The Nature of Man - Dualistic or Holistic?

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. —Gen. 2:7.

Another area of debate on the doctrine of man is the relationship of body and soul. On one hand, those who have adopted an analytical approach have generally held a dualistic view of man. Hodge, for example, in commenting on Genesis 2:7, says, "According to this account, man consists of two distinct principles, a body and a soul." On the other hand, those who embrace the relational approach to man hold that he is essentially a holistic or monistic being. They view human life as an indivisible unity.

Serious objections have been raised to the dualistic view of man:

1. Dualism is essentially a Greek view of man, foreign to Hebrew thinking and the Bible. Berkouwer does not hesitate to call Hodge's dualistic view a faulty exegesis of the biblical text. He observes that most scholars now agree that Genesis 2:7 does not support the idea of a substantial dichotomy in man's nature. Berkouwer says that a "fairly general consensus of opinion has arisen among theologians" in support of Hebrew holism rather than Greek dualism. He also says, "It appears clearly, then, that Scripture never pictures man as a dualistic, or pluralistic being. . . . There can be no idea of an essential dualism in Paul."

The basis of Hodge's dualism is not the Bible but his philosophical assumptions. He makes no effort to conceal this when he argues against those who, adopting the same basic approach as himself, say that human nature is composed of three rather than two distinct substances. He appeals to human rationalism rather than to Scripture when he says, "Consciousness reveals the existence of two substances in the constitution of our nature; but it does not reveal the existence of three substances, and therefore the existence of more than two [substances] cannot rationally be assumed."

2. The Bible does use such terms as soul, flesh, mind, heart, spirit, conscience, inner man and outer man. Thinking they describe component parts of human nature, some have tried to find an orderly system in the use of these terms. The Bible student is often tempted to become more systematic than the Bible. But when he tries to tuck everything into a neat package, he is in grave danger of bending scripture to fit his carefully arranged system.
This approach to man makes the Bible say something it does not say. Berkouwer observes that it is not possible to synthesize these biblical terms into a systematic anthropology which describes man's composition. Berkouwer observes that it is not possible to synthesize these biblical terms into a systematic anthropology which describes man's composition. Berkouwer observes that it is not possible to synthesize these biblical terms into a systematic anthropology which describes man's composition. Berkouwer observes that it is not possible to synthesize these biblical terms into a systematic anthropology which describes man's composition. Berkouwer observes that it is not possible to synthesize these biblical terms into a systematic anthropology which describes man's composition. Berkouwer observes that it is not possible to synthesize these biblical terms into a systematic anthropology which describes man's composition. It is generally recognized today that biblical words such as soul, mind and spirit do not mean exactly the same thing in every text.

When Paul talks about the sanctification of the body, soul and spirit in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, he is not saying that man is composed of three essential substances any more than Moses and Jesus are affirming four substances when they command us to love God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength. Biblical language, especially Hebrew, is often repetitive. This repetition does not indicate a precise distinction of ideas. What one Bible writer calls soul, another may call spirit, mind or heart. Another may even use the word soul to mean physical appetite. In four instances in the Old Testament it is even used for dead body. So the analytical and dualistic approach leads to impossible contradictions.

3. H. Wheeler Robinson points out that the Hebrews made no precise division between man's physical and psychical powers. They assigned psychical functions to such physical organs as the bones, heart, bowels and kidneys. Robinson concludes by saying that such different terms as heart, mind and soul simply present different aspects of the unity of the personality. "The Hebrew idea of personality is that of an animated body, not (like the Greek) that of an incarnated soul."

Referring to the Hebrew view of man, G. Ernest Wright says:

There was no separation of body and soul, and man was conceived as a unified psycho-physical organism in which the psychical functions of the ego were conceived as finding expression in the various parts of the body. . . . Certainly the Biblical view of man 'as an animated body and not as an incarnate soul' (H. Wheeler Robinson) is much nearer to modern psychological opinion than is that of the Greeks.

4. Dualism depreciates the body and the material order which God made and pronounced "good." S. Lewis said that God must love matter because he made such a lot of it. William Temple calls Christianity "The most avowedly materialist of all the great religions." As church history has amply demonstrated, dualism can lead either to a world-denying asceticism or to an indifferent licentiousness. Dualism is dehumanizing because it denies man's essential relationship to the material order. Man is not human apart from this relationship any more than he is human apart from his relationship to God or to the community.

