

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 4

The Constitution of Human Nature

Lesson 11

Body and Soul

The Dichotomist View of Human Nature

“What Are We Made Of? The Biblical Evidence for a Two-Part Constitution”

Key Texts: Matthew 10:28; 2 Corinthians 5:1–8; Genesis 2:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12; Ecclesiastes 12:7

“Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Matthew 10:28, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Unit 3 asked what the human creature bears, the image of God in all its richness and in all its damage. Unit 4 asks what the human creature is made of. These are not independent questions; the answer to the second shapes the answer to the first, and together they constitute the biblical doctrine of human nature in its full constitutional complexity. The question of the human creature's constitution, the number and the nature of the components from which the human person is made, is a question that the Scriptures address with remarkable consistency and with remarkable pastoral urgency, because the answer to it determines what happens to the person at death, what the intermediate state is, how personal identity persists through death and resurrection, and what the resurrection of the body means for the permanent structure of the redeemed person's existence. It is not a question about anatomy; it is a question about ontology, and its stakes reach from the death-bed to the throne of God.

The traditional Reformed answer to the constitutional question is dichotomy: the human person consists of two fundamental and irreducible components, a material body and an immaterial soul or spirit. This is the position affirmed by the Westminster Standards, by the great Reformed scholastics (Turretin, Hodge, Berkhof), by the Heidelberg Catechism's account of the human person, and by the overwhelming consensus of the exegetical tradition from the patristic era through the Reformation. It is not the only position held by Christians of genuine conviction, trichotomism (body, soul, and spirit as three distinct substances) has attracted serious defenders, and various forms of monism or physicalism have been proposed by scholars who believe the biblical testimony can be adequately accounted for without positing a genuinely distinct immaterial substance, but it is the position that the biblical testimony most consistently supports, and this lesson will defend it with the exegetical resources that the tradition has marshaled in its favor.

This lesson proceeds in six sections. We begin with the constitutional question itself and the major positions that have been proposed in answer to it. We then examine the biblical vocabulary of the human constitution, the Hebrew and Greek terms for soul, spirit, body, and heart, with attention to both their individual semantic ranges and the patterns of their use that bear on the constitutional question. The third and fourth sections address the positive case for dichotomy from the key New Testament texts and respond to the primary objections raised by trichotomists and monists respectively. The fifth section examines the theological importance of the constitutional question for the doctrines of the intermediate state and the resurrection of the body. The lesson closes with the pastoral and doxological conclusion that the biblical account of the human constitution produces: the recognition of the whole person, body and soul together, as the creature whom God made, whom sin has corrupted, whom Christ has redeemed, and whom the Spirit is renewing toward the eschatological wholeness of the resurrection.

A methodological note: the constitutional question is one on which genuine exegetical and theological debate continues within the Reformed tradition and the broader evangelical church. The dichotomist position defended in this lesson is the traditional and majority Reformed position, and this series holds it with conviction. But the lesson engages the trichotomist and monist alternatives with the seriousness they deserve, acknowledging the genuine exegetical considerations that have led serious interpreters to different conclusions, and modeling the kind of intellectually honest theological engagement that distinguishes careful exegesis from mere proof-texting. The goal is not to win a debate but to understand what the Scriptures actually teach about the constitution of the human person, and to let that understanding shape the way the church understands itself, its members, and the God who made them.

I. The Constitutional Question: What Is the Human Person Made Of?

The Three Major Positions and Their Historical Contexts

A. Dichotomy: The Traditional Reformed Position

Dichotomy holds that the human person consists of two and only two fundamental components: a material body (גוף, *guf* in Hebrew; *sōma*, σῶμα in Greek) and an immaterial soul-spirit that is genuinely distinct from the body, capable of existing in conscious separation from the body at death, and constitutive of personal identity in ways that survive the body's dissolution. The dichotomist tradition does not deny that the Scriptures use multiple terms for the immaterial dimension of the human person, soul (*nephesh*/psyche), spirit (*ruach*/pneuma), mind (*nous*), heart (*lev*/kardia), and others, but it holds that these multiple terms do not denote multiple distinct substances. They are different aspects, perspectives, or functional modes of a single immaterial reality: the terms vary with the specific function or relationship being described, not with the number of distinct substances being identified. When the Scriptures speak of the soul, they are describing the immaterial dimension of the person as the seat of personal identity and the locus of the person's relationship to God; when they speak of the spirit, they are often describing the same immaterial reality in terms of its animating capacity or its capacity for relationship with the Spirit of God; when they speak of the heart, they are describing the same immaterial reality in terms of its volitional and affective center.

The Westminster Confession of Faith's statement in chapter 4, God created man "with reasonable and immortal souls", is the clearest confessional expression of the dichotomist position, and it reflects the theological consensus of the seventeenth-century Westminster Assembly. The Shorter Catechism's description of the soul's enduring existence after death (Q&A 37: "at death the souls of believers are made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory") presupposes that the soul is a genuine substance distinct from the body, capable of conscious personal existence in the absence of the body. And the Longer Catechism's treatment of the resurrection (Q&A 87) explicitly affirms that the soul and body of the believer will be reunited at the resurrection, a formulation that presupposes the persistent existence of a soul that has been separated from its body and will be rejoined to it at the last day. The constitutional framework of dichotomy is built into the Westminster Standards at every point where the doctrines of death, the intermediate state, and the resurrection are treated.

The theological lineage of dichotomy in the Reformed tradition runs from Calvin (who distinguishes clearly between the soul and the body in the Institutes and treats the soul as the immortal, immaterial dimension of the person that survives bodily death) through the Westminster divines through the great scholastics of the seventeenth century through Turretin, Hodge, and Berkhof into the twentieth century. This is not a position adopted for philosophical reasons foreign to the Scriptures; it is the exegetical conclusion drawn by the most careful and the most sustained engagement with the biblical vocabulary and the biblical teaching on the constitution of the human person in the history of the tradition, and the case for it will be made in the sections that follow.

B. Trichotomy and Physicalism: The Alternatives

Trichotomy holds that the human person consists of three distinct substances: body, soul, and spirit. In its most common form, trichotomy distinguishes the soul (psyche), the seat of the natural, psychological life, the intellect, will, and emotions that the human being shares in modified form with the higher animals, from the spirit (pneuma), the higher faculty through which the human person is capable of relationship with God and through which the divine life is received in regeneration. On this account, the body is the physical component, the soul is the natural or psychological component, and the spirit is the spiritual or theological component, and the three are genuinely distinct substances whose interaction constitutes the full human person. Trichotomy was developed most extensively by the Romantic philosopher F. C. Oetinger and was popularized in nineteenth-century evangelicalism particularly through J. B. Lightfoot's commentary work and the Plymouth Brethren tradition. It remains a common position in certain evangelical and charismatic communities.

