

**Humanity: Constitutional Nature, II**

Let us pray.

*Father, we praise You for answered prayer. We ask You to work in these lives and situations that we have brought before You. Thank You for answering our prayers in the past, Lord, it gives us greater occasion to praise You. We thank You, Father. We commit our class time to You. Teach us further about the way You made us. Teach us about sin and its ruinous effects on our lives that we might be quicker to confess our own sins, that we might be burdened to reach unsaved people who are burdened down with guilt and misery of their own sins, Father, and even do not realize it. Lord, use it to reach the lost. Make this time profitable in your sight and for our lives we ask through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.*

Our goal for this lecture is to finish up our discussion of the doctrine of humanity, especially the nature of human beings. You remember last time we talked about different views as to the constitutional nature of human beings. Monism claims that we are indivisible, and thus, are not made up of any parts. When we die that is the end of us—there is no separable soul or spirit. This is the view of modern philosophy and theology for the most part. Dichotomy disagrees on the basis of biblical teaching concerning an intermediate state. We have to affirm that we are made of two parts: a material body and an immaterial spirit or soul. Trichotomy says that is right but we can go one step further. The immaterial part is subdivided in Scripture into two separate entities—a soul and a spirit—which are distinguishable in definable ways. Holistic dualism is a modern spin on dichotomy. I will tell you that I receive it heartily for it emphasizes that, although we are made of two parts—which we know from what happens at death, so in that sense I would ascribe to anthropological dichotomy or dualism—the normal state of affairs is a holistic dualism. Body and soul are united together in one. This is the way we were created by God. It is the way we live in the present state. It is the way we will be after the resurrection of the dead and henceforth, forever. The only exception is that aberration called death which involves the abnormal separation of our immaterial and material parts. Now God’s grace is such that it even conquers death so that Paul could say, “To be absent from the body”—for a believer—“is to be present with the Lord.” It is good, in our present state, to be alive in the body and to know God. We are forgiven, but we are forgiven sinners and the effects of sin are still with us. It is better, since Paul says so in Philippians 1, “To depart the body and to be with Christ.” The best is yet to come in which we will again be unified in body and soul and be able to enjoy the Lord forever. So those are the three positions. Last time we eliminated the monistic position by virtue of our study wherein these three biblical passages teach the existence of this interim or intermediate existence. There are many more passages, such as Hebrews 12, which speak of the spirits of just men made perfect, not meaning the resurrection of the dead. Revelation 6 speaks of souls under the altar crying out for vengeance from God before the Last Day and before the resurrection of the dead. Those human beings are existent but separated from their bodies—they have been martyred. Because of these, we reject monism. Compare the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 4, which speaks of Creation: Section 2 says, “God created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls.” There the notion of immortal souls means that our spiritual part, our souls, survive bodily death.

Now it is a debate between dichotomy and trichotomy. Here I want to look carefully at the two proof texts for trichotomy. I am convinced, if it were not for 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, there would be no such thing as trichotomy. To anticipate a discussion later on, you might be asking yourself the “so-what question.” For example, let us say the trichotomists are wrong and they subdivide us into an extra part, so what does that matter? Does it necessarily mean that somebody gets into theological or practical trouble? No. Have people gotten into theological and practical trouble by virtue of that division? Yes. Let us work with these texts and then I will cite names, books, and examples of such

people. I will say you could be a fine Bible-believing Christian and hold to trichotomy as long as you do with your trichotomy what the Bible does with it, which is nothing. If it does nothing with it, should that not make me question that distinction? I think so, but if you are an inactive trichotomist and do not build a doctrine of the Christian life upon it, it could end up being a harmless distinction. But let us look at these two texts and see if they really do teach that we are made up of two immaterial entities. That there are distinctions in the Bible at times between spirit and soul I do not deny and nobody needs to deny. But trichotomy says much more than that. Trichotomy says these are separate constituents of our being. They are divisible parts of human nature. I am not saying soul and spirit are always absolutely identical—although I can show you some contexts in which it looks like that to me—and they may well be distinguished in these two passages. But the question is do these passages intend to teach that they are distinct entities of our makeup? It seems to me the best answer is no.

