

Trichotomy: Beachhead For Gnostic Influences

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Originally published in *ModernReformation* (July/August 1995)
and edited for publication on the Riddleblog

One of the most difficult problems any theological tradition faces is that there are often times fundamental differences at critical points between the “official doctrine” affirmed by the divines and academics of that tradition, and those doctrines actually believed and practiced on a popular level by the rank and file. There is, perhaps, no greater illustration of this than the popular notion of trichotomy. Rejected by virtually all major theologians in all streams of the Christian tradition as a speculative Greek philosophical notion rather than a biblical conception, trichotomy is very likely the reigning notion of human nature in American evangelical circles today. With few exceptions, the Christian church has affirmed, with one voice, that human nature is bipartite. As men and women, we are necessarily a body—the physical aspect of our nature—and we are also a soul-spirit—the immaterial aspect described in the Bible as either soul or spirit. These two are united together as one person in a psychosomatic unity. This is simply known as dichotomy. Trichotomists, however, contend that human nature is tripartite, that is, as men and women we are body, soul and spirit. But while the theologians of evangelicalism, following the historic precedence, overwhelmingly reject the notion of trichotomy, the popular teaching and literature of evangelicalism abounds with trichotomistic views of human nature in one form or another.

It is also no accident that the Gnostic impulse, now so rampant in the quest for spirituality, finds a ready-made beachhead into evangelical circles through the trichotomist view of human nature. If the Gnostic impulse is defined as a quest for secret knowledge apart from the text of Scripture (*gnosis*), a disparaging of matter, including an aversion to things physical and intellectual, coupled to the notion that religion is essentially a quest for a vaguely defined spirituality attained via a mystical ascent into the heavenlies to encounter God apart from means and a mediator, then the notion that humans are essentially spiritual beings rather than a body-soul unity, opens the door to a host of serious theological errors and interesting paradoxes. While on the one hand evangelicals work feverishly to oppose the New Age Movement as it attempts to secretly infiltrate the church, on the other, the same evangelicals can be quite unwittingly seduced by the same dualistic separation of reality into a spirit-matter dichotomy that has spawned fads like the New Age movement in the first place. For if we are essentially spirit rather than flesh, as the trichotomists propose, then, in effect, we establish the same kind of dualistic hierarchy associated with classic Gnosticism, in which the spirit is exalted above both soul and body. Whether we intend to do so or not, we have opened the door wide to the essence of Gnosticism, namely, that matter is evil and spirit is good. If we adopt the trichotomist understanding of human nature, we inevitably set up the same dualistic conception of reality in which the Gnostic impulse thrives, and which we immediately recognize in the New Age movement, but fail to see when it comes from the lips or pens of certain popular evangelical figures, because it is couched in biblical

rather than philosophical terms. Therefore, it is important to set out the biblical evidence for dichotomy, and then evaluate the arguments raised by defenders of trichotomy. It is also important to evaluate how trichotomy and its theological cousin, the so-called “Carnal Christian” notion of sanctification, provides an unwitting justification for the Gnostic impulse. As we will see, it is surprising how effectively a trichotomistic understanding of essential human nature enables such a pagan ideology to establish a significant bridgehead in the hearts and spirits of countless evangelicals.

Historically, Christians have argued that dichotomy is clearly taught throughout Scripture. There is no doubt that the Scriptures not only teach a material aspect that is essential to human nature, the same Scriptures preclude any notion of the Gnostic tendency to depreciation of the body because it is material. God created our bodies first, and only then did God breathe life into the body he had made (Gn 2:7). The creation account is unmistakably clear; God pronounced everything that he had made to be “good” (Gn 1:31), including the human body. We are, in one sense, dust, and therefore material (Gn 3:17), but as John Murray notes, “the reason for [Adam’s] return to dust is not that he is dust, but that he has sinned.”¹

