

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. In our last session we introduced three views about the fundamental nature of man: monism, which means that man consists of just his physical body – this is a materialistic view of man; then dichotomy, which means that man has both a physical body and a spirit; and finally, trichotomy, which means that man has a body, soul and spirit, where the spirit and soul are considered to be separate entities. So, Dr. Spencer, how do you want to begin our examination of this topic today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, last time I noted that the fact that man is a volitional creature argues persuasively against monism and I said we wouldn't consider that further. But I've reconsidered that and would like to at least briefly present a case to show that monism is also antithetical to biblical Christianity.

Marc Roby: Well, it would certainly seem to not agree with Genesis 2:7, where we read that “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”<sup>1</sup> This verse at least strongly implies that there is an immaterial part to man.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And I think a rock-solid case can be made by pointing out that the Bible clearly teaches us that our spirits live on after our physical bodies die. For example, when Christ was crucified there were two thieves crucified with him. One of those thieves was saved even while he was hanging on the cross dying and in Luke 23:42-43 we read that he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” and Jesus graciously replied, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Marc Roby: What amazing grace. We should probably point out that the thief had demonstrated his repentance and faith when he rebuked the other thief. We read in Luke 23:40-41 that when the other thief continued to mock Christ, this thief, now saved by grace, said to him, “Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” So, he was saved the same way we all are, by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. And faith is always accompanied by repentance.

Dr. Spencer: That is the gospel in all of its glorious simplicity. But the point I wanted to make from this is that both Jesus and the thief were dying or, to be more precise, their physical bodies were dying, and yet Jesus said, “today you will be with me in paradise.” I think that is pretty clear evidence that our spirits live on after our physical bodies die.

Marc Roby: What Paul wrote to the church in Philippi also comes to mind. In Philippians 1:21-23 he wrote, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body,

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this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far”.

Dr. Spencer: That is also very clear evidence. Paul did not think that his physical death would be the end of him. There are a number of other verses we could cite, but I think that is enough. The clear teaching of the Bible is that our soul lives on after our body is destroyed. But there is still more that we can learn from these verses.

**Marc Roby: What is that?**

Dr. Spencer: We can learn something about the natures of our physical body and spirit. Jesus told the thief “*you* will be with me in paradise”. He didn’t just say that the thief’s spirit would be with him. And Paul thought that when he died, *he* would be with Jesus, not just his spirit. And it is very interesting that he said, “if I am to go on living in the body”. It clearly shows that the body is not the most important thing. It is a physical vessel for our spirit. If you think about that for a minute it seems clear that our spirits are what make us who we are, they are the seat of our intellect, emotions and personality. Our physical bodies are houses for our spirits. Our bodies cannot exist independently, but our spirits can.

**Marc Roby: That is interesting. But we want to avoid going too far with that idea. The ancient Greeks thought that the body was evil and the spirit was good. They envisioned the body as sort of a prison for the spirit and thought that death freed the spirit from that prison.**

Dr. Spencer: And we do want to avoid that extreme. The Greek philosopher Pythagoras, who is well-known to all junior-high math students because of the Pythagorean theorem, was one of the philosophers that taught that view. And not only did they consider the soul good, they considered it divine. This view came from a religion called Orphism, which also taught that our souls go through reincarnation until they are sufficiently purified to return to the divine realm.<sup>2</sup>

**Marc Roby: That sounds suspiciously similar to Buddhism and Hinduism.**

Dr. Spencer: It does sound very similar to them. But the Christian view, or we should say the biblical view, is that both the body and soul were created good. They have both been corrupted by sin, which is most obviously evident in our physical bodies by the facts that we all get sick and we age and die. But it is also evident in our souls, or spirits. It shows up in our corrupt thinking, especially about God and eternal realities, and it shows up in all of the sinful human emotions and thoughts which plague mankind; selfishness, greed, lust, deceitfulness, arrogance, hatred and so on.

**Marc Roby: Sadly, I have to agree that the corruption of sin is all too evident.**

Dr. Spencer: And you can’t separate us from our bodies without loss. Our bodies are vessels for our spirits, but they are still important. In fact, we want to be careful and not imply that you can separate our bodies from our souls without changing who we are to some degree. Clearly our

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<sup>2</sup> John Frame, *The History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, P&R Publishing, 2015, pg. 60

emotions are affected by, and have an effect upon, our bodies. We see, hear, feel, taste and smell and these all have an effect upon our emotions.

**Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point. It would seem impossible to take away our bodies without significantly impacting who we are.**

Dr. Spencer: Our bodies are part of who we are as human beings. Which is why, when God redeems us, he redeems us body and soul. Paul wrote about this in his first letter to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 we read, “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”

**Marc Roby: That is wonderful. And when Paul speaks about the body that is sown, he is using an agricultural metaphor and is comparing the burial of a body to sowing a crop.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And, as Paul says, that body is raised as a spiritual body. I don't want to spend a bunch of time on this now, but let me just quickly say that by calling it a “spiritual body” Paul is not saying it is immaterial. Our final eternal state will be with our resurrected bodies and they will be physical bodies, although different from the ones we have now. The condition where our spirit lives without our body after death is a temporary condition.

Paul also wrote in Philippians 3:20-21 that “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

**Marc Roby: That is a wonderful destiny to look forward to. And I think we have reasonably established that monism is unbiblical and, therefore, unchristian. What do you want to say about dichotomy and trichotomy?**

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin by stating that a truly born-again Christian can believe in either dichotomy or trichotomy. This is not an essential doctrine. In fact, while I think that the proper biblical doctrine is dichotomy, I do have some sympathy for trichotomy. Although, in some sense I think we get into an issue of semantics as we will see and, in addition, we get into some things that we simply don't fully understand and about which the Bible does not supply us with answers.

**Marc Roby: And it is never wise to be dogmatic on any doctrine about which the Bible is not clear.**

Dr. Spencer: No, that wouldn't be wise at all. But with that caveat stated, I do think the biblical teaching is clearly that man is made up of two, and only two, parts. Our physical bodies and our immaterial spirit or soul. We see this dichotomy in many places in the Bible. For example, right after telling us that God will be our Father and we will be his sons and daughters, Paul concludes, in 2 Corinthians 7:1, by saying, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of

reverence for God.” He only lists two elements here, body and spirit, and that is a common theme throughout the Bible.

**Marc Roby: In fact, the words soul and spirit are often used interchangeably in the Bible.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they are. In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem gives a couple of very good examples I’d like to share.<sup>3</sup> First, he notes that “in John 12:27, Jesus says, ‘Now is my *soul* troubled,’<sup>4</sup> whereas in a very similar context in the next chapter John says that Jesus was ‘troubled in *spirit*’ (John 13:21).”

**Marc Roby: Yes, that’s a good example. What is the second one you want to share?**

Dr. Spencer: It comes from the virgin Mary’s song of praise to God, often called the Magnificat. We read in Luke 1:46-47 that she began by saying, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”. Grudem points out that this is a clear example of Hebrew synonymous parallelism, wherein the same idea is repeated using different words. We discussed synonymous parallelism in Session 42 when we were going through hermeneutics. But it is a clear example to show that the words soul and spirit are used as synonyms.

**Marc Roby: Yes, that whole song is a beautiful poem of praise and these first two verses do clearly show that the words soul and spirit are used as synonyms. It also makes me think of a similar Old Testament example. In Job 7:11 we read, “Therefore I will not keep silent; I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.” This verse also uses synonymous parallelism and again establishes that soul and spirit are used interchangeably.**

Dr. Spencer: Grudem also points out a number of other ways in which the terms are used interchangeably. For example, when someone dies, we will sometimes read about their soul departing, but in other cases we read about the spirit leaving.

In Genesis 35 we read about the death of Jacob’s wife Rachel while she was giving birth to Benjamin. In Verse 18 we read, “And as her soul was departing (for she was dying)” (ESV). But in John 19:30 we read about Jesus’ death, “When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” So, Rachel’s death is described as her soul departing, but Jesus’ death is described by saying he gave up his spirit.

**Marc Roby: I noticed that you quoted the English Standard Version for Genesis 35:18, rather than the 1984 NIV that we usually use.**

Dr. Spencer: I did that because the NIV translated the phrase, “As she breathed her last”, rather than “as her soul was departing”. This is the only place in the Old Testament where the Hebrew word used there is translated that way. The translation accurately represents the meaning of course, but is not true to the original.

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pp 473-474

<sup>4</sup> Grudem quotes from the ESV here. The NIV uses the word heart instead of soul, but the original Greek has the word soul (ψυχή).

**Marc Roby: And I prefer the sound of “as her soul was departing”.**

Dr. Spencer: And so do I. The Hebrew word used there, *nephesh*, is used 757 times in the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> The NIV translates it as life 129 times, as soul 105 times and then with an astonishing collection of words for the other 523 times, including 5 times using the word spirit and 16 times using the word heart.