Physicalism, in its various forms called monism, non-reductive physicalism, or emergent dualism, holds that the human person is constituted entirely by the physical body, and that what the Scriptures call the soul or spirit is not a distinct immaterial substance but a set of functional capacities, relational orientations, or emergent properties of the physical organism. Scholars in this tradition, including Nancey Murphy, Joel Green, and Warren Brown in evangelical circles, argue that the biblical anthropological vocabulary does not require the positing of a distinct immaterial substance, that the Hebrew concept of *nephesh* is better understood as the whole living person rather than a separable immaterial component, and that the biblical hope is entirely the hope of bodily resurrection rather than the survival of a disembodied soul. Physicalism has attracted evangelical scholars who want to engage constructively with the neuroscientific consensus that mental and spiritual experience is entirely associated with brain activity, without conceding the reductive materialism that denies any transcendent dimension to human existence.

Both trichotomy and physicalism raise genuine exegetical and theological questions that the dichotomist must engage seriously. The trichotomist challenge centers on the apparent use of soul and spirit as distinct entities in key texts (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12), and the physicalist challenge centers on the Hebrew concept of *nephesh* and its apparent reference to the whole living person rather than to a separable immaterial component. These challenges will be addressed in Sections III and IV respectively. For now it is sufficient to note that the dichotomist position neither ignores these texts nor dismisses the concerns that generate the alternative positions; it engages them with the full resources of the exegetical tradition, and it does so from the conviction that the traditional position is more exegetically adequate and more theologically coherent than either of its alternatives.

“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.”

Ecclesiastes 12:7, NASB 1995

II. The Biblical Vocabulary: Soul, Spirit, Body, and Heart

What the Hebrew and Greek Terms for the Human Constitution Actually Mean

A. *Nephesh and Ruach: The Old Testament’s Constitutional Vocabulary*

The Old Testament’s vocabulary for the human constitution is rich, nuanced, and occasionally bewildering in its variety, and the bewilderment has been used by both trichotomists (to argue for multiple distinct substances) and physicalists (to argue against a separable immaterial soul) in ways that do not adequately honor the full range of the vocabulary’s usage. A careful survey of the key terms illuminates both the unity of the person and the genuine distinction between its material and immaterial dimensions.

Nephesh (נפש) is the Old Testament’s most common term for the person considered as a living, desiring, feeling, responsive self. Its range is extraordinarily wide: it can refer to the whole living person (Genesis 2:7: “man became a living *nephesh*”), to the seat of desire and longing (Psalm 42:2: “my soul thirsts for God”), to personal identity (Genesis 12:5: “the souls they had acquired”, meaning the persons in the household), to the seat of emotional life (1 Samuel 18:1: “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David”), and to the life-principle itself (Leviticus 17:11: “the life of the flesh is in the blood”, where “life” translates *nephesh*). This wide range has led physicalist interpreters to argue that *nephesh* simply means “person” or “living being” without any reference to a distinct immaterial component. But the argument from the wide semantic range to the non-existence of an immaterial soul is a non sequitur: the fact that *nephesh* is used to describe the whole person does not mean that the person has no immaterial component. It means that the immaterial component is so central to what the person is that the term for the immaterial component is regularly used to describe the whole person. This is the holistic

anthropology characteristic of Hebrew thought, not a denial of the immaterial dimension but a refusal to abstractly separate it from the whole person it constitutes.

Ruach (רוח) is the Old Testament's term for wind, breath, and spirit, and its application to the human person consistently emphasizes the animating and life-sustaining dimension of the immaterial reality: the ruach of the human being is the breath of life that the divine breath originally imparted (Genesis 2:7: "breathed into his nostrils the breath [נשמת] of life"; Job 33:4: "the breath [נשמת] of the Almighty gives me life"; Ecclesiastes 12:7: "the spirit [רוח] will return to God who gave it"). The ruach is typically used where the emphasis falls on the relationship between the human person and God, the dimension of the person through which the divine life is received, through which the Spirit of God operates, and through which the person is oriented toward her Creator. The interchangeability of nephesh and ruach in many Old Testament contexts supports the dichotomist's claim that they are two terms for the same immaterial reality viewed from different angles: nephesh emphasizing the personal, desiring, relational self; ruach emphasizing the animating, divine-breath-sustained, Spirit-oriented dimension of that same self.

B. *Psyche and Pneuma: The New Testament's Constitutional Vocabulary*

The New Testament's constitutional vocabulary follows the Septuagint's translation of the Old Testament terms and carries similar semantic range. Psyche (ψυχή) is the standard Greek translation of nephesh and is used throughout the New Testament with the same broad range: personal identity (Acts 2:41: "there were added about three thousand souls"), the seat of emotional and volitional life (Matthew 26:38: "my soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death"), the life-principle that persists through death (Matthew 10:28: "do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul"), and the whole person considered as a living self. Pneuma (πνεῦμα) is the standard Greek translation of ruach and is similarly used for the animating principle of human life (James 2:26: "just as the body without the spirit is dead"), the seat of the person's relationship with God (Romans 8:16: "the Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God"), and the whole inner life of the person as oriented toward God (1 Corinthians 2:11: "the spirit of the man which is in him").

The New Testament also employs the term kardia (καρδία, heart) with great frequency as a description of the immaterial center of the person, the seat of the will, the affections, the moral conscience, and the person's fundamental orientation toward God. In Romans 10:10, the heart is the seat of saving faith; in Matthew 22:37, the heart is the first faculty to be engaged in the love of God; in Ephesians 3:17, Christ dwells in the heart of the believer through faith. The heart is not a fourth substance alongside body, soul, and spirit; it is another perspectival term for the immaterial center of the person, emphasizing particularly its volitional and affective dimensions. The nous (νοῦς, mind) similarly describes the immaterial dimension of the person from the perspective of its rational and cognitive capacities. The multiplicity of terms does not indicate a multiplicity of distinct substances; it reflects the richness and the multidimensionality of the single immaterial reality that constitutes the inner life of the human person.

