

Some Thoughts about a Biblical View of Personality

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Theological theories about the nature of human beings can be categorized as either partitive or aspective theories. Partitive theories teach that human beings are composed of either two (dichotomous) or three (trichotomous) identifiable, divisible *parts or substances*. The dichotomous view teaches that humans are composed of a material substance (body) and an immaterial substance (soul or spirit). The trichotomous view teaches that humans are composed of three differentiable substances (body, soul and spirit are each unique substances). Trichotomous views are frequently found in books on Christian psychology, including the work of Bill Gothard (1979), Charles Solomon (1982), Tim LaHaye (1986), and Watchman Nee (1968). Dichotomous views are frequently found among those writers who have interacted with Reformed theology at some time in their theological development (e.g., Jay Adams, 1986, Larry Crabb, 1987).

Holism is less well known within the Christian community. It is an aspective view of human beings, and teaches that humans *in their present state* are an indivisible unity. They are *not* composed of differentiable (or ontologically distinguishable) substances:

- 1) *Body* refers to the *whole person* in one's mortality, that is, with the limitations and human frailties that come with having a physical body (Ladd 1974, 458).
- 2) *Soul* generally refers to the *whole person* as a living being related to other human beings. It refers to a human as a thinking, feeling, choosing, social being (Ladd 1974, 458–59).¹
- 3) *Spirit* sometimes has considerable overlap with soul, that is, it refers to the whole person as a living (as opposed to nonliving) being. The difference is that soul emphasizes the whole person *in relation to other humans*, while spirit emphasizes the *whole person* in his or her capacity for a relationship with God (Ladd 1974, 458–59).

We use words aspectively quite often when we talk about people. For example, we may say a person is a mother, a wife, a daughter, a teacher, or a full-time homemaker. Each description refers to an aspect of her whole being; there is no differentiable part that can be separated from other parts and labeled mother, wife, daughter, teacher, or homemaker.

If we look at the biblical texts we find that it is possible to read holistic, dichotomistic or trichotomistic definitions into many of them. What hermeneutical principle should be used to decide whether an aspective or partitive definition of these words should be used when we interpret Scripture?

¹However, soul and spirit are sometimes used interchangeably, as in “What does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26). See also Luke 1:46-47, where soul and spirit are used in a parallelism that suggests that, in this context, they are being used as synonyms.

From a hermeneutical perspective the correct answer to this question would be—*How did the Old and New Testament writers intend their words to be understood?* While it is likely that the Old and New Testament writers were not intending to make ontologically precise distinctions about the nature of human beings, a growing consensus among OT and NT scholars holds that the Hebrews understood humans holistically and used words like body, soul and spirit generally in a holistic rather than partitive sense. A partial listing of works written in the second half of the twentieth century suggesting this growing recognition follows:

- a. *The Pauline View of Man*, by W. D. Stacy (1956).
- b. *Man: The Image of God*, by G. C. Berkouwer (1962).
- c. The section on anthropology in *The Theology of Saint Paul*, by D. E. H. Whiteley (1964).
- d. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittell and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (1964–76). See, for example, vol. 7, p. 1064.
- e. “The Concept of Soul in Psychology and Religion,” J. F. K. Howard, *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, (December 1972): pp. 147–54.
- f. The chapter on Pauline anthropology (Pauline personality theory) in *A Theology of the New Testament*, by George Eldon Ladd (1974).
- g. “The Psyche in Psychology and Theology,” Basil Jackson, *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, Winter, 1975.
- h. “Romans,” by E. F. Harrison, in *Expositors Bible Commentaries*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (1976), 10:90.
- i. “2 Corinthians,” by Murray Harris, in *Expositors Bible Commentaries*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (1976) 10:345.
- j. Part 2, chapters 3 and 4 of *The Human Puzzle: Psychological Research and Christian Belief*, by David G. Myers (1978).
- k. “What God Hath Joined: The Psychospiritual Unity of Personality,” David Benner, *Christian Association for Psychological Studies Bulletin* 5, no. 2 (1979).
- l. *Christian Theology* (1985) and *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (1992), both by Millard Erickson.
- m. *Created in God’s Image*, by Anthony Hoekema (1986).
- n. “Anthropology,” by J. E. Colwell, in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (1988), 28–30.
- o. *Renewal Theology*, by J. Rodman Williams (1988).
- p. E. S. Kalland (1992), in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 3:64–65.
- q. Probably the finest multivolume set discussing the meaning of Greek words, written by a team of scholars, is *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Nearly every article in it concerning human personality is written from a holistic perspective (Brown, 1975, 1978; Esser, 1976; Schutz, 1975; Sorg, 1976; Thiselton, 1975).

