

**Trichotomy, Dichotomy, and Naturalism:**

*A Study of the Soul and Spirit in Biblical and Theological Contexts*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the distinctions between trichotomy, dichotomy, and naturalism as they pertain to the biblical and theological understanding of the soul and spirit. By examining the Old and New Testament uses of *nephesh* and *ruach* and their conceptual development, the study identifies how these terms interact with broader theological frameworks. Drawing on previous research, including works on the *Integrated Hypostatic Union*, *The Image of God*, and *Tracing Satan's Development*, and *Tracing the Development of Angels and Demons*, this paper synthesizes biblical theology and systematic theology. The study ultimately affirms the coherence of a trichotomist framework while engaging with alternative perspectives and their implications for anthropology and Christology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Purpose and Scope

The study of the soul and spirit is central to theological anthropology, forming the foundation for understanding human nature, divine interaction, and the *imago Dei*. This paper examines three primary frameworks for conceptualizing the soul and spirit:

**trichotomy, dichotomy, and naturalism.**

- **Trichotomy** posits that humans are composed of three distinct components: body, soul, and spirit. This framework draws heavily from biblical texts such as 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, where the distinction between soul and spirit is explicitly mentioned.<sup>1</sup>
- **Dichotomy** asserts a bipartite nature, combining soul and spirit into a singular immaterial aspect alongside the body. This view emphasizes the functional overlap between soul and spirit, aligning with passages like Genesis 2:7, where the creation of man is described in terms of body and living soul.<sup>2</sup>
- **Naturalism**, by contrast, denies the immaterial aspects of humanity, reducing human nature to purely physical processes. This perspective has gained traction in secular philosophy and scientific discourse, challenging traditional theological

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957), 123–124. See 1 Thessalonians 5:23 for a discussion on the distinction between soul and spirit.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Dallas: Word Books, 1987), 61. Refer to Genesis 2:7 for the creation of man and its implications for dichotomy.

constructs by positing that the soul and spirit are constructs of human cognition rather than ontological realities.<sup>3</sup>

- Integrating biblical theology and systematic theology is essential to evaluating these perspectives. Biblical theology provides the textual and narrative foundation, while systematic theology ensures coherence and consistency in understanding human nature across doctrines. This paper also draws on prior research, including explorations of the *Integrated Hypostatic Union*,<sup>4</sup> *The Image of God*<sup>5</sup>, and *Tracing Satan's Development*<sup>6</sup>, and *Tracing the Development of Angels and Demons*,<sup>7</sup> to offer a robust framework for analyzing these concepts.

### **Thesis Statement**

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of trichotomy, dichotomy, and naturalism, demonstrating the coherence and superiority of a trichotomist framework within biblical and theological anthropology. By integrating biblical evidence and

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<sup>3</sup> Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *A Brief History of the Soul* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 89–93. For perspectives on naturalism, see contemporary discussions on human cognition.

<sup>4</sup> D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Integrated Hypostatic Union Model: Addressing Christological Coherence: A Proposal for a Unified Framework in Understanding and Navigating the Dual Natures of Christ through Kenosis and Selective Communication*, accessed December 23, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

<sup>5</sup> D. Gene Williams Jr., *What It Means to Be the Image of God: A Theological and Functional Perspective*, accessed December 23, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

<sup>6</sup> D. Gene Williams Jr., *Tracing Satan's Development: Theological Consolidation, Conceptual Amalgamation, and Greek Influence*, accessed December 23, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

<sup>7</sup> D. Gene Williams Jr., *Tracing the Development of Angels and Demons: Theological Consolidation, Conceptual Amalgamation, and Greek Influence*, accessed December 23, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

theological reflection, the study aims to affirm the distinctiveness of the human soul and spirit while addressing alternative perspectives. In doing so, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of human nature and its implications for Christology, soteriology, and the broader theological narrative.

