

Humanity and Sin

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5. The Immaterial Aspect of Human Nature

The Immaterial Aspect of Human Nature

A portion of the previous chapter attempted to demonstrate that each of us consists of more than a physical body. There is an immaterial part of our being that survives death and (in the case of believers) consciously enters the presence of Christ to await the resurrection. I occasionally referred to this as the “soul,” following common usage, and I tended to avoid some of the other expressions found in the biblical text—for example, the human spirit (distinguished from the animating Breath of God), the heart, the mind, and the “kidneys.” This chapter seeks to clarify that terminology and fill in some of the details about our composition as humans.

Just as our discussion of the body had many implications with regard to bioethical issues, this examination of biblical “psychology” affects the way we approach counseling and personal sanctification. Unfortunately, many of the evangelical resources addressing those topics assume models of human nature that are overly simplistic and biblically indefensible. Such faulty foundations often lead to complex and confusing models of the spiritual life. Ironically a more complex (and more biblically accurate) model of human nature yields a much simpler approach to spirituality. To see that difference, we need to begin by considering some of the suggested models.

How Many Parts Do We Have?

In the last chapter we looked at monistic and dualistic understandings of human nature to determine whether people consist of more than just bodies. That debate is conducted even among non-Christians in areas like brain physiology and philosophy. This chapter introduces a few more models, all of which are essentially forms of dualism because they agree that our material and immaterial aspects are separated at death. The debate over these alternatives is generally confined to the church, and it focuses on the meaning of biblical language.

Paul wrote, “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” (1 Thess. 5:23). Many regard this as a very straightforward description of human nature. As they see it, Paul desired his readers’ entire sanctification, so he mentioned spirit, soul, and body, the three component parts of an individual. This *trichotomous* (“three-part”) view can be described in a variety of ways.

Some say that a plant consists only of body, an animal of body and soul, and humans of body, soul, and spirit. From this perspective, the soul provides physical life and ceases to exist at death (as in animals), while the spirit (with its rational abilities and immortal life) survives and awaits reunification with the body. A different version of this argument maintains that Adam’s spirit died as a result of the Fall, leaving him like an animal. Believers then receive a new spirit (or their spirit comes alive) at regeneration. Another trichotomous model regards the mind as part of the soul (along with emotion and will). From this perspective, the spirit provides God-consciousness, the soul self-consciousness, and the body world-consciousness. The three elements thus represent the spiritual, psychological, and physiological aspects of our humanity.

Such models may look nice on charts for weekend seminars, and they seem to summarize some important points very plainly, but they posit a sharp distinction between “soul”

and “spirit” that cannot be justified biblically. When Mary said, “My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46–47), she was not talking about two different entities within her any more than she was praising two different Gods. She was invoking the typical Hebrew pattern of synonymous parallelism, and she understood “soul” and “spirit” to be different expressions for essentially the same thing—her immaterial being. Similar examples can be multiplied. For example, Job said, “I will speak in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 7:11), and Isaiah wrote, “At night my soul longs for Thee, indeed, my spirit within me seeks Thee diligently” (Isa. 26:9).

Other texts use only one term or the other, but comparing them produces direct parallels. Genesis describes Rachel’s death as the departure of her “soul” (“as her soul was departing,” Gen. 35:18), but Stephen asked the Lord to receive his “spirit” (Acts 7:59; cf. Luke 23:46). Jesus spoke of people consisting of “body and soul” (“Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell,” Matt. 10:28). On the other hand, Paul spoke of “body and spirit” (“that she may be holy both in body and in spirit,” 1 Cor. 7:34; cf. 5:3–5; 2 Cor. 7:1). Jesus said His “soul” was troubled as He neared the cross (John 12:27), but John described it as His “spirit” (13:21). Hebrews speaks of “the spirits of righteous men made perfect” in God’s presence (12:23), but Revelation pictures their “souls” (“I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain,” 6:9; “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded,” 20:4). If the terms are not interchangeable, they at least appear to be referring to the same thing—the immaterial part of a person, which departs the body at death.

The trichotomists also describe the functions of “spirit” and “soul” too distinctively. It is inappropriate to describe the soul as the principle of physical life and the spirit as the principle of spiritual life when they overlap in so many ways. The “soul” can have sinful desires and be purified (“you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren,” 1 Pet. 1:22; “the fruit of your soul’s desire has gone from you [in judgment],” Rev. 18:14), but so can the “spirit” (“let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit,” 2 Cor. 7:1 cf. Deut. 2:30; Ps. 78:8). Mind, emotion and will cannot be confined to the “soul,” for these things are also experienced by the “spirit” (“Jesus [was] aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way,” Mark 2:8; “He became troubled in spirit,” John 13:21; “his spirit was being provoked in him as he was beholding the city full of idols,” Acts 17:16; “who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him?” 1 Cor. 2:11). In the same way, worship is not the sole domain of the “spirit,” for it is also enjoyed by the “soul” (“Bless the LORD, O my soul,” Ps. 103:1; cf. 62:1; 146:1; Mark 12:30). In light of such texts, Wayne Grudem rightly asked, “What can the spirit do that the soul cannot do? What can the soul do that the spirit cannot do?”¹

Even if they admit that they have only speculated about the ways in which spirit and soul differ, trichotomists want explanations for passages that suggest the difference is real. At the top of their list would be 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which we have yet to address, and Hebrews 4:12, which reads, “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.” Why would this verse speak of dividing soul and spirit if they were not divisible? In the same way, why would Paul imply that his spirit and his mind

¹Chapter 6: The Immaterial Aspect of Human Nature

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 477.

could be separated (“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful,” 1 Cor. 14:14) if in fact they are the same?

