



Week 14 – The Nature of Man

When we ask what humankind is, we are asking several different questions.

One, is the question of where humans came from— how did they come into being?

We are also asking what humanity's function or purpose is—what are they intended to do? That might lead us to the question of where humans are going— what is their ultimate destiny?

Human makeup is yet another issue raised by the question of what we are. Are we a unitary whole, or made up of two or more components, what are they?

Basic Views of the Human Constitution

Trichotomism or Tripartite

A view rather popular in conservative Protestant circles has been termed the “trichotomist” view.

Humans are composed of three elements.

The first element is the physical body. A physical nature is something we have in common with animals and plants. The difference is one of degree, as humans have a more complex physical structure.

The second part of the human person is the soul. This is the psychological element, the basis of reason, of emotion, of social interrelatedness and the like.

The third element would then be a spirit. This religious element enables the human to perceive spiritual matters and respond to spiritual stimuli. It is the seat of the spiritual qualities of the individual, whereas the personality traits reside in the soul.

The major foundation of trichotomism is certain Scripture passages which either enumerate three components of human nature or distinguish between the soul and the spirit.

1 Thessalonians 5: 23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 4: 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Beyond that, a threefold division seems to be implied in:

1 Corinthians 2: 14 The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Paul classifies human persons as “of the flesh” (sarkikos), “unspiritual” (psychikos—literally, “of the soul”), or “spiritual” (pneumatikos).

These terms seem to refer to different functions or orientations, if not to different components of human beings.

Trichotomism became particularly popular among the Alexandrian fathers of the early centuries of the church. Although the form varies somewhat, trichotomism is found in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa.

It fell into a certain amount of disrepute after Apollinarius made use of it in constructing his Christology, which the church determined to be heretical.

Although some of the Eastern fathers continued to hold it, it suffered a general decline in popularity until it was revived in the nineteenth century by English and German theologians.

Dichotomism or Bipartite

Probably the most widely held view through most of the history of Christian thought has been that humans are composed of two elements, a material aspect, the body, and an immaterial component, the soul or spirit.

Dichotomism was commonly held from the earliest period of Christian thought.

Following the Council of Constantinople in 381, however, it grew in popularity to the point where it was virtually the universal belief of the church.

Recent forms of dichotomism maintain that the Old Testament presents a unitary view of human nature. In the New Testament, however, this unitary view is replaced by a dualism: humans are composed of body and soul.

The body is the physical part; it is the part which dies.

The soul, on the other hand, is the immaterial part, the part which survives death.

It is this immortal nature which sets humanity apart from all other creatures.

Many of the arguments for dichotomism are, in essence, arguments against the trichotomist conception.

The dichotomist objects to trichotomism on the grounds that if one follows the principle that each of the separate references in verses like 1 Thessalonians 5: 23 represents a distinct entity, difficulties arise with some other texts.

For example, in Luke 10: 27 Jesus says, "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." Here we have not three but four entities, and these four hardly match the three in 1 Thessalonians.

Luke 1: 46– 47, which is in all likelihood an example of parallelism: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Here the two terms seem virtually equivalent.

There are many other instances.

The basic components of human nature are designated body and soul in Matthew 6: 25 and 10: 28, but body and spirit in Ecclesiastes 12: 7 and 1 Corinthians 5: 3, 5.

Death is described as giving up the soul (Gen. 35: 18; 1 Kings 17: 21; Acts 15: 26) and as giving up the spirit (Ps. 31: 5; Luke 23: 46).

At times the word soul is used in such a way as to be synonymous with one's self or life: "For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life [literally, soul]?" (Matt. 16: 26).

There are references to being troubled in spirit (Gen. 41: 8; John 13: 21) and to being troubled of soul (Ps. 42: 6; John 12: 27).

The points of agreement between the trichotomist and the dichotomist views exceed their differences. They both agree that humans are complex or compound, that they are made up of separable parts. In contrast are various forms of the view that humans are indivisible.

Monism

Monism insists that we are not to be thought of as in any sense composed of parts or separate entities, but rather as a radical unity.

In the monistic understanding, the Bible does not view the human being as body, soul, and spirit, but simply as a self.

The terms sometimes used to distinguish parts of human nature are actually to be taken as basically synonymous.