5. Greek dualism generally leads to the Greek idea that the soul is naturally and innately immortal. Berkouwer is clearly embarrassed and hard-pressed to explain how this idea of two separate substances and soul immortality got into some Reformation confessions. We suggest that it would be wise to admit that most Protestants of that era did not entirely
forsake the traditional wineskins of Grecian anthropology. Luther more nearly reflects Hebrew holism on this subject than most. But he was not always consistent, as some Lutheran scholars have recently demonstrated.

Today it is increasingly difficult to find competent Christian theologians who support the old idea of a natural immortality. Berkouwer says that using the immortal soul concept to establish the "infinite worth of the soul" is "excluded and made unacceptable by the gospel." Man is of infinite worth not because of what he is in himself, but because of what he is related to. Justification by faith teaches that a righteousness outside of man makes him acceptable and precious in the sight of God. Saying that man's value is in some substance of his nature is like saying that infused grace and personal righteousness justify man unto life eternal. Thielicke points out that the Roman Catholic notion of justification by an infused righteousness and the idea of an immortal soul belong together.

Reformed theologian Anthony Hoekema identifies immortality of the soul with the idealistic anthropology of Plato and Aristotle. Kuyper, the great Dutch Reformed scholar, has pointed out that "the concept of dependence in human existence (i.e., man's creatureliness) cannot be combined with the concept of the immortality of the soul." In recent years two Dutch scholars, Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, have also joined the attack on "the immortality of the soul." In Germany, Lutheran scholar Paul Althaus has declared flatly that "the Christian faith knows nothing of an 'immortality of the soul.' " Althaus and 100:Stange affirm "that Luther attacked the idea of the immortality of the soul as unchristian." Oscar Cullmann's epoch-making essay, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* is well known. In his book, *Life after Death*, Lutheran author T. A. Kantonen says:

Since Neoplatonism was the prevailing spiritual philosophy during the formative period of Christian theology, it is not surprising that many of the Fathers identified the Christian doctrine of eternal life with Platonic immortality. Through the centuries this unscriptural belief continued to permeate Christian thinking and to weld itself with popular animism into such an apparently self-evident and formidable "truth" that it seemed to be a veritable cornerstone of the Christian faith. In the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-17) the Roman church indeed proclaimed it to be an official dogma of the church. The Reformers were content with the ancient creeds which teach the "resurrection of the body," not the "immortality of the soul." But so firmly has the latter belief become imbedded in the Protestant mind too that the theologian or the minister who is led by Scripture to reject it is thought to be blasting the rock of ages. Thus when the Swiss scholar Oscar Cullmann, known for his profound interpretation of the New Testament and his positive Christian convictions, published a study in which he pointed out the contrast between the Greek conception of the immortality of the soul and the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, he aroused a storm of protest. He was accused of being a monster who delights in causing spiritual distress, one who
offers stones, if not serpents, to people hungering for the bread of life. In the preface to the recent English translation of the study *(Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?)* Professor Cullmann states that no critic has even attempted to refute him by scriptural exegesis, which is the whole basis of his presentation, and pleads with his readers to listen to what Scripture has to say. We cannot expect to grasp the Christian view unless we are willing to listen to Scripture even when it contradicts our own cherished wishes and traditional opinions. . . . Man does not have a mortal part, the body, and an immortal part, the soul. He is an indivisible unit, a body-animated-by-soul. As such, whether viewed under the body-aspect or the soul-aspect, he exists solely by his relation to God.\textsuperscript{19}

F. F. Bruce says:

Paul evidently could not contemplate immortality apart from resurrection; for him a body of some kind was essential to personality. Our traditional thinking about the 'never-dying soul', which owes so much to our Graeco-Roman heritage, makes it difficult for us to appreciate Paul's point of view. It is, no doubt, an oversimplification to say that while for the Greeks man was an embodied soul, for the Hebrews he was an animated body; yet there is sufficient substance in the statement for us to say that in this as in other respects Paul was 'a Hebrew born and bred' (Phil. 3.5). For others, including several of his Corinthian converts, disengagement from the shackle of the body was a consummation devoutly to be wished; but if Paul longed to be delivered from the mortality of this present earthly 'dwelling', it was with a view to exchanging it for one that was immortal; to be without a body of any kind would be a form of spiritual nakedness or isolation from which his mind shrank.\textsuperscript{20}

This is only a sample of what a host of both conservative and liberal scholars are saying on the question of soul immortality. Thielike's comment is the most penetrating, however, because he weighs the matter in the light of justification by faith. Man can possess both righteousness and life only by virtue of being related to Jesus Christ.