To understand Paul’s statement in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, which describes sanctification taking place in spirit, soul, and body, we need to recognize that other texts speak of the whole person using different terms. Mark 12:30, in which Jesus quoted the great commandment, reads, “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.” Do we consist of four parts—heart, soul, mind, and body (strength)? Or is it five, adding spirit? Matthew 22:37 has a similar quotation, but strength is not included. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Are we down to three again? If so, which three?

Obviously, such questions do not provide the basis for Paul’s exhortation. His point, like that of Jesus, is clear. By multiplying the terms used to refer to the human person, he meant, “Love God with your entire being. Be sanctified through and through. Don’t be content with partial commitment or a lackadaisical spiritual life.”

In Hebrews 4:12, the author was describing Scripture’s ability to pierce through appearances and judge a person’s heart. The spirit is not being divided from the soul any more than the joints are divided from the marrow. Both spirit and soul are sliced down the middle, and the bones—joints, marrow, and all—have been split apart. The individual has been opened up, and all that had been hidden has been placed on display like the inside of a fileted fish. Consequently, “all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (4:13).

Regarding 1 Corinthians 14:14, the fact that Paul experienced something in his spirit that he did not understand in his mind does not mean that spirit and mind (much less spirit and soul) are distinct entities. He simply meant he did not comprehend the words he uttered through the gift of tongues unless they were translated for him. The experience was still beneficial as Paul was refreshed by the demonstrable presence of God’s Spirit, but he desired to be encouraged by the message itself, so he preferred interpretation. By describing this as a blessing received only in the spirit, Paul used the same sort of expression we employ ourselves. When we want to communicate, “I really want to go with you, but I know I should stay home,” we might say, “My heart says, ‘Go,’ but my head says, ‘Stay.’” On another occasion we might say, “I feel like having more ice cream, but I really shouldn’t.” These expressions don’t imply that the head and the heart are distinct entities or that the will is located separately from the emotions. They simply mean that we find ourselves torn by conflicting desires. In the same way, Paul described an activity of limited benefit by saying that it aided only part of his being, but that does not mean that he regarded that “part” as distinct and separable.

Since so many verses seem to treat soul and spirit interchangeably while so little evidence suggests that they are distinct, most theologians have preferred a *dichotomous* (“two-part”) model of humanity. Unfortunately, many have understood that to mean that terms like “spirit,” “soul,” “heart,” and “mind” function as simple synonyms, all describing the same thing. They may all denote the same entity—the immaterial part of a person—but that does not mean they all communicate the same idea. Each term has its own field of meaning and its own connotations, so the different words were often used with different emphases. Of course, that should not be difficult for us to understand, because we use language the same way.

One Saturday I sat down at my desk to do some writing while the house was still quiet. I carefully placed my books and other materials within reach and started to run through the chapter in my mind as I opened the cover of my PowerBook. I was well refreshed from a good night's sleep, and I faced the day rather lightheartedly, ready to do a little work before getting on to other plans. My wife, Julie, and I were headed to an all-day concert later in the morning, and that sounded like fun. It would be an afternoon and evening filled with country music, which I don't always like, but the tickets were free and so was the babysitter, so the day promised delight for the soul! If I could get in a little writing first, it would be that much better.

Sometimes it doesn't take much of a hardship to ruin a nice morning.

In place of its usual "desktop," the screen on my computer displayed nothing but vertical lines, and the sight hit me like a hard kick in the gut. My spirit sank with the realization that not only would I not be able to write that morning, but if I couldn't access any files, I might lose the work I had done the night before. Repeated restarts didn't make things any better, and my heart began to race as frustration bordered on panic. Every breath became a sigh, and I squirmed in my seat each time the dreaded lines reappeared. I might have raised a hand against it, but I don't know enough about computers to know where a hard slap would help, so I just put it away.

I tried to do some reading, but my mind was too preoccupied to concentrate very well. On the way out to the concert, Julie tried to lift my spirits by making pleasant conversation, but that didn't help that nauseous feeling in my stomach. I knew in my heart that the problem wasn't irresolvable, and I reminded myself that it was ridiculously minor compared to the struggles of others, whose souls are in peril every day. Still, it was hard to put on a happy face in spite of the fact that it pained my conscience to feel depressed for something so small. Julie prayed that God would encourage me, and I started to think about getting access to a different computer. By the time we got to the concert, I was much less melancholy, contented enough that I could actually enjoy songs about homesick cowboys and broken hearts.

That story is true, but it's completely irrelevant to our topic. What is relevant, probably too obviously, is the way I told it. I described my feelings using words like "soul," "heart," "spirit," "mind," "conscience," "gut," and "breath" much the same way as they are used in the biblical text. I even spoke of feeling "melancholy," a word which calls to mind the ancient Greek notion that human emotions are governed by competing "humors," substances associated with different organs. Phlegm, the clear mucus secreted in the respiratory passages, produced the "phlegmatic" temperament – sluggish and impassive, not unlike the way one feels when troubled by the common cold. When blood was the prevailing humor, it yielded a "sanguine" personality – cheerful and colorful, full of life. Yellow bile (choler), secreted by the liver, made one "choleric" – irritable and easily moved to anger. The spleen could produce this as well. Even today, to "vent one's spleen" is to release pent-up anger. Along with the kidneys, the spleen also produced the fourth humor, black bile, which yielded a melancholic temperament – sad and depressed.

