



Dichotomy or Trichotomy

What people are made of...

If approached purely from a humanistic point of view, mankind is typically seen as nothing more than a physical, material beast. One, as it were, with the universe in which they dwell.

This is called "monism" and in most religious circles it is rejected as completely materialistic (which of course it is).

Most commonly, in the religious world, there are two additional views – that of humans being as a two part being or a three part being. These two views are known as Dichotomy and Trichotomy respectively.

1. **Dichotomy** – This is the belief that man is a spirit who lives in a body. The "soul" of man is a man-made division which does not actually exist since the "soul" is actually part of the spirit. To the Dichotomist, there is no separation nor distinction between the soul and spirit in any way.
2. **Trichotomy** – This is the belief that human beings ARE a spirit, they POSSESS a soul and LIVE IN a body. In this view all three parts are separate and distinct from each other but work synergistically in making up the whole of a person.

As for this article, we are only concerned with the scriptural and therefore Christian understanding of this topic. As such we will look at the inherent differences between these two views as far as how each "may be" seen or represented in scripture. Furthermore, we will attempt to come to a conclusion regarding which is most likely the truth.

Two views two supporting arguments

The belief in and case for Dichotomy rests primarily upon the argument that the Scripture uses soul and spirit interchangeably and synonymously.

The belief in and case for Trichotomy rests on language and the nature of and redemption from the fall.

That the scriptures use the terms Soul and Spirit somewhat interchangeably is not a point most Trichotomists would argue against. It is patently true!

Are they used synonymously however..well, maybe...maybe not, and that would be the question of the Trichotomist.

As used interchangeably, these two words MAY be nothing more than two “names” for the same thing OR they are different words BECAUSE they are different parts of mankind and this later possibility is the real question.

Interchangeable OR synonymous?

Before we can deal with this distinction we must first understand the culture penning the words.

For example, social psychiatrist and writer Richard Nisbett¹ and his colleagues carried out a study to illustrate that westerners and those from east Asia view the world in fundamentally different ways. *“Harmony is a central idea in East Asian philosophy, and so there is more emphasis on how things relate to the whole,” says Nisbett. “In the West, by contrast, life is about achieving goals.”*

While comparing mothers playing with their little boys with a truck they noted the following difference.

“An American mother will say: Look Billy, a truck. It’s shiny and has wheels.’ The focus is on the object,” explains Nisbett. By contrast, the Japanese mothers stresses context saying, “I push the truck to you and you push it to me. When you throw it at the wall, the wall says ouch’.”

Nisbett noted that this phenomenon extended to language development as well. *“To Westerners it seems obvious that babies learn nouns more easily. But while this is the case in the West, studies show that Korean and Chinese children pick up verbs – which relate objects to each other – more easily.”*

So my point of this illustration is that one has to bear cultural differences in mind when attempting to read into the meaning of a given passage or phrase. In our example, perhaps soul and spirit are used interchangeably not because they are not distinct, but because they are both part of the spiritual or immaterial part of man – thus, they are referred to holistically.

Now let me nip something in the bud before the thought develops too far in someone’s mind.

The fact that a culture’s way of thinking has an influence upon how thoughts are conveyed in scripture is NOT to detract from the FACT that ALL scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The inspiration of scripture is something many Christians do not have a firm grasp upon. Inspiration means that God moved upon men to accurately communicate what He wanted said, without controlling HOW they said it.

It is Inspiration NOT dictation. (For more on this see – [Copies of copies...are they Reliable?](#))

So while one might see this as a claim that scripture is influenced by society rather than purely inspired by the Holy Spirit I have to strongly disagree.

Dichotomy

As previously stated, Dichotomy rests primarily upon the argument that the Scripture uses soul and spirit interchangeably and therefore synonymously. The following are some examples...

In **Revelation 6:9**, John writes of seeing *“the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God,”* but in **Hebrews 12:23** they are referred to as *“the spirits of just men made perfect.”*

In **Revelation 20:4**, John sees the *“souls of those who had been beheaded”* come to life and reign for a thousand years with Christ, yet in **1 Peter 3:19**, we are told that after Christ’s death, He went and preached to *“the spirits in prison”*.