The significance of this biblical vocabulary survey for the constitutional question is twofold. First, the consistent distinction in the Scriptures between the material body and the immaterial inner life of the person, expressed through multiple terms with overlapping but complementary semantic ranges, supports the dichotomist's claim that the human person has a genuinely immaterial dimension that is distinguishable from the material body. Second, the lack of consistent, precise, technical distinction between nephesh and ruach (or psyche and pneuma) in the biblical usage supports the dichotomist's claim that these terms do not denote two genuinely distinct substances but rather two perspectives on a single immaterial reality. If the soul and the spirit were genuinely distinct substances in the way that trichotomy requires, we would expect the biblical writers to use them with more consistent and more technically precise distinction than they actually do, but the vocabulary exhibits the kind of fluid interchangeability that is characteristic of perspectival language for a single reality rather than the kind of consistent, technical distinction that would be expected if two genuinely distinct substances were being identified.

III. The Positive Case for Dichotomy: The Key New Testament Texts

What Matthew 10:28, 2 Corinthians 5, and Ecclesiastes 12:7 Actually Establish

A. Matthew 10:28 and the Distinction of Body and Soul

The most direct and most theologically decisive text for the dichotomist position is Matthew 10:28, where Jesus Himself draws a clear and explicit distinction between the body and the soul and attributes to each a different vulnerability to harm: “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (NASB 1995). The theological structure of this verse is worth unpacking carefully. Jesus draws a distinction between two categories: those who can kill only the body (human persecutors) and the One who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna (God). The distinction presupposes that the soul is a genuinely distinct entity from the body, one that the body’s killers are unable to touch. The soul is not simply the body’s life-functions; it is an immaterial substance that persists when the body is killed and that remains vulnerable only to the judgment of God.

The phrase “unable to kill the soul” (μὴ δυναμένων ἀποκτεῖναι τὴν ψυχὴν) is the most direct possible statement that the soul is not identical to the body and does not simply cease to exist when the body is killed. Human beings are able to kill the body; they are not able to kill the soul. If the soul were simply the body’s biological processes, as the physicalist holds, then killing the body would necessarily kill the soul, and the distinction Jesus draws would be meaningless. The fact that Jesus draws this distinction, and draws it as the basis for a call to a specific attitude of fearlessness in the face of human persecution, presupposes the genuine distinction and the genuine persistence of the soul as an immaterial entity separate from the body. And the reference to God’s ability to “destroy both soul and body in hell” reinforces the dichotomist picture: the final state involves both components of the person, reunited for the judgment and the destiny that each, in their reunited form, will receive.

The pastoral context of Matthew 10:28 is important for understanding the weight Jesus places on the soul’s persistence. Jesus is preparing His disciples for the reality of persecution, for the possibility that following Him will cost them their lives. The ground of the fearlessness He calls for is precisely the distinction between what human persecutors can do to the body and what they cannot do to the soul: the worst that human beings can inflict is death, which separates the soul from the body but does not destroy the soul; the soul of the martyr is beyond the reach of the persecutor. This is not a metaphorical comfort; it is a theological fact about the constitution of the human person that makes fearlessness in the face of mortal threat genuinely possible. The fearlessness of the Christian martyr, from Stephen at the first Christian martyrdom (Acts 7:59: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”) to the martyrs under Rome to the martyrs of the contemporary world, is grounded in the conviction that the persecutor’s power extends only to the body, while the soul is kept safe in the hands of the God who gave it.

B. 2 Corinthians 5:1–8 and the Conscious Intermediate State

Paul’s extended meditation in 2 Corinthians 5:1–8 on the condition of the believer between death and resurrection provides the most detailed New Testament account of the intermediate state and the most compelling argument from the intermediate state for the genuine distinction of body and soul. Paul describes the present mortal body as an “earthly tent” (oikia tou skēnous, v. 1), a temporary dwelling that can be struck down, and the resurrection body as a permanent “building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” The tent metaphor for the present body and the permanent house metaphor for the resurrection body establish a contrast between the temporary, mortal character of the present embodied existence and the permanent, glorified character of the resurrected existence. Between the striking of the tent and the inhabiting of the permanent house lies the intermediate state: the condition of “being absent from the body” (v. 8) that Paul nevertheless describes as “being at home with the Lord.”

The key phrase for the dichotomist’s argument is verse 8: “we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” The phrase “absent from the body” (ek dēmountes ek

tou sōmatos) presupposes a personal subject, the believer, who exists in a genuine, conscious relationship with the Lord (“at home with the Lord,” endēmountes pros ton kyrion) while simultaneously being separated from her body. This is not compatible with physicalism: if the person simply is her body, then being “absent from the body” cannot coherently describe a state of conscious personal existence, because there is no subject remaining when the body is absent. The text presupposes a subject, the believer’s soul or spirit, that is capable of being simultaneously absent from the body and present with the Lord: in other words, a genuinely immaterial personal existence that persists when the body is dissolved. This is precisely the dichotomist’s position.

Philippians 1:21–23 reinforces the picture of 2 Corinthians 5:8 with additional clarity. Paul contemplates his own death and describes it as “departing and being with Christ, for that is very much better” (v. 23, NASB 1995). The phrase “departing and being with Christ” (analein kai syn Christo einai) describes a personal existence with Christ that follows immediately upon death, a state that Paul describes as “very much better” than the present embodied existence, which is itself genuinely good. The grammar is unmistakable: Paul expects that his departure from the present life will result in his being with Christ. There is no interval of unconsciousness between the departure and the being-with-Christ; there is no suggestion that the being-with-Christ awaits the resurrection. Paul’s expectation is of a genuine, conscious, personal, relational existence with Christ between death and the resurrection of the body, an expectation that presupposes the genuine persistence of an immaterial soul that is capable of this conscious relationship in the absence of the body.

“We are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.”

2 Corinthians 5:8, NASB 1995

IV. Responding to the Alternatives: Against Trichotomy and Physicalism

The Dichotomist’s Engagement with 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12, and the Monist Challenge

A. Against Trichotomy: 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12

The two texts most frequently cited in support of trichotomy are 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 reads: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (NASB 1995). The listing of spirit (pneuma), soul (psyche), and body (soma) as three apparently distinct components of the human person that are to be wholly sanctified and preserved is the primary textual basis for the trichotomist claim that the Scriptures teach a three-part constitution. Hebrews 4:12 provides the second major text: “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (NASB 1995). The reference to the division of soul and spirit by the Word of God is taken by trichotomists to presuppose that soul and spirit are genuinely distinct substances capable of being divided from one another.

