
Pro Rege

Volume 20 | Number 1

Article 2

September 1991

Body-Soul Discussion: Historical Matters and Hermeneutical Principles

Robert E. Grossmann

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Grossmann, Robert E. (1991) "Body-Soul Discussion: Historical Matters and Hermeneutical Principles," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 20: No. 1, 13 - 24.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol20/iss1/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

The Body-Soul Discussion: Historical Matters and Hermeneutical Principles



by Robert E. Grossman

The discussion of the existence and nature of the human "soul" in recent Reformed teaching and writing is one that has several antecedents in the history of theology. While the central line of orthodoxy in the Christian church over the centuries since the Lord's ascension has held to a teaching of a bipartite (body/soul) nature of man, labeled "dichotomy,"¹ there have also been a number of challenges to this teaching. In addition to this generally accepted dichotomist teaching about man's constitutional nature, the Christian churches have with few exceptions held to a continued conscious

Robert Grossman is Professor of Church History and Ministerial Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Orange City, Iowa.

existence of the "soul" of man after physical death.²

The current discussion about the existence of the soul, like those of the past, finds its importance not only in attempting to settle a matter of biblical doctrine, but is also concerned with the larger issues of ontology and hermeneutics. Our part in this discussion will be to examine these two major issues and then turn briefly to the more focused question of the constitutional nature of man. Before entering in upon the direct discussion, however, I find it necessary to give some account of the historical background of the present discussion. In this way readers will be better informed and better able to judge their own responses and declarations.

Since the time of the Protestant Reformation two major groups within Christendom, the Anabaptists and the Seventh Day Adventists, have denied the continued conscious existence of human souls after death. The Reformation provides a useful starting point for this consideration because those movements found within Protestant Christendom, even speaking quite broadly, seek to ground their teaching in Scripture rather than in *a priori* philosophical principles, as was often the case with medieval speculative theology.

Both the Anabaptistic and the Seventh Day Adventists adopted a literalistic hermeneutic which, when applied to biblical passages that speak of death as "sleep," results in the idea that the soul, if it continues to exist after death, does so in an unconscious condition. The Anabaptists and Seventh Day Adventists, however, point also to other data in Scripture in support of their position, data which we will discuss below in connection with the more

recent questions about the constitutional nature of man.

Our critical evaluation of present-day "Reformed antidualism" is presented here not as a judgment or condemnation of those who hold it, but rather as a challenge to them to reconsider their own principles and methodology in the light of our commonly confessed Reformed philosophical and hermeneutical heritage.

Reformed Anti-Dualism

The twentieth century has seen from within Reformed circles a new challenge to the dichotomistic view of man's constitutional nature. Beginning in the early 1920s,³ certain followers in the train of the renewal of Reformed teaching instituted by Abraham Kuyper sought to work out the principles of a consistently Calvinist philosophy. These men included Herman Dooyeweerd and D.H. Th. Vollenhoven, later joined temporarily by K. Schilder, and partially by H.G. Stoker in South Africa and C. Van Til in the United States. These men sought to apply as a central idea in this neo-Calvinist philosophy Abraham Kuyper's declaration that there is not an inch in the whole of temporal life of which Christ, as Lord of all men, does not say "mine."⁴

In seeking to follow Kuyper's world-embracing viewpoint, however, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven soon found themselves convinced that Kuyper's own efforts in this direction, especially politically, had "run aground in the scholastic dualism of nature and grace, leaving the 'natural sphere' of life and knowledge to the natural light of human reason. . . ."⁵ Turning against this leftover "dualism" in Kuyper, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven soon found themselves also rejecting Kuyper's agreement with the common Christian dichotomistic view of man.⁶ In essence, the body-soul dichotomy was seen as a manifestation of the Greek dualism which had infected Christian teaching for centuries. Thus Kuyper and many other post-Reformation thinkers are seen as scholastic adherents of a dualism that views the spiritual, intellectual, and unseen world as higher, while it views the physical, temporal, and seen world as lower.⁷

Although the contemporary companions of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven varied in their willingness to follow the path of rejecting all duality

with respect to human constitution, a number of their students seem to have made this a crusade. Peter Steen, for example, criticizes Dooyeweerd himself for having "fallen into accommodation with the nature-grace ground-motive," for, among other things, speaking "of the heart or soul at death as leaving this life and going into eternity."⁸ John Vander Stelt also seems to take this tack by making his first criticism of Abraham Kuyper a flat statement that "it is impossible to harmonize the biblical understanding of man and an anthropology which is dichotomistic."⁹

