

A Critical Evaluation of Trichotomism: A Response to Biblical References for Trichotomism

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Abstract

This study is a critical study on trichotomism by responding to some Bible texts (1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 4:12; 1 Cor. 2:14-3:4) that are used for trichotomism. The main question that the present study seeks to answer to is “Is trichotomism biblical?” Continued two questions; (1) “How can we understand and explain the Bible references that they use for trichotomism?” and (2) “Can the nature of humanity be divided into three components as trichotomists assertion?” also will be considered.

Keywords: *Monism, Dichotomism, Trichotomism, nature of humanity, immortality of the souls or spirit*

Introduction

When it comes to the nature of humanity, three main views seem to parallel each other. Some believe that humans consist of two distinct parts: a body and a soul; the one material, the other immaterial; the one corporeal, the other spiritual. This view is called Dichotomism (Ward, 1960). Others, especially conservative Protestants, believe that humans are composed of three distinct parts: a body, a soul, and a spirit; σῶμα, ψυχή, πνεῦμα; corpus, anima, and animus. This view is called Trichotomism (Ward, 1960). These two views agree that the nature of humanity is made of separable and distinct components, two or three. In contrast, there is another view that humans are indivisible, a radical unity or a body-soul unity. This view is called Monism which sees the nature of humanity as whole man (Berkouwer, 1962; Ladd, 1974).

The main question that the present study seeks to answer is “Is trichotomism biblical?” From this, there are two subsequent questions, which are: “How can we understand and explain the Bible texts that they use for trichotomism?” and “Can the nature of humanity be divided into three components as asserted by trichotomism?” In order to answer these questions properly, the present study is going to look at and analyze some Bible passages used by adherents of this view. The relevant texts are First Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12, First Corinthians 2:14-3:4. Thus, the specific purpose of this research is to criticize and evaluate trichotomism by responding to some Bible texts that used for trichotomism.

This study has some delimitations. First, this study cannot deal with all the Bible texts, which refer to the term “body,” “soul,” and “spirit.” Just a few texts, which are discussed frequently, will be considered and interpreted. Secondly, this study does not seek to explain the dichotomical understanding of humanity or the monical view of human being because this study intends to evaluate and criticize some Biblical references for trichotomism. Finally, this study will not deal with the problem of the immortality of the soul or spirit.

General Understanding of Trichotomism

Though few contemporary theologians or scholars subscribe to the concept of trichotomism (Grudem, 1994), this view still has significance for proper understanding of the question about “What or who a human being is.” Regarding this significance, Hodge points out that the view of the nature of humanity has “greatly influenced the form in which other doctrines have been presented” (1997, p. 47). In this first section, a background and a general understanding of trichotomism, as well as an explanation and a brief history of trichotomism will be given.

Explanation of Trichotomism

Trichotomism, which has been a common view in popular evangelical Bible teaching, says that the nature of humanity is composed of three distinct elements, and it can be divided into three parts (Ward, 1960; Delitzsch, 1966). The first part is the physical body (σῶμα), which is the material element. The second part is the soul (ψυχή). This is the psychological element. The third is the spirit (πνεῦμα). This is the religious element, which enables man to understand and respond to spiritual and religious matters (Erickson 1998).

According to many trichotomists, human physical bodies, which everyone agrees that humans have, share something in common with animals and even plants. There is only a little difference between human bodies and those of animals. Humans have a more complex physical structure than animals physically. More significant is trichotomists' understanding on "soul" and "spirit." According to trichotomists, human souls, a psychological element, include understanding, feeling, emotion, sensibility, and social interrelatedness. However, this is not so much different from an animal's soul. Possession of a soul is what distinguishes humans and animals from plants. What really distinguishes humans from animals is the spirit, which is the religious element. It is a higher faculty that comes alive when humans become a Christian.

According to trichotomism, therefore, human physical bodies (σῶμα) are the material part; the soul (ψυχή) is the principle of animating personal life; and the spirit (πνεῦμα) is the principle of religious life through which humans can relate with God and the immortal element (Hodge 1997), which distinguishes humans from other creatures and constitute humans as responsible and immortal (Strong 1907). On this difference between the soul and the spirit, Erickson, a dichotomist, critically summarizes and expresses it like this; "it [spirit] is the seat of the spiritual qualities of the individual, whereas personality traits reside in the soul" (Erickson, 1998, 539; cf. Delitzsch, 1966, 116-117; Stacey, 1956, 74).

