

Dichotomy and Trichotomy

Trichotomy is the view that we as human beings are made up of 3 elements: body, soul and spirit.

Dichotomy is the view that we as human beings are made of 2 elements: body and an inner self that is referred to in many different aspects (soul, spirit, heart, mind etc).

Some people in the history of church have held to trichotomy, though the vast majority biblical scholars today would be dichotomists. Trichotomy has been promoted in recent times by the word of faith/prosperity gospel movement. Writers such as Watchman Nee and Andrew Murray have also popularized it. It is particularly connected to pentecostal churches.

Trichotomy

According to trichotomists the spirit is the part of human beings that enable them to worship God. It is deeper than the soul (= mind and will) and is where we worship God and meet with Christ. The spirit is our true self and is key to understanding who we really are. God is spirit, and because we're made in God's image, we must be spirit as well. Some people would also draw analogy with God as Trinity i.e. just as God is trinity so are we. Some would say that we are mini gods in "God's class". A common way of putting it is: "man is a spirit, has a soul and lives in the body".

Trichotomy argues that our bodies are submitted to our souls and our souls are submitted to our spirits, so there's a kind of hierarchy within us. True obedience to God requires a state in which the spirit dominates soul and body. Or, to put it the other way, sin results when body or soul dominates. In the fall of Adam the body and material things dominated spirit and our spirits died. Fallen man does have a spirit.

However, believers have been given a new spirit and now we live by this spirit. Sanctification is when the soul is led by the spirit. We must understand the rule of the spirit over body/soul if we are to live effectively as Christians. So our spirit can speak over our bodies and rule their destiny. The words I speak have innate spiritual power and affect my life. This spirit also gives us spiritual knowledge and we can know things intuitively from it. The knowledge that we have by the spirit is different from what we know through the mind/senses.

"In the beginning, man's spirit was the dominant force in the world; when he sinned, his mind became dominant – sin dethroned the spirit and crowned the intellect; but grace is restoring the spirit to its place of dominion" Kenyon, *Wonderful Name*, p.25

"One of the greatest mistakes that has been made in our intellectual culture has been the ignoring of the spirit. Knowledge of our intellects has taken the throne, and our spirits have been locked away in prison." Kenyon, *Two Kinds of Faith*, p.48

There are, though, a number of reasons why the dichotomist view is to be preferred. Negatively, the trichotomist view has a number of problems (see the points below). Positively, the dichotomist view seems to make sense of the way the Bible actually talks about us. The Bible refers to different aspects of who we are, such as our mind, wills, hearts, souls and spirits, but these divisions are not neat and carefully distinguished. Human nature is not consistently divided up into watertight categories such as soul and spirit, but there is a lot of overlap. There seems to be some flexibility in how we are

described. It may well be right to say that the different terms in Scripture refer to different *aspects* of who we are. We can speak of our heart or mind or soul or spirit, but these aspects are interconnected, overlapping and inseparable. They are not rigid distinctions. Therefore, it seems that dichotomy gives us a truer summary of the Bible's descriptions of human nature.

Here are some of the specific reasons why dichotomy is to be preferred over trichotomy.

1. "Spirit" and "soul" are used interchangeably in the Bible:

- They are explicit parallels in the same verses: Isa 26:9, Luke 1:46-47, Job 7:11, John 12:27 and 13:21
- Sometimes the Bible says we are body and spirit (1 Cor 5:3, 7:34, Col 2:5, James 2:26), sometimes it says that we are body and soul (Isa 10:18, Matt 10:28).
- *Both* spirit and soul can experience anguish, pain and trouble (**spirit**: Exod 6:9, 1 Sam 1:15 Job 6:4, 7:11, Ps 34:18, Ps 51:17, Isa 54:6, Lam 1:16, John 11:33, 13:21 **soul**: Gen 42:21, Judg 16:16, 1 sam 22:2, 1 Sam 30:6, Job 3:20, 10:1, Ps 6:3, John 12:27)
- *Both* spirit and soul are used to describe the me deep down or "the essential self" (**spirit**: Ps 31:5, Isa 57:15, 66:2, Ezek 11:19, 13:3, Haggai 1:14, Malachi 2:15, Matt 5:3, Matt 26:41, Mark 8:12, Acts 17:16, 1 Cor 2:11, 2 Cor 2:13, 1 Pet 3:4 **soul**: Exod 31:14, 26, Lev 26:15, 34, 1 Sam 18:3, 1 Sam 20:17, 1 Sam 25:26, Ps 7:2, Ezek 18:1, 4, Matt 16:26, James 1:21, Heb 13:17, 1 Pet 2:25)
- *Both* spirit and soul are used to describe my life given up at death (**spirit**: Matt 27:50, John 19:30, Luke 23:46, Acts 7:59 **soul**: Gen 35:18, Ps 49:15, ps 16:10, Ps 56:13, note particularly Jesus giving himself at the cross in Isa 53:10-12, Luke 12:20)

2. The "soul" does a lot of things that trichotomists argue the "spirit" does:

- The soul is the thing in me that loves God (Deut 4:29, 6:5, 10:12, 11:13, 11:18, 13:13, 26:16, 30:2, 30:6, Josh 22:5, 23:14, 1 Sam 14:7, 1 Kgs 2:4, 2 Kg 23:3 (loads more!), Ps 84:2, Matt 22:37, Acts 4:32)
- The soul is what worships and prays to God (1 Sam 1:15, Job 30:16, Ps 25:1, Ps 33:20, Ps 42:1 (loads more!))
- Note that though the Scriptures tells us that God is Spirit, it also speaks of the Lord's soul (Ps 11:5, Lev 26:11, 30, Isa 42:1, Jer 14:19). Soul and spirit therefore seem to be interchangeable categories.