In 1 Thessalonians 5, after some final instructions, we have a wish prayer, “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. The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it. Brothers, pray for us. Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” Paul has completed a list of practical exhortations in the previous verse. He now uses two unusual verbal forms in Greek to express a wish prayer. There are different types of literature within the New Testament: the Gospels, the book of Acts, letters, and an apocalypse. Within those four genres are subgenres and a wish prayer is such. It is both a combination of an expression of good will for somebody else—hence, wish—and also an expression of good will directed toward God in the form of a prayer, hence the designation, wish prayer. F. F. Bruce in *The Word Biblical Commentary on First Thessalonians* cites more of this including a reference to somebody’s dissertation on the matter, if you are really interested in pursuing it further. Paul offers up a wish prayer for the Thessalonian Christians. He prays that God might sanctify them, that is the first verb, verse 23, and in the middle of the verse he prays that “it” might be kept. “It” is their whole spirit, soul, and body. Paul puts the word “God” up front and even uses a form that causes him to underline it, as it were, and hence the NIV translates “may God Himself;” the emphasis is on God and God’s doing what Paul is praying. Also, there is guarantee in verse 24: “The one who calls you is faithful and He will do it.” So this is not a wish in the sense of our wishing somebody well or hoping against hope; no, there is real confidence here in the apostle’s prayer. The wish prayer of 5:23-24 can be profitably compared with an earlier one that we find at the end of chapter 3. For the sake of time, let me just summarize. Each of these points can be proved so this is not speculation. Each begins with a “Himself” reference. Each follows it with a reference to God Himself, including Christ in the first place. Third, both use the same verbal form to express the actual wish prayer. Fourth, both speak of holiness. And fifth, both end on an eschatological note; they both go to the future. What is the big deal of that? Nothing, although I will come back to it later. I will just note in passing that in the earlier wish prayer Paul prayed: “May God strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones.” Just tuck away in the back of your mind this reference to hearts.

Paul had earlier said important things about sanctification in 1 Thessalonians. Now he prays that God would bring about this sanctification. For example, in chapter 4 he says, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality.” Sexual immorality, particularly, is the aspect of sanctification he speaks of there. He gave instructions about it earlier and now he prays that God would bring about this sanctification. He asks God to consecrate the Thessalonians, in verse 23 of chapter 5, by saying, “Wholly”—the word means through and through—“May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify”—consecrate or make you holy—“through and through.” This prayer for sanctification is so important to the apostle that in another sentence he basically repeats the thought just expressed. Of the

two sentences, the second one does not add a whole lot of new information. It is a reinforcement of the first. Although they are not identical, it is a reinforcement of the same idea. He prays this time that the Thessalonians would be kept—obviously by God—blamelessly until the Lord Jesus comes again. He expands on the concept of verse 23, of his readers being wholly sanctified. There he prayed, “May God Himself sanctify wholly”—or through and through. Now he amplifies that; he says, “May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blamelessly.” “Through and through” or “wholly” now becomes opened up and becomes your whole spirit, soul, and body. It is more emphasis; it is giving more detail. He prays that their whole spirit, soul, and body might be preserved blamelessly at the coming of the Lord Jesus. “Your whole spirit, soul and body” is an expansion of wholly. Paul asks that God might keep the Thessalonians in the entirety of their beings at the time Christ comes again. His emphasis is on the unity of their persons; even those who would appeal to this as proof for trichotomy ought to agree with this because it is not speculation. His emphasis is clearly on the unity of their persons. Why do I say that? Because the verb is singular: may “it” be kept; so he is viewing them holistically; may your whole spirit, soul, and body—viewed as a unit—be kept blamelessly. Furthermore, the adjective “whole” is also singular. The emphasis is on the entirety of their beings rather than on their individual parts. Nevertheless, we must admit that their whole beings are spoken of by listing various aspects of human nature—some would say parts. There are at least two parts; humans are body, soul and spirit. Body refers to our material part. Spirit and soul either refer to two more parts or together they refer to our immaterial part. I certainly acknowledge some difference between spirit and soul in this text, although it is easier to say that than to biblically define it. The definitions I read last time of “soul” and “spirit” from the New Scofield Reference Bible, which takes the trichotomist position, do not hold up to a complete induction in Scripture, as we will see soon. You could do it selectively. The only way you could make it work is by excluding quite a bit of the evidence and saying, “It works here and it works there, but it does not work in these other places.” I do not think we ought to do our word studies in that way. In any case, I do not think that two distinct constituents of human nature are implied here any more than by similar expressions of humanity’s total being in both testaments. For example, in Deuteronomy 6:4 Moses says, “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Did he intend for us to understand heart and soul as different aspects of our being? No, you are missing the point. It is His way of saying that we are to love the Lord our God with all that we are and have. But He communicates it in that beautiful prose by expanding it. My contention is, it is exactly the same type of thing that Paul is doing in 1 Thessalonians 5, or how about Jesus’ words in which he refers back to Deuteronomy and says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” found in Matthew 22:37. Did Jesus really intend for us to say that we have three immaterial parts—heart, soul, and mind? It was never intended. It is a way of emphasizing, by listing aspects of our makeup. Why do we do it in one place and not in another? Maybe we should be tetrachotomists and have four parts if you push this way of interpreting the Bible. What do others think? F. F. Bruce comments: “It is precarious to construct a tri-partite, three part, doctrine of human nature on the juxtaposition, the putting right next to each other, of the three nouns spirit, soul, and body. The three together give further emphasis to the completeness of sanctification for which the writers (Paul, Silas, and Timothy) pray, according to the first verse of the letter. But the three together add but little to the sense “of your hearts” in 3:13. The distinction between the bodily and spiritual aspects of human nature is easily made. I might add from other Scriptures, but to make a comparable distinction between spirit and soul is forced, he says. His point is that this distinction was not intended by Paul. It is a beautiful literary way, even as the other passages I cited say, “Love the Lord your God with all you are and have,” this says basically says that God will sanctify you completely in the totality of your being.