So in some places those who have died are referred to as “souls” and in other places they are referred to as “spirits.”

Furthermore, in **1 Corinthians 5:5**, Paul states that he has handed a man over to Satan, *“so that the sinful nature in the flesh may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”*

The question is, does this mean the scriptures are teaching they are one and the same thing OR are the Scriptures simply using one as a representative of the whole with preference to one word above another depending upon context or writer?

A case for either could be made if limited to these passages alone, but let’s consider others as well.

In **Genesis 35:18**, it is Rachael’s *“soul”* that departs upon death, yet in **John 19:30** we read that Jesus bowed His head and *“gave up His spirit”* and Stephen, as he was being stoned to death, prayed *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”* (**Acts 7:59**).

In **1 Kings 17:21**, Elijah prays for the *“soul”* of the dead child to return and when it does the child comes back to life. Yet in **James 2:26** we read that *“the body without the spirit is dead”* and **Ecclesiastes 12:7** says that it is the *“spirit”* that returns to God at death.

The dichotomist would ask, if the soul and spirit are separate, then why do we not read that

Rachael’s soul **and** spirit departed; why didn’t Jesus pray for God to receive His spirit **and** His soul; why does Elijah pray for **only** the soul to return, when James tells us that it is the absence of the spirit that makes the body dead?

These are good questions, but not iron clad proofs in themselves. We have plenty of examples both in the Bible and in modern times where the same is practiced regarding things which are commonly know and accepted to be separate and distinct things.

“I will speak out in the anguish of my spirit, I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.” ~

Job 7:11

If one believes that the weight of Scripture shows the two terms are used interchangeably, then this verse would be understood as a common way of using synonyms to bring forth an emphasis. For example, the poet might say, *“Draw near; come close to me; do not stand afar off...”* using the repetition of synonymous terms and phrases to emphasize a single point.

“My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you.” ~ Isaiah 26:9

The same could be said for this verse—synonyms used for emphasis. Otherwise, what are we to think...one part of man yearns at night and another part longs in the morning? This doesn’t make a lot of sense!

So, the Dichotomist would argue that this is an example of the totality of my spiritual being both yearning for God in the night and longing for Him in the morning.

In truth, in THESE verses the Dichotomist would be correct, for this is a literary style known as “parallelism” and is very common in ancient Hebrew poetry.

One can see the beauty of the language when this use of synonyms is employed by looking at how the passages would read without it, just repeating the same word. (Try it with **Job 7:11** and you will see what I mean.)

In the scriptures however, we also see examples of words being used interchangeably which in actual fact were NOT synonymous terms.

For example, we see that the Jews divided up the scriptures into categories based upon certain criteria. The Law was most strictly the 10 Commandments. The Pentateuch was the first five books of the Bible, the prophets were the prophetic books, then there were the Historical books, the books of wisdom and the poetic divisions of scripture. Yet we have many examples of the entire old testament being referred to as “the Law”.

This was so true in the Jewish world that the mere mention of part of a passage was viewed as inclusive of the whole. This practice is seen a few times in the writings of Paul.

In Acts 15, Paul was addressing a false teaching which had come to the Gentile church in Antioch which told them that in order to be saved they had to be circumcised. After submitting to the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and informed them that such was not true. However, they WERE to, “...abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” By making mention of these few things, Paul was referring to much more. For example, my mentioning their need to abstain from sexual immorality, he was by extension admonishing them to keep the other 9 commandments. No one would argue that Paul was saying, “Ok...no immoral sex, but you CAN lie, cheat, murder, bear false witness, break the Sabbath, take the Lord’s name in vain...etc.” No of course not! By mentioning one part (the part they were most likely to be guilty of) Paul was indirectly including the whole. So this is an example of a single command or word, representing a plurality of things.

Furthermore, if using terms interchangeably is concrete proof that the two words literally represent the same thing, then an argument could be made from scripture that disobedience and unbelief are the same thing!