In this paper, *nephesh* will be referred to as 'soul,' *ruach* as 'spirit,' *psyche* as 'soul,' and *pneuma* as 'spirit.' While these terms often overlap in function, they carry nuanced distinctions that are explored throughout

## II. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

### The Old Testament View

The Old Testament presents a nuanced view of human nature, where the terms *nephesh* (soul) and *ruach* (spirit) are often used interchangeably. Both terms apply to humans and animals, reflecting a shared aspect of life and vitality. For instance, *nephesh* is used in Genesis 1:30 to describe living beings that possess the breath of life, while *ruach* frequently refers to the spirit or breath that animates life, as seen in Ecclesiastes 3:19, where humans and animals are said to share the same breath. In Scripture, the functional overlap between *nephesh* (soul) and *ruach* (spirit) often causes them to appear interchangeable. However, passages like Ecclesiastes 3:19 and Hebrews 4:12 reveal their ontological distinctiveness.<sup>8</sup>

This interchangeable use challenges the notion that the soul or spirit is unique to humanity. Instead, it emphasizes the shared life force that God grants to all living beings. However, the Old Testament also alludes to a deeper spiritual distinction in humanity,

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<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 33–34.

particularly through covenantal relationships and the divine image (*imago Dei*), as in Genesis 1:26–27.<sup>9</sup> This sets the stage for later theological developments, where the spiritual capacities of humans are further explored.

### **The New Testament View**

In the New Testament, the terminology evolves to reflect a more differentiated understanding of human nature. The Greek terms *psyche* (soul) and *pneuma* (spirit) often parallel the Hebrew *nephesh* and *ruach* but are used with greater theological precision. For instance, *pneuma* frequently denotes the immaterial aspect of humans that relates to God, such as in John 4:24, where Jesus declares that true worship must be “*in spirit and truth*.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, *psyche* encompasses both life and individual identity, as seen in Matthew 16:26, where the soul’s eternal value is emphasized.

The New Testament builds upon the Old Testament foundation by refining these concepts, especially in light of Christological and eschatological contexts. Pauline theology, for example, distinguishes between the (*soma psychikon*) and the (*soma pneumatikon*) in 1 Corinthians 15:44, suggesting a transformation of human nature through resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

### **Development of Terminology**

The progression from the Old to the New Testament reflects broader theological developments, including the evolving understanding of spiritual beings like angels,

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<sup>9</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 46–48.

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 113.

<sup>11</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 26

demons, and Satan. As explored in prior research, the use of terms like *ruach* and *pneuma* shifts to accommodate the growing emphasis on spiritual warfare and the role of the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

The Old Testament's depiction of *ruach* as the breath of life transitions in the New Testament to signify the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in believers, marking a significant theological development. Similarly, the concept of *nephesh* as life or soul expands to include individual identity and moral responsibility, aligning with New Testament teachings on salvation and eternal life.

### III. THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

#### Trichotomy

Trichotomy posits that humanity comprises three distinct components: body, soul, and spirit. This framework finds scriptural support in passages such as 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, where soul and spirit are explicitly distinguished. The soul (*psyche*) is often associated with individual identity and emotional capacity, while the spirit (*pneuma*) relates to the immaterial aspect of humanity that communes with God.<sup>13</sup>

The trichotomist view aligns with theological insights from the *Image of God*<sup>14</sup> and *Integrated Hypostatic Union*<sup>15</sup> papers. As bearers of the *imago Dei*, humans reflect God's triune nature, suggesting a structure that includes body, soul, and spirit. Moreover,

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<sup>12</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 135–138.

<sup>13</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 123–124.

<sup>14</sup> D. Gene Williams Jr., *What It Means to Be the Image of God*, accessed December 23, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Integrated Hypostatic Union Mode*, accessed December 23, 2024.

the doctrine of the hypostatic union, which affirms Christ's full humanity and divinity, underscores the importance of a tripartite anthropology. Christ's spirit enabled divine communion, His soul embodied human experiences, and His body participated in physical creation.<sup>16</sup> This coherence affirms the trichotomist view as both biblically and theologically robust.

