

Principles for Understanding Differential Use of “Soul” and “Spirit” in the New Testament

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1 Spirit and Soul in Triadic Biblical Anthropology

The Triadic (a.k.a. “tripartite”) model of Biblical anthropology declares that humans are composed of three distinct parts – *spirit*, *soul*, and *body* (1 Thes. 5:23). The New Testament uses the Greek words *psyche* (*soul*) and *pneuma* (*spirit*) to describe discreet non-corporeal parts of the human with largely discreet functions, revealing specific and important doctrinal distinctions. These distinctions are obscured or entirely missed when these words are considered synonymous (conflation) or of indeterminate definition (ambiguity or equivocation). The use of some unique hermeneutical principles and the triadic anthropological model can significantly help in explaining why each word is used in each context, and reveal truths hidden behind the obfuscation of the dualist approach.

2 Biblical Challenges to Partitism: Holism and Soul/Spirit Bifurcation

The two main Biblical challenges to defining a clear partite anthropology (triadic or dualist) are the doctrine of *holism* (a.k.a. “monism”) and the Bible’s use of at least two different New Testament words to describe the non-corporeal part of mankind, primarily *psyche* (*soul*) and *pneuma* (*spirit*). The challenge of holism is that it resists discreet partitions within man, but prefers to see the use of the words *soma* (*body*), *psyche*, and *pneuma*, as well as other words used to describe the human makeup such as *kardia* (*heart*) as largely overlapping aspects or views of the whole rather than discreet parts (Hoekema, 1994, p. 203). The second challenge is the use of the words *psyche* and *pneuma* (and to a lesser extent *kardia*), whose functions seem to overlap in scripture, which enjoy polysemous use (different definitions and scope based on context), and which are often used in synecdoche (the part representing the whole) (Cooper, 2000, p. 44; J. B. Green, 2008, p. 54).

3 Dualist, Monist, and Triadic Anthropologies

There are three major approaches to the problem of holist v. partite views of mankind; these positions are the dualist, monist, and triadic views.

3.1 Dualist Anthropology

The predominant biblical anthropology among modern Protestants is dualist (a.k.a. “bipartite” to avoid confusion with Platonic dualism), which claims that man is made up of two primary parts, physical and non-physical, i.e. *body* and *soul/spirit*. It further claims that the overlapping functionality of *psyche* (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit) in scripture, if not their synonymous use, make a triadic view unsupportable as well as unhelpful in our application and understanding of scripture (Grudem, 1994, pp. 475–483). Dualists agree with triadism in admitting that scripture often uses *pneuma* to describe the “higher” functions of the soul,¹ but they also agree with monists in the idea that man is a unity and cannot be reduced to the partition of body/soul, or that of spirit/soul (Grudem, 1994, p. 482). However, they are willing to interpret the intermediate state of humans as disembodied souls, and so in that sense are at least partially, if not completely modalist on that account.

3.2 Monist Anthropology

Contrary to dualism and triadism, the monist disavows any modalism in the major parts of mankind, although they too sometimes make an exception when it comes to the intermediate

¹ “In this more accurate use, *psyche* denotes man’s immaterial part in its inferior powers and activities; as *psyche*, man is a conscious individual, and, in common with the brute creation, has an animal life, together with appetite, imagination, memory, understanding. *Pneuma*, on the other hand, denotes man’s immaterial part in its higher capacities and faculties; as *pneuma*, man is a being related to God, and possessing powers of reason, conscience, and free will, which difference him from the brute creation and constitute him responsible and immortal.” (Strong, 1972, p. 484)

state.² For example, despite seeming to accept this intermediate state exception, Hoekema logically extends his monism to denying both dualism and triadism for their very willingness to accept such modalism

It is my conviction...that we should reject dichotomy as well as trichotomy....even aside from the Greek understanding of dichotomy, which is clearly contrary to scripture, we must reject the term *dichotomy* as such, since it is not an accurate description of man. The term itself is objectionable....It suggests that the human person can be cut into two “parts,” but man in this present life can not be so cut. (1994, p. 209)

Like dualists, most monists claim that the words *psyche* and *pneuma* are essentially synonymous, or significantly overlapping, and use this as another argument that the Bible does not mean for us to separate them as discreet parts. Monists denial of partitism may also be seen in the claim that the words did not have clear definitions in the first century (an argument shared by dualists against triadists), or that the Bible is not meant to be “scientific,” and so we should be careful about systemizing terms in an anachronistic, empirical fashion (J. B. Green, 2008, p. 26).