On the other hand, Klaas Schilder, who was at first associated with Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven in the Association for Calvinistic Philosophy, but later resigned, holds that it is impossible from a biblical perspective not to speak of "dichotomy" in some sense. Thus, while Schilder also wished to stress the radical unity of the bodily and spiritual aspects of man's constitution, he notes that even Vollenhoven spoke of the "putting off of the body" and of "the 'reunion' of the soul with the body."¹⁰

Schilder holds that it is not the idea of dichotomy per se that is the problem with some Christian and also some Reformed teaching, but rather that what is said about the dichotomy is rooted in an unbiblical ontology of body and soul as separate "parts" of man's constitution.¹¹ With Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, Schilder speaks of the soul as the "heart" or "the center of man's existence." However, Schilder also says that it is not entirely incorrect to speak of soul and body as "higher" and "lower" aspects of man much as one might speak of the "right" and "left" of some single object without denying the unity of that object.¹² It is perhaps partially for this reason that Vollenhoven found occasion in 1962 to discuss the "philosophical background of K. Schilder's scholasticism."¹³

In this historical background we find first of all a very powerful desire on the part of these Reformed philosophers and theologians to shed any ideas that might be tainted with a Greek dualistic ontology of the constitution of man. Certainly this is a laudable desire, and we need to credit Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven as much as anyone for pointing out certain elements of such dualism in the writings of many authors, including those of solid Reformed persuasion. For example, the notion that the physical aspect of man is a prison house for the soul is apparent even in Calvin's description of the deaths

of Christ and Stephen as being "when the soul is liberated from the prison of the flesh, God is its perpetual keeper."¹⁴ There can be no question that Calvin also thinks of the body and soul as separate parts of man's constitution when he avers that "the proper seat of his image is in the soul."¹⁵

As we look at Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, and their earlier followers, however, we see in the second place that they are not entirely of one mind as to what their antidualism implies even for the rejection of the dichotomistic view of man's constitutional nature. Not only is Schilder a case in point, but Cornelius Van Til, who highly respected and often agreed on fundamental principles with Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, speaks openly of body and soul in the traditional sense.¹⁶ Furthermore, according to the testimony of Schilder and their own followers, Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven do not entirely rid themselves of making a distinction between body and soul, a difference which allows for the possibility of separation between them at death.

Thirdly, some of the younger followers of Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven seem to have made an inviolable principle of their rejection of all possible traces of dualism or dichotomistic language. In this way they seem perhaps to have transformed an important critical insight into a fundamental philosophical principle that reads all thought and existence in terms of its own viewpoint. They hold to an anthropological monism based upon an ontological and epistemological antidualism.¹⁷ I will contend below that in doing this, they have reinstated the medieval notion of philosophy as the foundation, or at least arbiter, for theology and the other sciences, and have introduced a hermeneutic that distorts the historic Reformed understanding of the primacy of Scripture.

We believe that it is exactly this inviolable antidualism that accounts for the broad-based criticism and sometimes outright rejection of Abraham Kuyper's historic Reformed convictions by such neo-Dooyeweerdian writers as those mentioned above,¹⁸ as well as for their radical rejection of any notion of a dichotomy of body and soul.

The Duality of Reality

As we turn now to the larger questions raised in the current body-soul discussion, especially that of

ontology, I believe that it is necessary to point out the fundamental duality of all of reality as it is confessed by Christians. Now I realize that I have already loaded the issue by claiming that the duality of reality is "confessed by Christians." Nevertheless, I am convinced that there lies here a fundamental axiom that all Christians, including our opponents in this particular discussion, take for granted.

What I mean by the "duality of reality" is that as Christians we confess that behind the physical world of sight, touch, hearing, etc., there stands the spiritual reality of God as Creator and Sustainer of all that is seen. This fundamental idea is written

*A new challenge to the
dichotomistic view of man
has arisen from within
Reformed circles during this
century.*

large upon every page of Scripture, is clearly stated in so many words on a number of occasions therein, and is confessed by the church in its confessions. Without our confession of this "two-layered" view of reality,¹⁹ we simply jest when we talk about "God."

