

Collected Writings of John Murray

Volume Two

Select Lectures in Systematic Theology

Lecture 3

"Trichotomy"

Scripture usage in respect of the terms 'soul' and 'spirit' does afford plausibility to the contention that man's nature is trichotomic rather than dichotomic, that there are three components, body, soul, and spirit rather than two, body and spirit. Hence scholars of different shades of theological belief, particularly in the last century and a half, have maintained that this usage provides a basis for trichotomy. A classification is scarcely possible and will not be attempted.

C. J. Ellicott, for example, in commenting on 1 Thessalonians 5:23, says that here there is a 'distinct enunciation of the three component parts . . . the *pneuma*, the higher of the two united immaterial parts, being the "*vis superior, agens, imperans in homine*" (Olshausen), the *psuche*, the "*vis inferior quae agitur, movetur*" (ibid.), the sphere of the will and the affections, and the true centre of the personality'. And to assert that the apostle attached 'no distinct thought to each of these words' (Jowett) is 'to set aside all sound rules of scriptural exegesis'.

Franz Delitzsch maintains realistic duality, matter and spirit, but also insists that the Bible represents the supersensuous as consisting of two constituent elements.¹ On Hebrews 4:12 he says that soul and spirit designate the supersensuous, joints and marrow the sensuous. And as joints and marrow are separable constituents so must soul and spirit be regarded. The word of God dissects the whole into its several parts.

The spirit proceeds immediately from God and bears the divine image. Since the fall it has retired into itself and become as it were extinguished. Here the operations of grace begin. The heavenly nature reappears. The soul is the life emanating from the spirit when united with a body. Through sin it has become an 'unfree and licentious disharmony of energies and passions, and a powerless plaything in the hands of material and demonic influences'. The word of God exposes the breach between soul and spirit and the abnormal condition of the soul in itself.

J. B. Heard develops the thesis that the revelation of man's tripartite nature was

1 Franz Delitzsch: *A System of Biblical Psychology*, pp. 110f., 113.

progressive and parallel to the revelation of God's trinity.² In the Old Testament the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was latent, not patent. So with man's spirit. It is in the epistles of the New Testament that the human spirit appears as the divine and regenerate nature quickened by the Holy Spirit and created in the image of God, contrasted not only with flesh but also with soul.

In summary, Heard's position is as follows. The *soul* is the life of man in its widest sense, including all the faculties and energies that are natural to man and necessary to a definition of human nature. The spirit is the faculty or organ of God-consciousness, the presence chamber of God. God is a spirit and can be known and worshipped only through our spirit. Reason, the faculty of the soul, has only a representative knowledge of God, spirit alone has a presentative. Spirit is the sanctuary where God makes himself known; it is the organ of spiritual-mindedness.

Since the fall the spirit is not active in the natural man; it is dead or, at least, dormant. Man is not born with a depraved spirit but with a dead or dormant one. In regeneration the spirit is awakened from dormancy or made alive from death. Regeneration controls the animal in man, purifies the intellectual, but its primary action is to quicken the spiritual. The presence chamber of God is restored and our thought is lost in wonder, love, and praise.

In dealing with this view, we may examine, first of all, the usage of Scripture, then the passages alleged to offer support to the tripartite construction, and then present a resolution of the usage we find in the Scripture.

THE USAGE OF SCRIPTURE

1. *The Person of Man.* Sometimes the whole person is described in terms of body and soul, at other times in terms of body or flesh and spirit (Matt. 6:25; 10:28--body and soul; 1 Cor. 7:34; 2 Cor. 7:1--body [flesh] and spirit).

These texts are surely intended to be an inclusive description or, preferably, specification of the elements of human personality. If it were otherwise the whole purpose would be defeated. In the case of Matt. 10:28 the completeness of penal destruction is the main lesson, and in 1 Cor. 7:34 and 2 Cor. 7:1 it is the completeness of sanctification that is envisioned. But in the one case body and soul are deemed a sufficient specification, in the other body and spirit. If an integral component were omitted, the completeness would be negated.

2 J. B. Heard: *The Tripartite Nature of Man.*

James 2:26: This is relevant because it represents the spirit as the principle or condition of life in the body, a position that would not obtain if the spirit is dead or dormant in the natural man. On trichotomic premises, a body without a spirit is not dead; the soul comprises all that is necessary to the survival of the body as a living entity.

