

One, Two, Three... **How many parts can man be?**

Within theological circles, there is a debate about the essential nature of man. While there is clearly a physical element, the body, the controversy surrounds the possible existence of an immaterial element. If it does exist, what is the immaterial part comprised of?

1. Take a concordance and look up the Hebrew and Greek terms for “spirit” and “soul.”

Spirit: rûach (Hebrew), pneuma (Greek)

Soul: nephesh (Hebrew), psychē (Greek)

2. Grab a dictionary and look up the these terms that theologians have used to describe the essence of man: “monism,” “dichotomy” and “trichotomy.”

Monism takes the view that man is comprised of one element: the physical “body.” The biblical terms “soul” and “spirit” merely refer to the person as a whole and does not recognize a distinction between the physical and immaterial parts of a person. This view is not widely held.

Dichotomy takes the view that man is comprised of two elements: “body” and “soul” (or “spirit”).

Trichotomy takes the view that man is comprised of three elements: “body” and “soul” and “spirit.” In this instance, there is a belief that the immaterial part has two distinct elements.

While most theologians hold to the dichotomy view, many still hold to the trichotomy view.

3. Examine the two principle proof texts for the trichotomy view: 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12. What do you conclude from your exegesis?

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.

Hebrews 4:12

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.

Trichotomists point out, in the above passages, that the terms “soul” and “spirit” are not synonymous and that they describe distinctly different aspects of the immaterial part of man. And because man was made in the likeness of God (Gen 1:26), trichotomists see a parallel to the triune nature of God.

With 1 Thessalonians 5:23 in view, Paul desires that sanctification encompasses the whole person: spirit, soul and body. However, it is not clear that Paul is making a distinction about the parts of a person or whether he is emphasizing the wholeness of a person. Other passages speak of a whole person using different terms and if the same biblical hermeneutics were applied, man would have a variety of parts.

One, Two, Three...
How many parts can man be? (page 2)

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul** and with all your **might**.” (Deut 6:5)

“It shall come about, if you listen obediently to my commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your **heart** and all your **soul**.” (Deut 11:13)

Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendents, to love the Lord your God with all your **heart** and with all your **soul**, so that you may live. (Deut 30:6)

Only be very careful to observe the commandment and the law which Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you, to love the Lord your God and walk in all His ways and keep His commandments and hold fast to Him and serve Him with all your **heart** and with all your **soul**. (Josh 22:5)

And He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your **heart**, and with all your **soul**, and with all your **mind**.” (Matt 22:37)

And 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)

And He answered, “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)

With Hebrews 4:12 in view, there is an emphasis on the penetrating power of the word of God laying bare the innermost aspects of a person. Through repetitive parallelism, a pattern emerges where terms of close relationship are used, which function to emphasize the piercing ability of the word of God. The literary structure does not support the idea that the “spirit” and “soul” are two separate and distinct entities.

Soul and spirit: the spirit is a part of the soul.

Joints and marrow: the marrow is a part of the joint.

Thoughts and intentions: intentions are a part of thoughts.

From a historical perspective, the trichotomy view did not originate from the Scriptures; instead, it finds its roots in Plato and Greek philosophy. When studied within the context of the whole Bible, the scriptural evidence strongly favors the dichotomy view over the trichotomy.

4. Examine the basis of the dichotomy view: Matthew 10:28; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 and Colossians 2:5. How are emotions described (John 12:27; John 13:21)? How is the propensity to sin or sanctification is described (1 Pet 1:22; 2 Cor 7:1)? What survives after death (Gen 35:18; Luke 23:46)? How are people in heaven described (Heb 12:23; Rev 6:9)?

Examine how the dichotomy of man is described:

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 **soul** and **body** in hell. (Matt 10:28)

One, Two, Three...
How many parts can man be? (page 3)

For I, on my part, though absent in **body** but present in **spirit**, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in **spirit**, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his **spirit** may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor 5:3-5)

For even though I am absent in **body**, nevertheless I am with you in **spirit**, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ. (Col 2:5)

Man is described as either “body” and “soul” or “body” and “spirit”. Either “soul” or “spirit” appears to represent the entire nonphysical part of man.

Examine how emotions are described:

Now My **soul** has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. (John 12:27)

And Mary said: “My **soul** exalts the Lord.” (Luke 1:46)

When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in **spirit**, and testified and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me." (John 13:21)

Immediately Jesus, aware in His **spirit** that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts? (Mark 2:8)

The “soul” can experience emotion or the “spirit” can experience emotion.

Examine how the propensity to sin or sanctification is described:

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your **souls** for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, (1 Pet 1:22)

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and **spirit**, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (2 Cor 7:1)

And not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not prepare its heart And whose **spirit** was not faithful to God. (Ps 78:8)

and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and **spirit**; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. (1 Cor 7:34)

But when his heart was lifted up and his **spirit** became so proud that he behaved arrogantly, he was deposed from his royal throne and his glory was taken away from him. (Dan 5:20)

The “soul” can sin or the “spirit” can sin and either can experience the process of sanctification.

One, Two, Three...
How many parts can man be? (page 4)

Examine what survives after death occurs:

It came about as her **soul** was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin. (Gen 35:18)

Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the LORD and said, "O LORD my God, I pray You, let this child's life (**soul**) return to him." (1 Kings 17:21)

then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the **spirit** will return to God who gave it. (Ecc 12:7))

And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY **SPIRIT**." Having said this, He breathed His last. (Luke 23:46)

Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head and gave up His **spirit**. (John 19:30)

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my **spirit**!" (Acts 7:59)

At death, the "soul" departs or the "spirit" departs. It is worthwhile to note that the Bible never mentions that both the "spirit and soul" departs, which is what one would expect if the "spirit" and "soul" were separate and distinct entities.

Examine how people in heaven are described:

to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the **spirits** of the righteous made perfect, (Heb 12:23)

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the **souls** of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; (Rev 6:9)

Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them And I saw the **souls** of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Rev 20:4)

When describing Christians in heaven, "souls" and "spirits" are used interchangeably.

One, Two, Three...
How many parts can man be? (page 5)

There is significant biblical support that the terms “soul” and “spirit” are used interchangeably to represent the nonphysical aspect of man.

Everything that the “soul” does, the “spirit” also does.

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This understanding is consistent with the Bible’s focus on the totality of man; man is seen with his physical and nonphysical entities together as a whole unit. Thus, mankind’s relationship with God is with his whole being. Man knows, feels and worships God with his whole being; both physical and nonphysical parts of man are necessary for this.

One of the consequences of the trichotomy view is the distinctions that trichotomists make about the terms “spirit” and “soul” when speculating about their function. This fails to take into account the subtle nuances of the original Hebrew terms; moreover, these speculations cannot be justified within the context of the whole Bible.

On the other hand, the dichotomy view may oversimplify the understanding of the terms “spirit” and “soul” as biblical synonyms. While they represent the immaterial part of a human being, each term imparts their own meaning, context and emphasis. Only by taking the time to understand the subtleties of biblical terms can one fully understand and appreciate God’s word to man.

Reference:

1. Grudem W, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (1994).

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