The dichotomist’s response to 1 Thessalonians 5:23 is twofold. First, the listing of three elements in a prayer for completeness does not necessarily identify three distinct substances; it may be a merism, a rhetorical device that uses a series of complementary terms to express totality, rather than a careful ontological analysis. The parallel prayer in Deuteronomy 6:5, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might”, uses three terms (heart, soul, might) to express the totality of the person’s love for God without intending to identify three distinct substances. Similarly, 1 Thessalonians 5:23’s listing of spirit, soul, and body may express the totality of the person’s need for sanctification and preservation rather than identifying three ontologically distinct components. Second, even if Paul intends to identify distinct aspects of the human person

in this verse, the distinction between spirit and soul need not be a distinction between two genuinely distinct substances; it may be a distinction between two aspects, functions, or dimensions of a single immaterial reality, a distinction analogous to the distinction between the heart and the mind, which no one takes to identify two distinct substances in the human person.

The dichotomist's response to Hebrews 4:12's reference to the "division of soul and spirit" is similarly two-pronged. First, the primary point of the verse is the penetrating power of the Word of God, not the ontological structure of the human person: the author is declaring that no aspect or dimension of the human inner life is beyond the reach of God's Word, which penetrates to the most inaccessible recesses of the person's experience. The reference to the "division of soul and spirit" is a rhetorical expression of the Word's penetrating power, not a technical anatomical statement about the distinct substances of which the person is constituted. Second, the parallel expression "of both joints and marrow" in the same verse is clearly a merism rather than a literal identification of two distinct physical components: the author is not suggesting that the Word of God literally operates between a bone's joint and its marrow, but is using the paired terms to express penetration to the innermost physical reality. The "soul and spirit" parallel is best understood in the same rhetorical mode: the Word penetrates to every dimension of the human inner life, from the psychological (soul) to the spiritual (spirit), leaving no recess of the person's existence untouched.

B. *Against Physicalism: The Persistence of Personal Identity Through Death*

The physicalist challenge to dichotomy is in some respects more fundamental than the trichotomist challenge, because it does not dispute the number of distinct substances in the human constitution but challenges the existence of any genuinely immaterial substance at all. The physicalist's primary argument from Scripture is that the Hebrew concept of *nephesh*, and more broadly the Old Testament's anthropological vocabulary, describes the human being as a holistic, psychosomatic unity rather than as a composite of separable material and immaterial components. The physicalist argues that the dualistic picture, the ghost in the machine, the immortal soul inhabiting the mortal body, is more Platonic than biblical, and that the biblical hope is entirely the hope of bodily resurrection rather than the survival of a disembodied soul.

The dichotomist acknowledges genuine force in this argument at the level of anthropological holism: the biblical account of the human person does consistently present the person as a psychosomatic unity, and any account of the soul that treats it as the "true self" inhabiting a body that is alien or inferior to it has more in common with Platonism than with the biblical witness. But the acknowledgment of anthropological holism does not require the denial of a genuine distinction between the material and immaterial dimensions of the person; it requires the affirmation that both dimensions are genuinely constitutive of the whole person, and that the separation of the soul from the body at death is a genuine loss (not a liberation, as the Gnostic and Platonic traditions teach) that the resurrection will repair. The dichotomist and the physicalist are both committed to the holistic character of the human person; they differ on whether a genuinely immaterial component is part of that whole.

The most decisive argument against physicalism is the doctrine of the intermediate state: the biblical testimony to the conscious personal existence of the believer between death and resurrection cannot be accounted for if the person simply is her body. Luke 23:43, Jesus's promise to the dying thief: "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (NASB 1995), is a promise of conscious personal fellowship with Christ on the day of the thief's death, before any resurrection. Revelation 6:9–11 describes "the souls of those who had been slain" under the altar in heaven, crying out to God for justice and receiving the answer that they must wait "a little while longer", clearly a picture of conscious personal existence and personal communication between death and the final resurrection. And Paul's preference "to depart and be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23) as "very much better" than the present embodied existence is not compatible with the annihilation or unconsciousness that a consistent physicalism requires for the interval between death and resurrection. The intermediate state requires an immaterial subject, a soul, that persists when the body dissolves and that is capable of conscious personal

existence in the presence of Christ. Without this immaterial subject, the intermediate state cannot be what the Scriptures describe it to be, and the promises of Luke 23:43 and Philippians 1:23 are either false or meaningless.

V. The Theological Importance: Why the Constitutional Question Matters

The Intermediate State, the Resurrection, and the Perdurance of Personal Identity

A. *The Intermediate State and the Necessity of an Immaterial Soul*

The theological stakes of the constitutional question become most evident when the doctrines of death, the intermediate state, and the resurrection of the body are brought into focus. The intermediate state, the condition of the person between physical death and the resurrection of the body at the last day, is a crucial doctrine for the pastoral life of the church, because it addresses the most urgent and the most personal question that every member of the congregation faces: what happens to me when I die? The biblical answer to that question, as the preceding sections have demonstrated, is that the immaterial soul separates from the body at death and exists in a conscious personal state in the presence of Christ (for the believer) or in a conscious state of torment and separation from God (for the unbeliever), awaiting the resurrection of the body that will reunite the soul with its perfected or judged body for the final state.

This answer, which is the answer of the exegetical tradition from Justin Martyr and Tertullian through Augustine and Aquinas through Luther and Calvin through the Westminster Standards to the present, requires the existence of a genuinely immaterial soul that is capable of conscious personal existence separated from the body. Without such a soul, the intermediate state cannot be what the Scriptures describe it to be. The physicalist attempt to account for the intermediate state without a persistent soul typically involves either the doctrine of soul sleep (the soul exists unconsciously between death and resurrection, a doctrine condemned by the Reformed tradition and contradicted by the texts cited above) or immediate resurrection (the person is resurrected immediately upon death into the final state, bypassing the intermediate state entirely, a doctrine that requires abandoning the temporal sequence implied by the New Testament's eschatology). Neither alternative adequately accounts for the biblical picture, and neither is compatible with the Reformed confessional tradition. The doctrine of the intermediate state is the practical and pastoral argument for the dichotomist position.

