### The Inner Person

**1. Terms to Describe the Inner Person**

In investigating the inner person, it will prove helpful to acquaint ourselves with the various terms used to describe aspects of it, such as “spirit,” “soul,” “heart,” “will,” “mind,” and “conscience.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The Greek New Testament text contributes two other metaphorical designations: “kidneys” and “bowels.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Hebrew term נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) is widely distributed throughout the Old Testament and is typically translated “soul.” However, it often connotes a living being in totality. In addition, it can refer to various aspects or functions of the inner person, such as thought, feeling, desire, volition, or life’s essence.

The Hebrew word לֵבָב (*levav*), i.e., “heart,” possesses a wide spectrum of meaning. It can refer not only metaphorically to the “heart,” but also to the mind, soul, spirit, or conscience. In brief, it relates to the essence of a person, that is, to the life source of the inner person.

The term רוּחַ (*ruach*) is the conventional word for “spirit,” but can also designate the “mind” or “heart.” This aspect of the inner person facilitates fellowship with God.

The Greek term ψυχή (*psuche*)*,* which is usually translated “soul,” can apply to the person as a whole with emphasis on the principle of life within an individual. Louw and Nida comment that this is “the essence of life in terms of thinking, willing, and feeling.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The word νοῦς (*nous*) for the most part relates to a person’s intellectual faculties and is correspondingly translated “mind.” Louw and Nida describe it as “the psychological faculty of understanding, reasoning, thinking, and deciding.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Greek term καρδία (*cardia*) is “heart.” In its biblical use, this is the center of human initiative and motivation. Louw and Nida view it as “the causative source of a person’s psychological life in its various aspects, but with special emphasis upon thoughts.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Similar to the word νοῦς (*nous*), the Greek term φρήν (*phren*) accents a person’s intellectual powers. Correspondingly, Louw and Nida describe it as “the psychological faculty of thoughtful planning, often with the implication of being wise and provident.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Many are already familiar with the Greek word for “spirit,” i.e., πνεῦμα (*pneuma*). Similar to its Hebrew equivalent רוּחַ (*ruach*), this word features the spiritual aspect of one’s personality. According to Louw and Nida, it relates to “the non-material, psychological faculty which is potentially sensitive and responsive to God.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

A term that has no real English equivalent is σπλάγχνον (*splangnon*). It literally means “bowels” or “intestines,” but metaphorically can connote “the psychological faculty of desire, intent, and feeling.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Hebrew כִלְיָה (*kilyah*) literally refers to kidneys, but metaphorically also connotes the human psyche. In Jeremiah 12:2, it translates “heart.” The corresponding Greek term for “kidneys,” i.e., νεφρός (*nephros*), is also used metaphorically. In Revelation 2:23, it is translated “minds.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The term θέλημα (*thelema*) concerns the psychological aspect of persons that defines their intentions and directions. It is conventionally translated “will.”

The idea of “conscience” is expressed by the Greek term συνείδησις (*suneidesis*). In Romans 2:15, Paul speaks of it as “work of the Law written in their hearts.” The Greeks originally employed συνείδησις (*suneidesis*) in the sense of self-consciousness. Subsequently, it obtained the sense of reflection on one’s life. The Roman philosopher Seneca further developed the term to denote an evaluation of the correctness of one’s actions and future choices.

Interestingly, there is no word “conscience” in the Old Testament. The idea is present, but the term “heart” is used instead. In the first century A.D., however, Philo of Alexandria conjoined the Old Testament idea of “conscience” with the Greek term συνείδησις (*suneidesis*).

**2. The Structure of the Inner Person**

As we have just seen, there are an abundance of terms, both in Hebrew and Greek, to describe the inner workings of a person. At the same time, we desire to discover the overlying structure of the inner person to better grasp and understand our condition. Several options are conventionally proposed.

According to monism, people consist of only one element – the body. There are no other components to the human organism. Dichotomy proposes two elements – the body and the soul. Thus, the terms “spirit” and “soul” are thought synonymous. All other terms relating to the inner person simply describe its various aspects or functions. The third theory, trichotomy, posits that the human spirit and soul are different components in the tripartite human organism.

**а. Monism**

The theory “monism” claims that a person possesses only a material element – the physical body. The functions commonly ascribed to the inner person are merely expressions of the human brain. In support of this theory, its proponents note that if the brain is damaged, the individual appears to lose many of the functions of the “inner person.” This observation is thought to prove that the brain is the source of these psychological functions. Monists also appeal to the philosophical school “empiricism,” which asserts that all that exists is what the five senses can perceive. Since the “soul” is imperceptible to the senses, one may challenge its existence.