Monists, however, go further to claim that even the dualist view of body and soul/spirit is not warranted because of the unity of the human, as shown in part by the Bible’s use of locating various emotions in parts of the body (not just in the soul) such as the heart, liver, intestines, and kidneys (Cooper, 2000, p. 41).

² This monist exception seems contrary to monism itself, and as such, is considered an unexplained exception. “It is clear that the body is used to represent the whole man and militates against any idea of the biblical view of man as existing apart from bodily manifestation, *unless it be during the intermediate state.*” (Clarence B. Bass, quoted in Hoekema, 1994, p. 216 emphasis mine). Hoekema goes on to excuse this lack of logical consistency by appealing to mystery; “The Bible does not give us any anthropological description of life in this intermediate state....The Bible teaches it but does not describe it.” (1994, p. 221)

3.3 Triadic Anthropology

While there is no universally accepted model of triadism, modern triadists rely heavily on the model outlined by Watchman Nee in his perennial classic *The Spiritual Man* (Nee, 1968). Nee presented his triadism in a bullseye diagram, in part to show that the spirit is at the core of the person, the body is the outer man, and the

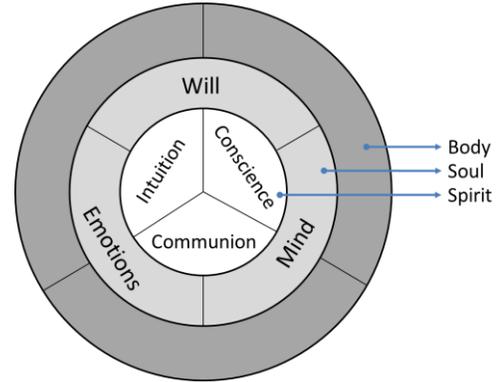


Figure 1: The Triadic Model of Man

soul is in between (Nee, 1965). A simple set of definitions for the three major parts might be as follows: “The body gives us *world*-consciousness, the soul gives us *self*-consciousness, and the spirit gives us *God*-consciousness” (Heard, 1868, p. 268; Nee, 1968, p. 26 Vol. 1).

Of particular note are what dualists often call “the higher functions of the spirit,” (conscience, intuition, and communion) which Nee attributes to the spirit, not just the “higher soul.”^{3,4} This paper will argue that these differences are real and scriptural, despite apparent overlap and integration of functions.

4 Triadic Principles for Dividing Soul from Spirit

To understand the Bible’s use of *pneuma*, *psyche*, *soma*, and *kardia* in the New Testament (as well as their Old Testament analogs, discussed below), I propose the following interpretive principles.

³ Nee proposed the three functions of *nourishment*, *reproduction*, and *defense* for the body, but these are not germane to this paper, and due to the primary battle with the majority dualist view, the important disagreement is not over the functions of the body, though our theology of the body is important (Nee, 1968, p. 88 Vol. 1)

⁴ Though a dualist himself, Grudem’s understanding, if not subconscious admission of the taxonomic value of tripartitism is very clear in his summation of sanctification by listing these exact soulical functions as a group, followed by what he describes explicitly as the sanctification of *spirit* and *body* (1994, pp. 756–757)

4.1 Polysemous Usage and Synecdoche

It must be acknowledged that all four of the aforementioned major New Testament words used for the human makeup have multiple meanings in scripture, and we use hermeneutics to differentiate them. As an example of our increasing translational precision, Joel Green has detailed that the translation of the word *psyche* as “soul” in the New Testament has declined from 39 instances in the KJV to 3 in the recent CEB (J. Green, 2013; Sinclair, 2020). It is high time to recognize that better interpretive methods may force us to abandon the assumptions that the New Testament is ambiguous in its use of *psyche* and *pneuma*.

Additionally, we must acknowledge that the Bible uses each of these parts to sometimes represent the whole person, i.e. employing *synecdoche*. However, this does not mean that such uses deny the existence of the other distinct parts of the human being. For example, *psyche* is used to refer to the whole person or their life (Luke 9:24), but also to their non-corporeal life which dualists and triadists argue includes the spirit (Matthew 10:28). Neither of these is a denial of the existence of the unlisted parts.