Ecclesiastes 12:7's account of death in terms of the return of body and spirit to their respective origins provides the Old Testament's most direct statement of the distinction: "then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." The parallelism is precise: body ("the dust") returns to the earth from which it came (Genesis 2:7's dust; Genesis 3:19's "to dust you shall return"); spirit (ruach) returns to God who gave it. This is not the language of the whole person's dissolution into nothingness; it is the language of the person's constitutional dissolution into its two components, each returning to its source. The spirit returns to God, not as an impersonal force that is reabsorbed into the divine, but as the personal, immaterial dimension of the individual human creature that is placed in the keeping of the God who created it. Zechariah 12:1's reference to God as the One who "forms the spirit of man within him" reinforces the picture: God is the author of each human spirit, which implies that each human spirit is a distinct, personal creation of God that He forms within the creature and to whom it returns at death.

B. *Personal Identity Through Death and Resurrection*

The question of personal identity through death and resurrection is one of the most philosophically interesting and pastorally urgent questions generated by the constitutional debate. When the believer dies and her body dissolves, and then her body is raised at the resurrection, how is the resurrected person the same person as the one who died? What constitutes the continuity of personal identity through the interval of bodily dissolution? The physicalist who denies a persistent immaterial soul faces a particularly acute version of this problem: if the person

simply is her body, and the body dissolves at death, then the resurrection is not the raising of the same person but the creation of a new person with the same memories and the same psychological profile, a numerically different person who merely resembles the original.

The dichotomist's answer to this question is elegant and theologically satisfying: personal identity through death and resurrection is secured by the persistent soul, which carries the person's identity, memories, relationships, and personal history through the interval of bodily dissolution and constitutes the continuity between the pre-mortem and post-resurrection person. The body that is raised at the resurrection is the same person's body because it is reunited with the same person's soul, the soul that has persisted through the intermediate state, that has been kept by God in the interval between death and resurrection, and that is rejoined to the resurrected body to constitute the glorified whole person who will dwell with God forever. The resurrection is not the creation of a new person who resembles the old; it is the restoration to the full person of the bodily dimension that death temporarily removed. And the guarantee that the resurrected person is genuinely the same person as the one who died is the persistent soul that bridges the interval and carries the personal identity through it.

The Reformed confessional tradition's consistent insistence on the resurrection of "the selfsame body" (Westminster Confession 32.2: "The bodies of the dead, being still united to Christ, do, through His Spirit, rise again unto glory"; Shorter Catechism Q&A 38: "At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment") reflects the deep conviction that the resurrection is not the creation of a new person but the restoration of the same person in glorified form. The theological coherence of this conviction depends on the dichotomist's affirmation of a persistent immaterial soul: the selfsame body is raised because it is reunited with the selfsame soul, and the identity between the mortal and the resurrection person is guaranteed by the continuity of the soul that bridges the interval of death. The constitutional question is not an abstract metaphysical puzzle; it is a question whose answer is required for the coherence of the church's hope.

VI. The Doxological Conclusion: Whole-Person Worship

Both Body and Soul Made by God, Redeemed by Christ, and Renewed by the Spirit

The doctrine of dichotomy, the human person as a genuine unity of body and soul, each distinct and each genuinely constitutive of the whole person, produces a characteristically biblical quality of whole-person piety that neither a purely materialist account nor a Gnostic spiritualizing account can achieve. The materialist account of the person produces an ethics of the body without an eschatology of the soul; it can tell the creature how to care for her physical existence but cannot account for the fact that her existence exceeds what the physical can contain. The Gnosticizing account of the person produces a piety that neglects or despises the body in the interest of a purely spiritual existence; it can celebrate the soul's relationship to God but cannot honor the goodness of the body that the Spirit indwells and will one day raise imperishable. The dichotomist's account produces both: a genuine honoring of the body as the Spirit's temple and the resurrection's subject, and a genuine honoring of the soul as the seat of personal identity and the locus of the person's relationship with God.

The biblical call to worship is consistently whole-person: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5, NASB 1995). "I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1, NASB 1995). "For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20, NASB 1995). These calls to whole-person worship presuppose the dichotomist's account of the person: they address a creature who has both an immaterial inner life (heart, soul) and a material body, and they call that whole creature to the worship of the whole-person God who made her. The worship of a purely immaterial being (as if the soul were the only thing that worships) or the worship of a purely material being (as if the body were the only thing that glorifies God) misses the whole-person character of the worship that the Scriptures consistently call for.

The eschatological vision of the resurrection of the body is the final and the fullest expression of the whole-person character of the human creature. The redeemed who stand before the throne in Revelation 7 are not disembodied souls floating in a purely spiritual realm; they are whole persons, soul and glorified body together, in the permanent, unmediated fellowship with the Creator for which the Creator made them. The God who formed Adam from the dust and breathed into him the breath of life, who made the creature in the twofold constitution of body and soul, will restore that creature in the fullness of its twofold constitution at the resurrection, and in that fullness the creature will worship, love, and glorify its Maker in the mode of creaturely existence for which it was always designed: as an embodied soul, glorified and perfected, in the presence of the God who made it, redeemed it, and will dwell with it forever. “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:9, NASB 1995)

“For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

2 Corinthians 5:1, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Dichotomy	The view that the human person consists of two fundamental and irreducible components: a material body and an immaterial soul/spirit. The traditional Reformed position (affirmed by the Westminster Standards, Turretin, Hodge, Berkhof, and the majority of the exegetical tradition) holds that soul and spirit are not two distinct substances but two different perspectives or functional modes of a single immaterial reality. The immaterial soul/spirit is genuinely distinct from the body, capable of conscious existence separated from the body at death, and constitutive of the personal identity that persists through the intermediate state and is reunited with the resurrected body at the last day.
Trichotomy	The view that the human person consists of three genuinely distinct substances: body, soul (psyche), and spirit (pneuma). Trichotomy typically distinguishes the soul as the seat of natural psychological life (intellect, will, emotions) from the spirit as the higher faculty through which the person is capable of relationship with God. Associated with F. C. Oetinger in Protestant history, popularized in nineteenth-century evangelicalism, and defended by appeal to 1 Thessalonians 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12. The dichotomist response holds that these texts do not require genuinely distinct substances but may be understood as perspectival or meristic descriptions of the single immaterial dimension of the person.
Physicalism / Monism	The view that the human person is constituted entirely by the physical body, and that what the Scriptures call the soul or spirit is not a distinct immaterial substance but a functional capacity, relational orientation, or emergent property of the physical organism. Evangelical physicalists (Murphy, Green, Brown) argue that the biblical anthropological vocabulary, particularly the Hebrew <i>nephesh</i> , describes the whole living person rather than a separable immaterial component. The dichotomist response holds that physicalism cannot account for the intermediate state (the conscious personal existence of the believer between death and resurrection) or the personal identity of the resurrected person with the pre-mortem person.
Nephesh (נפש)	The primary Hebrew term for the human person considered as a living, desiring, feeling, responsive self. Its semantic range includes the whole living person, the seat of desire and emotional life, personal identity, and the life-principle itself. <i>Nephesh</i> is used so broadly that it can describe the whole person (Genesis 2:7) as well as the specifically immaterial dimension (Psalm 42:2). Its interchangeability with <i>ruach</i> in many contexts supports the dichotomist's claim that the two terms are perspectival descriptions of a single immaterial reality rather than names for two distinct substances.
Ruach (רוח)	Hebrew for wind, breath, and spirit, used of the animating principle of human life and the dimension of the person through which the divine life is received and the Spirit of God operates. <i>Ruach</i> is used in Ecclesiastes 12:7 for the human spirit that returns to God at death, and in contexts emphasizing the person's relationship to God and receptivity to the Spirit's work. Its interchangeability with <i>nephesh</i> in many Old Testament contexts supports the dichotomist's claim that both terms describe the same immaterial reality from complementary perspectives.

