



FROM THE GARDEN TO THE CROSS

A 20-WEEK STUDY OF MANKIND, SIN, AND SALVATION

WEEK 2—THE IMAGE OF GOD IN MAN

Handout 2-2: Millard Erickson on Trichotomism and Dichotomism

Trichotomism

One popular view in conservative Protestant circles has been termed “trichotomism.” A human is composed of three elements. The first element is the physical body, something humans have in common with animals and plants. There is no difference in kind between a human body and that of animals and plants; but there is a difference of degree, as humans have a more complex physical structure. The second part of the human is the soul. This is the psychological element, the basis of reason, emotion, social interrelatedness, and the like. Animals are thought to have a rudimentary soul. Possession of a soul is what distinguishes humans and animals from plants. While the human soul is much more involved and capable than that of the animals, their souls are similar in kind. What really distinguishes the human from the animals is not a more complex and advanced soul, but a third element, namely, a spirit. This religious element enables humans to perceive spiritual matters and respond to spiritual stimuli. It is the seat of the spiritual qualities of the individual, whereas personality traits reside in the soul.

The major foundation of trichotomism is certain Scripture passages that either enumerate three components of human nature or distinguish between the soul and the spirit. A primary text is 1 Thessalonians 5:23: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Hebrews 4:12 describes the word of God as “alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Beyond that, a threefold division seems to be implied in 1 Corinthians 2:14–3:4, where Paul classifies human persons as “of the flesh” (σαρκικός—*sarkikos*), “unspiritual” (ψυχικός—*psuchikos*—literally, “of the soul”), or “spiritual” (πνευματικός—*pneumatikos*). These terms seem to refer to different functions or orientations, if not to different

components, of humans. First Corinthians 15:44 also distinguishes between the natural (ψυχικόν) body and the spiritual (πνευματικόν) body.

Some trichotomism is indebted to ancient Greek metaphysics. Some Greek philosophers taught that the body is the material aspect of the human, the soul is the immaterial aspect, and the spirit brings the two into relationship with one another. A parallel was often drawn between the way the body and soul are brought into relationship and the way God and his created world are brought into relationship. Just as God relates through some third (or intermediary) substance, so the soul and the body are related through the spirit. The soul was thought of, on the one hand, as immaterial, and, on the other, as related to the body. To the extent that it is related to the body, it was regarded as carnal and mortal; but insofar as it appropriates the spirit, it was regarded as immortal.

Trichotomism became particularly popular among the Alexandrian fathers of the early centuries of the church, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. It fell into a certain amount of disrepute after Apollinarius made use of it in constructing his Christology, which the church determined to be heretical. Although some of the Eastern fathers continued to hold it, it suffered a general decline in popularity until revived in the nineteenth century by English and German theologians.

More recently, trichotomism has received a revival through some within the “spiritual warfare” movement. Here the scheme is somewhat modified and adapted to the particular interests of that movement. Neil Anderson, for example, teaches that in the “natural person” the spirit is dead, with only the body and soul being alive. “At conversion,” however, Anderson writes, the person’s “spirit bec[omes] united with God’s Spirit. The spiritual life that result[s] from this union is characterized by forgiveness of sin, acceptance in God’s family and a positive sense of worth.” For the “fleshly person,” however, things are different: this one is spiritually alive in Christ, but “instead of being directed by the Spirit, this believing person chooses to follow the impulses of the flesh.”⁵

Dichotomism

Probably the most widely held view throughout most of the history of Christian thought has been the view that the human is composed of two elements, a material aspect (the body) and an immaterial component (the soul or spirit). Dichotomism was commonly held from the earliest period of Christian thought. Following the Council of Constantinople in 381, however, it grew in popularity to the point where it was virtually the universal belief of the church.

Recent forms of dichotomism maintain that the Old Testament presents a unitary view of human nature. In the New Testament, however, this unitary view is replaced by a dualism: the human is composed of body and soul. The body is the physical part of humans, the part that dies. It undergoes disintegration at death and returns to the ground. The soul, on the other hand, is the immaterial part of humans, the part that survives death. It is this immortal nature that sets humans apart from all other creatures.