Hebrews 3:18-19 states,

*“(18) And to whom did He “swear that they would not enter His rest,” if not those who **disobeyed**?
(19) So we see that they were unable to enter because of **unbelief**.”*

Now, no one, so far as I am aware, is arguing the notion that the writer of Hebrews was saying that to disobey was the exact same thing as not believing. However, in this case one produced the other and so they are used interchangeably.

The same is done in **Romans 8:5**, where it is said that to be carnally minded IS death. Well Jesus died...does that mean He was carnally minded? Of course not!

The wording is deliberate and means that one leads inexorably to the other. If one is carnally minded it leads to death.

My point is that while I without question acknowledge that nowhere do we read of the soul AND the spirit departing from a person at death in any one given verse and I also clearly see these two being used one in preference to the other – I believe it to be little more than circumstantial ground for claiming they are both one and the same thing. This is especially true when more robust theological statements are made which seem to point out a distinct differences and functions of the soul and spirit.

Rather than linguistic proofs which are anything but guarantees, what we really need are theological proofs for one view or the other which are in agreement throughout scripture.

So, this brings us to what Trichotomists believe.

Trichotomy

As we have established earlier, the belief in and case for Trichotomy rests on language and the nature of and redemption from the fall.

Both Dichotomy and Trichotomy understand that man consists of flesh and spirit, but the Trichotomist sees the spiritual element or immaterial part of man as consisting of spirit and soul, separate entities.

The spirit is...well, spirit—that which is closest to God.

The soul is usually associated with the mind, the emotions and the will.

I believe are the two most difficult passages to deal with and in which the trichotomist would have their greatest argument are the following:

“May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus

Christ.” ~ 1 Thessalonians 5:23

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it

penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and

attitudes of the heart.” ~ Hebrews 4:12

These passages should cause the Dichotomist great pause, for at first blush, it appears as if there is here a list in which we find the three elements of man: spirit, soul and body.

However, the Dichotomist would argue that if this were the correct understanding of the verse, all of the other passages mentioned would then become a problem. I disagree!

There are MANY passages in scripture which do not mention all that could be said of a given topic. In fact many times, more is less. To complicate a passage by being overly accurate and literal, often detracts from the greater focus of the passage.

The proper approach to studying complicated issues like this is to first divorce yourself from your bias and look at the totality of scripture, paying attention to the time, language and mind-set of both author and reader. Again – this is NOT to detract from the FACT that ALL scripture is inspired, but rather that it is not dictated.

So, the explanation would look something like this: there are many places where the Scripture lists things and they are not necessarily all different pieces. For example, most Trichotomists would say that the soul includes the mind and the heart, but in **Matthew** and **Luke**, Jesus says that we are to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and mind and soul...a list. If these are each separate pieces, then we now have man consisting of a body, a spirit, a soul, and a heart and a mind—five parts in total.

If the spiritual aspect of the heart and the mind are really part of the soul, then why not understand the list in 1 Thessalonians and in Hebrews the same way?

Why not understand the literary use of these synonyms to emphasize the totality of our spiritual being and our physical being kept blameless at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ? That would certainly reconcile all of the passages.

Well let's look at our passage in **Hebrews 4:12**,

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

The Dichotomist would state, again, that in light of the weight of the Scriptural evidence, where soul and spirit are used interchangeably and are referring to the totality of the spiritual aspect of man, then this passage, too, is using these synonyms for emphasis as in someone encouraging you to fight with all of your strength and all of your might.

Rather than looking at the passage as listing six individual pieces: spirit, soul, joints, marrow, thoughts, attitudes, look at the passage as listing two things that the Word of God can penetrate and divide: the spiritual part of man (soul/spirit) and the physical part of man (joints/marrow); followed by a third action: judging the heart (thoughts/attitudes).

Now, the Trichotomist may not find all of this convincing and may continue to believe that **1**

Thessalonians 5:23 and **Hebrews 4:12** are giving us evidence of separate elements of man's makeup and this view has merit.