Intermediate State	The condition of the person between physical death and the resurrection of the body at the last day. The Reformed tradition holds that at death the soul separates from the body: the souls of believers are immediately in the conscious presence of Christ in heaven (Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8), while the souls of the unrighteous await judgment in conscious torment (Luke 16:22–23; Revelation 20:13). The intermediate state is temporary: the final state for both the redeemed and the condemned involves the resurrection of the body and the last judgment. The doctrine of the intermediate state requires a persistent immaterial soul and is the primary pastoral argument for the dichotomist position.
Soul Sleep	The doctrine that the soul is unconscious between death and resurrection, that the person does not exist in any conscious state until awakened at the resurrection. Associated historically with certain Anabaptist traditions and in modern times with the Seventh-Day Adventist tradition and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The Reformed tradition consistently rejects soul sleep as incompatible with the New Testament’s testimony to the conscious intermediate state: Luke 23:43 (“today you shall be with Me in Paradise”), Philippians 1:23 (departing to be “with Christ”, which is “very much better”), and 2 Corinthians 5:8 (to be “absent from the body” is to be “at home with the Lord”).
Merism	A rhetorical device that uses two or more contrasting or complementary terms to express totality. For example, “day and night” means “always,” and “from the greatest to the least” means “everyone without exception.” The dichotomist appeals to the concept of merism in responding to the trichotomist’s use of 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (spirit, soul, and body) and Hebrews 4:12 (soul and spirit): these listings may function as merisms expressing totality (sanctify the whole person; penetrate every dimension of the inner life) rather than as ontological analyses identifying distinct substances.
Personal Identity (Through Death)	The question of what constitutes the continuity of the individual person through the process of physical death, bodily dissolution, and resurrection. The dichotomist holds that personal identity is secured by the persistent immaterial soul, which carries the person’s identity, memories, and relational history through the intermediate state and constitutes the continuity between the pre-mortem person and the resurrected person. The physicalist faces an acute problem: if the person simply is her body, and the body dissolves at death, then the resurrected person is a new person numerically distinct from the one who died, which undermines the coherence of the resurrection hope and the Reformed confessional insistence on the resurrection of “the selfsame body.”
Whole-Person Piety	The characteristically biblical pattern of devotion and worship that honors both the material body and the immaterial soul/spirit as genuine dimensions of the human person’s existence before God. Whole-person piety is grounded in the dichotomist’s account of the person and expressed in the biblical calls to worship that engage the whole person: Deuteronomy 6:5 (heart, soul, strength), Romans 12:1 (bodies as living sacrifices), and 1 Corinthians 6:20 (glorifying God in the body). It stands against both a purely materialist piety that reduces worship to physical acts and a Gnosticizing piety that despises the body and treats only the soul’s inner experience as spiritually relevant.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the human person is a genuine unity of body and soul, two distinct but inseparable components that together constitute the whole person whom God created, whom Christ redeemed, and whom the Spirit is renewing. The body is not the soul's prison, as the Gnostic tradition teaches; it is the integral component of the person's creaturely existence, destined for resurrection and glorification. The soul is not merely a biological function of the body, as the physicalist tradition teaches; it is the genuinely immaterial, genuinely personal, genuinely persistent dimension of the person whose existence cannot be terminated by the body's dissolution and whose relationship to the Lord is the most fundamental fact of the person's existence. This whole-person anthropology, body and soul together, neither dispensable, each genuinely constitutive of what the person is, is the constitutional framework that the intermediate state, the resurrection, and the whole-person piety of the Scriptures require.

We must also believe the intermediate state with the pastoral confidence that it deserves: that the believer who dies today is today in the presence of Christ, conscious and at home with the Lord, awaiting the resurrection that will restore the body to its glorified wholeness. This is not a vague spiritual comfort; it is a specific theological conviction grounded in Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23, and 2 Corinthians 5:8, and it is the conviction that makes the pastoral ministry to the dying both theologically grounded and genuinely comforting. The pastor who holds the intermediate state with this clarity and this confidence will stand at the deathbed and at the graveside with something more than platitudes to offer: the specific, Christological, bodily-resurrection-oriented hope that the biblical account of the human constitution makes possible.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the doctrine of the whole-person constitution produce in you a renewed gratitude for the specific creaturely existence you inhabit: the embodied, ensouled existence that the Creator designed with care, that Christ redeemed by taking it on in the Incarnation, and that the Spirit will one day raise imperishable. The body you inhabit is not a temporary inconvenience on the way to a purely spiritual existence; it is an integral component of what you are, destined for resurrection, indwelt by the Spirit, and called to glorify God in its specific material form. The soul that animates your body is not the only "true" you, waiting to be liberated from its material housing; it is the immortal, personal, relationally constituted dimension of the whole person you are, kept safe by the God who made it, destined to be reunited with its glorified body at the resurrection.