In addition to the creation account, there are other vital considerations proving the importance of this material aspect of being human. First, in the Incarnation, Jesus Christ, as the second person of the Holy Trinity, assumed to himself a true human nature (Gal 4:4). It is the Gnostic impulse that is condemned as the “spirit of Antichrist” because this spirit emphatically denies that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh (1 Jn 4:2,3). It is the docetic heresy which teaches a truly divine Jesus who only appears in human form, rather than a divine Logos who takes on a true human nature, as taught in the prologue to John's Gospel. A second, equally important, consideration is that of the Resurrection. Jesus’ resurrection is bodily (1 Cor 15:3-8; Lk 24:40-43), and his resurrection is itself the basis for the bodily resurrection of those who are in Christ (1 Cor 15:35-58). We will not spend eternity as spirits with harps, floating weightlessly on the clouds, but instead as redeemed persons in resurrected and glorified bodies, forever rejoined to our soul-spirit, as Jesus Christ through his own bodily resurrection and glorification has undone the penalty of sin, which is death and separation of body from soul. It is with this in mind, that Murray reminds us of the dangers of the Gnostic impulse to the Christian.

The body is not an appendage. The notion that the body is the prison-house of the soul and that the soul is incarcerated in the body is pagan in origin and anti-biblical; it is Platonic, and has no resemblance to the Biblical conception. The Bible throughout represents the dissolution of the body and separation of body and spirit as an evil, as the retribution and wages of sin, and, therefore, as a disruption of that integrity which God established at creation.²

¹ John Murray, “The Nature of Man,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2 (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1977), p. 14.

² Ibid.

The fact that we have an immaterial element (called “soul” or “spirit” in Scripture), in addition to our bodies, is equally clear in Scripture. It is our Lord who taught us that we are “body and soul” (Mt 10:28), and in Matthew 26:41, Jesus likewise contrasts “flesh and spirit.” The terms seem to be used interchangeably. A “spirit” is immaterial (Lk 24:39); it is “within us” (1 Cor 2:11), and sanctification is spoken of as purifying ourselves from “everything that contaminates body and spirit” (1 Cor 7:1). James tells us that a body without a spirit is “dead” (2:26), for at death the spirit leaves the body (Mt 27:50; Lk 23:46; Jn 19:30 and Acts 7:59). The term soul is used in various ways throughout Scripture as referring to “life constituted in the body” (Mt 6:25; 10:39; 16:25-26; 20:28; Lk 14:26; Jn 10:11-18; Acts 15:26; 20:10; Phil 2:30; 1 Jn 3:16).³ Soul certainly appears to be synonymous with spirit, in addition to serving as a synonym for the person themselves (Mt 12:18; Lk 12:19; Acts 2:27, 41, 43, 3:23; Rom 2:9; 3:11; Heb 10:38; Jas 1:21; 5:20; 1 Pt 1:9; 2:25). In light of this evidence, Murray concludes, “the thesis is simply that, with sufficient frequency, ‘soul’ as ‘spirit’ is used to designate the distinguishing component in the human person.”⁴

A doctrine is not necessarily false simply because it has a dubious pedigree, but it is important to remember that a doctrine's pedigree is often times a very good clue as to its source and its ultimate consequences. And when viewed from the perspective of Christian reflection across the ages, there is no doubt that trichotomy has a very dubious pedigree. With its roots in Plato's distinction between body and soul, and Aristotle's further division of soul into “animal” and “rational” elements, the trichotomist notion of human nature as tripartite is unmistakably Greek and pagan, rather than biblical. As Louis Berkhof notes, “the most familiar but also the crudest form of trichotomy is that which takes the body for the material part of man's nature, the soul as the principle of animal life, and the spirit as the God-related rational and immortal element in man.”⁵

Whether the Gnostic impulse is a cause or an effect, the trichotomist structure of human nature has served gnostically inclined evangelicals quite well by appearing to cover several biblical bases. Trichotomy allows for a doctrine of depravity—the body is bad and makes us sin. Furthermore, since we are spiritually dead, the miraculous work that God performs upon us when we are born again is that he gives to us a new spirit, or as some would prefer, he creates a spirit within us. Thus, as Christians, we have new life, which the non-Christian does not possess. B. B. Warfield, the great Princeton theologian, astutely noted that such schemes fail to see the obvious and fatal theological flaw associated with trichotomy, namely . . .

that thus the man is not saved at all; a different newly created man is substituted for him.

³ Ibid., p. 21.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 191 ff.