The Hebrews, too, associated emotions with bodily organs, but not as specifically. For them, outward emotions and behaviors were linked to "inner" inclinations which were described in the picturesque language of one's inner organs. Those organs, like the limbs of one's body, could be oriented in one direction or another. One's "heart" could be inclined toward good or evil, and one's "breath" (or "spirit") could reflect excitement or despair. We use similar expressions (as my story about the computer tried to demonstrate), but we don't always recognize the earthy connections that helped them make sense in their original context. The next several pages attempt to restore those connections, examining the appropriate biblical terms and their meanings.

Soul

When found in the Old Testament, the English word “soul” usually translates the Hebrew *nepes*. Like the words for “spirit” encountered in the last chapter (*ruah* and *pneuma*) *nepes* is strongly associated with breathing, especially in its verbal form. As a noun, it often refers to living (i.e., breathing) beings, describing both animals and people as “living *nepes*” (Gen. 1:30; 2:7, 19).² The Old Testament applies that label to people so frequently that *nepes* often means nothing more than “person.” In fact, it even refers to *dead* persons in several places (e.g., Num. 6:6; 19:13), but that’s more rare, because *nepes* usually retains the idea that this person is a living, breathing creature.

Our English Bibles often translate *nepes* with “person,” but most frequently they use “life.” That makes sense considering that the threat of death places one’s *nepes* under attack. If the threatened one is delivered, the *nepes* has been spared – his “soul” (or “life”) has been saved. Those who sought to kill Moses were seeking his *nepes* (Exod. 4:19), and Abram asked his wife to pose as his sister “that my *nepes* may live on account of you” (Gen. 12:13). When Sodom was destroyed, the angels told Lot, “Escape for your *nepes*” (19:17), and he asked for immediate refuge “that my *nepes* may live” (19:20). The sacrifices of the Law protected the Israelites from death, constituting a ransom or atonement for their *nepes* (Exod. 30:12, 15; Num. 15:28). Leviticus 17:11 makes the relationship clear – it is the sacrifice of the animal’s *nepes* for the *nepes* of the worshiper. “For the *nepes* of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your *nepes*; for it is the blood by reason of the *nepes* that makes atonement.” When the blood of the sacrifice was poured out, its life, its *nepes*, was given that the life of the worshiper might be spared. Isaiah 53:10–12 uses this language while looking ahead to the death of Christ. “But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would make His *nepes* a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His *nepes*, He will see it and be satisfied. . . . Because He poured out His *nepes* to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors.”

Jesus gave His life that we might have life, His “soul” that ours might be saved. This exchange provides the ultimate answer to the prayer of the psalmist, who asked the Lord to redeem his *nepes* (Pss. 69:18; 72:14). Hoping that his life would be spared, he may not have had much more in mind than immediate deliverance from his threatening enemies. Christ, however, provided a way for one’s *nepes* to live forever.

Life demands certain basic necessities, so the *nepes* naturally desires such things as food, water, and rest. God’s provision of these needs brings satisfaction to the “soul.” “They were hungry and thirsty; their soul [*nepes*] fainted within them. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble; He delivered them out of their distresses. He led them also by a straight way, to go to an inhabited city. Let them give thanks to the LORD for His lovingkindness, and for His wonders to the sons of men! For He has satisfied the thirsty soul [*nepes*], and the hungry soul [*nepes*] He has filled with what is good” (Ps. 107:5–9). When praising the LORD for such material benefits, the psalmist very appropriately said, “Bless the LORD, O my soul [*nepes*]” (Ps. 103:1). He

²Throughout this section the biblical quotations will continue to be based on the NASB, but they may vary slightly as I try to highlight the phrase in question. For the sake of consistency (and ease for English readers), I will not match the transliterated phrase (here, *nepes*) to the person, number, or case of the original.

is the one who “heals all your diseases; who redeems your life [*nepes*] from the pit; . . . who satisfies your years with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle” (103:3–5).

True life ultimately consists of more than such elemental needs, as the Lord frequently reminds us (Deut 8:3; Isa. 55:1–3; Luke 12:15). For this reason the *nepes* is associated with more than just physical survival. Even in Psalm 103:3–4, the soul is also commanded to offer praise for the fact that the LORD “pardons all your iniquities” and “crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion.” This more abstract use of *nepes*, in which it does not just mean “person” or “life,” but seems to denote one’s very being, can also be seen in Genesis 27, where Jacob and Esau contended for the blessing of their father’s “soul” (vv. 4, 19, 25; cf. 49:6). In the same way, one’s *nepes* can cling to that of another person, so that one’s life or being becomes dependent on the other. Joseph’s brothers meant this quite literally – they were afraid to tell their father that something had happened to Benjamin because they thought the news could kill the old man, and they said, “his *nepes* is bound to the lad’s *nepes*” (44:30). This is also the language of love letters and romance ballads, but in those cases the dependence of one’s soul upon another is more figurative (34:3). People today speak of “soul-mates,” and that is approximately the same idea – there is a dependent connection between them that extends to the depth of their being.

