

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. In our previous session we discussed dichotomy, which is the biblical view that man is composed of two elements: a body and a soul. And we noted that the essential attributes of the spirit or soul include the ability to reason, to make moral decisions, and to have a free will. Dr. Spencer, what more do you want to say about dichotomy?

Dr. Spencer: I want to point out that the Bible presents both the soul and spirit as being capable of sin, which is a problem for some, but not all, who believe in trichotomy.

Marc Roby: Why is that a problem for them?

Dr. Spencer: Let me quote from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* text, which we have been loosely following on this topic. He wrote that the trichotomist "generally thinks of the 'spirit' as purer than the soul, and, when renewed, as free from sin and responsive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit."¹

But, whether or not a trichotomist is disturbed by the idea of the spirit being sinful, the fact that both the soul and the spirit are represented as sinful in the Bible is again evidence that the words soul and spirit are used interchangeably in the Bible.

Marc Roby: Can you give some examples?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. In 1 Peter 1:22 we read, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart". This verse says "having purified your souls", which clearly implies that the souls were not pure, in other words were sinful, prior to these people being born again. I should note that I have quoted the English Standard Version (ESV) here, rather than our usual New International Version (NIV), since the ESV translates the Greek more literally. In this particular verse the NIV says "yourselves" rather than "your souls". We'll come back to this point later.

Marc Roby: And, although it is off topic, we should probably also point out that when Peter says they have purified their souls, he certainly does *not* mean they are sinlessly perfect.

Dr. Spencer: No, he doesn't mean that at all. But, to go on with the illustration that soul and spirit are used interchangeably, in 2 Corinthians 7:1 we read, "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."² This verse clearly states that sin has contaminated our body and spirit, rather than saying our body and soul.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg 475

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Marc Roby: Another verse immediately comes to my mind, in Hebrews 12:23 we read about “the spirits of righteous men made perfect”, which clearly implies that their spirits were not perfect before. In other words, their spirits were sinful.

Dr. Spencer: And that is speaking about the spirits of believers being perfected at death, so it also clear that our spirits are never perfect in this life.

And I think that is sufficient to establish that the Bible speaks of both the soul and the spirit as being capable of sin, and it never distinguishes between the two in that regard, but rather, uses the terms synonymously.

Marc Roby: Well, those verses alone would also seem to conclusively show that any trichotomist who thinks the spirit is without sin needs to reconsider that idea.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, but as we’ll see when we cover trichotomy, some trichotomists certainly agree that the spirit is sinful. So now I’d like to move on to Grudem’s last argument in favor of dichotomy.

Marc Roby: What is that?

Dr. Spencer: That everything the soul is said to do in the Bible is also ascribed to the spirit, and everything the spirit is said to do is also ascribed to the soul. To illustrate this point, I’m going to look at the three attributes that we said are essential for the soul or spirit: reason, conscience, and will.

Marc Roby: OK, what about our reason?

Dr. Spencer: In Proverbs 2:10 we read that “knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.” Clearly, if knowledge is pleasant to the soul, then the soul must be capable of reason. It can’t just be a faculty that deals with morality or desire. But then, in Mark 2:8 we are told that “Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking”, which clearly ascribes rational thought to his spirit. Also, in Job 32:8 we read that “it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding.” Which clearly says that our spirit is the source of our understanding, or, we could say, reasoning ability.

Marc Roby: And by referring to the “breath of the Almighty”, it alludes back to 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.”

Dr. Spencer: And it also equates that breath with our spirit. So now let’s turn to the second aspect of our spirits; our conscience, or we could be somewhat more general and speak of our moral nature, our sense of right and wrong. In 2 Peter 2:8 we are told about Lot, who was living in the wicked town of Sodom, and Peter tells us, “that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard”, which clearly speaks of his soul as the seat of his moral nature. But, in Matthew 5:3 Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” When Jesus refers to the poor in spirit, he isn’t speaking about those who have poor reasoning abilities or a lack of will, he is speaking about them recognizing their sin and need for salvation. So this is speaking again about their

moral nature, but now ascribes it to the spirit. Similarly, we are told about John the Baptist in Luke 1:80 that “the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.” I think this strength of spirit is again speaking about his moral nature and his ability to understand the things of God.

Marc Roby: Certainly being morally upright goes along with understanding the things of God. And that leaves us with the third essential attribute of our spirits, the will, or we could say our affections or desires.

Dr. Spencer: In Job 33:19-20 we read that “a man may be chastened on a bed of pain with constant distress in his bones, so that his very being finds food repulsive and his soul loathes the choicest meal.” Which places his desire, or in this case his lack of desire, his loathing, in his soul. But then, in 2 Samuel 13:39 we read about King David and are told that “the spirit of the king longed to go to Absalom”. So his desire, in this case his longing to see his son, is ascribed to his spirit, not his soul.

Marc Roby: Very well, do you want to say anything else about dichotomy?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, just one more thing. Let’s look at the example of worship. Both our spirits and our souls are said to worship. In Mary’s song of praise to God, called the Magnificat, she began by saying, in Luke 1:46-47, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”. To rejoice in God or glorify God are both aspects of worship and the synonymous parallelism in this verse indicates that soul and spirit are used interchangeably; in other words, our soul can be said to worship God, and our spirit can be said to worship God; there is no difference.

Marc Roby: That is an interesting point. Are we ready to examine trichotomy now?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we are. Let me begin by explaining a bit more about trichotomy. First, of course, the fundamental belief is that man is made up of three distinct elements; body, soul and spirit. According to Charles Hodge, the most common view in trichotomy is that the body is the material part of man; the soul is the principle of animal life; and the spirit is the principle of our rational and immortal life.³ He goes on to say the spirit, which is peculiar to man, includes reason, will, and conscience. While the soul, which we have in common with animals, includes understanding, feeling and sense perception.