What is implied and meant by this observation is that the Bible itself requires a certain metaphysical understanding of reality. Thus, while the Bible is neither a philosophical nor metaphysical treatise, we cannot escape certain metaphysical implications of what it does teach. The central teaching of Scripture about God and the universe he has created can mean nothing more or less than that God does exist and that the physical universe finds its unseen source in him. Now, whether we state these truths in the language of philosophy, in the propositional form of everyday declarations, or in the language of Scripture itself, these are the issues with which philosophy seeks to deal, and they are issues with which theology seeks to deal.

That the Scriptures reveal a two-layered view of reality can be seen in texts which speak about God the creator as distinct from his creation.²⁰ This teaching of Scripture is commonly called the "transcendence" of God.

We see this two-layered reality presented in Scripture also in such instances where the material and

spiritual worlds are placed alongside each other as distinguishable entities. In Hebrews 11:3, for example, we are told that the "worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible" (NKJV). Here the source of the visible world is declared to be nonvisible. God refuses to be placed in a test tube, and yet he himself declares in Scripture that his presence is not only involved in creation, but also in the continuing existence of the universe (see Heb. 1:3). If there is a proper place for Luther's "in, under and through" language, it is perhaps here, in describing that unseen spiritual power of God as he upholds and superintends the universe he has created.

On the basis of this biblical teaching the Reformed confessions speak of God as a "spiritual Being" who is also "invisible" (Belgic Confession, Article 1). They also, of course, teach on the basis of Scripture that God is triune, that he is three persons in one God (Belgic Confession, Article 8; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 8). Furthermore, this spiritual being created the material heaven and earth "of nothing," that is, of no pre-existing matter (Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 9; Belgic Confession, Article 11). The Belgic Confession also speaks of the Father as the "cause, origin and beginning of all things visible and invisible. . . ." Thus the Reformed Confessions also speak of the duality of reality—the material world on one hand and the spiritual one on the other, distinguishable but related in a very particular way.

The way in which the Creator and the created aspects of reality are related is also clear in Scripture and confession. Involved in the above discussion is the notion that the material world is created by and is dependent upon the spiritual God. It is not the other way around. Therefore we may speak of God, as do the Scriptures, as the "higher" reality.²¹ Furthermore, we find revealed in Scripture the existence of a created spiritual world which cannot be apprehended by the physical senses. By this revelation we are called to confess a further duality in reality, a duality of the spiritual and material in created reality. Now, while this is far from proving the existence of a separable spiritual part of man called "soul," it does tell us that it is not in line with biblical teaching to deny the soul's existence on the basis of an antidualist supposition about the nature of created reality.

There are, of course, other dualities in reality, which also need to be understood in terms of biblical teaching. The human race, for example, is composed of males and females, indeed the race began with one of each. Because male and female are distinct and distinguishable parts of humanity, there has often in history been a tendency for males and females to treat each other as somehow less valuable and even less human than themselves. It is interesting in this light that while the Bible teaches that the distinction between man and woman is never to be confused, it begins with a clear statement of their radical unity and equality as human beings made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). For light on the wrongness of confusing male and female note especially the Old Testament legislation forbidding the wearing of the other sex's clothing (Deut. 21:5) and Paul's admonitions concerning the length of hair as a necessary distinguishing feature of male and female appearance at worship (1 Cor. 11:4-15). The point here is that the radical unity of the female and male as participants in everything that it means to be human does not in any way destroy or diminish their distinctiveness as two, but not one or three, sexes, each of which has its particular role.²²

Now, while God and his creation do stand over against each other as distinct entities and we must guard against pantheism or the confusion of the Creator with the creature in any way,²³ this does not imply that the created spiritual world is somehow "higher" than the created material world either ontologically or ethically. Christian thought and language has often been influenced by pagan philosophies which teach such a hierarchy, particularly in their view of the constitution of man. The Bible, however, teaches that the spiritual and bodily aspects of man are equally created, and equally involved in sin and salvation.