Brief History of Trichotomism

The trichotomical view on the nature of humanity seems to have "developed from Plato's twofold division, body and soul, through Aristotle's further division of the soul into an (1) animal soul, organic aspect of man's being and a (2) rational soul, the intellectual aspect" (Ward, 1960, pp. 530-531). However, many early Christian Church fathers believed in a body, soul, and spirit distinction in relation to the nature of humanity. Consequently, trichotomical understanding of humans became common in the first three centuries of the Christian church (Bromiley, 1988).

During the Middle Ages, from the days of Augustine (in the 4th century) through the Protestant Reformation (in the 16th century), dichotomism, instead of trichotomism, became a matter of common belief. Furthermore, most of the scholars of the reformation also maintained the dichotomous view of humanity (Berkhof, 1998).

In the 19th century, several British and German theologians had refocused on trichotomism. From Britain came J. B. Heard's *The Tripartite Nature of Man*, and J. T. Beck's *Outlines of Biblical Psychology*. In Germany were Goschel, Delitzsch, and G. F. Oehler. Other works that affirmed this model of man included Ellicott's *Destiny of the Creature* (Strong, 1907).

In the 20th century, some theologians, H. C. Thiessen, L. S. Chafer, M. Cambron, and P. B. Fitzwater, included the trichotomical view of humanity in their systematic theology texts. Other trichotomists' volumes are G. H. Pember's *Earth's Earliest Ages and Their Connection with Modern Spiritualism and Theosophy*, L. T. Holdcroft's *Anthropology: a Biblical View*, Watchman Nee's *The Spiritual Man*, and Dale Moody's *The Word of Truth*.

Summing up, trichotomism is a theory about the nature of humanity, which implies that humans have three different and separable components: body, soul and spirit. Hence, according to trichotomists, humans are beings with three distinct parts. Although most modern theological scholars do not accept trichotomism, the trichotomical view on the nature of humanity has being taught by fundamental Bible teachers and preachers since very early Christian history. What we should notice is that though trichotomical view of humanity may be said to be from Greek thought

instead of from Scripture, and that the resurgence of trichotomism had occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries.

A Response to Biblical References for Trichotomism

The aim of this section is to analyze some Bible texts that trichotomists are using and criticize trichotomical view of man's nature and then finally to evaluate trichotomism. Three relevant Bible passages, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12, and 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4, will be considered. Based on these critiques and evaluations, it will be justified whether trichotomism is Biblical or not.

Biblical References for Trichotomism

Though trichotomical understanding on the nature of humanity originated from Greek metaphysics, the major argument of trichotomism is based on certain Bible passages that either tell three different components of humans or distinguish between the soul and the spirit (Erickson, 1998).

1. First Thessalonians 5:23

The trichotomists find confirmation of their tripartite view of humanity in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may *your spirit and soul and body* be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (NASB). From this text, they appeal to defend the view that humankind was made a tripartite being at creation, consisting of a body, soul, and spirit, each of which is a separate entity or part (Delitzsch, 1966). Their assertion, therefore, is that humankind consists of body, soul, and spirit because this text clearly shows the presence of the three different words that mean distinct parts of humans. In other words, human nature is composed by three distinct and separable components.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:23, the trichotomists notice the coordinate conjunction "and" between "spirit" and "soul," "soul" and "body." Thus, they interpret the coordinate conjunction "and," which conjugates three separate components, "body," "soul," and "spirit." Consequently, they insist that Paul divides humanity into three parts: the spirit, the soul, and the body (Delitzsch, 1966). Therefore, according to trichotomists, this passage presents a clear picture of humanity as the three-fold nature of human beings (Heard, 1875).

2. Hebrews 4:12

Another Bible passage, parallel to 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which is relevantly used for argument by trichotomism, is Hebrew 4:12 (Douglas, Walter, and Peter, 1989). It says;

"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as *the division of soul and spirit*, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

The primary support for trichotomism from this passage is the occurrence of the two words—soul and spirit—in the verse with no positive proof that they are identical. Then, the trichotomists interpret these two objects as distinct and separable. In other words, they assert that the distinction between soul and spirit is clear in this text since the soul can be separated from the spirit.