Evidence is gleaned from the Scriptures as well. The Old Testament, for example, places emphasis on the unity of the human person. The individual is seen as a unity and not fragmented into body, soul, and spirit. In fact, the Hebrew word for body, גְוִיָה (*giviyah*), occurs rarely in the biblical text. Instead, we usually encounter the term בָּשָׂר (*basar*), which has a wide spectrum of meaning. It can refer to the body, the flesh, and even the individual in totality.

Also significant is that the Old Testament does not speak of the resurrection of the *body*, but of the *person*. Adherents also note that the Hebrew term שְׁאוֹל (*sheol*), which is usually understood as the place of departed spirits, can also simply refer to the grave. Therefore, after death a person’s soul does not descend into שְׁאוֹל (*sheol*), but the body is simply lowered into the grave (שְׁאוֹל).

In addition, it is not uncommon for the Bible to speak of an unconscious existence after death.[[10]](#footnote-10)

- For there is no mention of You in death; in Sheol who will give You thanks? (Ps 6:5).

- For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness (Isa 38:18).

- For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten (Ecc 9:5; also see Ps 39:13; 88:10-12; 115:17; 145:4; Job 14:12-14; Ecc 9:6, 10).

Defenders of monism readily acknowledge that the New Testament does indeed teach that humans possess an immaterial part of their nature and speaks of an afterlife. Yet, they respond that New Testament authors were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and, consequently, introduced a new conception of human nature that was foreign to the original Old Testament view.

We may appeal, nonetheless, to the New Testament witness in refutation of monism, which unambiguously teaches the existence of the immaterial soul in distinction from the body.[[11]](#footnote-11) Paul even testified to have left his body for a time (2 Cor 12:2).

Monism’s claim that the New Testament is inferior in truth-value to the Old Testament is misguided. According to the principle of “progressive revelation,” which we employed in our discussion of the biblical canon and biblical interpretation in chapters 3 and 7 of volume 2, God progressively reveals more of His truth in the course of biblical history. Therefore, we would expect the New Testament to provide us with a more precise depiction of human nature than the Old Testament does.

It is true that the Hebrew word for “body” is seldom used. However, the lack of a specific term for an object does not mean that the given culture has no conception of that object. For example, the Russian language has no common word for “hand.” The Russian term *рука* applies to everything from the shoulder down. Nonetheless, Russian speakers have a definite conception of “hand” in distinction from the arm. Similarly, the infrequent usage of a specific word for “body” in Hebrew does not prove that in Hebrew culture the body was not distinguished from the soul.

We must also address the instances where Scripture seems to teach an unconscious existence after death. First, we may assume that the issue is not the end of one’s existence *per se*, but rather the end of one’s earthly activity. We also argue that many of these passages are taken from the book of Ecclesiastes, to which we apply a special approach to interpretation. The goal of this book is to describe the author’s search for life’s meaning. Consequently, in many cases the author is writing from the perspective of his experience or observation of life. Some of his statements, then, will reflect this earthly perspective. Yet, in the end he comes to a proper conclusion: “The conclusion, when all has been heard, {is:} fear God and keep His commandments, because this {applies to} every person” (Ecc 12:13).

**b. Trichotomism**

According to the theory of trichotomism, a person consists of three elements: spirit, soul, and body. The spirit enables fellowship with the Lord. Some (but not all) defenders of trichotomism claim that when people are born again, their spirit becomes perfect. Some also assert that the spirit of an unbeliever is either dead or non-existent.

Some early Church Fathers held to trichotomism, namely Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa. The Eastern Orthodox Church also accepts this theory. Since the 19th century, it has been gaining acceptance among Protestants as well.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Several biblical passages are cited in support:

- Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete… (1 Thes 5:23).

- 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… (Heb 4:12).

- But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God… But he who is spiritual appraises all things (1 Cor 2:14-15).

- For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful (1 Cor 14:14).

- …it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual {body} (1 Cor 15:44).

- That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit (Jn 3:6).

Paul often concludes his epistles with a benediction such as “The Lord be with your spirit” (2 Tim 4:22; сf. Phil 4:23; Philemon 25; Gal 6:18). It seem that believers fellowship with the Lord through their spirits. The human spirit is also the “lamp of the Lord” (Prov 20:27).