1 Corinthians 5:5: Here 'flesh' is used in an ethical sense and the thought is the destruction of that which is sinfully fleshly. But the sin was, in this instance, the sin particularly associated with the body (cf. 1 Cor. 6:18). Thus 'flesh' here does reflect upon the bodily aspect of the human person. If 'flesh' were used in the more embracive ethical sense, that is, as human nature dominated by sin, the spirit would be included as well as the body. So obliquely there is in this text some reflection upon the inclusiveness of the specifications 'flesh and spirit'.

It would be strange that, when occasions arise for describing personality in its entirety, sometimes body and soul have this purpose and sometimes body and spirit, if body, soul, and spirit are the constitutive components of human nature.

2. *The Seat of Spiritual Exercise.* The highest devotional exercises are ascribed to both soul and spirit.

(i) *Sorrow.* In terms of our Lord's undertaking in the days of his flesh and of his vicarious commitment, nothing had deeper significance than his sufferings (cf. Heb. 2:9, 10; 5:7, 8). And it is noteworthy that the grief entailed is predicated of soul as well as of spirit. Nothing engaged his human spirit with greater intensity and effect than the agonies of Gethsemane and Calvary. But it was on the eve of these agonies that he said: 'Now is my soul troubled' (John 12:27), and it was in Gethsemane he said: 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful unto death' (Matt. 26:38). The form in both cases would not have the pointed relevance to our present topic, or the cogency by way of evidence, were it not so that on other occasions, even when his grief did not have the same poignancy, the spirit is referred to as the seat (Mark 8:12; John 13:21). If the soul is the outer sanctuary, it would scarcely be appropriate to use the term 'soul' when the cup of woe came to its bitterest experience.

It may be that in John 12:27 and Matthew 26:38 the expression 'my soul' is a Hebraic way of saying 'I am troubled' and 'I am exceedingly sorrowful'. But in that event these expressions would still be pertinent to our subject, for they would show that the word 'soul' could be used to designate his person in the experience of its deepest exercises. It would not comport with the distinction trichotomy makes, to use the term 'soul' in connection with the most significant of our Lord's experiences, when the word 'spirit' is used in other instances. The same kind of variation in the use of terms appears in the case of mere men (Acts 17:16--spirit; 2 Pet. 2:8--soul). Grief or sorrow of the most deeply religious character is referred to the soul as well as to the spirit, and this is inconsistent with the trichotomic conception of the soul as *vis inferior*, and with the depreciatory estimate of soul in distinction from spirit.

(ii) *Joy*. The highest spiritual exercises are ascribed to the soul as well as to the spirit (cf. for 'soul' Psalm 42:1-6; 63:5; 103:1, 2; 116:7; 130:6; Isa. 26:9; for 'spirit' Psalm 32:2; 34:18; 51:10, 12, 17; Prov. 11:13; 16:19; Isa. 57:15; Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26). If it should be averred that the Old Testament usage is irrelevant because the distinction between soul and spirit had not yet been made, yet the distinction obtained though not revealed, and the sustained use of both terms would create a presumption, to say the least, that inspiration was not aware of the radical difference that existed, a supposition incompatible with the Holy Spirit's theopneustic operation in Old Testament Scripture. In the earliest period of New Testament revelation we have the same parallelism in the song of Mary (Luke 1:46, 47; cf. 1 Cor. 14:14-16; 16:18; 2 Cor. 7:13--spirit; Heb. 6:18, 19--soul).

(iii) *Devotion*. In Mark 12:30, for example, we have a statement of the sum of devotion to God. The four terms used are, heart, soul, mind (*dianoia*), and strength (*ischus*). If the spirit is the organ of God-consciousness, it must surely be enlisted in the highest reaches of devotion to God. It would not be consistent with this alleged primacy to omit the spirit in such an enumeration of the aspects of personality.