When the old man is got rid of--and that the old man has to be ultimately got rid of [we do] not doubt--the saved man that is left is not at all the old man that was to be saved, but a new man that has never needed any saving.⁶

In addition, the trichotomist scheme also allows for a doctrine of free will, since the body, as flesh, tends toward evil, and we are said to be spiritually dead; nevertheless, the soul retains the ability (with sufficient enticements, of course) to make a decision to accept Christ as Savior. This enables the trichotomist to attempt to take seriously those Biblical passages describing the fallen human condition, and yet still allows for the typically American idol, namely the conception that the human will, and not the grace of God, is the ultimate factor in determining just where, exactly, we will spend our eternity.

Another significant impact of the trichotomist understanding of human nature, is that it provides much of the theological justification for the rapid growth of Pentecostalism. In this case, trichotomy allows Pentecostals to argue that because the spirit is the higher element of human nature, “speaking in tongues” is the divinely appointed means of bypassing the lower elements of human nature, such as the rationality of mind and soul. In the Pentecostal scheme, we can commune with God directly, without the hindrances of the lower elements of human nature and language. Indeed, in such schemes, we can commune with God directly, apart from any means at all. Trichotomy conveniently provides the means for a host of neo-gnostically inclined Pentecostal practices.

The notion of trichotomy has been defended in a number of ways. In popular literature and preaching, it is often asserted that since God is a Trinity, and since as humans we are created in God's image, humans, too, are tripartite, having a body, a soul and a spirit. But such analogies are not drawn directly from the biblical data itself; they come only by way of crude inference. In addition, there are two texts that have been used to supposedly prove trichotomy to be the Biblical anthropology. Several early Christian writers, such as Origen, found a kind of confirmation to these Greek categories in the words of Paul, recorded in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Paul's words, “may your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless,” are interpreted to mean that Paul endorsed the tripartite distinction of body, soul and spirit. But as Anthony Hoekema has pointed out, when viewed in the light of the rest of the biblical data, which teaches otherwise, there must be some other intention on Paul's part.

When Paul prays for the Thessalonians that the spirit, soul, and body of each of them may be preserved or kept, he is obviously not trying to split man into three parts, any more than Jesus intended to split man into four parts when he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” (Luke 10:27). This passage therefore also provides no ground for the trichotomic

⁶ B. B. Warfield, “Review of He That Is Spiritual, by Lewis Sperry Chafer,” reprinted in Mike Horton, ed., *Christ The Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 211-218.

view of the constitution of man.⁷

In Hebrews 4:12, it is argued that the author makes a clear division between soul and spirit, implying that they cannot be synonymous. But John Murray contends that the verb used here—translated as “dividing” in the NIV—is never used elsewhere in Scripture in the sense of distinguishing between two different things, but is always used when distributing and dividing up various aspects of the same thing (see Heb 2:4; Lk 11:17-18; Mt 27:35; Jn 19:24).⁸ The point is not that the Word separates two distinct things—soul from spirit—but that “The Word of God judges the thoughts and attitude of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The Word does not divide soul from spirit, as though these were two distinct entities, but the Word does divide soul and spirit in the sense of penetrating into our inner most parts.

Every doctrine we affirm has consequences which will inevitably effect our lives as Christians, and trichotomy is no exception. There are many notable instances among influential evangelicals wherein trichotomy, and the related Carnal Christian teaching, has led to a foothold for the Gnostic impulse, with all of its associated doctrinal fallout. There are several clear examples of this which are important to consider because they so powerfully illustrate how pervasive this tendency can be, and how easily it slips into what are otherwise effective Christian ministries. There are always direct consequences in the life of the church whenever Gnosticism makes its influence known.

Calvary Chapel founder and pastor, Chuck Smith, is a prime example of one whose trichotomist leanings have produced serious doctrinal and ideological consequences. In commenting upon 1 Thessalonians 5:23, one of two key trichotomist proof-texts, Smith asserts, “we meet God in the realm of our spirit.”⁹ In his treatment of 1 Corinthians 2-3, Smith affirms the classic Carnal Christian teaching. We read that “many of the Corinthian Christians hadn’t entered the spiritual dimension yet,” and that the “Holy Spirit gives us knowledge beyond our experience.”¹⁰ The Gnostic impulse associated with trichotomy is at its height when Smith declares that “our problem arises from living as redeemed spirits in unredeemed bodies. We desire to be delivered from these bodies of flesh so that we can enjoy the full, rich, overflowing life in the spirit.”¹¹ In Smith’s conception, God does not meet us as Protestants have historically affirmed—through

⁷ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 204 ff; John Murray, “Trichotomy,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2, pp. 23-33.