Consequently, the trichotomists insist that the soul and the spirit are two separate and distinct ontological entities because the soul can be divided from the spirit. They may say; "If the sword of Scripture divides soul and spirit, then are they not two separate parts of man?" (Grudem, 1994, 478). Therefore, the soul and the spirit are two separate and distinct ontological entities in trichotomism.

3. First Corinthians 2:14-3:4

In the last parts of the second and the first parts of the third chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul, the apostle, seems to identify three categories of people for trichotomists. The first category of people is

“spiritual man” (πνευματικός, 1 Cor. 2:15), who has the spirit. The second is “soulish man” (or soulical man) (ψυχικός, 1 Cor. 2:14), who has the soul. The third is “of the flesh” or “carnal” (σαρκίνους, 1 Cor. 3:1), who has only body. Thus, this passage, for trichotomists, means a strong case for them. It shows the distinction between the soul and the spirit because the difference between “natural man” and “spiritual man” is clear in this passage. In other words, trichotomists are trying to divide and distinguish not only between the body and the soul but also between the soul and the spirit (Heard 1875).

The distinction between the soul and the spirit, especially emphasis on the spirit, therefore, is a logical basis for trichotomism. Trichotomists argue that when “natural man” becomes a Christian (“spiritual man”), his or her spirit comes alive. Thus, they clearly distinguish between the one who has only the soul, “natural man” and the one who has the spirit, “spiritual man.”

Furthermore, some trichotomists try to say that since both humans and animals have souls, and what really distinguishes humans from animals is not the soul but the spirit, which only humans have. Mark Cambron says that “plants, animals and man have bodies” but “only animals and man have a soul” and “only man has a spirit” (Cambron, 1954, 158).

Therefore, trichotomists assert that a three-fold organization of human nature may be implied in the classification of three categories of humans as “natural,” “carnal,” and “spiritual,” in 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4. In other words, humankind’s immaterial nature looks like one nature, but is composed of two parts, soul and spirit. Sometimes these two parts are sharply distinguished.

Summing up, trichotomists believe that the Bible describes two different internal components of humans beside the body, the external or the physical/material component of humanity. They assert that this three-fold view of human nature is presented in both 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 2:12. Furthermore, they insist that 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4, which implies the distinction between “natural man” and “spiritual man”, shows the difference between the soul and the spirit as the trichotomical view.

Response to Biblical References for Trichotomism

Although the trichotomical view of humanity is a possible interpretation of some Bible passages, the Bible does not support the trichotomical understanding of the nature of humanity and is even clearly against it. Trichotomism, in the final sense, denies the fundamental presentation of humanity as “an indivisible unity of body, mind [soul], and spirit” (Seventh-day Adventist Believe, 2005, p. 91). By responding to and critiquing these three relevant Bible references, it will be proven whether trichotomism is biblical or not.

1. Response to First Thessalonians 5:23

According to Grudem, the phrase “*your spirit and soul and body*” is not a decisive demonstration for trichotomism by itself (Grudem, 1994). On the other hand, “the structure of this verse makes it clear that the phrase ‘spirit, soul, and body’ is essentially a synonym for ‘you’” (Holmes, 1998, 200). Actually, Paul’s emphasis here is on the wholeness of humanity rather than on constituent elements of humankind (Homes, 1998; cf. Bruce, 1982; Morris, 1959). On this point, John A. T. Robinson’s affirmation is noticeable. He says; “there is no attempt, any more than in the Old Testament, to regard man as a trichotomy or dichotomy of exclusive elements” (Robinson, 1952, 27). For this understanding, three reasons can be presented.

Firstly, it is not suitable to argue that “spirit,” “soul,” and “body” refer to separate entities based on the coordinate conjunction “and” between them. The fact that they are connected by “and” does not warrant any refer to separate entities (Reymond, 1998). For instance, when we are commanded “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” (Luke 10:27), it does not mean that we have or are composed of so many distinct, separated substances. Some assert that the nature of humanity can be understood as multi-faceted: heart, conscience, mind, and will. It is called “multi-faceted view” (Ryrie, 1972). As the words heart, soul, strength, and mind are connected by the

coordinate conjunction “and”, it means wholeness of human being, but not separate entities of human nature. Therefore, Paul uses a periphrasis for indicating the wholeness of humanity in this text (Robinson, 1926).