Many passages of Scripture relate this concept of “soul” to our relationship with God. You might say He wants to be our soul-mate. Linking the soul to the “heart,” as the core of one’s being, He commands His people to love and serve Him “with all your heart and all your *nepes*” (Deut. 11:13; 13:3; Josh. 22:5; cf. Mark 12:30). Nothing is to be held back in our devotion. Likewise, God’s soul, His being, “delights” in His Servant (Isa. 42:1), but “has no pleasure” in those who shrink back from obedience (Heb. 10:38; cf. Lev. 26:30; Isa. 1:14).

As one’s being, the *nepes* demonstrates choices (“If it is your *nepes* for me to bury my dead,” Gen. 23:8); desires (“You may spend the money for whatever your *nepes* desires,” Deut. 14:26); and emotions (“My *nepes* is in despair within me,” Ps. 42:6). Further, it can sin (“the sin of my *nepes*,” Mic. 6:7; cf. Hab. 2:4), be in distress (Gen. 42:21; cf. Mark 14:34), or worship (“Praise the LORD, O my *nepes*,” Ps. 146:1). It should go without saying that those are all things that *I* do. My *nepes*, my “soul,” is *me*. It is my life, my being, and its desires, emotions, and commitments, are *my* desires, emotions, and commitments. When God tells us to love Him with all our souls, He means that we are to be devoted to Him with all our being.

The Old Testament does not dwell at length on the topic of life after death, perhaps because Israel’s sense of justice and blessing was primarily land-based until about the time of the Exile, when revelation concerning the righteous remnant brought individual (and eternal) justice more into focus. In the same way, the Israelites associated *nepes* so closely with life (and its salvation with temporal deliverance from one’s enemies) that they did not comprehend the “eternal salvation of the soul” as clearly as we do. Still, even if texts describing the deliverance of the *nepes* from Sheol speak primarily of escape from physical death (Pss. 30:3; 49:15; 86:13; 89:48; Prov. 23:14), others do seem to assume the separability of soul and body. Genesis 35:18 mentions the departure of Rachel’s *nepes* at death, and 1 Kings 17:21–22 describes the resurrection of the widow’s son as the return of his *nepes*. The word may mean nothing more than “life” in either passage, but *nepes* so often includes a sense of personal identity that here the departure of oneself from the body cannot be ruled out. The same may be said of Job 11:20 and Jeremiah 15:9, which speak of the “breathing out of the *nepes*” at death.

When found in the New Testament, “soul” usually translates the Greek word *psyche*, which has much the same field of meaning as the Hebrew *nepes*. It speaks of one’s life – when Eutychus fell from the window, the others were relieved to hear Paul say, “his *psyche* is [still] in him” (Acts 20:10). As in the Old Testament, one life can be substituted for another in sacrifice.

Jesus said, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His *psyche* a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). John, too, wrote, “We know love by this, that He laid down His *psyche* for us; and we ought to lay down our *psyche* for the brethren” (1 John 3:16). Like *nepes*, this word can refer simply to persons, as it likely does in Acts 2:41, 43 (where people are added to the church, not just immaterial souls), or it can describe the interior self. The *psyche* experiences emotions (“a sword will pierce even your own *psyche*,” Luke 2:35), worships (“my *psyche* exalts the Lord,” Luke 1:46), and makes moral choices (“strengthening the *psyche* of the disciples,” Acts 14:22; cf. 14:2). Believers are told to love the Lord with their whole heart and *psyche* (Mark 12:30).

The New Testament contains clearer statements about the afterlife, and some of these describe it as the separation of soul and body. Matthew 10:28 reads, “And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the *psyche*; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both *psyche* and body in hell.” Conversely, Revelation 6:9 mentions the conscious, heavenly existence of the *psyche* in the intermediate state.

Even though it can be distinguished from the body in some texts, the *psyche*, *nepes*, or “soul” commonly describes the totality of one’s being. It should never be treated as a distinct entity among several others in human nature. Its centrality can be seen in Proverbs 2:10–11, where both “soul” and “heart” are simply interchangeable with “you.” “For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul [*nepes*]; discretion will guard you, understanding will watch over you.”

Unless the Lord returns first, death will one day separate you from your body. Your survivors would treat it with respect for what it was, but that body would not be a part of you again until the resurrection. Nothing like that can be said of the soul. It is not a part of you from which you can be separated. It is you. So is the spirit – but that’s another story.

Spirit

Every Friday afternoon during football season, the snare drums of our high school band signaled the beginning of a pep rally in the gymnasium. Intended to raise our excitement about that night’s game, the rally usually consisted of a skit poking fun at the opposing team, some rousing cheers, a few words from the football coach, and the singing of the school fight song. Occasionally the cheerleaders would try to raise the decibel level by appealing to our competitive nature. Turning to one side of the crowded bleachers, they would call out, “We’ve got spirit! Yes we do! We’ve got spirit! How ‘bout you?” The students would shout it back to their peers on the other side of the room, and they would go back and forth until one group or the other felt they had shown themselves to be the loudest. “We’ve got spirit! Yes we do! We’ve got spirit! How ‘bout you?”

