

## Is Man Two-Part or Three Part?

Written by K B Napier

Wednesday, 15 July 2009 15:43

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When I first tackled this question in a publication for the Christian Research Institute (former name of Bible Theology Ministries), one of its readers telephoned to chat about it. At almost 90 years of age, the lady was infirm and housebound...but had borrowed an old typewriter so as to write an article in response to my own!

The lady - a good friend - had been a well-known speaker in her early years and she had definite views on Man's constitution. She said that she had always taught her listeners that Man was Body, Soul and Spirit. In her lively response, she argued that Man was triune "because God is triune". I did not have the heart to argue with her and just pointed out that my article was based on the Biblical texts. So, we agreed to disagree!

I did not argue because although it is an interesting topic, it is not vital to us on an everyday level, and should not cause enmity. (But it is important theologically). To that old lady, whose zeal was enough to shame us all, it was very important because, to her, Man was made in the exact image of God. That meant Man was triune. I suggested that if Man was indeed made in the exact image of God in that sense, then Man ought also to be omnipresent, pure, and so on. This is evidently not the case, so why argue that Man is triune? On the other hand... is Man Triune?

As always, we must go to our Bible to see what God says. If our opinions do not agree with what the Bible says, then there is only one answer - scrap our opinions! (One gentleman - an unbeliever - at the end of a very involved and philosophical written debate with me, protested when I said his arguments were academic and meaningless because he did not know Christ.

He retorted "Are you trying to tell me that my 30 years of painstaking study are useless? What arrogance!" My answer was "Yes, they are completely useless, for they point you away from Christ." What he thought was valuable information was, in reality, as filthy rags before a Holy God. The man's opinions have already been crushed underfoot by the Almighty Creator, for God does not listen to Man's opinions... He only wants to know how far we go to comply with His Word).

A number of theologians say that man is tri-partite (body, soul and spirit). Others, like Louis Berkhof for example, say that Man is bi-partite only (body and soul/spirit). It seems that the majority of Christians tend to accept the tripartite view, but, if pressed, they do not really know

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why (this vagueness extends to other aspects of doctrine too). Many say to me that they read of body, soul *and* spirit in the Bible, so man must be tri-partite. But, is this true? If we examine the texts of the Bible, we will find that the case is not proven (in a final sense) for either the bi-partite or the tri-partite view (so I am pushing neither of them)!

In the several theological theories on the topic, we find various functions are ascribed to each 'part' of Man, but these 'parts' are not found in scripture. Thus, they are speculative. An analogy is found in the way various psychologists describe the functions of the brain; the vast bulk of their work is purely speculative and the rest is indicative but not proven. This is because there is no way of proving what the brain does. We know that we think, for example, but there is no way Man can *ever* discover how we think, or where is the seat of thinking. Similarly, there is no possible way we can divide Man into easily defined parts with defined functions for each part.

When it comes to scriptural references, we find the issue is far from settled. Most of the words in the Old Testament for 'spirit' **mean** 'spirit'. One Hebrew word for 'spirit' means *both* 'soul' **and** 'spirit', but it is used very little.

When we come to New Testament references, the exact opposite is found! Here most words for 'spirit' also mean 'soul'!! That is, the terms are interchangeable. So, this cannot be of much use to the tri-partite theorists! If we put all the Old Testament and the New Testament references together, we discover there is almost a status quo situation, for neither the bi- or tri-partite arguments can be proven, one way or the other. We cannot tell, from scripture itself, what the true position is.

Of course, this short Outline has merely looked at the words used in scripture. We can do much more to research the topic. Perhaps a detailed study would show us something less vague, but the words themselves prove nothing, except that possibly 'soul' and 'spirit' are exactly the same thing\*. When we come across such vagueness, it does not mean that God is vague or that the Bible has made a mistake. It just means that the information is either not important enough, or that, as human beings, we are too finite to understand. Whatever the real answer may be, there is no cause for division on the issue.

(\*Note: Even so, men have a living soul whether or not they are saved. The fact that their 'spirit' is dead possibly shows us that it is indeed separate from the soul. Theologically, I believe we are tri-partite. The spirit is made alive at regeneration and we see from scripture that the thoughts, passions, emotions (e.g. soul) are altered by the indwelling living spirit. So, the

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argument is interesting!)

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