### **Dichotomy**

Dichotomy asserts a bipartite composition, where soul and spirit are unified as one immaterial component alongside the body. This view finds support in Genesis 2:7, where humanity is described as a living being (*nephesh*) formed by the union of dust and divine breath.<sup>17</sup> Proponents argue that the soul and spirit often function interchangeably in Scripture, making their distinction unnecessary for theological purposes.<sup>18</sup>

The dichotomist framework also aligns with aspects of the *Integrated Hypostatic Union*. Christ's humanity is often described in terms of body and soul, emphasizing His genuine human experiences without necessitating a distinct spirit. Dichotomy's simplicity offers an alternative to trichotomy while maintaining fidelity to biblical teachings.

### **Naturalism**

Naturalism denies the existence of immaterial components, reducing human nature to physical processes governed by biology and neurochemistry. This view

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<sup>16</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve*, 88–89.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume II* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 49–51.



challenges biblical perspectives by interpreting concepts like soul and spirit as cultural constructs rather than ontological realities.<sup>19</sup>

However, naturalism faces significant limitations, even within its reliance on science. In a debate with Dr. Peter Atkins, philosopher William Lane Craig pointed out five areas that science cannot explain:

1. **Logical and mathematical truths:** Science presupposes these truths but cannot prove them, as doing so would require circular reasoning.
2. **Metaphysical truths:** For instance, the reality of other minds, the external world, or the non-recent creation of the past cannot be scientifically demonstrated.
3. **Ethical beliefs:** Moral values, such as the wrongness of the Nazis' actions during the Holocaust, cannot be evaluated by scientific methods.
4. **Aesthetic judgments:** Beauty and art are subjective experiences beyond empirical analysis.
5. **Science itself:** The scientific method relies on assumptions, such as the constancy of the speed of light, which cannot be scientifically verified but are foundational to its operation.<sup>20</sup>

From a theological standpoint, naturalism undermines key doctrines such as the *imago Dei*, resurrection, and eternal life. Without an immaterial aspect, humanity's capacity for divine relationship and moral responsibility is diminished. For instance, J.P. Moreland critiques naturalism's failure to account for consciousness and abstract

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<sup>19</sup> Genesis 2:7; Ecclesiastes 12:7. These passages affirm the immaterial aspects of humanity within the biblical framework.

<sup>20</sup> William Lane Craig and Peter Atkins, "*Does God Exist?*" *Debate at the University of Manchester*, Reasonable Faith, accessed December 23, 2024, <https://subsplash.com/reasonablefaith/lb/mi/+79c1b84>.

reasoning, highlighting its inability to explain immaterial aspects of human experience.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, John Lennox argues that naturalism's reductionist framework devalues human dignity by viewing individuals merely as the product of chance and necessity<sup>22</sup>

Naturalism also presents significant challenges to eschatology and the doctrine of resurrection. N.T. Wright critiques naturalism's inability to address metaphysical dimensions, particularly the hope of bodily resurrection and eternal life, which are foundational to Christian doctrine.<sup>23</sup> By rejecting the spiritual dimensions of humanity, naturalism strips the biblical narrative of its coherence and purpose, reducing theological anthropology to a purely materialistic view of human nature.

Despite its prevalence in contemporary philosophy and science, naturalism's limitations highlight the need for a robust biblical anthropology that affirms the immaterial aspects of humanity. Scripture consistently presents human nature as both material and immaterial, as seen in Genesis 2:7 and Ecclesiastes 12:7, affirming humanity's unique capacity for divine relationship, moral reasoning, and eternal destiny.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> J.P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul: Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 100–105.

<sup>22</sup> John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2007), 85–90.

<sup>23</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 93–96.

