THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF MAN

by Hugh Dibbons

As Evangelical Christians we are committed to some sort of Biblical Theology. Many query whether it is possible to compile a Biblical Theology as such, and suggest that we ought rather to talk about Biblical Theologies, e.g. The Theology of St. Paul or The Theology of Ezekiel, etc. But if we believe in the common inspiration of all the books in the canon of Scripture and that they reveal the one true God then we must also believe that it is possible to construct a Biblical Theology, though we may also acknowledge that different Biblical writers have their own special emphases. After all the differences have been taken away there is always left a common residuum of truth which may be called 'Biblical Theology'. This is not to suggest that the differences are not as important as the residuum. For a true understanding of concepts and doctrines found in the Bible the teaching of all the Canonical books must be considered. But for the purposes of this paper I wish to distinguish between 'Biblical Theology' and Biblical Theologies as defined above, and I wish to discuss the Doctrine of Man as a doctrine of 'Biblical Theology'.

When trying to formulate a residuum of Biblical teaching there are two governing principles: that the Bible alone provides our data and categories, and that consistency with the emphasis and tenor of the Bible is the criterion for deciding between any conflicting formulations.

The Failure of Traditional Statements in the Doctrine of Man.

I contend that traditional statements of the doctrine of Man are not Biblical and therefore cannot be regarded as formulations of revealed truth, that discussions about 'man who has a soul' or 'man's immortal soul' are likewise non-Biblical, and that the controversy whether or not man is 'bipartite' or 'tripartite' is a mistake. In the face of these assertions the questions at once arise: 'What are the traditional statements?' and 'Where did the doctrines of the soul come from if not from the Bible?'

May I offer three statements. The first is from 'The Institutes of The Christian Religion', Book I Chap.15.

'That man consists of soul and body ought not to be controverted. By soul I understand an immortal yet created essence, which is the nobler part of him ..... The agility of the human mind, looking through heaven and earth and the secrets of nature ..... clearly demonstrates that there is concealed within man something distinct from the body. The soul ..... is an incorporeal substance ..... it is not properly contained in any place, yet being put into the body it inhabits it as its dwelling, not only to animate all its parts ..... but also to hold the supremacy in the government of human life.'

The key categories that Calvin uses in the exposition of this doctrine are 'essence' and 'substance', and these are the categories of Greek and Scholastic Philosophy, not of the Bible. It may be argued that Calvin was not writing Biblical Theology but Systematic Theology, i.e. he was presenting the Mediaeval World of his day with a system of Christian doctrine expressed in the accepted philosophic categories. Calvin was no doubt justified in doing this on the grounds of making himself understood by the intelligentsia of his time, but the simple fact that it is dated in this way is good reason why we should be critical of his formulation.

The second quotation comes from another master of Evangelical Systematic Theology - Charles Hodge, Vol.2 Chap 2: 'The Nature of Man'.

'The Scriptures teach that God formed the body of man out of the dust of the earth, and breathed into him the breath of life and he became "a living soul". According to this account man consists of two distinct principles, a body and a soul: the one material, the other immaterial; the one corporeal, the other spiritual. It is involved in this statement that the soul of man is a substance; and secondly, that it is a substance distinct from the body. So that in the constitution of man two distinct substances are involved ..... The soul is not a mere series of acts; nor is it a form of the life of God, nor is it a mere unsubstantial force but a real subsistence. Whatever acts is, and whatever is is an entity. A non-entity is nothing, and nothing can neither have power nor produce effects. The soul of man, therefore, is an essence or entity or substance.'

This is just a sample of a longer passage of argumentation. Had we progressed at all from Calvin's Aristotelian-Mediaeval ways of thinking by the end of the 19th Century?

The third quotation is from Professor E.L. Mascall, who is ranked as one of the greatest of contemporary Anglican theologians. In his book The Importance of Being Human (1958) he devotes a chapter to 'Body and Soul'.

> 'Why, it will no doubt be asked, do we need to hold that in man there is a distinct spiritual component which is not found in any sub-human creature and which is able to survive ..... the death of the body? I think the answer ..... is to be seen if we ask another question ..... Is there any difference of kind between man and the lower animals? That is, what is the significance of the Bible's assertion that God made man in His own image? If we believe that God is pure Spirit and at the same time recognise that man is not pure spirit but has a body which is continuous with the rest of the material creation, have we any real alternative, believing as we do that man is made in the image of God, than to hold that the way in which God made man was by uniting a physical organism - which did not differ in kind from other physical organisms - with a created spirit which, without suppressing the animal and vegetal functions of the physical organism, could subsume them into and make them subservient to its own supraphysical life? ..... The authentic Christian doctrine of man ..... is the view that man is a unique and highly complicated being composed of a body ..... and a soul, which, although it is itself a purely spiritual entity, is not the kind of spirit that can function fully and freely on its own, since it is made for the express purpose of animating a material body with which it is united.'