⁸ John Murray, “Trichotomy,” pp. 30-31.

⁹ Chuck Smith, *New Testament Study Guide* (Costa Mesa: The Word for Today, 1982), p. 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

means such as the Word and Sacrament—but instead, God meets us immediately “in the realm of our spirit.” Because this is the case, not all Christians have “entered into the spiritual.”

According to Smith, we now have two categories of Christians, the “carnal” and the “spiritual,” when the Bible knows only of one category, “Christians.”

This is a classic case of the Gnostic impulse establishing a major beachhead in the very heart of Evangelicalism. If this is true, what then is the likely source of this Gnostic influence? No, Chuck Smith has probably not been going to New Age seminars or studying the works of Plotinus. But Chuck Smith is an ardent supporter of the dispensational system of annotations found in the famous *Scofield Reference Bible*, at first glance an unlikely source for Gnostic influences. When one considers, however, several of the notes advocating trichotomy contained in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, the reader is immediately intrigued, for example, by the affinities between the notes on 1 Corinthians 2:14, and the mystical and speculative philosophy of Plotinus. A simple comparison will suffice. The *Scofield Bible* asserts:

Paul divides men into three classes: (1) *psuchikos*, meaning of the senses, sensuous, (Jas 3:15; Jude 19), natural, I. e. the Adamic man, unrenewed through the new-birth (Jn 3:3,5); (2) *pneumatikos*, meaning spiritual, i.e., the renewed man as Spirit-filled and walking in the Spirit in full communion with God (Eph 5:18-20); and (3) *sarkikos*, meaning carnal, fleshly, i.e. the renewed man who, walking “after the flesh,” remains a babe in Christ (1 Cor 3:1-4). The natural man may be learned, gentle, eloquent, fascinating, but the spiritual content of Scripture is absolutely hidden from him; and the fleshly or carnal Christian is able to comprehend only its simplest truths, “milk” (1 Cor 3:2).¹²

Plotinus, in but one example that may be cited, affirms an amazingly similar tripartite structure:

All men, from birth onward, live more by sensation than by thought, forced as they are by necessity to give heed to sense impressions. Some stay in the sensate their whole life long. For them, sense is the beginning and the end of everything. Good and evil are the pleasures of sense and the pains of sense; it is enough to chase the one and flee the other. Those of them who philosophize say that therein wisdom lies Others do lift themselves, a little above the earth. Their higher part transports them out of the pleasurable into the honorable. But, unable to perceive anything higher and with nowhere to set themselves, they fall back in virtue’s name—on the activities and “options” of that lower realm they had thought to escape. But there is another, a third class of men—men godlike in the greatness of their strength and the acuity of their perceptions. They see clearly the splendors that shine out from on high. Thither, out of the mist and fogs of the earth, they lift themselves. There they stay, seeing from above what is here below, taking

¹² *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, note on 1 Corinthians 2:14, p. 1234.

their pleasure in truth.¹³

Note that the first level of men, the so-called “sensate” of Plotinus, corresponds directly to the natural man of Scofield. Then in the second class, there are those who lift themselves above the earth, but are not able to perceive anything higher. In Plotinus’ conception, this corresponds well to Scofield’s “Carnal Christian” who can only comprehend the simplest truth, the “milk” of Scripture. Scofield’s “Spirit-filled Christian,” who is said to have full communion with God, mirrors Plotinus’ third class of men, those who attain the highest level above the fog and mist. Thus, one may not have to look to the mystery religions of the Middle East, or to the New Age Movement here in America to be influenced by Gnosticism. One may be unwittingly taken in merely by adopting the trichotomist anthropology, or “Carnal Christian” understanding of sanctification, so often associated with the Keswick or “higher-life” teachings that have become part and parcel of fundamentalist theology—a theology from which Chuck Smith has drawn deeply.

