

No.5, Dichotomy or Trichotomy

For the past two weeks we have been considering some thoughts in relation to *the nature of man*. Essentially, it has been presented that the nature of man is dichotomous or two-fold: man has a body as well as a soul; there are two parts to human nature.

THE UNITY OF HUMAN NATURE

It should be stressed, of course, that Scripture teaches us to view the nature of man as a unity. Man is a single personality with every act of his being the act of the *whole* man. It is *man* that sins, that dies; and it is *man* that is redeemed in Christ or else it is *man* that perishes. Thus, while man is dichotomous, Scripture does not present man as being comprised of two separate elements that move along parallel lines and never unite. Rather, in the Biblical view of man there is the fact of the unity of his nature. This unity is seen in Gen 2: 7 in the words “man became a living soul.” These words describe the whole man, the entire person, including both his body and soul.

DICHOTOMY

However, at the same time there is a *dichotomy* in the nature man – he is both body and soul. Thus, in the nature of man there are two factors – the physical & the spiritual. Therefore, while Scripture teaches the unity of man’s nature, it also teaches that he is dichotomous. As a creature of God he is both body and soul.

TRICHOTOMY

There are some Bible teachers, however, who maintain that man is a trichotomous creature in his relationship with God; that he is body, soul and spirit. Trichotomy is based on two main verses – 1 Thess 5: 23, Heb 4: 12, both of which seemingly teach this tripartite view of man, for these verses speak of body, soul and spirit.

The trichotomous position is presented in the writings of various men, one of whom is J.B. Heard in his book *The Tripartite Nature of Man*. He teaches that the *soul* is the life of man in its widest sense, including all the faculties and energies that are natural to man and essentially belong to human nature. Then he teaches that the *spirit* is the vehicle of God-consciousness; for, since God is spirit, He can only be known and worshipped through man’s spirit. But due to the Fall, man’s spirit is dead or dormant and is then awakened in the new birth in order to seek and worship God.

This discussion or debate on whether man is dichotomous or trichotomous has gone on for a long time. It should be said that the discussion is not over a point of orthodoxy. Therefore, while the Reformed position has essentially been that of the dichotomous view of man, those who see man as body, soul and spirit are most certainly not to be looked on as being heretical. But the discussion is interesting, at least in the sense that man must be one or the other with regard to his nature. The question is really over what Scripture means by the words *soul* and *spirit*. How are these terms employed in the Scriptures? Let us note the following points.

I. THERE IS IMPRECISION IN THE BIBLE’S USE OF TERMINOLOGY THAT IS RELEVANT TO THE QUESTION OF WHETHER MAN IS BIPARTITE OR TRIPARTITE

Trichotomists put much emphasis on the language of 1 Thess 5: 23 where Paul speaks of “your whole spirit *and* soul *and* body.” Also Heb 4: 12 where reference is made to “soul *and* spirit.” The teaching is that the connection of these words by the conjunction “and” is proof that man has a soul and a spirit as well as a body.

However, in Scripture there is other terminology used that is relevant to the subject of the soul, yet there is a particular imprecision with regard to this other terminology. Note the words of Deut 6: 5 – “*And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.*”

These words are quoted several times in the New Testament but there is much variation in the quotations – Matt 22: 37, Mark 12: 30, 33, & Luke 10: 27. In these verses five different words are used, all with reference to what we call the spiritual part of man; and they are all connected in the same manner as in 1 Thess 5: 23 and Heb 4: 12 – i.e., with the conjunction *and*. Those five words are – *heart, soul, strength, mind, & understanding*. But it would be absurd to insist that on the basis of this series of words connected as already noted that each one refers to some distinct spiritual entity in man. Rather, the Lord is simply emphasising that men are to love God with their entire and complete being.

II. THEN THERE IS INTERCHANGE IN THE BIBLE’S USE OF SOUL & SPIRIT

This interchange between “soul” and “spirit” is seen in a number of areas. For example, the person of man – sometimes the whole person is described in terms of *body and soul*; and at other times as *body and spirit*, so there is an interchange in the use of the terms. Note the following verses --

See Matt 10: 28 – in the first part of this verse Christ addresses believers to comfort them with the truth that while men may kill the body they cannot kill the soul. But, if man is tripartite and especially if the spirit, the vehicle of God-consciousness, is awakened through the new birth, why does Christ not include the spirit here since He is clearly referring to the whole being of the Christian? The answer must be that by *body and soul* Christ includes the whole person.

It is interesting too, that when Christ goes on to teach that God should be feared rather than men, He shows that God is to be feared because He is able to bring the whole person of man into eternal punishment, the reference being to the unsaved. But in announcing the completeness of the eternal punishment of the whole person Christ speaks of *soul and body*. Thus, in this one verse He uses the same terms in speaking of the whole person of either the believer or the unbeliever.

But staying with the child of God as a complete person, see 1 Cor 7: 34. In this verse the subject is the sanctification of the Christian in his whole being, but on this occasion he is described as *body and spirit*. Thus, there is an interchange of terms in these verses where the whole personality of the Christian is in view – body and soul in one case; body and spirit in the other. However, if man is tripartite then in either verse a vital component of his complete being is omitted – but such a charge cannot be laid against the Scripture. The conclusion is that when Scripture describes the whole person of man it interchanges the terms so that “body” and “spirit” are synonymous.

This thought of the whole being of man is what is in view in the two verses that Trichotomists use to support their position. Since the terms are interchangeable, in 1 Thess 5: 23 Paul is simply emphasising that the entire person of the Christian experiences sanctification. This understanding of the verse is supported by use of the words “wholly” and “whole.” Paul’s language suggests that the emphasis of the verse is on the believer viewed in his entirety. In Heb 4: 12 it is important to note that the verse does not say that the Word of God divides *between* the soul and spirit. In looking at the original text the thought is that of the penetrating power of God’s Word so that it divides or cleaves the whole being of man, revealing to him his true state before God.

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