Genesis 1 declares again and again that created material things are "good." Genesis 2:7 depicts the creation of man's material aspect just as clearly from God's special activity, as is the spiritual aspect which constitutes him a "living soul." As we will see below, the Bible distinguishes between man's body and spirit,²⁴ but it does not set them over against each other in an hierarchical scheme, either ontologically or morally. An important point here is that that which may be distinguished is not always to be seen in terms of antagonism or hierarchy. Dualities exist that can be made into false dichotomies,

but confessing duality does not *ipso facto* mean we have engaged in false or unbiblical dualism.

Nevertheless, the Scriptures *do* show, as does general revelation, that the spiritual aspect of man rules the body, that there is a hierarchy of function, *and*, as I will further argue below, that there is a conscious continued existence of the human spirit after its separation from the body in death.²⁵

Dealing With Duality

There have been those in the history of theology and philosophy who have attempted to handle reality by separating questions of ontology, from questions of "faith." This is done in several ways. The fundamentalist approach which denies the importance of this world as a place for serving God in favor of the "spiritual" values of salvation and eternal life is quite popular even today. This view is exhibited in the widespread idea that religion is a private matter to be exercised in home and church but never in public. Indeed, much of the argument against traditional Christian moral practices in society is based on the correlative idea that morality, being a religious value, is a purely private matter. This truncated version of Christianity has rightly been dubbed a "world-flight mentality." It is neither biblical nor compatible with historic Calvinism's emphasis on the whole of life being a service of God.

A second way of dealing with the issue of God and creation is that of Thomas Aquinas who held that a common body of knowledge is available to all men through reason, while another body of knowledge is available only through faith. Thus the Christian's knowledge of reality consists of two distinct parts which are to be added to each other for total knowledge, but between which there exists a true dichotomy. In this view faith speaks only to religious questions, while reason (and in an updated Thomism, experiential evidence) speaks to questions of material reality. Thomism was, of course, adopted as the official epistemology of the Roman Catholic Church by the Council of Trent and it has a good deal in common principally with the world-flight mentality of fundamentalism. It is this Thomistic nature-grace dichotomy, which sets nature and grace over against each other as separate realms, that Calvinist philosophers and theologians,

including those mentioned above, have found to be so lacking in consistency with the principle of living all of life before God.

An interesting development in recent years has been the adoption of Thomistic epistemological dualism by certain teachers in Reformed educational institutions who wish to maintain a biblical faith concerning salvation while at the same time adopting an evolutionary model of the physical world. An outstanding exponent of this new "Reformed Thomism" is Howard Van Till, who has recently become well-known for his outspoken acceptance of the Big Bang and evolutionary theories of the origin and development of the universe. Van Till

A two-layered view of reality is revealed in texts from Scripture that speak about God the creator as distinct from his creation.

is very honest and open in his description of the relationship between the Bible and science. The Bible, he says, may legitimately be asked questions only about "external affairs." These include questions of status, origin, governance, value, and purpose. Questions of property, behavior, and history, on the other hand, are "internal affairs," which belong exclusively to the realm of natural science.²⁶

Van Till thinks that when the Bible mentions matters of history or states of affairs, these are only the "packaging" in which the covenantal purpose of Scripture is contained. These packaging materials may be discarded without damaging the covenantal message in them. In fact, according to Van Till, it is not only possible but necessary to separate the "contents (the trustworthy teachings of God) from the vehicle and the packaging. Neglecting that separation would be as foolish as attempting to eat a granola bar without removing it from its wrapper or, more absurd yet, without distinguishing it from the truck which delivered it to the store."²⁷ The delivery truck metaphor reveals just how far removed Van Till believes the message of the Bible to be from the words that convey it.

Apart from the serious problems in Van Till's view of Scripture and the arbitrariness with which such a view weighs down the possibility of exegesis, I observe here a nature-grace dichotomy no less

deformed and dangerous than that developed by Aquinas himself. It is deformed because it again sets nature and grace over against each other as separate realms, especially as regards epistemology. It is dangerous because it makes natural science the arbiter of what the Scriptures may legitimately say. Any "fact" reported in Scripture that does not fit in with the latest scientific conclusions is relegated to the trashheap of "packaging." Scripture, on the other hand, may never act as arbiter for science; no investigation, theory, or conclusion of science that contradicts an idea presented in Scripture can be challenged by mere packaging. The result is that when the Bible speaks of the createdness of the universe, that createdness involves nothing more than a faith-relation for Christians to add to the conclusions of natural science. We point out that if "creation" does not say something about the actual physical nature of the world, it becomes an empty term, no matter how religiously we use it.