While Calvary Chapel has done great things in terms of evangelism, and in giving many of us our first exposure to serious Bible study—there are indeed elements of the true evangel present—it is no accident that Calvary Chapel under Chuck Smith’s leadership, has also pioneered the experience-based form of worship known as “Praise and Worship” associated with Maranatha Music. While in many cases, there has been a commendable emphasis upon the singing of Scripture, a historic Reformed practice, Calvary Chapel’s now ubiquitous “praise songs” have opened the door to a seemingly endless stream of praise and worship choruses specifically aimed at arousing the subjective emotions of the worshipping subject, thereby enabling the worshipper to escape the natural, and enter into the spirit above the mists. Content-laden hymns, and liturgy based upon biblical texts, can only hinder such a quest. Yes, our doctrines do have consequences, even for our worship.

Claiming to be the “ministry of balance,” Calvary Chapel is characterized by a marked imbalance in what it opposes: Sacraments as means of grace, liturgy in any form, Reformation theology (especially the doctrines of election, justification by an imputed righteousness, and a clear law-gospel distinction), an educated clergy, denominationalism and any form of tradition. It is important to notice that the things which are condemned are the very things that Protestants have historically thought quite important, if not essential. The things that are condemned are clearly fruit of the Gnostic impulse, brought into the movement by means of a trichotomist anthropology and “Carnal Christian” conception of the Christian life.

But the Gnostic impulse does not always make a frontal assault. Another important illustration of the way in which the Gnostic impulse operates in evangelical circles, is seen in the work of Charles Ryrie, former professor of Dallas Theological Seminary, and whose name appears on a

¹³ Plotinus, “The Intelligence, the Ideas and Being,” in *The Essential Plotinus*, Elmer O’ Brien (Indianapolis: Hackett Publications, 1964), pp. 46-47.

rather popular evangelical study Bible. While Ryrie wholeheartedly rejects trichotomy,¹⁴ he nevertheless affirms, in slightly modified form, the “Carnal Christian” teaching associated with Lewis Sperry Chafer,¹⁵ founder of Dallas Theological Seminary. In Ryrie’s system, the front door is deliberately slammed to the Gnostic impulse. Men and women are not tripartite, but dichotomous. For this we should be glad. The problem is, however, the back door is left wide open. For once it is argued that there are two-levels of the Christian life (the Carnal and the Spiritual), a hierarchy is re-introduced that once again has the practical consequences of making the “Spiritual Christian” operate on a higher plain than the “Carnal Christian,” who has merely trusted Jesus as Savior but, as of yet, has not fully surrendered to Christ’s Lordship. If the “Natural Man” is not a Christian, and the “Carnal Christian” is a Christian but not yet a disciple, the question naturally arises, “What must one do to move on to the next level—the spiritual level?” Thus, another Gnostic principle is unintentionally re-introduced back into the discussion, and that is the notion that religion is a kind of mystical ascent to the divine. Whether Ryrie intends to or not, once we have offered a bifurcated notion of sanctification, we have set up a system in which climbing the ladder to the next spiritual level is the norm, and we feed the Gnostic impulse yet again. We move progressively from Natural Man, to Carnal Man, to Spiritual Man. And it is no wonder then, that so many, who will not hear Ryrie’s rejection of trichotomy, will instead hear his natural, carnal and spiritual categories through a trichotomist grid.

Once again, we see the importance of recovering and articulating the biblical concept of human nature as a dichotomy of body and soul-spirit, as well as retaining the conclusions of historic Christian reflection on these issues. If our doctrines do have consequences—and they certainly do—there is no doubt that trichotomy will lead down some very predictable and problematic roads. Any scheme which depreciates the body and the mind, and which correspondingly elevates the spiritual without due regard to the fact that God the Holy Spirit works through the means that God Himself has created, is in fact, deeply influenced by the Gnostic impulse. There is always a real danger in divorcing what God has joined together (body and soul). No matter how well intended we are, and no matter how fashionable spirituality may be, the Gnostic impulse lurks behind every attempt to build a ladder to heaven, and we must be very careful to avoid its destructive influence. We need to be ever mindful of how easy it is to allow our minds to be captured by “hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends upon human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8).

¹⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988), pp. 195-196.

¹⁵ See for example the notes in *The Ryrie Study Bible*, especially notes on 1 Cor 2:10 ff. See also Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, pp. 338-339; and *So Great a Salvation* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992).