Secondly, the “spirit,” “soul,” and “body” in this text are synonyms. Woodward (2000) reflects Erickson's (1998) stance that man is a “radical unity,” instead of a consisting of separate parts. This is in line with the monistic understanding, where man is “never treated in the Bible as a dualistic being” (Erickson, 1998, 543). Wayne Grudem, in his responses to arguments for trichotomy, also argues:

“Paul could be simply piling up synonyms for emphasis, as is sometimes done elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Jesus says, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your *heart*, and with all your *soul*, and with all your *mind*’ (Matt. 22:37). Does this mean that the soul is different from the mind or from the heart?” (Grudem, 1994, 478-479).

Thirdly, we should notice that Paul did not intend to make a doctrinal statement in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, but he simply wrote a prayer. Here Paul is praying for the Thessalonians to be totally sanctified and preserved blamelessly until the coming of Christ. It is obvious that when the Apostle Paul prays that the spirit, soul, and body of the Thessalonians may be preserved blamelessly until the coming of Jesus, he is not trying to split human nature into three distinct parts. In the same view, Jesus did not intend to split human nature into four separated parts when He commanded: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

Therefore, Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians did not intend to make a distinction between the three components (spirit, soul, and body) of the nature of humanity. But rather his prayer intended to emphasize the total lifestyle and wholeness of humanity who waits for the second coming of Christ. This obviously concerns the sanctification of the total aspects of humanity (Berkouwer, 1962). This distinction between the three components of the nature of humanity is ethical rather than ontological. Finally, this text does not imply trichotomical understanding on the nature of humanity.

2. Response to Hebrews 4:12

While some trichotomists have interpreted Hebrews 4:12 as proving that the soul and spirit can be separated from each other, the issue is whether the Word of God separates the soul and the spirit or whether it pierces them both (Schweizer, 1974). The main point of this passage, in the context, is that God’s word is like a sword and then it pierces deeply into humankind to slice the soul, the spirit, the joints, and the marrow (Sherlock, 1996; Cf. Murray, 1977). However, it does not mean the soul and spirit are two distinct essences of humankind’s non-material part. The text, therefore, does not assume that the Word of God distinguishes between soul and spirit or divides soul from spirit as distinct parts of human nature (Grudem, 1994). Hodge also argues that Paul “does not assume that soul and spirit are different substances” but tries to say that “the word of God reaches not only to the feelings, but also the conscience” (Hodge, 1997, p. 50).

In other words, Paul is saying that humans can never be hidden from the penetrating power of the Word of God (Reymond 1998). According to Berkower, Paul’s point here is that “this sharp sword [the Word of God] pierces through the whole man; no creature can hide himself before Him, for all things lie open and revealed before God’s eyes (Heb. 4:13)” (Berkower, 1962, p. 210). Therefore, in order to say that the Word of God is very effective for working in or for wholeness of humankind, Paul uses the phrase of “division of the soul and spirit” (Sherlock, 1996, p. 218).

In some ways, Hebrews 4:12 is parallel to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:5: “He [the Lord] will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.” Thus, there is no clear reason to interpret Hebrew 4:12 as teaching a structural distinction between the soul and the spirit in the nature of humans. Therefore, what the text says is that the Word of God has power to penetrate and scrutinize the wholeness of human existence, even the very inwardness of our being, bringing to light the secret motives for our actions.

In conclusion, trichotomists' argument, which is based on Hebrews 4:12, is without substance since the text does not imply ontologically the different components of humanity. In this context, soul and spirit are not separate parts of human nature; they are simply additional figurative terms for wholeness of humanity.

3. Response to First Corinthians 2:14-3:4

In 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4, Paul uses the term "natural man" (ψυχικός) and "spiritual man" (πνευματικός). The use of these terms, to the trichotomist, implies that Paul distinguishes the one who has the spirit, "spiritual man" from the one who has only soul, "natural or soulish man." However, it is a false interpretation caused by their misunderstanding of Paul's intention in the context.