A third method for dealing with the duality of reality is seen in the methodology of the Reformed antidualists. While we have seen some difference of application of the principle of anti-dualism among these people, there is doubtless also a fundamental agreement in methodology among them. I have already given some account of their thinking, and will engage them at particular points below, but we must see at this point that they are proposing an essentially antidualist view of reality as a means of dealing with certain issues of ontology and epistemology. It is exactly this strictly antidualist view which I believe illegitimately limits their willingness to apply the historic Reformed hermeneutic. However, all of us would be far better served if these antidualists would be as open and complete about what they do hold as they are about that which they criticize.

Now it seems to me that the only right way to deal with the two-layered reality of God and the universe he has created is to maintain the old Reformed teaching of the primacy of Scripture. Nature and grace may not be set over against each other precisely because Scripture teaches that the same God who created all things outside of himself is the one who by grace restores that creation to himself through Christ. Nature and grace are indeed two aspects of reality, distinguishable because God's Word points them out, but inseparable as aspects of God's plan for the universe. With Augustine I

conclude that election is the "mystery of history." Election is not separated from history in the life of the universe but is worked out in that very history. The recipients of God's grace are tentatively distinguishable by their confession, but only the end of history will declare infallibly who are wheat and who are tares.

Human adoption of this perspective on reality is completely dependent upon the truth of the written Word of God. Nothing in nature declares it; indeed everything in nature requires some interpretive explanation if the full truth about it is to be known. It is my contention that such an explanation can legitimately come only from the authority of God himself. The historic Reformed view of the perfection of Scripture as the necessary, authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous Word of God, which interprets all of reality to man, is the only foundation upon which we can stand if we are to engage in an epistemology that is consistent with reality.

The assumption here is the primacy of Scripture, of special revelation as interpretive of general revelation, not because the two are set over against each other, but because they have different purposes in God's plan. General revelation is also necessary, authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous, and it is part of God's total revelation to man no less than is special revelation. However, general revelation has a different purpose in God's plan than does special revelation. General revelation is to be interpreted through the spectacles of special revelation, not the other way around. This is because Scripture as word-revelation is by nature interpretive, while general revelation needs interpretation to be understood properly. It is also true because the noetic effects of sin darken man's understanding so that he naturally misinterprets all revelation, and only special revelation is salvific.²⁸

Thus Scripture has a true primacy in revealing God to humanity. On this view the content of Scripture is all important. Scripture functions truly as spectacles only when what it says about reality is taken seriously. The idea that Scripture somehow conditions man's viewpoint without telling him actual truths robs us of the very corrective ability Scripture has as "spectacles."²⁹

There is then an epistemological duality, but this duality becomes a false dichotomy when general and special revelation are set over against each other, not when they are viewed as two aspects of the

overall revelation of God. The point here is very important for our whole discussion; we may point out dualities in reality, even dichotomies, but it is only when we set certain parts or aspects of a duality over against each other in a deceptive (or deceived) way that we become dualists in a dangerous sense. The answer to diversity is neither monism nor particularism but seeing that all things cohere in God. God who is one, is also three; he is Tri-unity. From our human perspective this is a mystery, but accepting this mystery enables us to also accept the diversity in creation without attempting to make either it or the unity of creation our god.

God has presented to us a universe of diversity in which he has declared in the Bible that all things are created by and find their unity in him. It is then up to him to tell us which things, things such as good and evil, should be set over against each other, and which things should not. However, even these things cohere in God, who can call the tree by which man fell the "tree of the knowledge of good *and* evil." What all of this means is that man has not yet outgrown his dependence upon God for existence and upon God's revelation for knowledge.

Another conclusion of the above discussion is that while we must avoid false dichotomies, the duality of reality requires the rejection of any kind of monism as a fundamental principle of ontology or epistemology. God cannot be reduced to creation and God's knowledge cannot be reduced to the same qualitative category as that of human knowledge. Furthermore, the material world cannot account for the spiritual world, and especially its Creator, God. Indeed, the spiritual God is given as the biblical account for the material as well as of the created spiritual world. Now, while all of this does not yet prove the existence of the human soul as a separable aspect of man's existence, it does awaken us to the fact that duality is not itself to be rejected upon *a priori* philosophical grounds.

