

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. We ended last time in the middle of discussing the view called trichotomy, which means that man is composed of three distinct parts; a body, soul and spirit. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed with that discussion?

Dr. Spencer: Let's take a look at another point made by trichotomists, which is summarized well by James Boice in his *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. He writes that "It is possible, though not certain, that in the Pauline writings the spirit of a man or woman is considered as being lost or dead as a result of the Fall and as being restored in those who are regenerated."¹

Marc Roby: Well, I'm not sure that I see a problem with that statement. Paul certainly spoke about people being dead in their sins and being raised to life by faith in Christ. For example, in Colossians 2:13 he wrote that "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ."²

Dr. Spencer: He does use that imagery quite often. In the verse you just read, it is clear that when Paul said "you were dead in your sins" he did not mean that you had ceased to exist. You were walking, talking, making decisions and so on. But you were dead toward God.

Marc Roby: And we often refer to that as being spiritually dead.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we do. For example, when Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately died in three different senses of the word. First, they immediately died spiritually, meaning that they lost communion with God. Second, they immediately became subject to physical death; meaning they started to age and their ultimate physical death was certain. Third, they also became subject to God's wrath, which, had God not later saved them, would have led to eternal death, in other words, eternal hell.

When we speak of an unbeliever being spiritually dead, we are using language that is consistent with trichotomy. If the spirit is only responsible for our relationship with God, and there is a separate part of us called the soul that is responsible for our reason, moral nature and will, then it could be true that our spirit is actually dead even when we are still alive.

Marc Roby: I think I see the problem now. If, as we have labored to show, dichotomy is the proper biblical position, then it certainly doesn't make sense to speak of someone's spirit being dead and his soul being alive at the same time since the words spirit and soul both refer to the immaterial part of man, which is not only responsible for his capacity to worship and have fellowship with God, but also for his reason, moral nature and will. If the spirit were dead

¹ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 152

² All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

according to that definition of the spirit, then we would be physically and spiritually dead; in other words, we would cease to exist. As we have argued, the body cannot live without the spirit.

Dr. Spencer: I think another point of confusion has to do with the term, “death.” People often tend to think of death as being the equivalent of “ceasing to exist.” Even truly born-again Christians can fall into that trap. But that idea is unbiblical. It is clear that everybody’s spirit continues to exist eternally after their bodies have died as we have noted before. In fact, as Wayne Grudem defines it, “Death is a temporary cessation of bodily life and a separation of the soul from the body.”³

Marc Roby: I like that definition. In fact, the key idea is separation in each of the categories of death you mentioned a moment ago. Spiritual death means that we, body and soul, are separated from God’s blessing because of our sin. Physical death means that our soul and body are temporarily separated. And eternal death means that sinners, in both body and soul, are forever separated from God’s blessing. Nobody ever actually ceases to exist, to paraphrase C.S. Lewis, you have never met a mere mortal.⁴

Dr. Spencer: And eternal death is even worse than being separated from God’s blessings, sinners in hell are actively under his wrath, which I find too terrible to even contemplate. Spiritually dead people are alienated from God and totally depraved in their souls. To say they are dead doesn’t mean that they don’t have a spirit or that their spirit no longer exists. Paul tells us in Colossians 1:21 that we were once alienated from God and were enemies in our minds because of our evil behavior. That is what is meant by saying that someone is spiritually dead; they are alienated from God and are his enemy in their mind.

Marc Roby: But thanks be to God, he saves his people by applying the redemption accomplished by Christ.

Dr. Spencer: And he does that by regenerating sinners by the power of the Holy Spirit. We’ll talk a lot more about this later, but for now it will suffice to say that regeneration is a work of God whereby he gives us a new heart and a new spirit as he promised in Ezekiel 36:26. In other words, he makes us spiritually alive.

