

God is a Trinity – Are We?

Dipartite vs. Tripartite Nature of Man

By Alice Grady

Many Christians believe that human beings possess three aspects which consist of a **body**, which connects us to the physical world; a **soul**, which might be considered the essence of our being, or personality; and a **spirit**, which connects us with God. If one believes that these aspects are distinct and separate, this is a **tripartite view**, sometimes also called a trichotomy. Some, however, consider the soul and spirit to be synonymous. Those who believe that humanity is a dichotomy (dipartite view) would have the same understanding of the physical body, but might view the spirit as the part of the soul that connects with God. Some might believe that man has a soul but not a spirit at all, as perhaps, in the case of non-Christians. (If one does not believe there is a God, there would be no need of a “spirit” to connect to Him.)

We could represent the dipartite view as BODY/SOUL or BODY/SOUL-SPIRIT. The tripartite view would be diagrammed as BODY/SOUL/SPIRIT. Dr. Clarence Larkin uses concentric circles to illustrate the three parts with an outer circle for the BODY, a smaller middle circle inside the first representing the SOUL and a still smaller inner circle signifying the SPIRIT. He states that the outer **Body** circle touches the material world through the five senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. The “senses” of the **Soul** (psyche) are conscience, memory, reason and emotions. The faculties of the **Spirit** are faith, hope, reverence, prayer and worship.

It is important to look at a passage which some might use to support a dipartite view. Genesis 2:7 is sometimes translated to say that God breathed into Adam the breath of life and he became a *living soul*. However, a modern commentary on The Torah indicates that a better translation is “*living being*”. So this verse cannot be used to support the idea that we are only a “soul” without a spirit. We do see from this passage that humanity does not just have a soul but is a soul. The soul seems to be the seat of emotions, affections and appetites and is expressed in how we relate to other persons. In Genesis 34:8, Hamor said to Jacob, “The *soul* of my son Shechem longs for your daughter” and of David and Jonathan (in First Samuel 5:8) it is written, “The *soul* of Jonathan was knit with the *soul* of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own *soul*.”

In context, we need to consider the nature of God and that humanity is made in His image. Genesis 1:26 states “And God said, “Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness....” Hebrew commentaries say that this passage denotes either a “majestic plural” or is spoken to an angelic court. Some also state that Christian theology generally takes the phrase to indicate the triune nature of God. As Christians we do believe that the words “us” and “our” indicate that God is a plurality and from other Biblical passages we know that He is manifested as God, the Father; God, the Son; and God, the Holy Spirit, as, for example in Second Corinthians 13:14,

“May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” We believe that God is, indeed, a Trinity or *Tri-unity* and it seems reasonable to suggest that His human creation is also a Trinity or tripartite being. This is one way we are made in the image of God. Much of God’s creation seems to contain three parts. We measure objects by height, length and depth. Most of the chemical elements in our universe come in the forms of solid, liquid and gas. Time, for us, is measured in past, present and future. Though we now know that the atom is comprised of more parts than we previously learned in physics class, the basic atomic parts are electrons, protons, and neutrons. God has stamped His tri-unity on His universe.

The trinity of man (generic term) is an essential component of the Image relationship between himself and God. We know that the physical body is not the whole man, although some act as though that is all that matters. Neither is the soul in itself, nor the spirit in itself, the whole person but rather we are “spirit and soul and body”. Some years ago when I was instructing student nurses in the hospital, the pathologist would page me to let me know when he was going to do an autopsy and would allow my students to view it so long as I was present. Because many people have qualms about autopsies, I talked to the students and tried to prepare them for the experience. I told them that the body was not the real person but was only the shell which contained the person. I told them that my body was not who “I am” but housed the real “me”, my personality, my soul and spirit. The autopsy was not desecrating the person because the essence of that person was no longer present.

The word spirit in the Scriptures has several meanings. When the word “Spirit” begins with a capital letter, we know it refers to the third person of the Trinity. But the word “spirit” spelled with a small “s” may refer to the spirit of man, as part of his tripartite nature, through which he can have a relationship with God, or it can indicate an evil spirit, such as an agent of the Devil. In the unregenerate state, the “inner spirit” of a person does not yet know the things of God but when we are born of Him, the Holy Spirit reveals them to our inner spirit. “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16). Paul says in First Corinthians 2:9-11 “...as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him’ – but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” Some people consider themselves “spiritual” but acknowledge no relationship with the true God; they may go to church but get nothing out of Bible reading or have no desire to learn. This is the unregenerate person who has the “spirit of man” that has not been transformed by the Holy Spirit.

So where in Scripture do we find clear passages delineating spirit, soul and body? The Apostle Paul, in First Thessalonians 5:23 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.” In Luke 1:46,47 the Virgin Mary said: “My **soul** magnifies the Lord, and my **spirit** rejoices in God, my Savior.” She could not truly magnify (or exalt) the Lord until her spirit acknowledged God. In this beautiful passage, Mary, the mother of Jesus, alludes to at least fifteen Old Testament passages which show her familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures. At this point, her spirit was in tune with God and her soul could express her deepest emotions. Hebrews 4:12 is a classic passage which speaks of the soul and spirit and body, although the emphasis in the verse is on the activity and power of the Word of God (the Scriptures): “For 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 (*indicative of the body*); it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Donald Guthrie, in the Tyndale Commentary on Hebrews states: “Although it has been suggested that the division is of the soul (*psyche*) from spirit (*pneuma*), it seems better to suppose that the penetration is into soul as well as spirit, i.e. its action brings out the true nature of both. In this case, the Word would be seen as penetrating the whole person, both soul and spirit.” In explaining further the difference between spirit and soul he says: “The New Testament use of pneuma for the human spirit focuses on the spiritual aspect of man, i.e. his life in relation to God, whereas psyche refers to man’s life irrespective of his spiritual experience, i.e. his life in relation to himself, his emotions and thought.”

In light of the evidence of the tri-partite nature of man, God wants you to offer your BODY as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), thank Him for saving your SOUL (I Peter 1:9) and worship Him in SPIRIT and truth (John 4:23,24).

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