns, especially when it spawns idolatrous notions about the Godhead.