Also notice Bruce’s comparison of “your hearts” from the wish prayer in Chapter 3 with “body, soul and spirit” from this wish prayer. Where would heart fit in a trichotomist view of human nature? You say it

would not, he never intended that in chapter 3. Then why does he intend it now in chapter 5? So here is my claim: our trichotomist brothers and sisters are making a mistake. They are, sort of, literalizing the Bible and missing the purpose of the language, which is rather to make an emphasis toward the entirety of our sanctification and not to give us a list of immaterial entities.

Let us go to Hebrews 4. Often I have found students were taught trichotomy in a dogmatic way—by just reading the verse and saying, “Hebrews 4:12 says, ‘separation of soul and spirit,’ that proves it.” I find, from a careful examination in the case, it could mean something else, and that it does. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews has been warning his readers of the danger of disobedience in the preceding context. In verse 4 he speaks of God’s Word. Hebrews 4:1 says, “Let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it,” which refers to the promise of entering God’s rest. And then verse 11 says, “Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.” If I had taken Hebrews 4:12 out of this context, not given you the reference or the verse, you would be a pretty good Bible student if you could put it in the proper context in your mind because it is a verse that is often isolated. Of course, we should not do that. “For the Word of God”—notice the conjunction “for”—“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. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” How do these verses fit in the context? The Word of God is further described here. In verse 12 the writer to the Hebrews speaks of God’s Word being able to penetrate to the depths of a person’s being to reveal disobedience within. Do not be faithless and do not be disobedient, for he says here is God’s instrument, God’s spiritual x-ray machine, to search us out in the nooks and crannies of our hearts. God’s Word will expose disobedience. God’s Word will expose lack of faith. That seems to be the contextual tie-in.

There are five adjectives to describe the Word in terms of this dynamic heart-searching function. I do not claim that all five are identical, but they are not totally different either. They are five ways of saying something pretty similar. And again, the five are given by way of emphasis. He begins with, “For the Word of God is living and active.” God’s Word here is spoken of as dynamic or living, and “active,” which means powerful. That is, it is able to accomplish the purposes for which God uttered it. Compare this to Isaiah 55:11: God’s Word “will not return to Me empty, but will accomplishing what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” It is the powerful Word of the living God. The Word of God is further described as “sharper than any double-edged sword” in that it pierces human beings both without and within. The Word is able to penetrate the human heart and disclose any disobedience lurking there—this is a contextual interpretation. The passage then says, “It pierces to the division of soul and spirit.” That is how minutely it works and “it penetrates to the separation of joints and marrow.” Here is God’s instrument for really getting deep inside of us. Are we to understand these two pairs of nouns as designating the constituents of humanity’s nonmaterial makeup—soul and spirit—and material makeup—joints and marrow—and, hence, parts on each side, nonmaterial parts and material parts? One may say, “yes indeed,” and give as evidence the fact that joints and marrow are distinctive entities in our bodily makeup, but one immediately encounters a difficulty, however; there are many other parts of humanity’s physical being: skin, bones, and so forth. Joints and marrow do not exhaustively describe humanity’s material composition. Rather, they seem to be used as that which is very hard to separate. Some commentators think that it is a reference to the priestly function in the preparing of sacrifices. An experienced priest, similar to an experienced butcher, could make that cut. Perhaps that is the background as far as the terminology goes. In any case, here it is used of human beings and it is used of a very delicate, a very tiny, separation.

Furthermore, our text goes on to describe the Word of God as able to judge the thoughts and deliberations of the heart. The Word of God is living, it is active, it is sharper, it penetrates, and, fifthly, it judges—"It judges the thoughts and deliberations of the heart." How does heart, *kardia*, in Greek, relate to soul and spirit? Is humanity composed of three nonmaterial entities? No, that was never intended and it misses the point. It is safer to regard the division of soul and spirit as, quoting F. F. Bruce in another commentary, "rhetorical accumulation of terms to express the whole being of humanity." That is similar to 1 Thessalonians. It is rhetoric, a way of speaking, there to speak of the total wholeness God will give us and the delicate divisions that the Word can pierce unto. The point is that no separation could be more intimate than that between soul and spirit or between joints and marrow. The penetrating Word of God is able to judge our inmost thoughts. It probes in the inmost recesses of our spiritual being and brings the subconscious motives to light. That is exactly the point in the context. Thoughts and deliberations are not to be construed as minute differentiations of the mental life of human beings. They are virtually synonymous and describe further the searching qualities of God's Word. The next verse goes on to tell how all creation is open and laid bare before God's eyes. Nothing is hidden from Him. In context again, the writer is urging his readers to obedience by describing God's intimate knowledge of the human heart.