Objection: We might be inclined to ask: Why then do so many Christian writers (including Christian mental health writers) and older theologians talk about human beings as dichotomous or trichotomous?

One possible answer: We’ve been brought up in a Greek-influenced culture. The Greeks believed in a partitive view of human nature. Human beings were composed of a body, their corporeal substance, and a soul, a noncorporeal substance. During the early years of the Christian era the church substituted partitive Greek definitions of words for the holistic definitions intended by the Hebrew authors (Erickson 1985, 520), and we have continued to use these definitions ever since, not realizing that we may have been giving these words different definitions than the biblical authors intended.

While some liberal theologians recognized the influence of Greek culture as much as 100 years ago, most conservative evangelical theologians have only come to recognize this influence and to recognize that the Old and New Testament writers were writing out of a Hebrew, not a Greek mindset in the last forty years. Many of the standard systematic theologies (Berkhof 1941; Buswell 1962; Chafer 1947; Strong 1907; etc.) were written in the 1940s or before, and so reflect the dichotomistic and trichotomistic views of those days.

However, more recent theological works such as George Eldon Ladd's highly respected *A Theology of the New Testament* (1974), the many articles related to the nature of man in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (1975, 1976, 1978), Erickson's highly regarded *Christian Theology* (1985), and J. Rodman Williams' *Renewal Theology* (1988) all reflect the awareness that the Hebrews used these words holistically. Ladd (1974), for example, says:

Paul's view of man has been interpreted in three ways. Scholars of an older generation understood 1 Thessalonians 5:23, where Paul prays for the preservation of spirit, soul and body, to be psychological statement and understood Paul in terms of trichotomy: spirit, soul, and body are three separable parts of man. Other scholars have interpreted Paul against the background of Greek dualism and have seen a dichotomy of soul and body. Recent scholarship has recognized that such terms as body, soul and spirit are not different, separable faculties of man but different ways of viewing the whole man. (457)

Thus if we believe that to interpret the Bible's meaning accurately we must understand the words as the authors intended them to be understood, then we should understand human beings holistically, at least when reading Scripture.

Objection: But what about Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23? Don't they require a trichotomous understanding of man?

Response: Hebrews 4:12 was not intended to be a discussion of the constitutional nature of human beings, and should not be so used. Highly respected biblical expositor Leon Morris (1981) says on this passage:

We should not take the reference to "soul" and "spirit" as indicating a dichotomist" over against a "trichotomist" view of man, nor the reference to "dividing" to indicate that the writer envisaged a sword as slipping between them. Nor should we think of the sword as splitting off "joints" and "marrow." What the author is saying is that God's Word can reach to the innermost recesses of our being. We must not think that we can bluff our way out of anything, for there are no secrets hidden from God. . . . The Word of God passes judgment on men's feelings (*enthymeseon*) and on their thoughts (*ennoion*). Nothing evades the scope of this Word. What man holds as most secret he finds subject to its scrutiny and judgment. (44).

Just as God's Word did with the ancient Israelites, it was doing with believers who were part of the New Covenant era: penetrating to the depths of their personalities to reveal where their true commitments lay. Modern commentators generally agree that it is inappropriate to base a theory of trichotomy on this passage (Bruce 1964; Morris 1981).

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.” The author’s intention here, as in Hebrews 4:12, is not to give a discourse on the nature of human. This is more likely a rhetorical device (*hendiatriis*) emphasizing Paul’s desire that their entire being be set apart as holy and kept blameless until the second coming of Christ (see, for example, Leon Morris 1959; for an opposing view see Thomas 1978, pp. 294–295.)

Other Reasons for Believing in a Holistic View of Man

Scriptural writers frequently use “body,” “soul,” and “spirit” interchangeably to refer to the whole person. This makes sense if they are using the words holistically. It doesn’t make sense if the words refer to parts of man that are divisible from one another and different in substance.