Supports of trichotomism also voice the following argument from logic. It is thought that plants possess only one component: the body. Animals possess two: a body and a soul. Only humans have the full compliment of three: body, soul, and spirit. They also note three usages of the Hebrew verb בָרָא (*bara*), i.е., “create,” in Genesis chapter 1: when God created the inanimate world (v. 1), when He created animals (v. 21), and when He made humans (v. 27).[[13]](#footnote-13) Could this indicate a tripartite structure in human beings?

Trichotomists acknowledge that at times Scripture uses the terms “soul’ and “spirit” interchangeably (see below). They respond, however, that such passages are not written with the intent to teach anthropology. On the other hand, verses like 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, which speak specifically of a tripartite human nature, have this goal in mind. In addition, they argue that since Scripture commands us to keep our thoughts and emotions under control, then there must be a separate, higher aspect of our nature that these commands are addressed to (i.e., the spirit), since thoughts and emotions (features of the soul) cannot regulate themselves.[[14]](#footnote-14)

A strong supporter of trichotomism among Protestants, Kenneth Hagin, appears to derive his understanding of anthropology from E. W. Kenyon.[[15]](#footnote-15) Echoing Kenyon, Hagin made famous the formula that man is a spirit, has a soul, and lives in a body. He equates the human spirit with the “heart.” He also holds that 2 Corinthians 5:17 refers to the new birth of the human spirit: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, {he is} a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” The reborn human spirit possesses God’s nature: “The life of God has been imparted into our spirits! The nature of God is in our spirits.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Our sinful nature, though, is associated with our physical bodies. For Hagin, progress in sanctification occurs when our souls side with our spirits to oppose the “flesh,” i.e., the body’s tendency to sin.

As mentioned, Hagin borrows many elements of his teaching on human nature from E. W. Kenyon, who also taught that the spirit is the essence of a person. All spiritual strength comes forth from the spirit. Even Jesus manifested His supernatural powers from His human spirit.[[17]](#footnote-17)

However, this theory encounters certain difficulties. First, beside the terms “spirit,” “soul,” and “body,” the Bible employs other terms in relation to the inner person: heart, mind, conscience, and will. Proponents of trichotomism must account for these terms in their system. In addition, Jesus spoke of four components of the human organism: heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk 12:30). Moreover, the Bible clearly uses the terms “soul” and “spirit” synonymously, which better corresponds to the theory of dichotomism (see below).

The Bible does not teach that the human spirit becomes perfect at the new birth. In 2 Corinthians 7:1, Paul urges believers to cleanse their spirits “from all defilement.” 1 Thessalonians 5:23 teaches that God’s work of sanctification concerns body, soul, and spirit. 2 Corinthians 5:17 does not say that believers are new creatures “in their spirits,” but “in Christ.” The “new creation” is who we are in Christ by faith, and this new life in Him is progressively worked out in our experience both in our outer and inner person.

**c. Dichotomism**

We conclude with the theory “dichotomism.” According to this view, humans possess two component parts – body and soul. The terms “soul” and “spirit” are synonyms. Dichotomism has traditionally been the prominent view among Catholics and Protestants from the fourth century.

Several biblical passages support a bipartite view of humans, consisting of two elements: spirit and body:[[18]](#footnote-18)

- For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit… (1 Cor 5:3).

- …to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved (1 Cor 5:5).

- ...the body without {the} spirit is dead (Jam 2:26).

- 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 (1 Cor 7:34).

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

Sometimes this dichotomy is expressed not by “spirit and body,” but by “soul and body” or “inner man/outer man”:

- 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).

- Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers (3 Jn 2).

- Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day (2 Cor 4:16).

Such verses leave the impression that persons consist of two elements and that the terms “soul” and “spirit” are interchangeable. Also significant is the observation that a disembodied person is described either as a “spirit” (Heb 12:23; 1 Pet 3:19; Lk 23:46; Ecc 12:7; Jn 19:30; Acts 7:59), or a “soul” (Rev 6:9; 20:4; Gen 35:18; 1 Kin 17:21; Lk 12:20), but never both in combination.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The following texts show that “spirit” and “soul” are used in poetic parallelism, indicating that they refer to the same object:

- Now My soul has become troubled (Jn 12:27) // When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit (Jn 13:21).

- Mary said: “My soul exalts the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior” (Lk 1:46-47).

- At night my soul longs for You, indeed, my spirit within me seeks You diligently (Isa 26:9).