Body-Soul, The Hermeneutical Question

Assuming that all of those involved in the present discussion wish to answer the question of the existence of the soul on the basis of Holy Scriptures, the issue becomes one of ascertaining what they say by the application of sound hermeneutical principles. When we look into the history of the inter-

pretation of Scripture on the issue of the existence of the soul, we find that there have at times indeed been conflicting hermeneutics at work. Therefore we need to be sensitive to the possibility that such differences might be at least a part of the occasion for the present challenge to the dichotomistic view of man.

I have already noted the literalistic hermeneutic of the Anabaptists and Seventh Day Adventists, which leads to their conclusion that the soul is but the "life force" of the body and that it dies with the body. As pointed out, these sects tie this conception of the "soul" with the biblical use of the word "sleep" to describe death to produce the doc-

*Scripture calls us also to
confess a duality of the
spiritual and material in
created reality.*

trine commonly known as "soul-sleep." I know of no evidence which would indicate that the Reformed antidualists with whom we are having this discussion give such a literalistic explanation of the passages which speak of death as sleep. At the same time, I caution them at this point because their statements that Scripture does not teach dichotomy sometimes seem to indicate that they would accept it only if they were shown a passage that used the word "dichotomy" for man or mentioned body and soul as "parts" of man's constitutional nature. If this is true, it imposes a kind of negative literalism on those with whom they disagree.

On the other hand, it is worthy of note that Reformed antidualists do express strong preference for the understanding of *nephesh* and *psuche* as referring to the life force of man, or to the whole man, while they deny the possibility of its reference to a separable spiritual existence that might be viewed as a part of man. In this they have at least a *prima facie* agreement with the Anabaptist understanding of the biblical texts in which these words appear.³⁰ The problem with this is that while Scripture does indeed use "soul" with varied reference to man, including the whole man, the antidualists seem to discount entirely those references in which a spirit of man might well be in view as a separable aspect of his constitution. Berkhouwer, for example, does not even mention Matthew 10:28

in his book on man as the image of God, even though he is at great pains to deny the dichotomistic view of man's nature.

When we look into the Reformed confessions for information on the hermeneutic by which their conclusions were reached, particularly on the issue of body and soul as the constitutive elements of human nature, we find two sources of information, one direct, and the other indirect. Of the Reformed creeds, only the Westminster Confession directly describes a hermeneutic. In Chapter I, Article 6, we read, "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture . . ."; and in Article 9, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself. . . ."

Two points may be made about this hermeneutic which are important for our discussion here. First, the hermeneutic expressed in the Westminster Confession accepts a certain kind of literalism, but also goes beyond it to accept teachings which are the "good and necessary consequence" of biblical statements. This Confession's literalism accepts those things "expressly set down in Scripture." No one should have a problem with this. When Scripture says "Christ died for our sins," or, "God created the heavens and the earth," we take it to mean what it says and to say what it means. At the same time we do not deny, but find it necessary to point out that such a "literalism" does not imply that Scripture does not use parables, anthropomorphisms, metaphors, and hyperbole. In other words we take Scripture literally for what *it means to say*, not literalistically for anything the words might express without reference to their context or particular mode of use.

That a Reformed hermeneutic includes receiving things "deduced by good and necessary consequence" needs emphasis in our discussion. The doctrine of the Trinity is a good example of the use of this principle. The Bible nowhere uses the word "trinity," nor does it say that God is "three-in-one." Nevertheless, on the basis of speeches that place Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on a par, that argue for the deity of the Son and of the Spirit, that call forth the same honor for the Son and the Spirit as for the Father, and so on, the church has concluded, and we believe, that God is indeed the Holy

Trinity. This is important because it is this principle that is also operating in the traditional exegesis of such texts as Matthew 10:28 and Luke 23:43.

Since Christ says in Matthew 10:28, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell," traditional exegesis has deduced by good and necessary consequence that there is a soul which is not destroyed by destroying the body. In the same way, because Jesus tells the confessing thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise," traditional exegesis has deduced by good and necessary consequence that the spirit, or soul, of this man would indeed find a continuing and conscious existence with Christ, since it is quite obvious that his body would soon be quite dead. These are not farfetched conclusions from the statements Christ made; they are sober and logical implications.