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 2:7; Ecclesiastes 12:7. Scripture supports the dual nature of humanity as material and immaterial.

## **Challenges of Naturalism and Reasoning**

Naturalism's reliance on biology and neurochemistry to explain human reasoning creates a fundamental problem: if all thoughts and decisions are purely the result of biological processes, how can one discern whether they are rational or merely instinctual? Without an immaterial component, such as the soul or spirit, there is no objective basis for distinguishing between logical conclusions and survival-driven responses. This critique echoes the argument that naturalism undermines its own claims to rationality by reducing reasoning to mere chemical reactions.

For example, C.S. Lewis famously argued that if naturalism were true, it would invalidate human reasoning, as thoughts would be determined by biological necessity rather than truth-seeking.<sup>25</sup> This inconsistency highlights the need for an immaterial dimension, which provides the framework for rational thought, ethical reflection, and the pursuit of truth—none of which can be fully explained by naturalistic processes. Scripture, by contrast, affirms humanity's capacity for reason as part of the *imago Dei*, enabling us to think, choose, and relate to God on a level beyond mere biology.

## **Interchangeability and Ontological Distinctiveness**

While dichotomy and trichotomy differ in their structural frameworks, they often appear functionally interchangeable. At the time of inception, the soul and spirit work so closely together that they seem to operate as one, reflecting the unified immaterial aspect of human nature. This functional unity is what naturalistic perspectives mistakenly

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<sup>25</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), 22–24. Lewis critiques naturalism by arguing that it invalidates human reasoning, as thoughts would be determined by biological necessity rather than truth-seeking.

interpret as evidence of a singular immaterial essence, akin to the unity observed between body and soul.<sup>26</sup>

However, Scripture indicates that the soul and spirit are ontologically distinct. For instance, Hebrews 4:12 reveals their separability by describing the Word of God as capable of piercing to the division of soul and spirit.<sup>27</sup> Early theologians like Origen supported this view, noting that the spirit represents the God-conscious aspect of human nature, while the soul governs emotions and reasoning.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 5:23 emphasizes their distinct roles within a tripartite framework.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Irenaeus affirmed that the spirit gives life to the soul and body, maintaining its distinctiveness even in their unity.<sup>30</sup>

Modern theologians echo these insights. Anthony Hoekema highlights the soul as the center of personality and emotions, while the spirit uniquely relates to divine communion.<sup>31</sup> Millard Erickson observes that the functional unity of soul and spirit often

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<sup>26</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 515–517. Erickson highlights how naturalists interpret functional unity as evidence for a singular immaterial essence.

<sup>27</sup> Hebrews 4:12. See also Origen, *De Principiis*, Book 2, Chapter 8, trans. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 159–161. Origen observes the scriptural basis for the separability of soul and spirit.

<sup>28</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515–517. Erickson highlights how naturalists interpret functional unity as evidence for a singular immaterial essence

<sup>29</sup> Hebrews 4:12. See also Origen, *De Principiis*, 159–161. Origen observes the scriptural basis for the separability of soul and spirit.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:23. See also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, Chapter 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 535–537. Irenaeus supports the distinct roles of soul and spirit within the tripartite framework.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 75–78. Hoekema emphasizes the soul as the center of personality and emotions, with the spirit uniquely connecting to God.

causes confusion, particularly among naturalistic thinkers, who conflate them into a single immaterial entity.<sup>32</sup>

This distinction has profound theological implications. The spirit's unique role in sanctification, as seen in Romans 8:16, affirms its God-conscious nature, while the soul's renewal through transformation (Romans 12:2) highlights its emotional and intellectual functions. Together, they reflect the *imago Dei*, as Irenaeus observed, representing humanity's capacity for divine relationship and moral reasoning.