Supporters of dichotomism also cite Genesis 2:7, where God breathed into Adam the singular “breath of life.” This implies that the inner person is a unity, not a dichotomy. Some may object that the Hebrew word “life” in this passage stands in the plural. Nonetheless, in Hebrew the word for “life,” i.e., הַיִים (*hayim*), is never found in the singular, but always in the plural.[[20]](#footnote-20)

It is also interesting to note that at times character traits that are typically associated with the soul are ascribed to the spirit, and vice versa. For example, we would more likely associate sin with the soul than the spirit. Yet, 2 Corinthians 7:1 urges us to “cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit.” Moreover, emotion is more naturally associated with soul than spirit. In John 13:21 and Proverbs 17:22, though, the spirit is the emotive force. Furthermore, one would expect to seek God with one’s spirit. Yet, many passages speak of the soul seeking God (Ps 25:1; 42:1-2; 62:1; 103:1; 146:1; Lk 1:46). Jesus taught His disciples to love God not with their spirits, but with their souls (Mk 12:30).[[21]](#footnote-21) Such examples show that “soul” and “spirit” are synonymous elements in the human constitution.

A proposal for combining the various terms describing the inner person into a dichotomisic format may look something like this. The term “soul” can refer to the entire inner person in all its aspects. The “heart” is the seat of motivation and energizes the inner person. The Greek terms “bowels” and “kidneys” describe the inner person’s capacity for compassion. Moreover, the “will” is the inner person making decisions. “Spirit” is the inner person in fellowship with the Lord. The “mind” is the intellectual capabilities of the inner self. “Conscience” is the inner person’s capacity for self-evaluation.

Millard Erickson suggests a variant of dichotomism, which he calls “conditional unity.” Although he recognizes two elements in the human constitution, at the same time he accentuates the tight relationship between those elements and the inherent unity of the human person. In Erickson’s words, “We might think of a human as a unitary compound of a material and an immaterial element.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Russian Orthodox theologian Ilarion also stresses the unity of the person: “Only the combination of soul and body constitutes a genuine personality-hypostasis. The soul alone or the body by itself does not qualify as such.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

How do adherents of dichotomism interpret the biblical texts that enumerate three components of the human constitution? They understand the triad “spirit,” “soul,” and “body” in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 as simply denoting the “whole person.” The goal of the passage is not to delineate the elements of human nature, but simply to express God’s desire to sanctify the entire person.

Concerning Hebrews 4:12, dichotomists note that the Word of God penetrates “*as far as* the division of soul and spirit.” This may imply that the soul and spirit are not, in fact, divisible.[[24]](#footnote-24) Dickason comments, “The idea is that the Word of God penetrates the deepest recesses of a man’s being,” which are related to the “thoughts and intents of the heart.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Commenting on Jesus’ description of the new birth in John 3:5, “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,” Dickason concludes that the Lord is not talking about what part of a person is regenerated, but rather about “the nature of the birth,” that it is spiritual in nature.[[26]](#footnote-26)

When Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14:14, “If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful,” he is indicating that various aspects of the inner person can be occupied with various actions. For example, a person’s intellect (mind) can struggle against conscience, or suppress emotion. Concerning 1 Corinthians 15:44, supporters of dichotomism explain that this passage is not describing the make up of the inner person, but rather the condition of the glorified body. Finally, dichotomists regard 1 Corinthians 2:14-15 as a description not of the composition of the inner person, but the spiritual condition of the individual as a whole.

**3. The Origin of the Inner Person**

Next, we will examine the question of the inner person’s origin. In particular, does it originate in the individual’s parents, or does it come directly from the Lord? Three positions are worth our consideration: the theories of preexistence, creationism, and traducianism.[[27]](#footnote-27)

**а. The Theory of Preexistence**

The theory of preexistence dates back to the Church Father Origen of the third century, who taught that persons’ souls were created before their physical conception and existed in heaven during that prenatal time. Somehow, these souls sinned against God and, as a consequence of their transgression, were cast down to the earth and became incarnate in human bodies. Physical birth as a human, therefore, is a punishment from God.

In refutation, we note that such an understanding of human origins finds no support in the Bible. Furthermore, this theory advances a negative view of the human body, which God created “very good.” We also consider that according to Scripture, humanity’s fall into sin began not as disembodied souls in heaven, but with Adam and Eve in the Garden.