These conclusions are in fact similar to the one Christ himself made on the basis of God's use of the present tense when speaking to Moses at the burning bush about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This, Christ held, proves that these patriarchs were alive and well in the presence of God many years after their physical death; "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living," he concludes (Matt. 22:29-32). The church stands on good ground when it carefully exegetes the particular words, grammar, and implications of biblical language.

The second implication of the Westminster hermeneutic, particularly as expressed in Chapter I, Article 10 of the Confession, is that we must subject our teaching to *all* of Scripture. If Scripture is to interpret Scripture, we may not use it as a smorgasbord, picking and choosing here and there for our evidences for what is "biblical." We have noted already Berkhouwer's failure to comment on Matthew 10:28. When he does include Luke 23:43 in his discussion, he allows that Scripture speaks of the reality "of the communion with Christ which is not broken through death," but concludes that there is no analyzable solution to what happens to man at death so that "the 'in-between state,' too, is God's mystery."³¹ Here we face a subjective kind of exegetical minimalism which refuses to deal with the implications of biblical statements which might interfere with our own conclusions.

An examination of the earlier Reformed creeds, particularly the Three Forms of Unity, suggests that

a hermeneutic similar to that described by the Westminster Confession was at work in their writing. Not only do they express similar adherence to the doctrine of the Trinity, but their view of the constitutional nature of man, insofar as it is addressed, is similar. A very brief examination of the biblical evidence adduced by the earliest editions of the Heidelberg Catechism will serve to demonstrate this to be true.

There are a number of references to man as “body and soul” in the Heidelberg (Questions and Answers 1, 11, 26, 34, 37, 76, 109, 118). In all of these the assumption is that a man is composed of a body and a soul, and the term “body and soul” is used generally to refer to the whole of the human person. I will examine biblical evidence given for the questions and answers most concerned with human constitutional nature. My references are taken from the third edition of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, in order to demonstrate that the Reformed hermeneutic was in operation in the writing of this confession. The year 1563 was, of course, the first year of the Catechism’s publication.

With reference to the sufferings of Christ in Answer 37, the Catechism parallels II Peter 2:24 with Isaiah 53:12 as proof that he suffered in both “body and soul.” (Verses were not given in the earliest German editions of the Catechism. They are included in the Latin edition of 1563, which appeared after the third German edition.) The passage from Second Peter describes Christ bearing our sins “in his own body,” while the Isaiah passage says that he “poured out his soul unto death.” In synthesizing the Bible’s teaching, the writers of the Catechism took the implication of these statements to be that Christ’s human soul and body underwent his suffering, their meaning being that Christ’s sufferings were both spiritual and physical. Notice here that they are synthesizing doctrine from what they take to be the implications of the Bible’s statements. They are applying the hermeneutic described by the Westminster Confession and are using the word “soul” to refer to the spiritual aspect of human constitution.

When we turn to the Catechism’s question and answer that gives its teaching on the intermediate state and the resurrection of the body, we find again that this Reformed hermeneutic of deduction is at work. The first Scripture given in support of the continued conscious existence of the soul after death

is none other than Luke 23:43, which we have discussed above. The second text mentioned in support of the same conclusion is Phillipians 1:21-23, verses which by necessary implication, but not by express statement, support the idea of continued conscious existence immediately following death. If the intermediate state remains a mystery to G.C. Berkhouwer, it was not so to the minds of Ursinus and Olevianus.

The purpose of all of this is to point out that there truly is a difference in the hermeneutic applied by the antidualists who follow Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven from that applied in the writing of our Reformed creeds. If we are to make real progress

Scripture requires a view of man’s nature that includes a spiritual as well as a physical aspect—aspects that are different in their essential characteristics.

in this discussion, we must face this difference openly.³²

Before leaving the matter of hermeneutics, I think another issue needs airing at this point, and that is the tendency in recent years to stress word studies at the expense of listening to what the sentences of the Scripture say. The above-mentioned differences in hermeneutic at least to some extent grow out of a methodology which assumes that if one can determine the meaning of a particular word, one can determine what the text can or may be saying in using that word. Lexical and philological studies are essential to sound exegesis and can be very helpful in understanding a text, but they are only parts, not the totality of exegesis. Using such studies, one must go on to listen to what the sentences of literature actually say. We cannot limit exegesis to lexical and philological studies.