3. Our "spirit" is described in ways that contradict trichotomist claims.

- Our spirit can be impure/sinful (Ps 51:12 (spirit needs transformation), 78:8, 106:33, Prov 16:2, 16:18, 16:32, 29:11, Eccl 7:8, 7:9, Isa 29:24, Dan 5:20, 2 Cor 7:1)
- Unbelievers have spirits (Gen 41:8, 1 Chron 5:26, 2 Chron 36:22, Ezra 1:1, Ps 76:12, Ps 77:3 (also Num 16:22, 27:16), Ps 142:3, 4, 7, Prov 15:4, 13, 17:22, 18:14, Jer 51:1, 11, Dan 2:1, 7:15)

4. The 'proof texts' for trichotomy don't help us reach any conclusions.

The actual number of proof texts for trichotomy are very few. Just by way of warning, we should be very careful about building big conclusions on just a few Bible texts. We should always go with the sweep of the whole Bible and emphasize things to the degree the Bible emphasizes them.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ". This is best understood as referring to the whole person and the completeness of God's work in us. There is a parallel here to Luke 10:27, "And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." The point of Luke 10:27 is to speak of the *whole person* loving God, not to divide us up into neat watertight segments. Otherwise, we'd need to say that human beings are made up of 4 things (!): our heart, our soul, our mind, our strength. Notice that our "spirit" is not mentioned in that list.
- Hebrews 4:12 "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The point here is the *penetrating* power of God's word that goes down deep into us. It finds us out and gets through all our defences and goes to the core of who we are. The point is not, however, to teach us the difference between soul and spirit. If we want to main a rigid distinction between spirit and soul here, what are we to make of the reference to "joint and marrow"? Are we four parts: spirit, soul, joint and marrow?!!
- But how about those passages in the letters of the Paul that speak of the battle between flesh and Spirit (e.g. Gal 5:16-26, Rom 8:1-11; note: read Rom 8:10 in the ESV, not the NIV)? These passages do not refer to a battle between 2 aspects of who we are (i.e. our bodies vs our spirit), but rather a contradiction between the Holy Spirit and our old selves in Adam. The flesh in Scripture refers to human beings in their fallen state and not just their physical bodies. The Spirit referred to in these passages is the Spirit of God (not our spirit). He now lives in us and defines who we are. Incidentally, the same goes for John 4:24, which is sometimes referred to in discussions.
- 1 Corinthians 14:14-15 "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also." Paul is not here elevating tongue-speaking above the mind or intelligible speech, actually he's doing the opposite. His whole point in the passage is that the Corinthians should be praying and speaking for the building up of the body of the church, and therefore make as much as possible intelligible. Tongues, he argues, should be limited and done mainly privately because other people don't know what you're saying. The whole argument of 1 Corinthians 12-14 is that the work of the Spirit is to build up the body and that is done through love, service and use of speech that everyone can understand.

5. There are some significant problems with the theology of trichotomy.

- I have some concern that people who argue for trichotomy draw wrong analogies between us and God. Sometimes the analogies they draw can seem to bolster their

argument, but actually the theology is very muddled. So, for example, it doesn't work to argue the following:

1. God is spirit
2. We are made in the image of God
3. Therefore we must be spirit.

This logic will actually lead to a number of problems for how we think of God. The same logic would make us argue:

1. We have a body
2. We are made in the image of God
3. Therefore God has a body

This shows the danger of reasoning from abstract principles without being explicitly controlled by Scripture.

The same goes for drawing the analogy people sometimes draw between God being Trinity (Father, Son, Spirit) and us being a trinity (body, soul, spirit). This is misguided though. The doctrine of the Trinity is totally different from trichotomy. Trichotomy speaks of 3 parts of human nature, whereas the Trinity speaks of three *persons* who share the same nature. Strangely, by arguing in this way, a trichotomist could imply a very heretical view of God as 3 parts in one whole!

- Trichotomy can lead to a number of spiritual problems.

Firstly, it can be *anti-intellectual*. Because it emphasizes the spirit as the highest contact point with God, over our souls, it easily follows that one looks down on the importance of *thinking* in our relationship with God. It might well lead to an approach that views theology/reflection as unspiritual and insignificant - though we are called to love God with our minds and thinking (Luke 10:27). It might also lead us to believe we can simply discern or know spiritual truth 'intuitively' without reflection on the word of God or discussion with others. This is very dangerous and can lead us into all kinds of falsehood. We should remember that the man who spoke about tongues speaking in 1 Corinthians 14 was also the man who wrote the deep theology of the book of Romans.

Secondly, it can be *anti-body* because the body, again, needs to be subjected to the spirit. With regards to the body, we must remember that the creation is originally good and that the body is originally good. Our fallen nature has not eradicated that original goodness, though it has twisted it. Further, we must remember that sin does not reside in one part of me, such as in my physical nature, but goes through the whole of who I am. The whole of me needs to be cleansed by the work of Christ. And we must remember the great hope of the Christian life: resurrection and new creation. God did not just raise Jesus 'spiritually', but physically. He will do the same for us.

Lastly, it can lead to a kind of *super-spirituality* because we emphasize that we're living "in the spirit" and look down on the world of 'ordinary things' as inferior. However, we are not called to neglect ordinary, everyday life as believers and to think that God is not involved in it. Rather we are to recognize that God is involved in all we do, whether that involves feeding a crying baby, stacking shelves in a supermarket, sorting out my bank account or eating my dinner. God hasn't called us to give ourselves only to prayer and fasting, but he wants us to live for him in all we do. When you are in Christ and filled with his Spirit nothing is unspiritual or remote from him.