In like manner various passages refer to community of interest and purpose in the kingdom of God and to wholehearted dedication in the fulfilment of the demands of the Christian vocation. This devotion is expressed in terms of the soul as well as of the spirit (cf. Acts 4:32; 14:2, 22; Eph. 6:6; Phil. 1:27; 2:2, 19, 20). 'One spirit' and 'one soul' are, at least, parallel if not synonymous (Phil. 1:27). To do anything wholeheartedly is to do it from 'the soul' (Eph. 6:6). One soul is equivalent to one heart (Acts 4:32).

The conclusion is inescapable that the centre of devotion and the seat of the most characteristic exercises of the regenerate person is the soul as well as the heart and the spirit. The evidence cannot be adjusted to the supposition that the soul is the outer chamber, and that it is the spirit that is the organ of God-consciousness and the centre of spiritual-mindedness.

3. *The Contrast between Natural and Spiritual*. According to trichotomy the natural man (*anthropos psuchikos*) is man whose spirit is dead or dormant, and the spiritual man (*anthropos pneumatikos*) is the man whose spirit is revived and attains to hegemony in the human person. The only instances of *psuchikos* in the New Testament are 1 Cor. 2:14; 15:44, 46; James 3:15; Jude 19. *Pneumatikos* occurs frequently. The reasonable procedure is to study the latter and discover its import and application. This will, in turn, indicate the meaning of the contrasted epithet (*psuchikos*). Several instances may be examined:

Romans 1:11--'spiritual gift' (*charisma*). 1 Cor. 12:1-12 is the most instructive index to the meaning, for Paul begins with the words: 'But concerning the spiritual gifts' (*pneumatikon*), and the succeeding context provides the answer to the reference in this term 'spiritual'. On nine occasions we have reference to the Holy Spirit--vss. 3(2), 4, 7, 8(2), 9(2), and 11.

Hence the spiritual gifts are those derived from the Holy Spirit and exercised in the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 2:4 is confirmatory. There we have the expression, 'distributions of the Holy Spirit'. So a spiritual gift is one derived from and bestowed by the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 2:13--'combining spiritual things with spiritual'. The meaning is established by the preceding clause, 'but in words taught of the Spirit', namely, 'combining spiritual things with spiritual words'. And 'taught of the Spirit' determines the meaning of the term 'spiritual'. As in the preceding clause the agent is the Holy Spirit (cf. vss. 10-12). So 'spiritual' means taught by the Holy Spirit, indited by the Spirit. Reference to the human spirit as that from which 'spiritual' is derived is rendered exegetically impossible. The same meaning applies to 'spiritually' (vs. 14) and 'spiritual' (vs. 15). As will be observed later, the meaning of *psuchikos* (vs. 14) is fixed by the contrast to 'spiritual'. In 1 Corinthians 10:3, 4, the 'spiritual rock' is said to be Christ and could not be a rock that derives its quality or reference from the human spirit.

1 Corinthians 15:44 (cf. Rom. 8:11)--Here again the contrast appears in application to body (*soma*). On tripartite premises *soma psuchikon* would be body governed by soul, as distinct from spirit, and *soma pneumatikon*, body governed by the human spirit. It is apparent how inconsistent this interpretation would be with trichotomic premises. Paul is dealing with the death and resurrection of *believers* and they are 'spiritual' prior to and at death. Of them it could not be said, even on tripartite premises, that they die as *psuchikoi*. It is surely significant that in the two cases where the contrast expressly occurs, the view in question fails to provide a meaning that is consonant with the contexts. What Paul is emphasizing in 1 Corinthians 15:44 is that the resurrection body is so conditioned by the resurrection power of Christ as 'life-giving Spirit' (vs. 45), that it is no longer mortal and corruptible; it is body belonging to the realm constituted by Jesus' resurrection; it is pneumatically conditioned.

When Paul says that 'flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor. 15:50), he is not denying the physical composition of the resurrection body. It is still body (*soma*) and therefore physical. What he is saying is that human nature characterized by mortality, corruptibility, weakness, shall not inherit the kingdom of God (cf. vss. 52-54). And the term 'spiritual' draws at least some of its warrant and complexion from the agency and efficacy of the Holy Spirit in the resurrection, as Paul states in Romans 8:11: God 'will make alive your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you'.

Other passages demonstrating the meaning of 'spiritual' are: Ephesians 1:3; 5:19; Colossians 3:16; 1 Peter 2:5.