Late in the year, all the department stores play holiday music, prepare elaborate displays, and host special events for the enjoyment of Christmas shoppers. They know that customers delighting in the season will probably buy more gifts than those feeling grumpy, so retailers do their best to nurture “the spirit of Christmas.”

Those who gamble on horse racing try to determine which thoroughbred has the most spirit, and Americans cheer fireworks every Fourth of July to celebrate the “spirit of 1776.” A particularly kind person might be described as having a sweet or gentle spirit, but someone with the opposite personality is mean-spirited. Such things don’t have to be permanent, for our spirits can be broken or revived. Likewise, they can be sad, cheerful, high, or low.

The biblical writers also used the word “spirit” in many different ways, so many that one scholar said the varied use of this term “almost defies analysis.”³ Its basic meaning is “moving air” — “wind” or “breath.” The *ruah* as the life-giving Spirit of God animates all of creation. However, the concept broadens to include the breath that we have as a consequence of His Breath and the various winds that move us as we conduct our affairs.

God gives life and breath to every creature through His animating Spirit. That breath then provides an indication not only of the presence or absence of life, but also of its fervor. When someone is sad, his breath becomes shallow or is filled with sighs. The psalmist said that his spirit had been overwhelmed and was failing (Pss. 142:3; 143:4, 7). Encouragement or refreshment then restores the spirit. When Jacob heard that Joseph was still alive, he was stunned (literally, “his heart grew numb,” Gen. 45:26). When they showed the old man the wagons Joseph had sent, his “spirit revived” (45:27). His breath returned with vigor as he was encouraged by the news. In the same way, when Samson had grown fatigued, “his spirit returned” after a long drink of water (Judg. 15:19; cf. 1 Sam. 30:12).

The breath also provides an indication of one’s emotions. The Old Testament writers described anger as a hot flaring of the nostrils. Similarly, a patient person was “long in breath,” breathing evenly, while an impatient person was “short in breath,” clearly agitated (Prov. 14:29). An even-tempered person “ruled his spirit” (16:32), while one whose spirit was “without restraint” needed to be avoided (25:28). The spirit could be sorrowful (1 Sam. 1:15), anguished (Ex. 6:9), or broken (Prov. 17:22), rendering someone quiet or even inactive. It could then be refreshed (1 Cor. 16:18; 2 Cor. 7:13) and fervent (Rom. 12:11), leading to ongoing service. (“We’ve got spirit! Yes we do! We’ve got spirit! How ‘bout you?”) Describing another emotion, the writer of 1 Kings said that when the queen of Sheba saw all of Solomon’s wealth, “there was no more spirit in her” — it took her breath away (1 Kings 10:5).

When one’s spirit is at peace, like the breath in slumber, one is content. However, when one’s spirit is restless, sleep and contentment become impossible (Dan. 2:1) and some kind of change is bound to occur. When God moved kings or armies, He “stirred up their spirit” and moved them to action (1 Chron. 5:26; 2 Chron. 36:22).

Thus the breath is not just an outward expression of emotion; it functions as a moving internal influence. A “spirit of jealousy” compels one to distrust (Num. 5:14, 30); a “haughty spirit” is synonymous with pride (Prov. 16:18); and a “spirit of harlotry” led Israel astray (Hos. 4:12; 5:4). This sense of “spirit,” in which it represents a compelling inner tendency or emotion, can be hard to distinguish from the use of the same word in reference to personal spirits or demons (1 Sam. 16:14–16; Mark 9:17). In most passages the difference may not be very important, as either kind of “spirit” highlights one’s hardness toward God while not discounting responsibility for one’s actions.

Likewise, the more positive sorts of “spirits” are often difficult to distinguish from the Spirit of God. He specially gifts people with wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and skill (Exod. 31:3; 35:31; Isa. 11:2; Eph. 1:17), and His presence brings a “spirit of gentleness” (1 Cor. 4:21; Gal. 6:1). By the Spirit of God we are “renewed in the spirit of [our] minds” (Eph. 4:23), and He is no doubt the source of the psalmist’s contrite, right, willing, and broken spirit (Pss. 34:18; 51:10, 12, 17). It is probably in this sense that the “spirit of Elijah” rested on Elisha (2 Kings 2:15) and God took “of the Spirit who was upon Moses” and gifted the seventy elders (Num. 11:25). The

³Carl Schultz, “Spirit,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 744.

presence of God's Spirit yields certain gifts and tendencies that can be re-created by His presence in others. This also explains the "new spirit" and "new heart" promised in the New Covenant through the indwelling of the Spirit (Ezek. 36:26-27). The Holy Spirit as God's animating Breath brings life and breath to all creation, but He also moves God's people with a compelling inner influence (the new spirit and new heart) and gives them an everlasting relationship with God by His presence (eternal life in regeneration). God's Spirit thus brings assurance to the spirits of believers (Rom. 8:16), but the spirits of others He will cut off (Ps. 76:12). That is why Paul's familiar benediction states, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (Phil. 4:23; cf. Gal. 6:18; 2 Tim. 4:22; Philem. 1:25).