**The Meaning of Soul and Body**

Grecian philosophy has had great influence on Christian theology. Too often, Christians have been guilty of trying to read the Grecian idea of *soul* into the biblical word. But we must not assume the Bible uses the word *soul* in a Grecian fashion— as a distinct, metaphysical substance capable of separate, incorporeal existence.

Genesis 2:7 is the *locus classicus* of the biblical concept of soul: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." The Hebrew word for soul is nephesh. Genesis 2:7 simply
means that man became a living, breathing creature (see most modern translations of Genesis 2:7). Says *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*:

The word "soul" in English, though it has to some extent naturalized the Hebrew idiom, frequently carries with it overtones, ultimately coming from philosophical Greek (Platonism) and from Orphism and Gnosticism, which are absent in [nephesh]. In the OT it never means the immortal soul, but is essentially the life principle, or the living being, or the self as the subject of appetite and emotion, occasionally of volition.\(^{21}\)

*The Interpreter's Bible* also says that *nephesh* in Genesis 2:7 means "a complete person."\(^{22}\) *The New Bible Dictionary* says that it is "clear from Gen. 2:7, the primary meaning [of soul] is 'possessing life'. Thus it is frequently used of animals (Gen. 1:20, 24, 30, 9:12,15, 16; Ezk. 47:9)."\(^{23}\)

We must not read a presupposed "religious" meaning into the Hebrew word *nephesh*. In many Old Testament texts *nephesh* plainly means the animated, living person. We cannot impose a "spiritual," metaphysical meaning on *soul* where, for instance, a person is represented as saying that his soul desires physical food, water or honey (Prov. 25:25; 27:7; Num. 21:5; Deut. 12:15, 20-21). Because the Hebrews made no sharp distinction between the physical and the psychical, the word *soul* can have either a physical or psychical emphasis. The whole living person is always in view. The word *soul* can be applied to a person's thinking, emotions, will or action (Gen. 49:6; Deut. 4:29; Job 7:15; Ps. 86:4; Isa. 1:14). Quite often *soul* is used where we would use the word *person* (Lev. 7:21, 17:12; Ezek. 18:4). When the Bible talks about seventy souls going down to Egypt, it obviously means seventy persons. The word *soul* is also used as a synonym for the personal pronouns *I, me, myself* (Judges 16:16; Ps. 120:6; Ezek. 4:14). It can even be used to designate a dead body (Lev. 21:11; Num. 6:6; Hag. 2:13).

H. Wheeler Robinson says that of the 754 times the word *nephesh* appears in the Old Testament, it means *principle of life* 282 times, it has a *psychical* meaning 249 times, and it means *the person himself* 223 times.\(^{24}\)

It is interesting to notice that both biblical dictionaries and scholars who have objectively looked at the Hebrew view of man unhesitatingly say that the soul is capable of death. To say this would have been unthinkable in orthodox circles a few years ago. Berkouwer calls attention to the remarks of a Dutch scholar:

Thus Van der Leeuw criticizes the dualistic view of man, which he says is the source of the popular belief in immortality which has infiltrated modern Christianity. Such a view is, he says, Greek rather than Christian, and "in conflict with the essence of the Christian faith." We may make no distinction between body and soul as regards the effects of death. The whole man, according to the Old
Testament as well as the New Testament, is threatened by death. There is nothing he can fall back on; "the soul also dies."²⁵

H. Wheeler Robinson has amassed overwhelming evidence to prove there is little or no trace of body/soul dualism in the Old Testament.²⁶ He flatly says the soul "has no existence apart from the body."²⁷ W. David Stacey says, "Incorporeal life for the [nephesh] was never visualized. Death afflicted soul (Nu. 23.10) as well as body."²⁸ D.R.G. Owen says, "The Hebrews had no idea of the immortality of the soul in the Greek sense. . . . It was impossible for them even to conceive of disembodied human existence."²⁹ G. Ernest Wright declares that "the Hebrews had no conception of pure being in spiritual terms apart from material form."³⁰

When we come to the New Testament, we should realize that Hebrew thought forms are maintained. In most cases, especially in Paul, soul (Greek, psyche) simply means life. A comparison of Mark 8:36 and Luke 9:25 shows that soul can mean self. Robert Jewett points out that even the most confirmed dualists have to admit that psyche simply means life in many Pauline usages of the word.³¹