Marc Roby: I’m not sure how you can differentiate between reason, which Hodge says belongs to the spirit, and understanding, which he says belongs to the soul.

Dr. Spencer: I don’t see how to do that either, and I should point out that Hodge himself believed that the proper biblical view is dichotomy, he was simply explaining what trichotomists typically believe. But I think this simultaneously shows one of the things many people find attractive about trichotomy, myself included, and also one of its severe weaknesses.

³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. II, pg. 47

Marc Roby: OK, you've now piqued my interest. What are you referring to?

Dr. Spencer: The attractive feature is the idea that there is some similarity, beyond the purely physical, between man and the higher animals. It seems clear that higher animals, like dogs, cats, horses and so on, have personalities, some reasoning abilities and that we can have a form of relationship with them as a result. They are clearly self-aware and have some kind of rudimentary feelings and understanding.

Marc Roby: Alright, I see how that can be an attractive component of trichotomy. How is it also a weakness?

Dr. Spencer: Because it is so hard, if not impossible, to define the threshold. As you pointed out about the words Hodge used; how do you differentiate between reason and understanding? How do you carefully draw a line between the kind of mental processes that the higher animals are capable of and those that human beings are capable of? We are learning more all the time about what animals can do, and some of it is quite surprising.

Therefore, I think it is simply trying to draw too fine a line to divide the functions of soul and spirit. We must acknowledge that some animals are capable of a rudimentary form of reasoning, that they are self-aware and that they make decisions. And yet, there is a clear difference between even the highest animals and man. We are the only creatures made in God's image.

Marc Roby: And we can't get inside the head of a horse or a dog to find out exactly what they think or feel. We have to deduce that from their actions.

Dr. Spencer: That is very important. People can draw all sorts of conclusions about what they *think* is going on in the minds of animals, but the bottom line is that we really don't know. On the other hand, the Bible is clear that only man is made in God's image, and he is given dominion over the creatures. That makes the difference very clear and very large. But we can certainly admit that some animals have far more capable brains and, as a result, they have personalities and we have an ability to have a relationship with them. I just don't want to go so far as to say that they have a soul and then try and distinguish that from the spirit.

As we've seen, the words soul and spirit are used pretty much interchangeably in the Bible. In addition, they are both sometimes used as a synecdoche as well.

Marc Roby: Now that statement requires a definition. A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part of something is used to refer to the whole.

Dr. Spencer: And so, as an example, when we read in Psalm 130:6 that "My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning". The word soul is being used as a synecdoche. Clearly the whole man must be waiting. And yet, to say that "my soul waits" does have added meaning as well. It seems to imply that there is a deep spiritual need involved in the waiting. You wouldn't be likely to say that "my soul waits for the bus I take to work every morning."

Marc Roby: No, I can't imagine anyone saying that. And, of course, this figurative usage does complicate any attempt to precisely define the words soul and spirit. They, along with heart, are frequently used in the Bible, and elsewhere, to refer to strong feelings or deep-seated needs and

they often have at least some sense of being used as a synecdoche. We see expressions like, “my heart is troubled” or someone, “being troubled in spirit”. Clearly the whole person is affected by the trouble, but at the same time these expressions imply a deep inner trouble.

Dr. Spencer: And, as you noted, that does make it more difficult to precisely define these terms. And given the arguments we’ve made about the words soul and spirit being used more-or-less interchangeably and the evidence that man is composed of only two parts, I conclude that the biblical view of man is dichotomous. But now I would like to present some of the case often made in favor of trichotomy.

Marc Roby: Very well, please proceed.

Dr. Spencer: I’m again going to loosely follow the treatment in Grudem here⁴, so any listeners interested in examining this topic in more depth can look there. One of the verses often used in defense of trichotomy is 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which says, “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.”

Marc Roby: Well, that verse certainly mentions spirit, soul and body as three distinct things.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. And we must admit that it is consistent with trichotomy. But the question is, does it demand, or even teach, a trichotomist view? I think the answer is clearly “no”.

I would say that Paul is simply giving an extended list for emphasis without necessarily implying that these are distinct elements. As a similar example, consider Mark 12:30, where Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Are we to interpret this to mean that heart, soul, mind and strength are all distinct elements of man? Virtually everyone would admit that our soul includes our ability to reason, but isn’t that what mind refers to as well? We really don’t want to get overly literal in interpreting statements like this. We should accept them at face value as being the kind of things people say all the time for emphasis.

So, for example, if I tell you that some baseball player is the life and soul of his team, you shouldn’t spend too much time trying to figure out how I distinguish between life and soul. We all know what I mean.

Marc Roby: Yes, I think that point is clear. What other verses are used to defend trichotomy?

Dr. Spencer: A similar verse is Hebrews 4:12, which says that “the word of God is living 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.”

Marc Roby: Again, a simple reading might indicate that the soul and spirit must be different if they can be divided one from another.

⁴ Grudem, op. cit., pp 477-481

Dr. Spencer: But the verse does not say that they can be divided from one another. Look at the other part of the verse; joints and marrow. A sword cannot separate a joint from the marrow, which is inside our bones.

I think Grudem has the right interpretation here, he wrote that “The author is not saying that the Word of God can divide ‘soul *from* spirit,’ but he is using a number of terms (soul, spirit, joints, marrow, thoughts and intentions of the heart) that speak of the deep inward parts of our being that are not hidden from the penetrating power of the Word of God.”⁵

Marc Roby: Yes, that makes good sense. And this is a fascinating discussion, which I look forward to completing. But we are out of time for today.

Let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we will do our best to respond.

⁵ Ibid, pg. 479