By speaking of the spirit as a moving influence, I do not mean to give the impression that it is somehow distinct from the "real me." We have already seen substantial overlap between the spirit and the soul, and Paul said that only the spirit knows the true thoughts of an individual (1 Cor. 2:11), perhaps because the breath was thought to flow throughout the body (Prov. 20:27). In this sense the spirit also shares much in common with the "heart." It perceives (Mark 2:8), worships (Luke 1:47; 1 Cor. 14:14-15) and demonstrates willful intentions (Matt. 26:41), and the two words are often used in parallel ("my spirit is overwhelmed within me; my heart is appalled within me," Ps. 143:4; cf. Deut. 2:30; Ps. 51:10; Isa. 57:15). Since the breath is more visible, it might be appropriate to regard the spirit as the expression of desires and thoughts that are rooted in the heart.

In summary, we use "spirit" in much the same way as the biblical text. We have lost the foundational idea of breath, but we still think of spirit in terms of emotions or tendencies (good or bad) and relate it to life and the vigor with which we express ourselves. We recognize the reality of evil spirits, but we don't confuse that meaning of the word with the others, even if we don't know which kind of spirit causes someone's misbehavior. Finally, we don't usually attempt to distinguish between our spirit and ourselves—the spirit may change like our moods, but it's part of who we are on a given day.

Heart

If you had some difficulty understanding the Hebrew idea of breath, it may revive your spirit to know that the concept of "heart" is much easier to grasp. From country songs to love letters and valentines, we speak of the heart in almost exactly the same way as did the biblical writers. We describe others as good-hearted, cold-hearted, soft-hearted, hard-hearted, or brokenhearted. We give our hearts to others in love, and they ache when love is lost. We set our hearts on things we want, guard them against things we want to avoid, and turn them away from things we no longer desire. In our hearts we feel emotions, ponder questions, remember events, and make plans. Our hearts may not be as pure as those of the biblical writers, but at least we have the same vocabulary.

It is surprising that traditional models of human nature commonly employ the terms "soul" and "spirit" but leave out the heart, which the Bible mentions more frequently. As the physical organ hidden deep within the chest, the heart is that part of a person that is both central and unreachable. On this point, Bruce Waltke wrote, "The hiddenness and inaccessibility of the physical heart give rise to its figurative sense for anything that is remote and inaccessible. The 'heart of the seas' (Jon. 2:3) refers to the sea's fathomless, unapproachable depths and the 'heart of the heavens' is its most unreachable height."⁴

⁴Bruce K. Waltke, "Heart," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 331.

Because it is so inaccessible, the contents of the heart cannot be seen by other persons. We describe some people as especially “transparent,” meaning that they are very “open” about their thoughts and feelings. Both expressions imply unhindered access to the heart. As the seat of emotion, understanding, will, and conscience, the heart is the center of one’s being, the source of all thoughts and behavior.

The heart can produce belief (Rom. 6:17) or rebellion (Ps. 14:1); integrity or corruption (101:1-5); obedience or obstinance (Heb. 3:12-15). It can be enlightened (Eph. 1:18) or blinded (2 Cor. 3:15); arrogant (Is. 9:9) or humble (Matt. 11:29). It can be fearful (Isa. 21:4; 35:4), astonished (Deut. 28:28), saddened (Deut. 28:47), or joyful (Ps. 16:9). It can be inclined toward evil (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9) or good (Deut. 10:12; Josh. 24:23), demonstrating pride (Deut. 8:14) or humility (2 Kings 22:19). Many of these things can be observed by others, and behavior (more accurately than profession) reveals the inclination of one’s heart. Still, we all try to look better than we know our hearts to be, and those who don’t know us well might believe the facade. God is never deceived by false virtue or impressed by physical appearances, for He “looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). Jesus said, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). Even when people continue to praise Him, He knows when their hearts have turned away (Isa. 29:13), and that makes His judgment truly fair (Rev. 2:23).

Depending on what is in our hearts, God’s knowledge of their contents can be threatening or encouraging. When falsely accused by others, it is very reassuring to know that God knows our hearts. Paul took comfort in His judgment in such instances, writing, “as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God, who examines our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:4). The psalmist also invited His inspection (“Search me, O God, and know my heart,” Ps. 139:23), but at times we may not want our hearts on display. Denying both His understanding and our own sinfulness, we often try to conceal our iniquity, making ourselves appear righteous when in our hearts we know better. Obviously such attempts are futile. The day will come when the Lord will “both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of hearts; and then each man’s praise will come to him from God” (1 Cor. 4:5). It’s no use pretending He doesn’t know. “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. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:12-13). When His word exposes our sinfulness, the proper response is, of course, to seek forgiveness. David wrote, “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. . . . When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me. . . . I acknowledged my sin to Thee, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’; and Thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin” (Ps. 32:1-5). God’s knowledge of our hearts makes His love and forgiveness all the more amazing. He who knows us best loves us most.

As the seat of our deepest feelings, beliefs, choices, and convictions, our hearts become the central focus of biblical commands. Rituals like circumcision and sacrifice are inadequate unless they touch the heart (Deut. 10:16; Rom. 2:29), and God demands that we love and serve Him wholeheartedly (Deut. 11:13; 13:3). We don’t do that very well, so His solution ultimately is to replace our hearts (Ezek. 36:26), for God desires His people to love Him with all their heart and all their soul (Josh. 22:5; Mark 12:30).