Firstly, for proper understanding on this passage, we should know Paul's intention of using these terms in the context. The "natural man" (ψυχικός), Paul says in this passage, is a humankind who has an unchanged nature, and a man who only lives but has not received the Holy Spirit (Grosheide, 1984; Grudem, 1994; Erickson, 1998). It means the unbeliever. The "spiritual man" (πνευματικός), in contrast with the "natural man" (ψυχικός), refers to the person who is in and with the Holy Spirit. It simply means a believer (Blomberg, 1994). Thus, Grudem suggests that the Greek word πνευματικός in this context must be translated "Spiritual man," who possesses the Holy Spirit, but "spiritual man," who has a spirit because the word πνευματικός seems to mean be "possessed and influenced by the Holy Spirit" (Grudem, 1994, 479). In other words, Paul simply distinguishes the "Spiritual man" who is entirely under the influence of the Holy Spirit from the "natural man" who is destitute of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, the human spirit is not something that is dead in an unbeliever but comes to life when he or she becomes a Christian. The Bible gives many examples of unbelievers having a spirit that is alive but is in rebellion against God. Grudem shows many examples; Sihon, King of Heshbon (Deut. 2:30: the Lord hardened his spirit), Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 5:20: "his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly"), the unfaithful people of Israel (Ps. 78:8: their "spirit was not faithful to God") (1994). Moreover, the spirit is not the unique way by which humans communicate with God. The soul also is a way of religious works. Strong argues: "the highest exercises of religion are attributed to the ψυχή [soul]" (Strong, 1907, 485).

Thirdly, it is true that only humans have spiritual power by which they can relate with God in worship and prayer. We, however, do not need to assume that we have a distinct component called "spirit" because we can love God with our hearts and serve Him with our hearts. Moreover, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (RSV, Rom 5:5) and "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith" (RSV, Eph 3:17).

In conclusion, Paul does not say that some people have the spirit while others have the soul only. The passage, 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4, does not imply that only Christians have a spirit but non-Christians do not, neither is Paul saying that the spirit of a Christian is alive while the spirit of a non-Christian is not. Paul is talking about living with and under the influence of the Holy Spirit; he is not talking about different parts of humans at all (Grudem, 1994).

Summary and Conclusion

Trichotomism is a theory that humans are composed by three distinct and separate components: body, soul, and spirit. Although most scholars do not accept it, fundamental Bible teachers have still taught trichotomical view, which had been influenced by Greek Philosophy.

This study seeks to answer to the question, "Is trichotomism Biblical?" Thus, it tries to analyze and evaluate three Bible references, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12, and 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4, which is relevantly used for the argument of trichotomism.

First, trichotomists assert that 1 Thessalonians 5:23 clearly shows that humans are composed three distinct parts because the three different terms; body, soul, and spirit, are connected by coordinate conjugation "and" in this passage.

However, Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians did not intend to make a distinction between the three components (spirit, soul, and body) of the nature of humanity. But rather his prayer intended to emphasize the total lifestyle and wholeness of humans who wait for the second coming of Christ. Therefore, the text obviously concerns the sanctification of the total aspects of humankind.

Second, trichotomists insist that the two words, soul and spirit, in Hebrews 4:12, are two separate and distinct ontological entities. They assert that the Word of God divides the spirit from the soul as it separates the joints from the marrow.

However, the text should not be taken to mean that the Word of God makes a separation between soul and spirit. Paul's emphasis is that the Word of God is very effective for working in or for wholeness of humankind. Therefore, Paul is saying that humans can never be hidden from the penetrating power of the Word of God.

Third, trichotomists say that I Corinthians 2:14-3:4 show the distinction between the "natural man" and the "spiritual man." Moreover, they assert that when the "natural man" becomes a Christian ("spiritual man"), his or her spirit come alive. Furthermore, some trichotomists try to say that only humans have the spirit and then what really distinguishes the humans from animals is the spirit.

However, the "natural man" (ψυχικός), Paul says in this passage, is an unbeliever who has an unchanged nature, and humans who only live but have not received the Holy Spirit. The "spiritual man" (πνευματικός), in contrast to the "natural man," refers to a believer who is in and with the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the human spirit is not something that dies in an unbeliever and comes to life when he or she becomes a Christian. Furthermore, the spirit is not the unique way by which humans communicates with God.

In conclusion, although trichotomical interpretations of the three Biblical texts have some force, none of them provides conclusive argument for trichotomism. The texts do not support the trichotomist's emphasis upon the separation of the nature of humanity into three distinct parts or components: body, soul, and spirit. On the contrary, the Bible is clearly against trichotomism. Thus, the terms body, soul and spirit, are used for describing humankind as a whole or unity. Consequently, none is a definite Biblical reference to trichotomism in the Bible. Therefore, the answer for the question, "Is trichotomism Biblical?" is NO.

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