These instances show plainly that 'spiritual', when applied to things, means derived from, or indited by, the Holy Spirit; and when applied to persons, indwelt, directed, and governed by the Holy Spirit. And the contrast instituted between *psuchikos* and *pneumatikos* is not derived from any contrast between the soul and spirit in man, but between man as he is in and of himself; actuated, directed, and governed by his own self;

that is, between man as self-controlled, on the one hand, and man indwelt, actuated, directed, and controlled by the Holy Spirit, on the other. The contrast is not that of any duality that exists within man himself, or of any antithesis deriving its definition from the component parts of human nature, but between man in his entirety as self-governed, and man in his entirety as God-governed; between man himself and the Holy Spirit as the governing agent. This apostolic contrast is to the same effect as our Lord's word: 'If any man wills to come after me, let him deny himself' (Matt. 16:24). It is that we offer to self the denial of its demand, namely, hegemony.

4. *Corruption Predicated of Man's Spirit.* Psalm 78:8; Proverbs 14:29; 16:18; 25:28; Ecclesiastes 7:8; Isaiah 29:24; also by implication Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; Malachi 2:16; 2 Corinthians 7:1 (cf. 1 Cor. 2:12).

PASSAGES ALLEGED TO SUPPORT TRICHOTOMY

1. *Hebrews 4:12.* In dealing with this passage we may focus attention upon the terms relevant to our present interest.

(i) *'Joints and marrow'*. These have been interpreted as figurative in this verse, denoting man's immaterial nature. There is no warrant for this view. The body comes under the scrutiny of the Word of God because it is integral to our personality. In accord with the leading thought of the passage, it would be not only appropriate but necessary to mention the most occult parts of our physical frame in order to show that no aspect of our being is impervious to the penetrating scrutiny of the Word of God.

(ii) *'Dividing asunder' (merismos)*. It is too readily assumed that this term means "'division between', and indicates the distinction between soul and spirit, joints and marrow. This Delitzsch plainly asserts. 'The Divine "logos" not only penetrates to a man's inmost being, but also divides it into its component parts. . . . The word of God . . . marks out and separates the *pneuma* in him' (*ad* Heb. 4:12). This interpretation is not borne out by the usage of Scripture nor by the verse in question. Usage points rather to the meaning 'division of', 'cleaving', 'dividing within'. It is not the dividing between one thing in its distinct identity and another thing in its distinct identity, but the dividing, sundering, or distributing of a thing in itself. 'Division between' implies two things, 'division within' can apply to one thing; it can be rent asunder.

Hebrews 2:4 is the only other New Testament instance of *merismos*, and the meaning is the distributions of the Holy Spirit, with the accent upon these as sovereignly bestowed. The thought is far removed from that of division or separation of two things; it is that of impartation, dividing out.

The verb occurs, however, frequently, some 14 times (*merizo*). In some cases it means 'to

distribute' or 'impart', as the substantive in Hebrews 2:4 (cf. Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 7:17; 2 Cor. 10:13). In some instances the thought of division appears, as when a kingdom is divided against itself, or when an inheritance is divided, or when a married person is divided in the care and concern entertained (cf. Matt. 12:25, 26; Mark 3:24-26; Luke 12:13; 1 Cor. 1:13; 7:33). In each case the thought is remote from that of separation of one entity from another. It is that of sundering apart, dividing up, distributing.

A compound substantive (*diamerismos*) occurs once (Luke 12:51-53), and the corresponding verb some 11 times. The same import appears, namely, that of an entity being rent asunder and not that of distinguishing one thing from another (cf. Luke 11:17, 18; Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 22:17; Luke 23:34;³ John 19:24; Acts 2:45). In Acts 2:3 the verb occurs, but the idea is that of distributing, parting asunder and not of separating one thing from another.

Thus there is no instance in which the idea of distinguishing or separating two things is apparent, and the thought of cleaving within is abundantly attested. How does this idea apply to Hebrews 4:12? The relevance is obvious. The Word penetrates to the inmost parts of our being and like a sharp sword can rend them asunder. The Word cleaves soul, spirit, joints, marrow.