There may be some accommodation to Greek thought forms in the New Testament, for the apostles had to communicate to a Greek world, using the Greek language. But we should beware of assuming that Jesus and the apostles adopted the essential dualism of the Greeks. One of the very few places which might appear to present a prima facie case for dualism is Matthew 10:28, where our Lord says, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." We suggest that Jesus means that since God is the giver of life, only He can take it away in the ultimate sense. Therefore, do not fear him who can end your present mortal life, because it is God who is going to have the final decision whether your life is saved or destroyed. The words of Jesus certainly contradict the notion that the soul is essentially indestructible.³²

The soul, then, is the whole person. The body also is the whole person.³³ Neither soul nor body is a detachable part of man. Soul is man thinking, willing and living. It is the life, the me, the self in its acting and feeling. Body is the same whole person seen from the perspective of his form and substance. In the words of Pedersen, "The body is the soul in its outward form."³⁴

Body and soul are like the biblical expressions flesh and spirit. They do not refer to two parts of man but to the whole man from two different perspectives. The medieval church read flesh and spirit with Grecian glasses. She understood them to mean the higher and lower nature. This had disastrous consequences for the church's view of piety and salvation. Luther returned to the biblical view that flesh means the whole man in his natural, sinful state, while spirit means the whole man led by the Holy Spirit.
Berkouwer speaks of "a fairly general consensus of opinion [which] has arisen among theologians" with respect to the Hebraic and biblical view of the holistic, indivisible man. Luther attacked as "rubbish" the notion that one can tear off a part of man and say, "It lives." To be man means to exist as a unity of body and soul in the threefold relationship with God, the community and the material order.

**The Holistic Man and its implications**

Man in relationship to God is the *spiritual* man. Man in relationship to the community is the *social* man. And man in relationship to the material order is the *physical* man. These are not three parts of man, like this:

![Diagram of the Holistic Man](image)

Rather, the spiritual, social and physical are each the whole man seen from the perspective of his three different relationships:

![Diagram of the Holistic Man relationships](image)

The spiritual realm embraces the entire life since every part of man and his existence is related to God. In the same way, the social realm is the whole person seen from the perspective of his relationship to others. Finally, the physical dimension embraces the
whole person since every act of life involves the function of the physical organism. Man needs his body to think, pray and love his fellow man. Thinking is a chemical process which takes place in the brain cells. That is not all there is to thinking, of course, but it is at least that. No brains, no thought!

This view of the total, indivisible man has far-reaching implications. It means first of all that everything a person does has spiritual, social and physical connotations. Praying is not just a spiritual exercise. The person who prays is a social and physical being, and these relationships are involved in praying. Eating is not only a physical activity. Even nutritionists recognize the social context of eating as an important factor in human well-being. Whether a person eats with thanksgiving and to the glory of God is also important. So we have to be careful when saying that certain activities are physical while others are social or spiritual.

In the following list of activities—eating, praying, celebrating a birthday, studying the Bible, exercising, digging ditches and singing hymns—we cannot make three separate headings and call some physical while others are social or spiritual. Each activity is physical, social and spiritual. The whole life is always physical, social and spiritual at the same time. There can never be a human activity unrelated to God, to the community or to the physical order. This is holism.

If man were not related to God, he could not do one physical thing. ("In Him we live, and move, and have our being"—Acts 17:28.) By the same token, if a person were not related to the material order, he could not pray, study God's Word or do those things we customarily call "spiritual." Again, a man cannot love and serve God unless he loves and serves his neighbor too.

Whatever affects one relationship affects all relationships. When he disobeyed God, Adam disrupted his social and physical relationships. He began blaming his wife, and nature itself rebelled against man's dominion.

The idea that the soul is a jewel worth caring for while the body is a sack of dung deserving only neglect is "Grecian," unbiblical and unchristian. He who neglects his body neglects his neighbor and his God. The state of a person's physical health has more to do with his social and spiritual well-being than many suppose. To injure one relationship is to injure all.37

This leads to the subject of death. Death is not something which affects a part of man. It affects the whole man. Death is God's judgment. It is His "No" upon the whole life. No part of human existence escapes the judgment of death. There is no death-proof substance, no spark of immortality within us, which can avoid this disaster. Death afflicts the soul as well as the body. The whole man goes down into the grave. The Bible, of course, speaks of life beyond the grave, of immortality and eternal life. But we receive death (not immortality)
from the first Adam. Life and immortality are a gift from the Second or Last Adam (2 Tim. 1:10; 1 Cor. 15:21-22). Resurrection to future judgment comes because of Christ's atonement. Life is not an inherent property of body or soul. Life is derivative. It is found inherently only in Christ.