This distinction underscores the theological depth of trichotomy while affirming that dichotomy maintains a coherent understanding of their functional overlap within a unified immaterial aspect.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV. INTERSECTIONS WITH THE IMAGE OF GOD

##### The *Imago Dei* and Human Nature

The *imago Dei* serves as a theological cornerstone for understanding human nature. Trichotomy reflects the image of God through its alignment with the Trinity—body corresponding to the Son, soul to the Father, and spirit to the Holy Spirit. This structure highlights humanity's unique role in creation and divine relationship.<sup>34</sup>

Dichotomy also affirms the *imago Dei* but interprets it more broadly, emphasizing humanity's moral and relational capacities rather than specific structural parallels. By

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<sup>32</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515–517. Erickson's observation about functional unity reinforces the distinction between soul and spirit for theological clarity.

<sup>33</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 75–78; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515–517; Origen, *De Principiis*, 159–161; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 535–537. These sources collectively affirm both the functional unity and ontological distinction of soul and spirit in modern and early church thought.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 75–78.

contrast, naturalism denies the spiritual dimensions of the *imago Dei*, reducing human uniqueness to evolutionary and cultural factors. This negation challenges biblical teachings on humanity's divine purpose and eternal destiny.<sup>35</sup>

### **Biblical and Systematic Theology**

Applying a *prima scriptura*<sup>36</sup> methodology, the *imago Dei* is best understood through an integrative lens that prioritizes biblical revelation while engaging with systematic theology. Scripture affirms humanity's unique creation (Genesis 1:26–27), declaring that humans are made in God's image and likeness, setting them apart from all other creatures.<sup>37</sup> This foundational truth provides the bedrock for theological reflection on human nature and purpose.

Systematic theology complements this biblical foundation by examining how different anthropological models—trichotomy and dichotomy—interpret the *imago Dei*. Trichotomy highlights the structural parallel between humanity and the Trinity, offering a framework where body, soul, and spirit reflect God's relational and functional attributes. This approach emphasizes humanity's capacity for worship, moral reasoning, and divine communion as expressions of God's image.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 140–143.

<sup>36</sup> D. Gene Williams Jr., *A Comparative Analysis of the Three Methods of Scripture:*

*Sola Scriptura, Prima Scriptura, and Sacra Scriptura et Traditio*, accessed December 23, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

<sup>37</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Adam and Eve: Genesis 2–3 and the Human Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 54–56.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 75–78.

Dichotomy, on the other hand, focuses on the relational and moral dimensions of the *imago Dei*. It interprets the unity of body and soul/spirit as sufficient to reflect God's image without requiring further subdivision. This view underscores the human ability to relate to God, others, and creation, emphasizing function and purpose over structural parallels.<sup>39</sup>

By rejecting naturalism, which reduces human distinctiveness to evolutionary and cultural phenomena, this integrative approach safeguards the spiritual dimensions of the *imago Dei*.<sup>40</sup> Systematic theology further explores the implications of humanity's divine likeness in areas such as stewardship over creation (Psalm 8:4–8), ethical behavior (Micah 6:8), and ultimate redemption through Christ, the perfect image of God (Colossians 1:15).<sup>41</sup>

Together, biblical and systematic theology affirm that the *imago Dei* is central to understanding human identity, purpose, and destiny. This holistic perspective not only preserves the spiritual and relational aspects of human nature but also ensures that the *imago Dei* remains a dynamic and transformative concept within Christian anthropology.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology, 3rd ed.*, 515–517.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *A Brief History of the Soul* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 120–123.

<sup>42</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 201–204.

## V. APPLICATION TO CHRISTOLOGY

### **The Integrated Hypostatic Union**

The doctrine of the hypostatic union affirms that Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human, possessing two natures in one person. This theological reality offers profound implications for understanding trichotomy and dichotomy.