Before commenting in general upon the passages quoted something must be said about Professor Mascall's argument. He sets out to answer the question - 'Why do we need to hold that there is a distinct spiritual entity in man?', and then he begins by assuming that man is made up of two entities, body and soul. His argument from Gen.1:26 is likewise fallacious. The bones of it run: God is pure Spirit; Man is made in the image of God; Therefore the respect in which Man resembles God is that a part of him is pure spirit. The conclusion does not follow from the premisses and by a similar argument one could show that man resembled God in almost

any respect. Why chose this particular characteristic?

We may briefly summarise the above quotations as the view that man is conceived as having at least two parts - body and soul, that the soul is a non-spatial entity capable of surviving physical death, but until death this metaphysical entity dwells within the body.

The contention of this paper is that this doctrine is non-Biblical but rather derives from Greek philosophy. To make this point let us look at a few lines from one of Plato's dialogues:- Phaedo 79 ff.

Socrates: 'Is not one part of us body, another part soul?'

Cebes: 'To be sure .....'

Socrates: 'And is the soul seen or not seen?'

Cebes: 'Not by man, Socrates.'

Socrates: 'What we mean by "seen" and "not seen" is that which is or is not visible to the eye of man? Then the soul is more like to the unseen, and the body to the seen? ..... When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve. Now which of these two is akin to the divine and which to the mortal?'

Cebes: 'The soul resembles the divine, and the body the mortal, there can be no doubt of that, Socrates.'

Socrates: 'Then reflect, Cebes: of all that has been said is not this the conclusion? - that the soul is in the very likeness of the Divine, and Immortal, and intellectual, and uniform, and indissoluable, and unchangeable; and the body is the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintellectual, and dissoluable, and changeable ..... will the soul, if her nature be as we describe, be blown away and destroyed immediately on quitting the body as many say? The truth is rather ..... that the soul, herself invisible, departs to the invisible world - to the divine, immortal and rational: thither arriving she is secure of bliss and released from the error and folly of men, their fears and wild passions and all other human ills .....'

This is one short extract from one of the Dialogues in which Plato discusses the soul. It is true that there are significant differences between the traditional Christian Doctrine of the soul

and the Greek view. The differences are due to a Christianising of the Greek doctrine, but the close similarities are due to derivation.

The Biblical Doctrine of Man.

We must now proceed to the main part of this paper. The method of investigation will be first to survey what the Old Testament understood by the words 'nephesh' and 'ruāch' (usually translated 'soul' and 'spirit' respectively by the Authorised Version). Then we shall illustrate New Testament usage by reference to St. Paul, and after answering some objections to the main conclusions of the study we shall consider some consequences of accepting the Biblical view of man's constitution.

The task of investigating Old Testament concepts is complicated by the Hebrew use of Synechdoche (a part standing for the whole) and of poetic parallelism (two phrases identical in meaning standing side by side). These phenomena will become obvious as the study proceeds.

'Nephesh' (754 references in the Old Testament)

This word can have a strictly physical connotation, and has etymological associations with the Accadian 'Napistu' which means 'throat' or 'neck'. In fact it is used ten times in this sense in the Old Testament, e.g. Ps.105:18 - "His neck was put in a collar of iron" (RSV).

Another almost physical usage occurs in those verses that seem to identify 'nephesh' and 'blood', e.g. Gen.9:4 - "You shall not eat flesh with its life (nephesh), that is, its blood." Deut.12:33 - "The blood is the life (nephesh) and you shall not eat the life (nephesh) with the flesh." (Note: it is probably at this physical level that Gen.35:18 is to be understood, i.e. "as her soul (nephesh) was departing ..... she called his name Benoni" perhaps means that Rachel died of a haemorrage.

The Hebrew conceived the world dynamically, and the difference, essentially, between someone living and a corpse was that the living did things and the dead did not. A living man was a centre of power, a being who fought battles, ploughed fields, made love, propagated children, etc. But how was the Hebrew to express the living man's essential activity in words? He did it by extending the use of 'nephesh' and our next term 'ruach'. A man who had lost a lot of blood was less active than someone with his full quota, so why not extend the use of 'nephesh' to indicate man's vitality? Whether

or not this represents a true account of the development of the term, 'nephesh' generally means man's vitality in the Old Testament. This may be summarised more precisely under the following four headings (used by Professor A.R. Johnson in The Vitality of the Individual):-

'Nephesh' meaning 'Principle of Life': e.g. 1 Kings 3:11 - "the life of your enemies"; Gen.37:21 - "Let us not take his life".