Many of the arguments for dichotomism are, in essence, arguments against the trichotomist conception. The dichotomist objects to trichotomism on the grounds that if one follows the principle that each of the separate references in verses like 1 Thessalonians 5:23 represents a distinct entity, difficulties arise with some other texts. For example, in Luke 10:27 Jesus says,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.” Here we have not three but four entities, and these four hardly match the three in 1 Thessalonians. Indeed, only one of them is the same, namely, the soul. Further, “spirit” as well as “soul” is used of the animal creation. For example, Ecclesiastes 3:21 refers to the spirit of the beast (the word here is the Hebrew רִיחַ [ruach]). The terms “spirit” and “soul” often seem to be used interchangeably. Note, for example, Luke 1:46–47, which is probably an example of parallelism: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Here the two terms seem virtually equivalent. There are many other instances. The basic components of a human are designated body and soul in Matthew 6:25 (ψυχή—*psuchē*, “life”) and 10:28, but body and spirit in Ecclesiastes 12:7 and 1 Corinthians 5:3, 5. Death is described as giving up the soul (Gen. 35:18; 1 Kings 17:21; Acts 15:26 [ψυχάς—*psuchas*, “lives”]) and as giving up the spirit (Ps. 31:5; Luke 23:46). At times the word “soul” is used in such a way as to be synonymous with one’s self or life: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul [ψυχήν]?” (Matt. 16:26). There are references to being troubled in spirit (Gen. 41:8; John 13:21) and to being troubled of soul (Ps. 42:6; John 12:27).

Liberal theology quite clearly distinguished the soul and the body as virtually two different substances. The person was identified with the soul or spirit, not the body. William Newton Clarke spoke of a twofold division of the human into body and spirit (soul and spirit are used as interchangeable terms for the same entity). “The person, the self-conscious moral agent, is not the body; rather does it inhabit and rule the body.” The spirit of a human is to be conceived of as “incorporeal and immaterial, inhabiting and acting through the body.”⁸ The body is the seat and means of our present life, but not a necessary part of personality. Rather, it is the organ through which personality gathers sensations and expresses itself. Personality might exist without the body, conceivably learning of the external world by some means other than sensation and expressing itself by some means other than through the body, and yet “be as real as it is at present.” The body, then, is not an essential part of human nature. This is a full and true dualism. Death is the death of the body, and the spirit lives on quite successfully. It “leaves the material body, but lives on, and enters new scenes of action.”

Less clear-cut but exhibiting the same basic position is the thought of L. Harold DeWolf. He notes that any view that denies that there is a real difference of identity between the human soul and body is contrary to the indications of Christian experience. DeWolf concedes that the Bible assumes that the life of the soul is dependent on a living body; but, he counters, “this assumption may well be attributed to old habits of thought and speech, to the difficulties of representing reality without the imagery of sense and to the indubitable necessity that the consciousness of man have a context of communication provided through some medium.”¹²

DeWolf calls attention to numerous passages that suggest a body-soul dualism. At his death Jesus gave up his spirit with the cry, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Matt. 27:50; John 19:30; Luke 23:46). Other salient references are Luke 12:4; 1 Corinthians 15:50; 2 Corinthians 4:11; 5:8, 10. The body has a high place in God’s plan. It is used as an instrument to express and accomplish the person’s intentions. But the soul must rule the body.

The dualism of Clarke and DeWolf, while holding that the soul can exist apart from the body, did not lead them to deny resurrection of the body. In their view, the separate existence of the soul after death is a temporary situation. Some liberals, however, substituted immortality of the soul for the traditional doctrine of resurrection of the body. One of them, Harry Emerson Fosdick,

regarded the New Testament idea of resurrection as a product of its time. Given the Jewish conception of Sheol, a place where the dead abide in meaningless existence, immortality could hardly be understood apart from the idea of resurrection. During the exile, Judaism came under the influence of Zoroastrianism, and the idea of resurrection became increasingly attached to the expectation of immortality. Fosdick, however, like those who had been working from the perspective of Greek metaphysics, saw no need to identify the idea of immortality with resurrection. He preferred the idea of “persistence of personality through death” to that of resurrection of the flesh.

Conservatives have not taken the dualistic view this far. While believing that the soul is capable of surviving death, living on in a disembodied state, they also look forward to a future resurrection. It is not resurrection of the body versus survival of the soul. Rather, it is both of them as separate stages in a human’s future.¹

¹ Millard J. Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 477–480.