Desire the whole-person piety that Deuteronomy 6:5 and Romans 12:1 describe: the worship that engages not merely the soul's inner experience but the body's physical presence; not merely the spiritual disciplines of prayer and meditation but the physical disciplines of embodied service, embodied community, and embodied sacrifice. The God who made you whole demands the worship of the whole: heart and soul and strength; body presented as a living sacrifice; the body and soul together brought into the service of the God who created both and will one day perfect both in the glory of the resurrection.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10 as a continuous unit, attending to Paul's account of the relationship between the present mortal body, the persistent inner person, and the future resurrection body. Note the contrast between "the outer man" and "the inner man" in 4:16; the tent and the building in 5:1; the groaning and the desire to be clothed with the heavenly dwelling in 5:2–4; and the preference for being absent from the body and at home with the Lord in 5:8. Ask yourself: what specific pastoral comfort does this passage offer for someone facing death? And what specific theological conviction about the constitution of the human person does the comfort depend on?

- Practice the whole-person piety that the dichotomist account of the person requires. This week, identify one specific way in which your pattern of worship or spiritual discipline is deficient in its engagement with the body, one way in which you have treated the spiritual life as primarily an inner, mental, or emotional experience without adequate engagement of the physical dimensions of creaturely existence. It may be the incorporation of more physical acts of worship (kneeling, lifting hands, fasting), or the physical service of others in the church's ministry to the vulnerable, or the physical stewardship of your own body in sleep, diet, and exercise as dimensions of the Spirit's temple. Commit to one specific embodied practice as an expression of the whole-person piety the doctrine calls for.
- **Read Louis Berkhof's Systematic Theology, Part 3, Chapter 2 ("The Nature of Man").** Berkhof's treatment of the constitutional question is the most accessible and most thoroughly referenced Reformed account available in English. His engagement with the trichotomist texts (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12) and with the physicalist challenge provides the student with the exegetical tools needed to defend the dichotomist position in pastoral and academic settings. For a more contemporary engagement with the physicalist challenge specifically, J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae's *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics* (2000) provides the most thorough philosophical and theological defense of substance dualism against the physicalist alternatives.
- Prepare a five-minute pastoral account of what happens at death for a believer, suitable for delivery at a hospital bedside or at a graveside service. The account should be theologically grounded in the constitutional doctrine of this lesson (body and soul, the intermediate state, the resurrection hope) but expressed in the pastoral register of a minister speaking to a grieving family rather than in the academic register of a theological treatise. Ask yourself: what theological convictions about the constitution of the human person underlie the comfort I am offering, and am I offering those convictions clearly enough that the grieving family can hold them?
- Consider the specific pastoral situations in which the doctrine of the intermediate state is most directly relevant in your ministry context: the terminal diagnosis, the sudden loss, the deathbed conversation, the graveside service, the pastoral visit to the bereaved. For each situation, identify the specific promise or truth about the intermediate state that is most directly applicable, Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23, 2 Corinthians 5:8, Revelation 6:9–11, and commit to holding these texts with enough clarity and confidence that they can function as genuine pastoral resources rather than mere theoretical doctrines in the moments when your congregation needs them most.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before working through this lesson, what was your understanding of the human constitution? Did you hold a dichotomist, trichotomist, or physicalist position, or were you unaware that the question was contested? What specific experience, text, or theological tradition most shaped your prior understanding? Has the lesson moved your position, and if so, which argument was most persuasive?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Matthew 10:28 carefully. What is the specific distinction Jesus draws between what human persecutors can do and what God can do? What does the phrase “unable to kill the soul” presuppose about the soul’s relationship to the body? How does the pastoral context of the verse, the call to fearlessness in the face of persecution, depend on the theological claim the verse makes about the soul’s persistence after bodily death?
- Read 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10 as a unit. What is Paul’s account of the contrast between the outer person and the inner person in 4:16? What are the “earthly tent” and the “building from God” in 5:1, and what interval exists between them? What does the phrase “absent from the body and at home with the Lord” (5:8) presuppose about the person’s constitution and the character of the intermediate state?
- Read 1 Thessalonians 5:23 in the full context of the letter’s closing benediction. What is the primary purpose of Paul’s prayer in this verse? Is it primarily an ontological analysis of the human constitution, or a prayer for the completeness of the Thessalonians’ sanctification? How does the dichotomist’s merism interpretation account for the listing of spirit, soul, and body while remaining consistent with the two-part constitutional view?
- Read Ecclesiastes 12:1–7 as the close of the Preacher’s meditation on old age and death. What is the literary and rhetorical function of the image in verses 2–6, and how does verse 7 bring the meditation to its conclusion? What does the parallelism of “the dust will return to the earth as it was” and “the spirit will return to God who gave it” suggest about the constitution of the person at death? Is the spirit that returns to God a personal, conscious entity, or merely a life-force that returns to its source?
- Read Philippians 1:18–26 in full. What is Paul’s specific expectation about what will happen to him if he dies (v. 23)? How does the phrase “departing and being with Christ” describe the relationship between death and the intermediate state? What does the evaluation of this departure as “very much better” (v. 23) suggest about the quality of conscious personal experience in the intermediate state? And how does this passage create difficulties for both the soul sleep doctrine and the physicalist account of death?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the wide semantic range of *nephesh*, its ability to describe the whole person, personal identity, the life-principle, and the seat of desire, does not support the physicalist’s denial of a distinct immaterial soul but rather reflects the holistic character of Hebrew anthropology. Is this argument persuasive? Does the breadth of *nephesh*’s usage more naturally support the dichotomist’s perspectival interpretation or the physicalist’s functional interpretation? What additional evidence from the usage of *nephesh* and *ruach* in the Old Testament would most clearly settle the question?
- The lesson offers two responses to the trichotomist’s use of 1 Thessalonians 5:23: the merism argument (spirit, soul, and body expressing totality rather than identifying three distinct substances) and the perspectival argument (spirit and soul as two aspects of a single immaterial reality). Which response do you find more exegetically compelling? Are both responses necessary, or is one sufficient to answer the trichotomist challenge? What additional exegetical evidence, from the usage of *psyche* and *pneuma* elsewhere in Paul’s letters, would strengthen the dichotomist’s response?