'Nephesh' meaning Physical Vitality: e.g. Lam.2:12 - "While they swoon ..... in the city ..... their soul (nephesh) doth drain away ..... they say where is corn and wine"; Num.11:6 - "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt ..... the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks ..... but now our soul (nephesh) is dried up".

'Nephesh' can mean Emotional Vitality: e.g. Ps.42:6 - "My soul is cast down within me"; Job 30:16 - "My soul is poured out within me", i.e. I'm losing the will to live.

'Nephesh' can mean Volitional Vitality: e.g. Deut.21:14 - "If you have no delight in her you shall let her go where her soul determines"; 2 Kings 9:15 - "Jehu said, 'If this is your soul (i.e. what you have decided) then let no-one slip out of the city'".

Now that the general usage of the Old Testament has been surveyed, we are in a position to look at Gen.2:6 - "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 phrase 'living soul' which includes the word 'nephesh' does not indicate anything distinctive about man compared with the rest of the animal kingdom, for the same words are used to refer to other living members of the creation in Gen.1:20, 21, 24; Gen.2:19, etc. A 'living soul' is a being which has vitality.

(Note: Deut.8:3 - "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" probably means that for maximum vitality a man needs much more than just physical sustenance, he needs also to be in the will of God.)

'Ruach'

C.A. Briggs reckons that 117 out of a possible 378 occurrences of this term in the Old Testament refer to the wind or air with no spiritual overtones, e.g. Jer.2:24 - "a wild ass ..... sniffing the wind"; Ps.107:25 - "He raised the stormy wind which lifted up the waves of the sea".

Since man depends on air for life, and since wind easily conveys the idea of power and activity, it is not hard to see how it became a synonym for man's essential vitality. Any unusual manifestation of energy or mental alertness came to be described as having more or less spirit; and as an individual may display this energy in the service of God, the energy was attributed to God and it was said that the spirit of the Lord was upon him, e.g. Gen.41:38,39 "And Pharoah said to his servants, 'Can we find a man such as this, in whom is the spirit of God?' And Pharoah said to Joseph, 'Since God has shown you this there is none so wise and discreet as thou art.'" Jud.15:14 - "And the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him .... and he found a fresh jaw bone of an ass, and with it he slew a thousand men". To be filled with the spirit and not to be doing anything is a contradiction in terms.

In such verses as Isa.42:5 - "The Lord .... who gives breath (ruach) to the people upon it, and life (ruach) to them who walk therein", there is very little to distinguish it from 'nephesh'. And again we find that other creatures have the breath of life in common with man, e.g. Gen.6:17 - "I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life."

If one had to distinguish different types of vitality indicated by 'nephesh' and 'ruach' respectively, then one would say that 'nephesh' refers rather to physical vitality and 'ruach' to psychical. An example of the latter would be Isa.9:2 - "There shall rest upon him the spirit of the Lord, a spirit of wisdom and discernment, a spirit of counsel and might, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord." In ordinary English usage this would mean that the servant will be wise and discerning, mighty, knowledgeable, and will fear God, and that all these characteristics will be attributable to the fact that God is with him. We may all pray to God to help us to develop good characteristics and attitudes, so that we may act in accordance with His will; thus Ps.51:12 -

> "Create for me a clean heart, O God.
> And produce a new and steadfast spirit within me ....
> Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation
> And sustain me with a willing spirit ....
> A broken and a contrite spirit thou wilt not despise."

<u>The Body' in the Old Testament.</u>

The Hebrews have no term which is equivalent to the Greek 'soma'. Thus the Hebrew language has not the vocabulary to make the Greek distinction between 'soma' and 'psuche' (body and soul), and the

reason is that they did not think in these terms. In the LXX the Greek word 'soma' translates no less than eleven different Hebrew words, and for none is it a true equivalent. In some contexts it is even used to translate 'nephesh'! (e.g. Gen.36:6)

Summary of the Old Testament View of Man.

The Old Testament regards man not as a union of parts but as a unity. Man is a being capable of a wide variety of activity whose nature consists in doing things.

It may be objected that the Bible tends to departmentalise man on a physical level; thus different parts of the body, e.g. arm, hand, heart, bones, flesh, foot, mouth, etc. are isolated as if they performed their functions on their own initiative. But it is just in such contexts that the device of synechdoche is used, e.g. Job 23:11 - "My foot hath held fast to his steps, his way have I kept, and not turned aside." Eccl.2:11 - "Then I contemplated all my works that my hands had wrought, and the labour that I had laboured to do."

