

Luther on Trichotomy as Symbolized by the Tabernacle

(from John Woodward, *Man as Spirit, Soul, and Body*, chapter 5.)

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Luther gave a detailed explanation of the parts of man when he discussed Mary's Magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46). Luther wrote,

Let us take up the words in their order. The first is "my soul." Scripture divides man into three parts, as St. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 . . . The nature of man consists of the three parts--spirit, soul, and body . . . The first part, the spirit, is the highest, deepest, and noblest part of man. By it he is enabled to lay hold on things incomprehensible, invisible, and eternal. It is, in brief, the dwelling place of faith and the Word of God.[1]

This quotation shows the Reformer's ontological distinction of the spirit from the soul. Luther's reference to 1 Thessalonians 5:23 gives further support to his basic definition of trichotomy.

One might wonder why Luther's trichotomous teaching has been virtually ignored. One reason may be that his references to the soul as the immaterial element (in contrast to the body) have been taken as evidence of dichotomy in his writings. In the same context, his definition of soul as immaterial exemplifies this:

The second part, the soul, is this same spirit, so far as its nature is concerned, but viewed as performing a different function, namely, giving life to the body and working through the body.
[2]

In his *Systematic Theology*, Strong gave a footnote to Luther's trichotomous statement quoted above, noting that Franz Delitzsch also quoted this passage in his *System of Biblical Psychology*. Yet, Strong hastened to refer to Thomasius' argument for Luther as dichotomous. Thomasius's argument, however, primarily rests on the preceding quote, which merely describes the soul as immaterial. This being the case, it is vital to rightly examine Luther's teaching on the model of man in the context of this description to the soul. When Luther said that the soul is the same "nature" (German--*natur*) he was affirming what trichotomists concede as well, i.e., that the soul and spirit are united as the immaterial side of human nature. In the same paragraph that he defined soul Luther continued to further elucidate the distinction between soul and spirit:

It is its [the soul's] nature to comprehend not incomprehensible things but such things the reason can know and understand. Indeed, reason is the light of this dwelling; and unless the spirit, which is lighted with the brighter light of faith, controls this light of reason it cannot but be in error. For it is too feeble to deal with things divine. To these two parts of man [spirit and soul] the Scriptures ascribe many things, such as wisdom and knowledge--wisdom to the spirit, knowledge to the soul.[3]

This shows that Luther believed the distinction between soul and spirit to be more than merely a functional one. The term "part" is used eight times in this context in denoting the parts of man (spirit, soul, and body). The German term Luther used was *teil*, meaning "part," "division," or "portion." [4] He also used the synonym *stück*, meaning "piece," "part," or "portion." [5] However uncomfortable to the ears of the proponents of monism or monistic dualism, Luther did not hesitate to speak in terms of

the three parts of a person.

After noting the distinction of the body, Luther gave a profound analogy relating to the tabernacle. What seems at first glance to be an unusual comparison becomes increasingly meaningful. Luther continued,

Let us take an illustration from the Scriptures. **In the tabernacle** fashioned by Moses there were three separate compartments. The first was called the holy of holies: here was God's dwelling place, and in it there was no light. The second was called the holy place; here stood a candlestick with seven arms and seven lamps. The third was called the outer court; this lay under the open sky and in the full light of the sun. In this tabernacle we have a figure of the Christian man. His spirit is the holy of holies, where God dwells in the darkness of faith, where no light is; for he believes that which he neither sees nor feels nor comprehends. His soul is the holy place, with its seven lamps, that is, all manner of reason, discrimination, knowledge, and understanding of visible and bodily things. His body is the forecourt, open to all, so that men may see his works and manner of life.[6]

Luther continued by drawing attention to the priority of man's spirit in sanctification. Expounding again on 1 Thessalonians 5:23, he even took note of the sequence Paul mentioned:

When the spirit that possesses the whole inheritance is preserved, both soul and body are able to remain without error and evil works. On the other hand, when the spirit is without faith, the soul together with the whole life cannot but fall into wickedness and error . . . As a consequence of this error and false opinion of the soul, all the works of the body also become evil and damnable, even though a man killed himself with fasting and performed the works of all the saints . . . it is necessary that God preserve, first our spirit, then our soul and body, not only from overt sins but more from false and apparent good works.[7]

Thus, Luther clearly connected trichotomy of man with the biblical strategy for progressive sanctification.



[1] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed., Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 21:303. McClintock and Strong noted that trichotomy was still held by evangelical Lutherans in the late 1800's -- *Cyclopedia of Ecclesiastical Literature*, 10:549.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Muret-Sanders Encyclopedic English-German and German-English Dictionary*, 1910 ed., s.v. "Tiel," 2:952.

[5] *Ibid.*, s.v. "Stuck," 937.

[6] Luther, *Luther's Works*, 304.

[7] *Ibid.*, 305-06 [Emphasis added].