4.2 Emphasis on the Soul as “Self”

The soul is generally emphasized over the spirit in scripture because it is the seat of our self-awareness, identity, and will (a.k.a. “volition”). This seat of decision making is seen in such passages as Proverbs 16:43 (“he who controls his spirit is better than one who captures a city”), where the volition is controlling the spirit because such volition does not originate in the spirit. The spirit informs, the soul decides (irresistible grace may be the exception). This is one reason why the scriptures often address the non-corporeal as *psyche* rather than *pneuma*. Nee explains:

The soul is the pivot of the entire being because man’s volition belongs to it...it is the will which determines whether the spirit, the body, or even itself is to rule.

In view of the fact that the soul possesses such power and is the organ of man's individuality, the Bible calls man a "living soul." (Nee, 1968, p. 28 Vol. 1)

4.3 The Soul's Dependence on the Body

When the spirit is in the body, the soul is present. When the spirit leaves the body, the soul as a part ceases to exist. This is seen in the emergence of the soul in the creation of man in Genesis 2:7, coming into existence as the interface between body and spirit. This is also implied in the Bible's insistence that when one dies, their spirit returns to God, while the soul or "life" is poured out or extinguished (Isaiah 53:12, Matthew 26:38, Col. 1:19:20).

4.4 Man As Temple: Differentiating Internal and External Experiences of God

The spirit is the most interior place of mankind, where communion with God is accomplished. This triadic claim is based on 1 Cor. 3:16, where Paul calls us the temple of God in which the Spirit lives. The triadist would add that this is where the spirit of the man exists as well. An examination of the Jewish temple shows three courts, of which the innermost court is the most holy. This biblical analogy makes a distinction between the holy of holies and the inner court, between the direct and indirect communion with God, aligning them with spirit and soul. This model can help us interpret the difference between the experience of worshipping the *transcendent, external* God with our souls, and communing with the *immanent, internal Spirit* with our spirit.

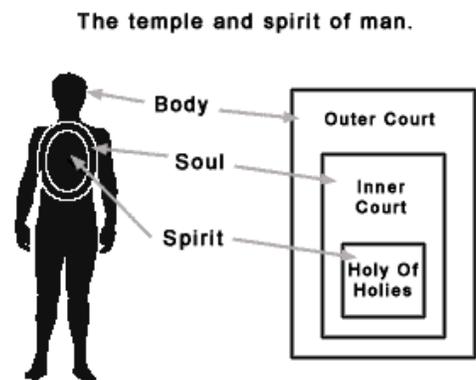


Figure 2: Man as triadic temple

4.5 Differentiating origin v. impact in the unified whole

Both dualists and triadists, like monists, support the unity and integration of spirit, soul, and body, and despite their modalist approach, also support the idea of the essential unity of the

human. To allude to the trinitarian formula, there are “three parts, one person.” Integration means that any function proposed to have root in one part has some connection to, dependence, or impact on the others. This means that although a function may *originate* in one part, it may be reflected in the other parts as an *impact* (e.g. sin originating in the volition, but defiling body and spirit).

5 Example Scriptures and Objections

5.1 The Magnificat

In Mary’s hymn of praise to God, she begins with the words “My soul (*psyche*) exalts the Lord, and my spirit (*pneuma*) has rejoiced greatly in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46-47). Grudem argues that this is a case of synonymous usage and a Hebrew parallelism, but it can easily be seen as two separate actions, one from the grateful soul *towards* God, and the other communing *with* God by the spirit, as evidenced by the use of the word “in” in the second phrase.⁵ Hebrew parallels do not have to be *synonymous*, as Grudem is suggesting. They can be *additive* (synthetic) or *climactic*. Using both soul and spirit here can show the completeness of her praise as an *additive* and *climactic* parallel in two parts; her outward praise visible to men, and her inward communion with God. It is also notable that the verb tense changes from present tense to past, perhaps indicating the joy was initiated in the spirit of Mary, and then expressed outwardly (Nee, 1968, p. 27 Vol. 1). But we might miss this if we are thinking of this as a mere synonymous parallel.

⁵ Grudem uses a similar argument regarding the word “in” when he discusses the difference between believing Jesus and believing *in* Jesus, the latter being communion with God, not just an external acknowledgement. (1994, p. 711)

5.2 Death and the departing of the soul/spirit

Dualists remark that the Bible describes both soul and spirit departing men upon death, and so are synonymous (Grudem, 1994, p. 474). However, note the distinction between passages such as “pour out his *soul* unto death” (Isaiah 53:12) and “this night your *soul* will be required of you” (Luke 12:20) on one hand and “Into your hand I commit my *spirit*” (Luke 23:46) and “the *spirit* returns to God who gave it” (Eccl. 12:7) on the other. The soul dissipates or is poured out, but does not go to God. The spirit, by contrast, is seen as going to God. Triadism explains that because the soul cannot exist without the body, being created from the combination of spirit and body, the suffering of death is the passing of the soul into non-existence. This disintegration of the soul is the pain of death. When Jesus and Stephen are dying, they surrender their *spirit to God*, which is the immortal part of their being, which stays intact but returns to God. This clearly shows that spirit and soul are not the same in death and that while the soul may be the seat of the will, the spirit may be the foundation of the person’s immortal being, and this distinction seems consistent in scripture.