Marc Roby: Not only so, but the born-again person is united to Christ by faith; he is no longer separated from God, but has been brought into God’s very family! In John 10:10 Jesus told us that he came so that we “may have life, and have it to the full.” This is life that will transcend the grave and continue with God forever.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, your mentioning the grave reminds me of what Jesus said in John 11:25-26, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” This wonderful promise would not make sense unless we understand life and death biblically. When Jesus says that Christians shall live, even

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 816

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, Revised and expanded edition, Macmillan Pub. Co., 1980, on page 19 Lewis wrote, “You have never talked to a mere mortal.”

though they die, he means that we will remain reconciled to God, under his blessing, even in the hour of our physical death. Though our spirit will leave our body at the moment of death, that spirit shall be perfected and immediately be with the Lord in heaven.

Marc Roby: And when Jesus said that we shall never die, he meant that we shall never experience eternal death – separated from God’s blessing and experiencing only his curse in hell. Instead, we shall be with God in heaven, enjoying his presence and blessing forever.

Dr. Spencer: What a glorious promise that is! Now we have drifted off topic and although the digression was useful since it clarified what the Bible means when it speaks about death, I think its time to get back to talking about trichotomy. We were discussing the trichotomist idea that an unbeliever’s spirit is dead, but his soul is alive. Boice had said this idea was a possible interpretation from Paul’s writings.

But Paul never stated that our spirit is dead before we are regenerated. He did write that *we* are dead, as in Colossians 2:13, the verse you read a few minutes ago. And another example is Ephesians 2:1-2, where we read, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

Marc Roby: And, as we have discussed, to be “dead in your transgressions and sins” means to be separated from God, to be his enemy. It does not have to mean that your spirit is dead.

Dr. Spencer: And since Paul says that you use to *live* this way, if dichotomy is the right view, your spirit cannot be dead. This is precisely why Boice says that if Paul meant that our spirits were dead before they were regenerated, it *would*, in fact, be evidence for trichotomy. But, as we just saw, in both the verse you cited, Colossians 2:13 and the ones I cited, Ephesians 2:1-2, Paul does not say that our spirit or soul was dead, he says that *we* were dead, and he clearly means dead in terms of our relationship with God.

Marc Roby: Alright, but what about 1 Corinthians 2:12-14? Paul does speak about the spirit in those verses, so we should take a look at them.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we should look at them to be complete. In 1 Corinthians 2:12-14 we read, “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Marc Roby: It is important to point out that in all but one instance in these verses the word spirit is capitalized in the NIV, which means that they interpret it as referring to the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. The one exception is when Paul wrote that “We have not received the spirit of the world”, which clearly can’t be the Holy Spirit.

Marc Roby: No, it can’t. And, praise God, Paul didn’t just say that we have *not* received the spirit of the world, he said that *we have* received “the Spirit who is from God”.

Dr. Spencer: And I think it is abundantly clear, and therefore doesn't require any argument to support the interpretation, that "the Spirit who is from God" must refer to the Holy Spirit. Which is why the NIV capitalizes the word.

Marc Roby: That does seem fairly obvious.

Dr. Spencer: The next reference to the Spirit in those verses is when Paul says that we speak, "not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit". Now I suppose it is possible that a trichotomist could interpret this as referring to our supposedly new spirits, and the assumption would then be that when we are born again, we receive a spirit that comes with knowledge, which can then be imparted to our soul. But I think that is reading an awful lot into the verse that isn't stated and it is far more natural and reasonable to say this wisdom is taught to us by the Holy Spirit, which is, again, why the NIV capitalizes the word there.

Marc Roby: I certainly agree that is by far the more reasonable interpretation of what Paul meant.

Dr. Spencer: And now, finally, the last sentence in that passage says that "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." When Paul refers to "the man without the Spirit", it is virtually certain that he is speaking about someone who has not yet been regenerated. It could be, as trichotomy would say, that the man has no functional spirit. But I think it is far more likely that the NIV is correct in capitalizing the word Spirit here, meaning it is referring to the Holy Spirit, which believers receive when they are regenerated. To receive the Holy Spirit means to be influenced or controlled by him. This seems to be the far more natural reading in context.

Marc Roby: And the Bible clearly teaches us that believers have the Holy Spirit, for example, in Romans 8:9, Paul wrote, "You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."