Heart and soul are not viewed as distinct entities, for they appear too often in synonymous parallelism to allow for that (Deut. 4:29; Ps. 24:4; 73:21; 84:2; Acts 4:32), but the terms do have slightly different emphases. The soul, as we have seen, is “me” because it is my life. The heart is “me” because it is the central organ of my being. The spirit is “me” because it is my breath and that which moves me.

Other Anthropological Expressions

The terms used most frequently in the Bible to denote the immaterial aspect of humanity are “soul,” “spirit,” and “heart,” but others occur often enough that they should also be mentioned. Though they are often associated with distinctive bodily organs, these terms do not denote separate immaterial entities. As in English, they describe particular functions or emotions using picturesque language. One feels deep anguish in the *loins* (Isa. 21:3; Nah. 2:10) and central emotions are expressed by the *kidneys* (Ps. 73:21; Prov. 23:16; Jer. 12:3; Rev. 2:23). Likewise, the New Testament often uses the Greek word for *intestines* to refer to feelings (Phil. 1:8; Philem. 1:7). Those idioms might seem odd to us, but we use essentially the same concept when we talk about “gut feelings” or say that news hits us “like a kick in the stomach.”

Thinking usually takes place through the soul, spirit, or heart, but the New Testament also attributes it to the *mind*. The contents of the mind reflect the orientation of the heart, so the mind of the unbeliever is “set on the things of the flesh,” is “hostile toward God,” and “does not subject itself to the law of God” (Rom. 8:5, 7). Indeed, it is “not even able” to subject itself to God’s law (8:7), for it is depraved (1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Tim. 3:8), defiled (Titus 1:15), and blinded (2 Cor. 4:4). It needs to be opened to the truth (Luke 24:45) and renewed (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23) so it will then be set “on the things of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5–6). We’ll discuss the effects of sin in a subsequent chapter, but for now we simply note that the mind is not a neutral entity used by the self. It is an expression of the self.

One’s moral capacity can also be expressed through the *conscience*. As an internal monitor of one’s behavior, the conscience condemns evil deeds (Rom. 2:15). When its standards are violated, the conscience is “wounded” or “defiled” (1 Cor. 8:7, 12). However, it can be purified in Christ, whose forgiveness washes the conscience clean (Heb. 9:14; 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21). Having been washed, the conscience remains clear through consistent good behavior (Acts 23:1; 24:16).

Summary and Implications

The biblical writers used many different expressions to describe the immaterial aspect of human nature. However, when they spoke of one’s soul, spirit, heart, mind, or gut, they did not regard those as distinguishable entities any more than we do. The phrases do not denote different parts, but their particular nuances do contribute to the meaning of the biblical text. For example, when David spoke of enemies who pursued his soul (Ps. 143:3), he meant that they were attempting to kill him. Because of them, his spirit was overwhelmed and his heart was appalled (143:4)—he was deeply discouraged. He recalled God’s previous acts of deliverance and longed for Him with all his being (“my soul longs for Thee like a thirsty land,” 143:6). Asking for a quick answer, David said that his spirit was failing (143:7). If God delayed, his breath (and his life) would be gone. But David had confidence in the Lord, so he lifted his soul to Him (143:8), entrusting Him with his life.

This perspective on human nature contradicts the trichotomist idea that the soul and the spirit are distinct components making up the immaterial part of each individual. It rules out

models of sanctification and counseling in which the spirit or the heart, wholly purified or even replaced at conversion, must be expressed through the mind, emotion, and will that abide in the soul. There is no reason to treat the spirit or the heart as distinct from the soul, nor is there reason to exclude from them faculties like mind, emotion, and will, which are so central to the human personality. By locating the "real you" in the spirit, these approaches lean toward anti-intellectualism (if rational thought is a function of the soul), perfectionism (if the spirit is wholly pure), and gnosticism (if sinful desires reside only in the body or perhaps also in the soul). Further, many make misleading (and ultimately meaningless) statements about demonization, contending that demons can reside in the body or soul of believers, but not in their spirits. Such arguments are rooted more in contemporary tradition than in Scripture, but they have become very popular in evangelical churches.

Those who make an overly simplistic distinction between soul and spirit (or between soul and heart) often approach sanctification in a formulaic, but complex fashion. Using charts and diagrams, they describe the conflict between different parts of human nature, noting what happened to each at conversion and suggesting ways in which the "real you" can be manifested. A more biblical approach affirms the complexity of human nature – we cannot be neatly divided into parts – while suggesting a much simpler approach to the spiritual life. Love the Lord your God with all your heart. That is, be wholly devoted to Him. Rather than trying to figure out a conflict between different aspects of our being, we should simply aim to love the Lord in every way.

Having discussed both the material and immaterial aspects of human nature, and having considered their temporary separation in the intermediate state and their final reunification in resurrection, we are left with one more question. How did they get together in the first place?

The Union of Material and Immaterial (or The Origin of the Soul)

We understand the formation of the body in the womb, but what about the rest of the person? Where does the "soul" come from? There have been several approaches to the problem.

The Preexistence Theory

Many people believe in the "preexistence of the soul," maintaining that the immaterial aspect of each person existed in some previous state before its union with the body. This view was popular among Greek dualists and a few early Christian theologians who were heavily influenced by Plato's thought. He believed that souls had become incarnate from the world of Forms, making life here an attempt to return the soul to its proper home. Largely through the influence of Augustine, this view has not been held by the Christian church since about the fifth century, though versions of it may still be found in Eastern thought and in Mormonism. The current popularity of reincarnation has encouraged belief in the preexistence of souls, but neither concept should be considered a serious option for Christians.