5.3 Destruction of body and soul in Gehenna

Why does Jesus only mention the potential of the destruction of body and *psyche* in Gehenna (Matt. 10:28)? There are at least two important possibilities for his omission of spirit. The first is that he is emphasizing the soul by choosing it to represent the non-corporeal, a synecdoche that we should already recognize as typical due to the soul as the home of volition, identity, and self-awareness. Because the body is being mentioned, and because the *trauma* of death is in the soul’s disintegration from the body and non-existence without it, He has chosen to use *psyche* instead of *pneuma*. Either way, Jesus’ use of “body and soul” does not mean that the spirit is synonymous with the soul when such reasons for the use of *psyche* explain the choice.

5.4 Dividing soul and spirit

Hebrews 4:12 is a triadic proof text which is said to illustrate that *psyche* and *pneuma* are separate parts. Dualists, however, emphasize that “piercing to the division of soul and spirit, joint and marrow” is not about an actual separation or division, but *depth*, essentially arguing for “piercing to the *depth* of soul and spirit.” (Grudem, 1994, p. 479) This interpretation is half correct based on the use of the word “piercing,” but ignores the more forward argument of the author in the word “dividing.” Not only does the Greek favor this reading (*merismos* / separation), in the context (the difficulty of the natural man in being rightly enabled and motivated), the superiority of being spirit-led and empowered seems a likely emphasis. The power of the Word being discussed is that it helps us know the difference at the depths of our being and in our inner experience.

How can we tell truth from error, real from fake? Soulish from spiritual? While we may know it by experience, the distinction is easily described by the triadic view. The word used by the Spirit helps us know the difference between the faculties of the soul (emotions, will, intellect) and the spirit. The soul is powerful but can be controlled by the flesh OR the spirit, and only discernment by the spirit and word can distinguish them. They show the difference between emotional ecstasies and the real presence of God, between man’s “vain philosophies” and God’s wisdom, between man’s self-willed drives and God’s callings. Even greater lessons can be pulled from this analogy if we assume actual parts, such as the gradient between bone and marrow that make them hard to distinguish, the hardness of the bone and softness of the marrow, the deeper, more difficult to reach recesses of the marrow compared to the outer bone – all of which can tell us something about the soul and spirit of man. However, all of this is potentially lost by conflating the soul and spirit.

5.5 God has no soul ⁶

If God is a spirit, then under triadism, would God be unable to have a soul? Technically, that is mostly true, though the anthropomorphism “My soul has no pleasure in him” in Hebrews 10:38 attributes a soul to God. However, the absence of God having a literal soul is borne out in scripture and even admitted by evangelical theologians like George Ladd, who wrote “Spirit is often used of God: soul is never so used” (Ladd, 1993, pp. 461–463). This is an objection to dualism, as evidence that (a) the soul is absent when a physical body is absent, and (b) it is likely that the *spirit* of man is the seat of his immortality, not his soul. God himself exists without a soul because he has no body.

5.6 Parallelism v. other types of lists

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

In this triadic proof text, is Paul listing a three-part taxonomy for the human, or is he just “piling up synonyms for reference” (Grudem, 1994, p. 478) as Jesus does in Mark 12:30, asking us to serve God with all of our “heart, soul, mind, and strength”? The answer to this objection is found in the clear difference between these two passages in the *holistic* approach of 1 Thes. 5:23, with its concern for the *entire* person. The Markan and parallel passage in Matthew 23:27 not only exclude the body, and so are obviously not lists of the “entire” person, they use obviously overlapping analogs in a different context, one of *personal devotion*, not of *complete sanctification*. The Markan attributes are obviously and irreducibly overlapping, while the Thessalonian ones are not necessarily overlapping, and can be scripturally understood as

⁶ Kudos to theologian and author R.L. Solberg for realizing this implication and coining the phrase “God has no soul” (Personal communication)

separate, non-overlapping parts of a unified whole. Paul the Apostle has elsewhere created complete rubrics such as his discussion of spirit and flesh in Romans, and it would not be out of character for him to create a complete taxonomy here, especially since he alerts us that he is talking of the *complete* person.