Confirmation of this meaning is derived from the anatomy of joints and marrow. These are not adjacent so as to require a sharp sword to get in between to separate. The text does not speak of bones and marrow. So, obviously, the thought is not that of getting in between to separate, but that these are the most inaccessible parts of our physical frame and illustrate the piercing power of the Word when, by a metaphor, it is said to be sharper than a two-edged sword.

(iii) If we were to press the premises of trichotomy, we should find more than trichotomy. The text speaks of the thoughts and intents of the *heart*. If there is the distinction posited between soul and spirit, why not also between soul and spirit and heart?

The lesson of the text is well summed up by Plummer to the effect that joints and marrow represent the most occult parts of our physical frame, soul and spirit our inmost spiritual being, and thoughts and intents of the heart our inmost mental activities. The Word searches all. All is naked and open to God. The Word of God confronts us, and of the Word is predicated the judgment which belongs to God in his omniscience. There is no discrepancy between the judgment of God and that of his Word.

2. *1 Thessalonians 5:23*. It is in accord with the usage of Scripture to employ an accumulation of terms to express completeness (cf. Mark 12:30; Heb. 4:12). It would be in

3 **KM note:** Professor Murray had these two texts in reverse order: "Luke 23:34; Luke 22:17."

line with this usage to express the entirety of sanctification and of preservation by the terms of the passage concerned, and it would be unwarranted to assume that it is intended to provide us with a definition of the component elements of human nature. This would no more follow in this instance than in the instance of Mark 12:30; Hebrews 4:12.

CONCLUSION

The evidence does not support the tripartite construction. We need not suppose, however, that soul and spirit are always synonymous and are interchangeable. The entity denoted by soul and by spirit is to be viewed from different aspects. When one aspect is in view, the term 'spirit' is the appropriate designation, and when another aspect is in view the term 'soul'. For example, dying is represented as giving up of the spirit but as laying down of the soul (life), with different terms in different instances (cf. Eccl. 12:7; Matt. 20:28; 27:50; Mark 10:45; Luke 23:46; John 10:17, 18; Acts 7:59; Heb. 12:23). The variant usage has reference to the distinct aspects from which death may be viewed. Again, the disembodied entity is usually called 'spirit' (Eccl. 12:7; Heb. 12:23; 1 Pet. 3:19) whereas persons embodied are frequently called 'souls', so much so that 'soul' is a virtual synonym for person (cf. Psalms 16:10; Acts 2:27, 31, 41, 43). In such cases it can be seen how inappropriate it would be to substitute the term 'spirit'.

It may be impossible to define precisely the distinction that lies back of the variant usage. There is no hard and fast line of distinction. But it would appear that, in certain cases, 'spirit' views the principle of life as derived from God and returning to him on the event of death, whereas 'soul' views the animating entity as life constituted in a body, and finds its prototype in Genesis 2:7. It is man in his entirety who is called 'living soul'.

It should not surprise us that such a distinction should obtain. We find distinction in respect of the terms 'body' and 'flesh', when, obviously, the same metaphysical entity is contemplated. They cannot be always used interchangeably (cf. Matt. 26:41; 1 Cor. 5:5; 15:39, 44). 'Flesh' often reflects on the weakness of human nature.

Hence, in passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12, it is appropriate that both terms should be used for the purpose of emphasizing that the psychical aspect of man, from whatever angle it may be viewed, comes under the sanctifying operations of the God of peace (1 Thess. 5:23) and under the searching scrutiny of the Word of God. And we are at the same time advised that distinct component parts are not thereby denoted because the usage elsewhere cannot be adjusted to this construction.

To conclude, the inference would have to be that the spirit or soul is the substrate, centre, and seat of human personality. The unique identity of man is that he is a psychosomatic being with the most intimate correlation, coordination, and integration of constituent elements, so that he is equipped to exercise the dominion with which he has been invested.

The duality belonging to man's being provides the basis for the duality of relationship, relationship to what is above and to what is below. It is, however, in the unity and integrity of his being that he sustains these relationships. As body alone he could not exercise dominion and it is in his totality that he owes subjection to God. The components of his being may never be viewed in abstraction. It is as psychosomatic being he is made in the image of God, and as such he sustains and exercises all relationships.

Lecture 3, "Trichotomy," in *Collected Lectures of John Murray, Volume Two* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977).