Following are just a few examples of the many that might be cited:

- a) Body—*soma*. Romans 12:1 “Present your bodies (your entire selves) as a living sacrifice.”
- b) 1 Co. 9:27 “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” (Paul kept his entire self, not just his body, in a state of self-discipline.)
- c) Soul—*psuche*. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 “We love you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our souls as well (our entire selves).”
- d) Spirit—*pneuma*. Romans 8:16 “The Holy Spirit testifies with our spirit (with our entire personality) that we are God’s children.”

Understanding humans in a consistently partitive fashion requires that we be ochtochotomists, for Scripture speaks of eight parts of man that have psychological denotations—body, soul, spirit, heart, mind, strength, liver, and flesh (e.g., Lam. 2:11 (KJV); Matt. 15:19; 22:37; Mark 12:33; John 6:63; 1 Thess. 5:23).

Dichotomous and trichotomous theories don’t make sense conceptually. For example, both of these theories place the intellect, emotions and will in the soul. But do we do no thinking, feeling and deciding in our spiritual relationship to God? Second, if thinking, feeling and deciding occur in the substance of the soul, which activity occurs in the body (that is, the brain)? Third, if the trichotomous view is correct, then we have a physical brain, but we must also have a second kind of mind—a soulish brain, and third, a spiritual brain (e.g., Kylstra and Kylstra 1996). And yet that does not seem to be how we function. When an electrical impulse goes through certain neurons in our physical brain it produces a psychological thought or feeling or decision (Medina 1996), and that thought or feeling or decision can take us either closer to or farther away from fellowship with God (the spiritual part of that process). These three processes are a single functioning unity—not parallel processes taking place in three different kinds of substances that just happen to be perfectly correlated.

If the body and soul are substantially different parts of man, and intellect, emotions and will are part of the soul rather than of the body, then why is it that damage to the body (brain damage) effects our ability to think, to feel, and to make wise choices? Fifth, many organically based mental illnesses (e.g., mental retardation, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, etc.) are bodily based genetic defects but significantly affect soulish functions (interpersonal relationships) and spiritual functions. This doesn’t make sense if they are different substances, for what happens to one substance would not necessarily affect the other substances of which man is composed.

Objection: But couldn't these substances *interact* with one another, rather than be totally independent? Thus damage to the body could *indirectly* affect soulish functioning and spiritual functioning?

Response: They could, but the relationship between damage to *the body* (e.g., brain damage or hormonal dysfunctions) and the deterioration in psychological or spiritual functioning is very specific. For example, a lesion of a tumor in a certain part of the brain causes very specific difficulties in psychological functioning, and these specific difficulties occur regularly among most people who have this specific damage to the brain. The correlation between damage to a certain part of the body and the specific psychological and/or spiritual difficulties it causes suggests that the *brain* is what causes the person to think and feel and make decisions, not just that the brain interacts with a nonmaterial substance to cause the specific decrements in functioning.

Objection: But what about death? Doesn't the separation of the body from the personality at death demonstrate that we are composed of both a material and an immaterial substance?

Response: It is possible that something that is one integrated unit at a certain point in time can subsequently be separated into two different substances. For example, water can be separated into hydrogen and oxygen. The fact that it can be separated through electrolysis does not mean that the atoms were not integrated into one unit at an earlier point in time. In a similar way, the fact that our personalities are separated from our physical bodies during the intermediate state (and we will temporarily be in a state of incompleteness—2 Cor. 5:1–8) does not mean that God has not created us as integrated biological, psychological and spiritual beings in our present state.

The question is not whether we have difficulty conceptualizing what we will be like during the time between death and when we are given our glorified bodies. The question is what these words meant to the Hebrew writers whom God inspired to write the Bible? And the consensus is that the Hebrew writers were writing out of a holistic rather than a Greek (partitive) mind-set.

Objection: Don't New Age religions often embrace holism? Won't we decrease the difference between Christianity and the New Age religions if we accept this concept?

Response: As has been shown above, the biblical writers accepted a holistic view of human beings thousands of years before New Age religions appeared. We should not abandon a biblical understanding simply because another religion also adopts it.

Almost every theorist who claims to be a partivist conceptually becomes a holist when he starts to explain how human beings function. For example, Clyde Narramore (1960) is a trichotomist; J. Oliver Buswell (1962) is a dichotomist, as are Jay Adams (1986) and Larry Crabb (1987). Yet each of these persons, claiming to be an ontological partivist, becomes a holist when trying to explain human functioning. Whenever we have to move from the theory we claim to be right to another theory in order to explain how something works, it should make us question the validity of our first theory.