The New Testament Doctrine of Man.

Both Old Testament and New Testament are basically Hebrew in their thinking, and the New Testament stands within the Old Testament in its anthropology. The key concepts are 'soma', 'psuche', 'pneuma' (spirit), and again there is the phenomenon of synechdoche. These points will be briefly illustrated from the Epistles.

'Soma'. Though this word is used to mean what we would ordinarily understand by 'body', its use is generally more akin to the Hebrew 'basar' (flesh, i.e. as opposed to kidneys, heart, etc.) e.g. Gal.6:17 - "I bear branded in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Then by synechdoche and parallelism it is equivalent to the whole man or person, e.g. 1 Cor.9:27 - "I buffet my body and bring it into bondage lest by any means after I have preached to others I myself should be a castaway."; Rom.6:12 - "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, that you should obey the lusts thereof, neither present your members unto sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves unto God as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." One can easily see the parallelism of the two halves of the verse, and hence the failure to distinguish between 'body' and 'person'.

'Psuche'. This is roughly equivalent to the Old Testament 'nephesh'. Thus it can mean the principle of life, e.g. Phil.2:30 - "Epaphroditus nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life

(psuche) to complete your service to me." And it can mean 'the whole man', e.g. Rom.13:1 - "Let every life (psuche) be subject to the governing authorities."

'Pneuma' (Old Testament equivalent of 'ruach'). The doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament makes it necessary to distinguish carefully between 'pneuma' when applied to God and 'pneuma' referring to man. However, in the latter case it is used to refer to man acting, often to psychic activity, e.g. 2 Cor.2:13 - "I found no rest in my spirit."

Possible Objections to this Interpretation.

1. One could apply the same method of argument to the doctrine of God, and one would conclude that there was no doctrine of the Trinity in Scripture. This invalidates the method.

Reply. It seems axiomatic that in Biblical Theology one's attention must be confined to the data of the Bible, and one must use Biblical categories of interpretation. If this leads to a denial of the Trinity, as it does to a denial of Bi-partite and Tri-partite Doctrines of man, then the doctrine of the Trinity must be excluded from a Biblical Theology. But the Christ-event and Christ's own prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit are sufficient for the distinctness of the Persons of the Trinity (c.f. John 14).

2. The case has been rigged, and unfavourable texts have been excluded! What about texts like 1 Thess.5:23 - "I pray that your whole body, soul and spirit be preserved ...."?

Reply. One's conclusions will depend on the presuppositions that one brings to that study. Thus if one starts with an isolated text like the one quoted, and one assumes that whenever nouns are used side by side then each must refer to a distinct entity, then one will conclude that man is Tri-partite. This sort of approach is part of a scientific heritage of thought. But if we take our categories of thinking from the Bible then we conclude that if any distinction is intended in the above verse it is a distinction of activity, and not of parts.

3. If there is no immortal soul then there can be no life after death.

Reply. The answer is in the Resurrection of the Body (1 Cor.15: 12-14, 17-19, 51). The argument may crudely be summarised as: Man without a body is a contradiction in terms. Therefore if man is to live after death he must live as a body. Therefore he

must be resurrected, as Christ has been resurrected.

But this raises great problems, e.g. What happens when you die? If the resurrection is a future event and the body ceases to exist as such does that mean that at death I cease to exist? Is there any relation between my present body and my resurrection body; if not, then how can I be the same person then as now?

No-one would dispute that the doctrine of the Resurrection has difficulties, but most of these are intrinsic and are not solved by postulating a 'soul', which has its own special problems anyway (e.g. its relation to the body). But what sort of questions are those that have been raised? They are philosophical questions and depend to some extent on a spatio-temporal way of thinking. Perhaps we should not expect revealed truth to be philosophically defensible, and perhaps the New Creation of which the Resurrection Body is part is non-spatio-temporal.

Conclusions.

The traditional doctrine of the Soul is non-Biblical and even contra-Biblical and therefore it must be omitted from Biblical Theology. As the word itself always carries Platonic overtones, I suggest that we abandon the use of it altogether.

The Biblical doctrine has many practical consequences. If we realise that Christ died to save men instead of immortal souls, then our praying and evangelism will concern themselves more with people, as such. Our social conscience will be sharper, and perhaps we shall see the feeding of the hungry as one dimension of the message preached. Also we shall be able to answer such questions as, 'Why do I find it difficult to pray when I am sick?'

Finally, the Biblical doctrine puts us in a position to benefit from modern psychology. Man as man is conceived as a unity in the Bible. A man at variance with himself is to that extent the less enjoying full manhood. Modern psychology helps us to appreciate in detail this Biblical truth.

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