If trichotomists agree that this is a very minute separation—soul and spirit are such hard things to separate that no human being could do it, only God could—would not that contradict their own theology? No, it would not have to be a contradiction of their theology. They could say this indicates that these are separable parts but very hard to separate. They could get the point of both of these passages, so that is not the problem. The problem is when they take this rhetorical accumulation of terms here or very similar in 1 Thessalonians, and not only understand them that way, but further, literalize them as if they were giving a schematic of our immaterial life, saying that these are different constituents or parts of our makeup. It does not seem to be the intention of these passages. The definitions that the Scofield Reference Bible gives are nowhere given in the Bible; nowhere do we have soul and spirit distinguished and defined in some type of way. This looks, to me, like an inadequate basis for making a theological distinction in terms of parts.

The point is made that this passage speaks of the Word of God, meaning the Scriptures, maybe especially preached. But since Christ is also spoken of as the Word of God in John 1, 1 John 1, and Revelation 19, and in the Gospels we have records of Christ able to read the hearts of people He is dealing with, especially his opponents, is this not a demonstration in the Incarnate Word of the heart-searching function of the Word spoken of here? I agree heartily, though our passage does not speak of Christ.

Before I point to passages problematic for trichotomy, I hinted earlier at errors. I feel badly criticizing some of these people because they have far more good than bad in things they have said, but there have been examples throughout Christian history, especially more recent history of abuses along these lines. I will again say what I said earlier: you could be a trichotomist and not get into any trouble with it as long as you did not build a doctrine of the Christian life upon it. Where some people have, they have gone astray. For example, the godly martyr for Christ, Watchman Nee, taught a doctrine of the Christian life that epitomized releasing the spirit. This is simply not what the Bible teaches as the epitome of the Christian life. How about Bill Gothard? His *Institutes for Basic Youth Conflicts* have helped many people. My wife and I went once and we profited. But, I am told—on good authority by pastor friends who have gone to his pastor seminars—that Bill holds to trichotomy; he does things with it and ends up with a teaching on marriage that is potentially destructive of the marriage relationship. He believes in a spiritual marriage that downplays the physical aspects of marriage. Bill seems have the gift of singleness himself and does not need a wife. The Bible acknowledges such a thing. For him to discourage husbands

and wives to enjoy sexual intercourse in the name of a view of spiritual marriage runs afoul of 1 Corinthians 7 where couples are encouraged to frequently enjoy each other in that way. In the context of abstaining they are to devote themselves to prayer but must be careful lest they be tempted, which is actual encouragement of frequent marital relations in that way. Pentecostal pastor friends have told me of an older teaching they abandoned that was based on a trichotomist view of human nature whereby the deep teaching of the Holy Spirit was given directly to the human spirit thus bypassing the mind. A man I know who is a Pentecostal pastor said, at that time in his ministry, he would not study the Bible for hours, but instead he would pray for hours, seeking these deep things of the spirit to be impressed directly and immediately upon his human spirit, bypassing his mind. Now he says he would not blame on the Holy Spirit what He said in His messages in those days. He is a godly man and not afraid to laugh at himself. He says now he does pray and he keeps praying, but he also prays while he studies and looks to the Holy Spirit to guide him as he studies the Word of God. Charles Solomon is a psychologist and Bible teacher who likewise makes some distinctions and ends up with a “let go and let God” approach, which has some good things to it. Certainly God is the primary actor in the Christian life, but the New Testament pictures of the Christian life do not encourage us to let go. Think of the images of farmer, athlete, and soldier. Those people do not let go; they work hard, and we, too, are to work hard at the Christian life under God’s lordship, trusting utterly in His power.

Again I will say it: people holding these views do not have to get into error. One of the abiding concerns of my own studying of Bible teachings for years now is not only to know what the Bible teaches, but also to know why it teaches what it teaches. When you study the doctrine of predestination, why does the Bible give that doctrine? Teach it and use that doctrine for the purposes God gave it originally and you will be safe; you will be protected from harm. If we all consistently follow this, it would even blunt the effects of our errors because, if we kept within the function of Scripture, we would be much safer. In any case, the Bible never uses trichotomy; I think it does not even teach it, but it never uses it to build a teaching on the Christian life.