There are many different models of reincarnation, but they share the idea that a person's essence is immaterial, occupying one body after another while striving for moral and spiritual perfection. Many people believe that this system answers the problem of injustice, for the next life brings each individual what he or she deserves. Unfortunately, it also makes any notion of salvation utterly dependent upon works while establishing an impossible standard in perfection. Does that demonstrate justice and compassion? Further, belief in reincarnation encourages social apathy by teaching that everyone is receiving what he or she deserves. It is ironic that some

would believe in reincarnation out of a desire for justice, only to perpetuate injustice in society through that belief. Finally, the concept of reincarnation is incompatible with Scripture. The Bible teaches, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). An individual's birth and death do not continually reoccur in an indefinite cycle. Each is a single event that will not be repeated.

Whether it comes in a package with reincarnation or not, the concept of the soul's preexistence cannot be accepted. It tends to deny the importance of the body through a form of dualistic philosophy that we have already seen to be false. The view destroys the true unity of the human race, relating us to one another only by our bodies, which it does not believe are essential to our humanity. In the same way, it ignores the Fall as the pivotal event in human history. (If the immaterial aspect of humanity has always existed, how are those souls who were not present in the Garden of Eden affected by Adam's sin?) The preexistence of the soul finds no support in the biblical text.

The Creationist Theory

Creationism (not to be confused with the alternative to biological evolution) maintains that God creates the soul of each individual and joins it to the body in the womb. He thus creates the soul "immediately" (without the use of secondary agents) and the body "mediately" (through sexual reproduction).

Most Reformed theologians join the Roman Catholics in holding this view, and some have argued that it best explains the sinlessness of Jesus. If all persons inherit a sinful nature from Adam, then how did Christ avoid that inheritance unless His soul was created directly by God? Further, since He was made like us, our souls must be created in the same fashion.

Others see a pattern for the creation of humanity in Genesis 2:7, believing this to be the addition of the soul to the body of the man. I have already argued that the passage describes the coming of the breath of life, not the addition of a soul, but it is by no means irrelevant to the discussion. God gave life to the man by His breath, but we do not see that act repeated in His creation of the woman, whom God formed from living flesh (2:22). We should not rely too heavily upon silence, but Eve's creation does raise another question. If she was made in such a way as to preserve the essential relatedness of the primal pair, wouldn't the separate creation of her soul damage that relatedness?

The Traducianist Theory

Also known as generationism, traducianism maintains that both body and soul are propagated through sexual reproduction. Most Lutherans hold this view, as do many evangelicals, and they often cite the same issue that concerns many creationists – the transmission of sin. If God creates each individual soul, traducianists argue, then how is Adam's sin passed on to his descendants? Obviously, this is the flip-side of the creationist argument. Creationists say that souls must be created separately to prevent Jesus' from being sinful, and traducianists say that souls must be related to one another to explain the sinfulness of the rest of humanity. It may be that neither argument is accurate. If Adam's sin is transmitted not physically, but judicially, it would have no relation to the origin of the soul.

Traducianism does better than creationism at explaining the inheritance of both material and immaterial traits from one's parents, and it better supports the essential unity of the human

race. Creationists will counter that their view better accords with the concept of the soul as a nonphysical entity that cannot be divided, but traducianists might regard that notion as too dependent on Greek philosophy. Creationists claim the scriptural support of Hebrews 12:9, which describes God as “the Father of spirits,” but traducianists observe that it says nothing of mediate versus immediate creation, even if the verse does imply that God creates human spirits.

Many theologians have abandoned the discussion altogether, considering the issue unimportant and recognizing the lack of clear biblical arguments for either side. We should always seek to retain the biblical priority of certain topics over others, but this debate has found its way into a very practical concern. In spite of the fact that most creationists maintain that the soul is infused at the moment of conception, abortion-rights groups have used creationism to say that we do not know when the soul is added to the body of the unborn baby, thus making it human. While preserving the biblical emphasis on human nature as a complex whole, traducianism removes any theological basis for such an argument. This does not establish the truth of either side, but it does show that the debate is not completely esoteric.

Summary

This chapter has covered some significant issues related to the immaterial aspect of humanity. We have seen that simple assumptions about distinctive “parts” do not do justice to the broad biblical usage of terms like soul, spirit, and heart. These expressions all refer to the whole person or to the immaterial aspect in particular with varying emphases. However, while the biblical terminology may seem relatively complex, the biblical expectation is not. We are to love the Lord our God with our whole being. We have also considered the origin of the immaterial aspect of our nature, finding more support for traducianism than creationism while recognizing the biblical emphasis on other issues.

Some of the toughest questions about the relationship between soul and body concern not their union in the womb or their separation in the intermediate state, but their function in human behavior. We tend to follow a biblical pattern in locating attitudes, emotions, thoughts, and choices in the immaterial heart, but we also recognize that all those things are affected by physiological factors like inheritance, rest, diet, exercise, or drugs. If emotions can be changed by mood-altering medications, are they rooted in the soul or the body? If certain behaviors are genetically predisposed, what is the nature of human will? Those are some of the questions to be considered in the next chapter.