#### **Trichotomy in Christology:**

- In the trichotomist framework, Christ's body reflects His physical humanity, His soul encompasses His emotional and relational experiences, and His spirit represents His divine communion and eternal nature. For example, Jesus' surrender to the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39) illustrates the interplay of soul and spirit within His human experience.<sup>43</sup> His spirit uniquely enables perfect communion with the Father, while His soul processes the emotional weight of His impending suffering. His body, as the physical vessel of His humanity, endures the agony of His mission, demonstrating the distinct yet unified operation of these aspects..<sup>44</sup>
- **Dichotomy in Christology:**  
Conversely, dichotomy emphasizes the unity of Christ's immaterial nature, where soul and spirit function together as a singular aspect alongside His physical body. This view highlights the inseparability of Christ's divine and human natures in His earthly ministry and salvific work. For instance, during Jesus' temptation in

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<sup>43</sup> Matthew 26:39. See also Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515–517. Erickson highlights the interplay of soul and spirit in Christ's submission to the Father.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 75–78. Hoekema emphasizes the distinct yet unified operation of body, soul, and spirit in trichotomy.



the wilderness (Matthew 4:1–11), His immaterial soul/spirit sustained Him in resisting Satan’s challenges, while His body experienced genuine hunger.<sup>45</sup> This integrated perspective reinforces the unity of His person without compromising the fullness of His humanity.

- **Gospel Insights Supporting Both Models:**

Both trichotomy and dichotomy find compatibility within Christology. Jesus’ cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46), reflects the interplay of His immaterial and physical natures. In the trichotomist view, His spirit’s unique communion with the Father emphasizes His divine connection, while His soul processes the anguish of separation.<sup>46</sup> In the dichotomist view, His unified immaterial soul/spirit expresses the full weight of His suffering in perfect alignment with His redemptive mission.<sup>47</sup>

- **Theological Unity in the Hypostatic Union:**

Whether through trichotomy or dichotomy, the hypostatic union affirms the theological significance of Christ’s spirit (*pneuma*), which enabled perfect obedience to the Father and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit throughout His life and ministry. His human soul and body further exemplify His participation in every dimension of human existence, ensuring His role as the

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew 4:1–11. See also Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 150–153. Heiser discusses the unity of Christ’s person during His temptation.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew 27:46. See also Origen, *De Principiis*, 159–161. Origen explores the spiritual dimension of Christ’s cry of forsakenness.

<sup>47</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, Chapter 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 535–537. Irenaeus highlights the redemptive mission expressed through Christ’s immaterial unity.

Second Adam.<sup>48</sup> This unity of purpose and nature makes the hypostatic union a versatile framework for engaging with both trichotomist and dichotomist interpretations.

### **Christ as the Perfect Image of God**

Christology reveals Jesus as the perfect and ultimate expression of the *imago Dei*. Unlike fallen humanity, Christ fully embodies the image of God through His sinless life, divine nature, and redemptive mission. Trichotomy underscores this perfection by illustrating how Christ's body, soul, and spirit harmoniously reflect God's nature.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, understanding Christ as the perfect image of God provides a framework for interpreting human nature. In His resurrection, Christ's glorified body demonstrates the future transformation of humanity, where the *psyche* and *pneuma* are perfected in unity with a glorified physical existence. This eschatological hope affirms the theological coherence of humanity's tripartite nature.<sup>50</sup>

## **VI. PHILOSOPHICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **Philosophical Anthropology**

Trichotomy, dichotomy, and naturalism each offer distinct frameworks for understanding humanity. Trichotomy affirms humanity's unique position as bearers of the *imago Dei*, emphasizing the spiritual dimension as essential to divine communion.

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<sup>48</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 515–517. Erickson affirms the Second Adam typology as central to Christ's redemptive work.

<sup>49</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 98–100.

<sup>50</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 201–204.