The idea that death means separation of soul from body is often imposed on the biblical word death. God warned Adam that sin would bring death. We have no warrant to ignore the plain Hebraic meaning of death and arbitrarily impose a Grecian concept of death' on the words of the Bible.

Jewish scholar Emanuel Feldman presents an excellent dissertation on the relation of death and uncleanness in Hebrew thinking. First he shows that the Hebrew word for defilement or uncleanness has the idea of being alien, foreign, strange or estranged. Then he states that according to the law of Moses, death was the "father of fathers of defilement." He quotes von Rad, who says, "Every uncleanness was to some extent a precursor of the thing that was uncleanness out and out, death." (See Num. 5:2; 6:1-10; 9:7; Lev. 21:1-6; 11:32; Ezek. 44:25.) Feldman shows that the primary characteristic of God in Hebrew religion was that He was the living God. Since death was the opposite of life, it was the opposite of God. To live was to have the potential of a relationship with God, to serve and praise Him. Death separates from life and so from the potential of this relationship with God (Ps. 6:5; 88:11-13; Isa. 38:18-19). As von Rad says, "The dead were excluded from fellowship with Yahweh and were in the highest degree unclean."

If we are to restore an appreciation of the New Testament proclamation of Christ's resurrection, we must first restore the deadness of death. We must appreciate its radical seriousness as the last stage of man's disease, as the ultimate uncleanness and opposition to God. This is what Christ conquered and bridged for us so that neither sin nor death can separate the believer from fellowship with God (Rom. 8:32-39). In Christ the believer has perfect righteousness and therefore perfect fellowship with God—a fellowship which not even death can affect in the slightest degree because Christ dies no more. Even though the believer dies and awaits his resurrection on the day of God, in Christ he has already crossed over and been resurrected. So even though dead in himself, he is alive in Christ and thereby continues in perfect fellowship with God.

While we confess with Paul that those who die in the Lord are "with Christ" (Phil. 1:23), we need to maintain a sanctified reticence where the Scripture is silent about details. Berkouwer remarks, "It is noteworthy in these and other references in the New Testament that we never encounter an anthropological definition or analysis of what it is that remains after death." We can trust God to keep and preserve that which is committed unto Him.

The resurrection of Christ teaches that the restoration of the whole man in bodily existence is the destiny of the Lord's people. It was not a disembodied Christ who appeared and brought joy to the disciples. The blessed hope of the church is the resurrection and the
putting on of a somatic (bodily) immortality at the parousia (1 Cor. 15). "The blessed hope" is His coming, not our going.

Redemption is the restoration of man to a right relationship to God, to society and to the material order. This is what it means to be human. We should not embrace dehumanizing views of life after death. Redeemed life means that the whole man is restored to perfect soundness together with his environment. The restoration to life after death must be corporate since man's humanness includes his relationship to the community. Individual eschatology is not "the blessed hope" of believers. Salvation means the restoration of man to a restored community and to a restored environment as well as restoration to perfect fellowship with God.

Footnotes:

1 Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, p.42.
2 We use Hodge and Berkouwer merely as classic examples of the two points of view, especially since both are Reformed theologians.
6 Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, p. 49.
14 Hoekema, *Doctrine of Man*, p.2.
16 *Ibid*.
32 "This statement [Matt. 10:28] is a flat contradiction of the innate indestructibility of the soul" (Kantonen, *Life after Death*, p.17).
33 The Hebrews did not have a word corresponding to our use of the word *body*.
34 Pedersen, *Israel*, p.171.
36 "Now, if one should say that Abraham's soul lives with God but his body is dead, this distinction is rubbish. I will attack it. One must say, 'The whole Abraham, the whole man, shall live.' The other way you tear off a part of Abraham and say, 'It lives.' This is the way the philosophers speak: 'Afterward the soul departed from its domicile,' etc. That would be a silly soul if it were in heaven and desired its body!" Theodore G. Tappert, ed. & tr., *Luther's Works*, vol.54, *Table Talk* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967], p.447).
40 *Ibid*.