Dr. Spencer: That's a great verse to make this point. Therefore, I conclude that when we read in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God", it most naturally fits with dichotomy. In the end, when all of the evidence we have discussed is considered, I have to conclude that trichotomy is wrong and that the biblical view of man is dichotomy.

Marc Roby: And yet, as you stated last time, this is not an essential doctrine. Christians are free to disagree about this point.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, Christians are definitely free to believe dichotomy or trichotomy or even to simply say that they don't know which is right. James Boice said that this "debate need not overly concern us"⁵ and I think he was right about that, but with one caveat I'll get into in a

⁵ James Boice, op. cit., pg. 151

moment. He also said that “In this area the particular words used are less important than the truths they are meant to convey.”⁶ He went on to say that if someone adheres to dichotomy, “they nevertheless recognize that there is something about man that sets him off from animals. That is all that the distinction between spirit and soul in the three-part system means.”⁷ And by the “three-part system” he is, of course, referring to trichotomy.

Marc Roby: I’m not sure that all trichotomists would agree that this is all they mean, but there certainly is a sense in which Boice is correct in framing this as an argument about semantics. You mentioned a caveat in your agreeing that the debate need not overly concern us. What is that caveat?

Dr. Spencer: There is a danger inherent in trichotomy, depending on exactly what one takes that to mean.

Marc Roby: What is that danger?

Dr. Spencer: Well, if a person thinks of the soul as being the seat of our intellect and the spirit as being the seat of our ability to commune with and worship God, there is a very serious danger of thinking that the soul is corrupted by sin and is, therefore, less reliable than the spirit, which is thought to be more pure. This view can then lead to a very anti-intellectual, mystical type of Christianity, which is contrary to the Bible as Grudem points out.⁸

All through the Bible we are called to think carefully about God and our lives. Our faith must not be purely subjective. Biblical Christianity is based on objective truth, not our feelings.

Marc Roby: Yes, when you say that I immediately think of Romans 12:2, where the apostle Paul commands us, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Dr. Spencer: That is the classic verse. But there are many others that speak about the importance of using our minds. This is true in both the Old and New Testaments. In Isaiah 1:18 we read, “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’” In other words, we are to listen to God’s word to understand his plan of salvation. He has a way of taking care of our sins and we must use our minds to understand it.

And then, as just one more New Testament example, in Acts 17:11 we read about the response of the people in Berea to the message preached by Paul and Silas, “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”

⁶ Ibid, pg. 152

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Wayne Grudem, op. cit., pg. 482

Marc Roby: And Christ told us, in Mark 12:30 that we are to, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” Examining the Scriptures clearly requires the use of our minds and also assumes that the Scriptures are our ultimate standard for truth.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Christians are called to think carefully and to have the Bible be our ultimate standard, not our feelings or some mystical experience.

Marc Roby: Alright, so to begin to wrap-up our discussion of dichotomy and trichotomy, the whole question seems to hinge on how you define soul and spirit.

Dr. Spencer: I think that’s true. Grudem remarks, correctly, that “If we define ‘soul’ to mean ‘the intellect, emotions, and will,’ then we will have to conclude that at least the higher animals have a soul.”⁹

In our discussion so far, I have deliberately avoided giving a precise definition of the soul, or spirit. We did say, by quoting Charles Hodge, that “The essential attributes of a spirit are reason, conscience, and will.”¹⁰ And we also noted that our souls live on after our physical bodies have died and so they in some way contain the essence of who we are, and we have recognized that the soul or spirit is the immaterial part of man.

Marc Roby: Well, we could simply put all of that together and say it is our working definition of soul or spirit.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. If we put it all together, we would define soul, or spirit, as the immaterial part of man, which includes the essence of who he is, and which lives on after his physical death, and has as essential attributes the faculties of reason, morality and free will.

Marc Roby: That seems like a reasonable working definition, and it looks like a good place to end for today. It’s hard to believe, but with this session we have completed two full years of this podcast.

Dr. Spencer: That is very hard to believe. And we really appreciate hearing from our listeners. So, even if you don’t have a specific question, we’d like to hear from you. You can send your questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, and we will do our best to respond.

⁹ Ibid, pp 480-481

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, pg. 97