For the above five reasons I believe that the holistic view of man's nature is both hermeneutically more valid and more commensurate with the biblical and psychological data than either of the partitive views.

Question: We've been used to defining the words related to human personality in partitive senses. What would holistic definitions of these words look like?

DEFINITIONS (from a holistic perspective)

Explanatory note: All words existing in a language for any length of time develop a variety of meanings, or denotations. When you look at a word in a dictionary and see (1) followed by a definition, (2), and so on, each of these is a denotation. Similarly, biblical words, including those that sometimes refer to human personality, have a variety of denotations. Thus, each word below will often include two or more definitions:

1. *soma* (body): can mean either (1) a corpse, (2) the body in a general biological sense, or (3) (psychological denotation) the whole person. “The body is not something external to man which, as it were, is added to his essential self or soul. Man does not *have* a soma [body], he is soma” (Motyer 1975, 235).
2. *sarx* (flesh): can refer to (1) body in a nonmoral sense (neither good nor bad) or (2) (psychological denotation) a set of thoughts or attitudes that are in direct contrast to godly thoughts and attitudes. Contrary to the thinking of some writers, the flesh itself is not bad (see denotation 1), but a fleshly mindset (denotation 2) is.
3. *psyche* (soul): can refer to (1) a living being or (2) (psychological denotation) to the whole person as a striving, willing, purposing self (Ladd 1974, p. 460).
4. *pneuma* (spirit): “that aspect of man through which God most immediately encounters him; that dimension of the whole man wherein and whereby he is most immediately open and responsive to God” (Dunn 1978, p. 693). The Holy Spirit works in our spirit to produce a mind-set that is in direct contrast to the fleshly mind-set (Gal. 5:17 [KJV] “the flesh lusteth against the Spirit”). When used in this way, the “flesh” refers to our sinful nature (which is the way the NIV translators translated the word *sarx* in this context). The Holy Spirit works within our spirit to produce attitudes that are compatible with God’s will for us as humans, and that generally are contrary to fleshly (sinful) attitudes. The word is sometimes used of human’s self-awareness or self-consciousness (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:11), another example of how it is impossible to make sharp distinctions between *pneuma* (spirit) and *psyche* (soul).
5. *suneidesis* (conscience): Conscience is the ability to reflect upon one’s past actions and either feel convicted or approved. There appear to be some basic ideas that God places in our conscience but which can be subverted (e.g., Rom. 1:18–32). However, many of the ideas of right and wrong found in our consciences are produced by family or societal upbringing. The conscience can be scarred, so it no longer performs its function of warning us of personal wrongdoing. Therefore the Holy Spirit and our consciences are not synonymous.
6. *leb* or *kardia* (heart): (1) “a comprehensive term for the personality as a whole, its inner life, its character. It is the conscious and deliberate spiritual activity of the self-contained human ego. . . It is the person, the thinking, feeling, willing ego of man, with particular regard to his responsibility to God, that the NT denotes by the use of *kardia*” (Sorg 1976, 181–82). (2) The word “heart” in the OT and NT is sometimes used as a synonym for conscience (e.g., Rom. 2:14), sometimes as a synonym for the mind (e.g., Rom. 1:21; Eph. 1:18), and sometimes as a synonym for the will (1 Cor. 4:5; Rom. 2:5; 6:17). The wide diversity of ways it is used argues against the possibility of dividing personality up into discrete parts.
7. *nous* (mind): the biblical writers do not use the word “mind” to refer to a person’s intellectual processing capability independent of his moral stance. Biblically the concept of “mind” refers to our capacity for religious knowledge and insight, which can distinguish between good and bad.

(Harder 1978, 127). In modern psychological terminology it refers to a *mind-set*, a set of attitudes that correspond in varying degrees to the set of attitudes God wishes us to possess. For example, “Let this mind [this set of attitudes] be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.”

8. *old man, new man*: The “old man” refers to the entire human personality of a person whose attitudes are characterized by self-centeredness and who tries to earn acceptance through good works. The “new man” is the entire human personality of a person whose attitudes are characterized by God-centeredness and who accepts God’s vicarious atonement as the basis of his acceptability. These two states do not refer (as one Christian counselor stated) to a person before and after psychotherapy.

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