5.7 The words were not well defined in the first century

According to this objection, both the New Testament authors, as well as the Author behind them, used the words ambiguously and interchangeably. However, this notion is refuted by Laidlaw:

It is easy to prove, from the Old Testament Apocrypha, and from the writings of Philo and Josephus, that, by their time, a definite use of the terms “soul” and “spirit” had passed into psychological language, and even into current popular speech. (Laidlaw, 1895, p. 86)

This unwillingness to distinguish clearly between *psyche* and *pneuma* comes in part from a valid concern for expecting overly precise or anachronistically empirical language of the pre-modern Biblical writers. Especially if these are viewed as clinical psychological terms. However, in this case, we can have confidence that these terms were well defined in Jewish and Greek culture, and the dualist’s approach of assuming apparent indiscriminate or synonymous use is an unsupported argument, and should not be used by the usually grammar and word-focused evangelical scholar. In this instance, evangelical dualists have neglected to pursue the meanings of *pneuma* and *psyche* in the specific word usage here, as they do in almost all other exegesis.

5.8 Soul and spirit have overlapping functions

This is a significant challenge to the triadic distinction between *psyche* and *pneuma*. However, the triadist can argue that this is a reflection of the *integration* of soul and spirit, not a description of *dual origins* for emotions or other interior phenomena. It may also be argued that

while some functions are *initiated* in one part, they *impact* the other parts. As a biblical example, emotions, which are typically located in the soul, are also said to be felt in the body, which is in part why we talk about the heart as the seat of emotions. But this does not mean they are initiated in the body.

5.9 Both soul and spirit can sin

This accusation is merely another specific instance of the conflation of *origin* with the *impact*, as described in 5.9 above. It is a conflation of the sinner's *guilt* (which the soul's volition is held responsible for) and the resulting *defilement* of the body and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1). In addition, such items as a *haughty, proud, or hardened* spirit may seem like sins of the spirit, but it may be equally valid or superior to view them as *impacts* created by the sins of the soul. An important analogy may be made to the story of Peter requesting to have Jesus wash his whole body instead of just his feet (John 13). His zeal for cleansing lacked the understanding that a new creature in Christ is forgiven, and only needs to be washed from the world's external defilement.⁷ The application here is that though the spirit may be defiled, that does not mean that the spirit is unregenerate or internally sinful, but merely impacted by the sins of the soul.

5.10 Do disembodied spirits then have no will, intellect, or emotions?

Under triadism, if the soul dies with the body, it might indicate that we don't have the supposed functions of the soul (will, emotions, intellect) if we are only spirits in the intermediate state. There are three possible solutions to this enigma. First, soul sleep would alleviate the issue of an existence of only spirit. Second, J.B. Heard's definitive theology of triadism does *not* propose that the soul cannot live without the body as I have but claims that both soul and spirit

⁷ Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." (John 13:10)

exist in the intermediate period (Heard, 1868, pp. 284–287). A third possible solution is to say that the spirit does have some qualities of intellect or reason that are apart from the soul.

6 Conclusion: Triadism as a superior Biblical Interpretive Model

Modern dualistic biblical anthropology depends mostly on the supposed synonymous and overlapping use of the words *psyche* and *pneuma* in the New Testament, as well as a similar pattern in the Old Testament. It is befuddled by the polysemous use of these words, as well as the use of synecdoche, failing to recognize the increasing ability of contextual hermeneutics to clarify the meanings and translation under these conditions. By considering the integration and unity of the human, triadism can explain the apparent sharing of functions like emotions or intellect, in part because sharing does not imply that the *origins* exist in both partitions. If we avoid reducing all lists to synonymous parallelisms, we may find that scripture is making additions or distinctions, not merely repeating itself. The emphasis on the soul as the seat of volition may also explain the New Testament emphasis of it over the spirit. Lastly, exploring the metaphor of the body as temple with three courts may reveal a host of helpful perspectives into the important differences between *psyche* and *pneuma*. The lack of these important distinctions dampens our understanding of and insights received from the Bible, and can also lead to the obfuscation of doctrines related to anthropology, including original sin and the delayed deaths of Adam and Eve, regeneration, sanctification, the intermediate state, and the necessity of the resurrection and nature of the resurrection body for both judgment and eternal life.

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