The argument is that if the Scripture uses different words to describe the essence of man's nature, then they must be distinctly different parts. There are many examples in scripture where everything one could say about a given subject is NOT mentioned in any one series of verse, but IF...as a whole...the scriptures recognize other parts, then that MUST be taken into account and way very heavily in the positive for evidence.

Conclusions

The only difficulty for which the Trichotomist has an answer that the Dichotomist does not regards the fall and redemption of man.

If our soul and spirit are one in the same, then how our spirits can be 100% “one with God”, in agreement with Him and completely contrary to the flesh and yet still have desires for evil?

1Cor. 6:16-17, “(16) Do you not know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her? For it says, The two will become one flesh. (17) But anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.”

This is NOT a problem for the Trichotomist.

Both **Romans 7** and Galatians seem to bear out a three part division of man.

Paul, in addressing the Romans, says that now that he is born a new, he desires to do good, but finds himself doing evil. So now, he concludes (by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) that if he sins it is no longer Paul who is doing it, but the sin that dwells in his flesh.

Rom. 7:15-18, “(15) For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (16) Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. (17) So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (18) For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”

Galatians tells us that the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh and these are contrary to one another so that we do not do the things we wish we did. [**Galatians 5:17**].

If we are a tri-part being...spirit...soul...body, then the choices we make are not directly controlled by either our flesh or our spirit, but is that part of us which exists between the two which is influenced by both and by which we make our choices to serve either good or evil.

This is hinted at in the previously mentioned writings of Paul in **Romans 7** as well as in the writings of John in **1 John 3:9**.

There are two ways of translating (and therefore understanding) **1 John 3:9**. The passage reads like this...

“Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he

cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” ~ 1Jn. 3:9

The wording for cannot sin, can be taken to mean that the child of God cannot sin habitually. This is true on one level. A child of God cannot live a life-style devoted to sin as if he never came to know the Lord.

As **Matthew Henry** would say,

” He cannot so sin as to denominate him a sinner in opposition to a saint or servant of God.

Again, he cannot sin comparatively, as he did before he was born of God, and as others do that are not so. And the reason is because he is born of God, which will amount to all this inhibition and impediment.

1. *There is a light in his mind which shows him the evil and malignity of sin.*
2. *There is that bias upon his heart which disposes him to loathe and hate sin.*
3. *There is the spiritual seminal principle or disposition, that breaks the force and fulness of the sinful acts.*

They proceed not from such plenary power of corruption as they do in others, nor obtain that plenitude of heart, spirit, and consent, which they do in others. The spirit lusteth against the flesh. And therefore in respect to such sin it may be said, It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. It is not reckoned the person's sin, in the gospel account, where the bent and frame of the mind and spirit are against it.

Then, 4. There is a disposition for humiliation and repentance for sin, when it has been committed. He that is born of God cannot sin."

I would agree with Matthew Henry, but I also see another conclusion here that does not present an "either/or" scenario, but a "both/and". The words, "the seed of Christ" speak of the nature, character and tendency of Christ remains in the born again believer.

Who is "him"?

I would argue that this is the spirit of the man. That part which Paul says, "*If I sin, it is no longer "I" who does it, but the sin that remains in me, for I know that IN ME (that is in my flesh) nothing good dwells.*"

That part of man which is incapable of "producing sin" is the spirit man...that is "*who the man actually IS.*"

So it is also true that because the born again man has the divine nature in his spirit, his soul is still subject to evil. Which is why James tells us to receive the engrafted word of God which is able to save our **SOULS**.

James is here speaking to Christians, and therefore they are already saved. So what part of the Christian is saved by receptivity to the holy word of God...the mind, will and emotions!

There are several other places in the New Testament which reveal this absolute new man or new creation, while not denying the ongoing need for our souls **to be conformed** to His image.

This I believe is the greatest proof of the existence of a soul which exists separate from the spirit, yet directly connected with it in function. I also believe the dichotomist has little of value to say which could contradict this conclusion.

1. Richard Eugene Nisbett is an American social psychologist and writer.