- The lesson argues that the intermediate state, the conscious personal existence of the believer in the presence of Christ between death and resurrection, is the primary pastoral argument for the dichotomist position, because it requires a persistent immaterial soul that the physicalist cannot provide. The physicalist typically responds with either soul sleep (unconscious intermediate state) or immediate resurrection (no interval between death and resurrection). Evaluate each physicalist response against the biblical evidence. Which is more exegetically defensible? Which is more theologically problematic? And what specific texts most directly contradict each response?
- The lesson argues that personal identity through death and resurrection is secured by the persistent soul, which bridges the interval of bodily dissolution and constitutes the continuity between the pre-mortem and post-resurrection person. The physicalist argues that this account introduces a problematic dualism in which the “real” person is the soul rather than the whole person. How does the dichotomist respond to this charge? Is it possible to affirm a persistent immaterial soul as the locus of personal identity without thereby reducing the whole person to the soul alone? How does the resurrection of the body function in the dichotomist’s account of the final, whole-person constitution of the redeemed?
- The lesson closes with the call to whole-person piety: the worship and service that engage both the body and the soul as genuine dimensions of the person’s existence before God. How does the constitutional doctrine of dichotomy specifically ground this whole-person piety, as opposed to either a purely materialist piety that honors the body without the soul, or a Gnosticizing piety that honors the soul while neglecting or despising the body? What specific practices of worship, service, and personal discipline are most directly grounded in the dichotomist’s account of the whole-person constitution?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the doctrine of the intermediate state is the primary pastoral argument for the constitutional doctrine of dichotomy. How confidently can you articulate and defend the intermediate state in the pastoral contexts that your ministry presents, the hospital room, the deathbed conversation, the graveside service, the pastoral counseling of the bereaved? What specific biblical texts do you rely on most heavily for pastoral comfort about the intermediate state, and how do those texts depend on the constitutional doctrine this lesson defends?
- The pastoral practice of preparation for death, the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying well, has been a feature of the church’s pastoral ministry from the earliest centuries. How adequately does the congregation you serve prepare its members for death? Does the formation that occurs in preaching, in the Lord’s Supper, and in pastoral care equip members to face death with the whole-person confidence that the dichotomist account of the intermediate state and the resurrection provides? What specific initiatives in pastoral formation would most directly develop this preparation for death in the congregation?
- The doctrine of the body as the Spirit’s temple (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) and the call to glorify God in the body (v. 20) are grounded in the dichotomist’s account of the whole-person constitution. In what specific domains of your congregation’s life is the body’s dignity as the Spirit’s temple most inadequately honored? Consider: the care of physical health as a dimension of stewardship of the Spirit’s dwelling, the physical service of others as a form of embodied witness, the physical disciplines of fasting, prayer with physical posture, and manual labor as dimensions of whole-person piety. What specific teaching or formation would most effectively develop the congregation’s whole-person engagement with the spiritual life?
- The doctrine of the resurrection of the body, the permanent reunion of the soul with its glorified body at the last day, is the eschatological destination of the whole-person anthropology this lesson defends. How vividly and how specifically does the resurrection hope function as a motivating and comforting reality in the congregation’s life? Does the congregation’s operative eschatology look more like the Gnostic hope of a disembodied spiritual existence in a purely heavenly realm, or the biblical hope of a whole-person, embodied, resurrected existence in the new heavens and the new earth? What specific preaching, teaching,

or pastoral formation would most effectively correct any Gnostic residue in the congregation's eschatological imagination?

- Acts 7:59 records Stephen's final words as the stones fell: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." This is the martyr's prayer of entrusting the immaterial dimension of the person to the Lord who holds it through the intermediate state. Have you thought about what you would want to say, or what you would want to be said on your behalf, at the moment of death? How does the doctrine of dichotomy, the specific belief in a persistent soul that the Lord receives and keeps until the resurrection, shape the way you think about and prepare for your own death? What would it look like to hold this doctrine not merely as a theological conviction but as a lived pastoral and personal reality?

Prayer Focus

Open this eleventh lesson of the Anthropology series, and the first lesson of Unit 4, with a reading of Psalm 139:1–18, which provides the most personal and most theologically concentrated account of the whole-person relationship between the human creature and the Creator in the entire Psalter. Read it slowly, attending to the specifically whole-person character of the divine knowledge it describes: God knows the Psalmist’s sitting down and rising up (bodily acts), his thoughts from afar (inner mental life), his way and his lying down (bodily movement through the world), and his words before they are on his tongue (the intersection of the inner life and its physical expression). The Creator’s knowledge of the creature is whole-person knowledge: it encompasses the soul’s innermost thoughts and the body’s most external acts without distinction, because the creature is a whole, body and soul together, and the Creator who made the whole knows the whole. Read the Psalm as both a theological affirmation of the whole-person constitution and a devotional expression of the whole-person relationship with God that the constitution makes possible.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the doctrine of the whole-person constitution to deepen your worship of each person of the Trinity. Begin with the Father, the Creator who designed the human person as a genuine unity of body and soul, who formed the body from the dust with artisanal care and animated the soul with the breath of divine life, and who holds the souls of the departed in His keeping through the intermediate state until the resurrection restores the body to its glorified wholeness. Move to the Son, the Last Adam who took on the full whole-person constitution of the human creature, body and soul together, in the Incarnation, who died in body while His spirit was entrusted to the Father (“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit,” Luke 23:46), who was raised bodily on the third day, and who at this moment retains in glory the full whole-person constitution of the incarnate Son. Conclude with the Spirit, who indwells the body of every believer as in a temple, who gives life to the mortal body (Romans 8:11) even in the present age as the first installment of the resurrection that is coming, and who will one day raise the mortal body to imperishable life as He raised Jesus from the dead, restoring the whole-person constitution of the redeemed to its final, glorified, permanent wholeness.

Pray together for Unit 4 of this series, which will address the full range of questions about the constitution of human nature across three lessons (Lessons 11–13), in three specific directions. First, for theological clarity about the constitution of the human person: that every member of the community would hold the whole-person anthropology of the Scriptures, body and soul together, neither dispensable, each genuinely constitutive of the whole person, with the exegetical confidence and the pastoral clarity that the biblical testimony provides. Second, for comfort in the face of death: that the doctrine of the intermediate state, the conscious personal existence of the believer in the presence of Christ between death and resurrection, would function in the congregation as a genuinely pastoral reality, grounding the ministry to the dying and the bereaved in the specific, Christological, bodily-resurrection-oriented hope that the biblical account of the human constitution makes possible. Third, for whole-person piety: that the knowledge of the whole-person constitution would produce in every member of the community the specific quality of whole-person worship that the Scriptures consistently call for, the worship of heart, soul, and strength; the presentation of the body as a living sacrifice; the glorifying of God in the body that the Spirit indwells and will one day raise imperishable.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.”

Psalm 139:23–24, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 2:7; Ecclesiastes 12:7; Zechariah 12:1; Matthew 10:28; Luke 23:43, 46; Philippians 1:21–23; 2 Corinthians 4:16–5:10; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 6:9–11*

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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