**b. The Theory of Creationism**

“Creationism” teaches that the human soul/spirit comes directly from God as a special creation. We can name the Roman Catholic Church and John Calvin among its supporters. The following Scripture passages claim a heavenly origin for the human soul/spirit:

- For You formed my inward parts (Ps 139:13).

- Thus says God Yahweh… who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it (Isa 42:5).

- Thus declares the Lord who… forms the spirit of man within him (Zech 12:1).

- …shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? (Heb 12:9).

- O God, God of the spirits of all flesh… (Num 16:22).

- …the spirit will return to God who gave it (Ecc 12:7).

- For the spirit would grow faint before Me, and the breath {of those whom} I have made (Isa 57:16).

Also notable is that in the book of Job, both Job and Elihu claim that the human spirit is the breath of the Lord (Job 27:3; 32:8) that returns to Him after death (Job 34:14-15). In addition, Psalm 33:15 asserts that God “fashions the hearts” of all the inhabitants of the earth.

On the other hand, this theory leads to the conclusion that if God gives the spirit directly, then He is communicating it to people in a sinful condition. We know that the entire human constitution is tainted by sin, including the inner person. Does this make God the source of sin?

**c. The Theory of Traducianism**

The theory of traducianism asserts that an individual’s spirit/soul derives from the parents and is communicated by them. Among adherents of this position, we can name Tertullian, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, and Martin Luther. According to this understanding, God does not communicate to the newly conceived a fallen spirit/soul. Sin is inherited completely from the parents. Psalm 51:5 is cited in support, where David claims, “In sin my mother conceived me.”

Exponents of this view offer the following explanation of the verses cited above in support of creationism. They appeal to the principle of the mediated creation of the soul. We note that the Bible claims that God creates a person’s body (Ps 139:13-14, Jer 1:5), yet we know that the body actually comes from the parents. Therefore, we conclude that these verses imply that God creates bodies in a mediated fashion, by means of the instrumentality of the parents. The conclusion follows that God does the same for the soul/spirit of the individual. God does indeed form it, but again in a mediated fashion through the instrumentality of the parents.

Certain arguments support traducianism. First, in Genesis 2:7 God breathed into Adam the breath of life, which may indicate God’s direct creation of the soul. Yet, no other text speaks of God doing this for another individual. Adherents conclude, then, that in all other cases the soul/spirit is communicated by the parents.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Moreover, Seth was born in “the likeness” of his father Adam (Gen 5:3). One may assume that Adam’s “likeness” includes not only his physical makeup, but his inner constitution as well. Finally, it is written of Levi that, in a sense, he existed in the “loins of Abraham” before his birth (Heb 7:9-10). This may indirectly imply that the potential for the entire person, not just the body, lies in the parents.

Some may object, though, that the soul/spirit, being immaterial, cannot be communicated from one person to another. In addition, if Jesus received His human soul from Mary, how could He be conceived without sin? In answer to the second objection, the fact that the Spirit “overshadowed” Mary may explain why a sinful nature was not communicated to her offspring, Jesus.

**4. The Question of Human Freedom**

The nature of human freedom is usually understood as either compatibilistic, or non-compatibilistic. According to the first view, people always make decisions based on their desires and motives. The most desired option among alternatives always becomes the preferred choice. When desires conflict, the strongest one will prevail and determine the course of action. Desires and motives, in turn, are determined by the character of the individual. They arise from the heart, that is, the essence or character of that person. Finally, it is assumed that character is formed by external factors, such as a person’s upbringing, culture, education, culture, etc. Since God is able to determine all these factors, a person’s character is ultimately formed by Him. So then, if behavior depends on desire, desire on character, and character on God’s arrangement of one’s circumstance, then people are not free in the fullest sense. Their freedom is determined by external factors.

The rival conception of human freedom is non-compatibilistic freedom. Here it is claimed that people, as self-conscious beings, are able to make decisions independent of their internal desires or external factors – even contrary to them.

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2. Munyon T. The Creation of the Universe and Humankind // Horton S. M. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – BookMasters. Kindle Edition. – P. 265-266. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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4. Ibid., v. 1, p. 323-324. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., v. 1, p. 320. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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7. Ibid., v. 1, p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., v. 1, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Also see Munyon, p. 265-266. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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24. Thiessen, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Dickason, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Discussion from Munyon, p. 272ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. However, in the vision of Ezekiel 37:8-10, the רוּחַ (*ruach*, i.е., spirit or breath) of God animates the dry bones. Nonetheless, one might respond that this text is not intending to teach the origin of the soul, but symbolically represents the restoration of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)