I point all of this out because it illustrates that the words for soul and spirit have a broad range of meanings as we will discuss more later. But, in general, this word refers to the essence of life. It is, for example, the word used in Genesis 2:7, which we’ve looked at before. We read there, “the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.” When it says that “man became a living being”, the same Hebrew word, *nephesh*, is being translated as “being”. Both the King James and the American Standard versions, say “man became a living soul.”

**Marc Roby: That does make it clear that this word is related to the essence of life. Which even in modern English is sometimes referred to as a man’s spirit, or soul, or heart.**

Dr. Spencer: We do use those same words. But the main point Grudem makes here is that you never once see the Bible say that a person’s “soul and spirit departed”, or anything like that.

**Marc Roby: Yes, that is pretty clear evidence that they are synonymous terms.**

Dr. Spencer: And there’s a lot more. Grudem also points out man is sometimes referred to as “body and soul” and sometimes as “body and spirit”, when the clear intent of the passage is to represent the entirety of the man; in other words, both his material and immaterial parts.

So, for example, in Matthew 10:28 Jesus commands us, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” Clearly by referring to “soul and body”, Jesus means the whole person. And then, when the apostle Paul commanded the church in Corinth to excommunicate a man, we read in 1 Corinthians 5:5, “you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” I have again quoted from the ESV because it makes the contrast between the flesh, or we could say the body, and the spirit clear. That contrast is lost in the NIV, but *is* present in the original Greek.

**Marc Roby: I think you’ve made a reasonably strong case for dichotomy being taught in the Bible. Is there more to say?**

Dr. Spencer: There are a couple of more topics to consider before we move on to examine the biblical case made by those who believe in trichotomy. But before we move on to look at them, I want to remind our listeners what we mean by spirit or soul.

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<sup>5</sup> The numbers given here come from: Edward Goodrick & John Kohlenberger, *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance*, Zondervan, 1990, pg. 1546

Last time I quoted the theologian Charles Hodge and I'd like to repeat a portion of the quote I read then. As I read this, I want our listeners to think of spirit or soul every time Hodge uses just the word spirit. In his *Systematic Theology* he wrote, "The essential attributes of a spirit are reason, conscience, and will. A spirit is a rational, moral, and therefore also, a free agent. In making man after his own image, therefore, God endowed him with those attributes which belong to his own nature as a spirit."<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: He says that the spirit, or soul, is the seat of three things then: our ability to reason, our moral nature, and our free will.**

Dr. Spencer: And these agree with an argument I made last time. Namely, that if you assume a materialist's view of man, then we are just atoms in motion obeying the laws of physics, and you cannot explain volition, or free will. And you can take that argument further. Since you can't explain volition, you really can't explain reason in any meaningful sense of the term.

A purely materialistic view of man could certainly allow for some kind of very sophisticated reflex responses and even reflex responses that have been adapted over time, which could present fairly complex patterns of behavior. But you would never cross the threshold into having what most of us mean when we talk about reason. Adaptive machines can do many things, but they can't really think in any meaningful sense of that term.

**Marc Roby: I can imagine that it would be very difficult to precisely define the dividing line between the behavior that a very sophisticated adaptive system could exhibit and the behavior necessary to infer real intelligent reasoning.**

Dr. Spencer: It would be very hard to do indeed. People have tried to define what is required to establish intelligent behavior, like the famous Turing test,<sup>7</sup> but I really don't want to get into that now, so I will leave it deliberately vague.

**Marc Roby: OK. You've mentioned free will and reasoning. By referring to our conscience Hodge also noted our moral nature. What about that?**

Dr. Spencer: In order to be moral creatures, there must be some ultimate standard for morality by which we are to be judged. Otherwise, all we are really talking about is our own personal ideas of right and wrong, and no one person's ideas are any more worthy than any other person's ideas.

The only possible source for an absolute moral standard is God. So, if you have a purely materialistic view of man, which involves rejecting God, you also have lost any possibility for an objective moral standard. In that case, Hodge's reference to our conscience would be meaningless. It could, at best, refer to our personal ideas of what is right or wrong.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. II, pg. 97

<sup>7</sup> For a brief introduction, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turing\\_test](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turing_test)

Marc Roby: OK, so we've established that three essential attributes of a spirit or soul are an ability to reason, a conscience and free will.

I think this is a good place to end for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We'd love to hear from you.