Dichotomy simplifies this model by uniting soul and spirit, reflecting humanity's relational and moral capacities without overcomplicating anthropological distinctions.<sup>51</sup>

Naturalism, by contrast, reduces human nature to physical processes, denying the existence of immaterial components. This view challenges theological anthropology by undermining doctrines of resurrection, eternal life, and the intrinsic value of human beings. Philosophical debates over life, death, and the afterlife reveal the inadequacy of naturalism in addressing the existential and spiritual dimensions of human existence.<sup>52</sup>

### **Pastoral and Practical Theology**

A proper understanding of soul and spirit profoundly influences Christian living and ministry. Trichotomy highlights the need for spiritual formation that addresses the whole person—body, soul, and spirit. This holistic approach fosters growth in Christlikeness, emphasizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in sanctification.<sup>53</sup>

Dichotomy's emphasis on relational and moral capacities informs pastoral care, focusing on the unity of the person in relationships and ethical living. By contrast, naturalism's reductionist view challenges pastoral ministry by dismissing spiritual realities, underscoring the need for robust theological education to counter secular ideologies. Ultimately, a biblical understanding of the soul and spirit equips believers to live faithfully and minister effectively in a complex world.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> J. P. Moreland and Scott B. Rae, *Body & Soul*, 145–148.

<sup>52</sup> Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro, *A Brief History of the Soul*, 120–123.

<sup>53</sup> Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting On the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 38–40.

<sup>54</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 150–153.

## VII. CONCLUSION

### Summary of Findings

This study has explored the distinctions and interactions between trichotomy, dichotomy, and naturalism in understanding the soul and spirit. Trichotomy posits a tripartite human composition—body, soul, and spirit—emphasizing the spiritual dimension as essential to divine communion and reflection of the *imago Dei*. Dichotomy simplifies this model by uniting soul and spirit into a singular immaterial aspect alongside the body, highlighting relational and moral capacities. By contrast, naturalism reduces human nature to physical processes, rejecting immaterial components and challenging core theological doctrines such as resurrection, eternal life, and divine image-bearing.

Throughout this analysis, both trichotomy and dichotomy were shown to have biblical and theological support, though trichotomy uniquely reflects the tripartite nature of humanity as designed by God. Naturalism, while influential in secular thought, fails to account for the spiritual and existential realities integral to Christian anthropology.<sup>55</sup>

### Final Argument for Trichotomy

The trichotomist framework emerges as the most biblically and theologically robust model for understanding human nature. Scriptural evidence, including passages such as 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, supports the distinction between soul and spirit.<sup>56</sup> Theologically, trichotomy aligns with the *imago Dei* and Christology,

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<sup>55</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 123–124.

<sup>56</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 61.

demonstrating how body, soul, and spirit reflect God's triune nature and humanity's capacity for divine relationship.<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, the doctrine of the hypostatic union affirms trichotomy's coherence by illustrating Christ's full humanity and divinity as harmoniously integrating body, soul, and spirit. In contrast to naturalism's reductionism and dichotomy's simplification, trichotomy provides a comprehensive framework that upholds the integrity of biblical teachings, and the richness of human nature as created in God's image.<sup>58</sup>

As such, trichotomy not only offers theological depth but also practical implications for Christian living, pastoral care, and spiritual formation. It equips believers to embrace a holistic understanding of humanity that honors God's creative intent and redemptive plan, ultimately affirming the spiritual, moral, and relational dimensions of life in Christ.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 150–153.

<sup>58</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed., 515–517.

<sup>59</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 98–100.

## APPENDIX A: THE INTERPLAY OF BODY, SOUL, AND SPIRIT



This conceptual illustration visually represents the theological understanding of body, soul, and spirit as distinct yet interconnected components of human nature. The central figure symbolizes the human body, illuminated by a radiant light representing the soul's emotional and intellectual core. Above and around the figure, ethereal lines depict the spirit's connection to God, emphasizing the transcendent and immaterial aspect of humanity. Surrounding the composition are abstract references to areas science cannot explain—mathematical truths, moral values, and metaphysical realities—underscoring the limitations of naturalism and the unique insights provided by theology.

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