According to monism, to be human is to be or have a body. The idea that a human can somehow exist apart from a body is unthinkable.

Biblical Considerations

We must now evaluate monism in the light of the whole of the biblical data.

As we take a closer look, we will find that the absolute monistic view of humankind has overlooked or obscured some of the significant data.

Certain passages seem to indicate an intermediate state between death and resurrection, a state in which the individual lives on in conscious personal existence. One of these passages is Jesus' statement to the thief on the cross, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23: 43). Another is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16: 19–31).

Some have thought that this is not a parable but the record of an actual event, since it would be unique among parables in naming one of the characters within the story. We are told that a rich man and a poor man died. The rich man went to Hades, where he was in great torment in the flame, while the poor man, Lazarus, was taken to Abraham's bosom. Both were in a state of consciousness.

A third consideration pointing to an intermediate state is Paul's reference to being away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5: 8).

Finally, there are some references in the Scripture where the distinction between body and soul is difficult to dismiss.

Matthew 10: 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

It appears, from the foregoing considerations, that it is by no means necessary to conclude that the biblical teaching rules out the possibility of some type of compound character, or at least some sort of divisibility, within the human makeup.

1. Each human is to be treated as a unity. One's spiritual condition cannot be dealt with independently of physical and psychological condition, and vice versa.

The Christian who desires to be spiritually healthy will give attention to such matters as diet, rest, and exercise. Any attempt to deal with spiritual condition apart from physical condition and mental and emotional state will be less than completely successful, as will any attempt to deal with human emotions apart from one's relationship to God.

2. Humans are complex beings. Their nature is not reducible to a single principle.

3. The different aspects of human nature are all to be attended to and respected. There is to be no depreciating of the body, emotions, or intellect. The gospel is an appeal to the whole person. It is significant that Jesus in his incarnation became fully human, for he came to redeem the whole of what we are.

4. Religious development or maturity does not consist in subjugating one part of human nature to another. There is no part of human nature that is evil per se. Total depravity means that sin infects all of what a human is, not merely the body or mind or emotions. Thus, the Christian should not aim at bringing the body (which many erroneously regard as the only evil part of human nature) under the control of the soul. Similarly, sanctification is not to be thought of as involving only one part of human nature, for no one part is the exclusive seat of good or of righteousness. God is at work renewing the whole of what we are. Consequently, asceticism, in the sense of denying one's natural bodily needs simply for its own sake, is not to be practiced.

5. Human nature is not inconsistent with the scriptural teaching of a personal conscious existence between death and resurrection.

[Erickson, Millard J. (2001-04-01). *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (pp. 180-186). Baker Publishing Group.]

Why Does This Matter

We are in dire need of sanctification:

1. to make holy; set apart as sacred; consecrate.
2. to purify or free from sin: Sanctify your hearts.

And, how does this happen?

*Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, **but be transformed by the renewal of your mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

*2 Corinthians 10:3-5 For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to **destroy strongholds**. We **destroy arguments and every lofty opinion** raised against the knowledge of God, and **take every thought captive to obey Christ**,*

It helps to understand that there is more than just what we see.

We have a “non-physical” part that influences our “physical” part.

When that “non-physical” part influences our “physical” part apart from Christ, we sin.

Romans 1: 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. 29 They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

But after we allow Christ to be the Lord of our lives we begin a process of “transforming” “by the renewal of your minds”.

Then when we are thinking like Christ we are able to “destroy strongholds”, “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion”, and “take every thought captive to obey Christ”.

Our “non-physical” part (soul/spirit) influences our “physical” part (body) by obeying Christ instead of carnal desires.

Ephesians 4: 21 assuming that you have heard about him (Christ) and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, 22 to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24 and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Things to Mull

1. Of the three descriptions of the nature of Man, which is the one you have been most familiar with? Least familiar?

2. Has your understanding changed at all through this study of the nature of man? In what ways?

3. Does it matter what the exact nature of man is? (Is this topic an essential?) Why or Why not?

4. Why does a good understanding of the nature of man help us in the process of sanctification?

5. Why is sanctification so important?

6. Why does it matter, if our sins are already forgiven, that through our bodies we sin less and less?

7. In Romans 12:2 it says that our minds are to be renewed. How are our minds to be renewed?