The antidualist position we have been studying has tended to follow this word study method and to deny that Scripture can say any more than our word studies allow. G.C. Berkhouwer’s work I have cited on the issue is an example of this tendency. Berkhouwer denies what the earlier Reformed writers have posited about the soul of man because word studies have been inconclusive in providing

single succinct definitions of *nephesh* and *psuche*. The conclusion that the intermediate state remains "God's mystery" rests on this kind of thinking.

Quite influential upon Berkhouwer and other antidualists have been the word studies on *nephesh* by J.H. Becker,³³ and on *psuche* by J.N. Sevenster.³⁴ Their negative statements about prior Christian teaching about the soul are often based on these studies as well as upon the conclusion of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd that the "soul" is similar to the heart and thus refers to the whole man.³⁵ While these are excellent word studies, they ought to be seen and used according to their own limitations. I conclude that it is because of this methodology that antidualists have often rejected the older Reformed hermeneutic of recognizing the "good and necessary consequences of the statements of Scripture." They seem to have traded in the old grammatical-historical-theological method of exegesis for one that places more credence on lexical and philological studies.

Body-Soul, The Semantic Problem

As we observe the history of Christian teaching on the constitutional nature of man, it is apparent that the church has adopted the word "soul" to refer to the spiritual aspect of man. Now, while there are at least three distinct usages in Scripture for the Hebrew *nephesh* and the Greek *psuche*, the church generally has chosen one of those uses, namely, that referring to the spiritual aspect of man, as the one it uses in its confessions and most theological writing. While this choice has sometimes led to confusion and the importation of Greek ideas of "soul" into Christian thinking, we hold that the church has the right to use the word in this way.

It is legitimate to use "soul" in this way because one of the biblical usages is reflected in this choice. We have little doubt that the church and its theologians have often read the one meaning of the spiritual aspect of man's constitution back into Scripture, which actually uses the words *nephesh* and *psuche* in other ways. Writers have also been tempted to import Greek ideas into the Christian doctrine of man. Beginning with the early Gnostics and Manichees, we find numbers of dualist ideas which set man's spiritual aspect over against his material one in ontological and ethical hierarchy. Bad use, however, does not preclude legitimate use.

As a result of these problems, and in more consistency with biblical usage, theologians like John

Murray have preferred to use the word "spirit" rather than "soul" in reference to man's spiritual aspect.³⁶ Nevertheless, just as the Protestant churches have used the word "catholic" with a meaning quite distinct from its meaning to Roman Catholics, it is the church's prerogative to use the word "soul" in connection with the spiritual aspect of man since that use is found in Scripture.

Man: Body-Soul

We will not repeat the excellent work done on the question of the unity of human nature by those who continue to hold the older Christian teaching of dichotomy. John W. Cooper's work, *Body, Soul and the Life Everlasting*, cited at the beginning of our paper, deals competently with many of the philosophical and exegetical issues that have been raised in recent years, also by the antidualists. John Murray's brief but careful articles on "The Origin of Man" and "The Nature of Man" in the second volume of *The Collected Writings of John Murray*³⁷ can serve as a solid foundation for further studies.

There is no question that the past history of Reformed, as well as of broadly Christian, writing has often shown the influence of false dualisms, especially concerning the relationship of body and soul. However, the entire rejection of the dichotomistic nature of man seems to be an over-reaction to these problems. We cannot escape the conclusion that the express statements and implications of Scripture require a view of man's nature which includes a spiritual as well as a physical aspect, and that these aspects are different in their essential characteristics. The body is material in substance, the "soul" is spiritual in substance.³⁸

The conclusion is that man is a unified creature with a bipartite nature. As Murray concludes, "man is body" and at the same time "man is spirit or soul, as well as body."³⁹ Therefore man is body-soul. On this supposition a human being is not complete unless body and soul are united. At the same time, both body and soul continue to exist after their separation at physical death. "The body without the spirit is dead," however, and is subject to dissolution by natural forces unless preserved. The soul, even while in the presence of the Lord, and thus comforted, also longs for the resurrection of the body and the completeness of eternal life (see Rev. 6:9-11), even as the body awaits release from its slavery to corruption (Rom. 8:21).

Conclusion

A number of conclusions have already been stated, but I wish to summarize them in a general way.

First, one does not have to be an antidualist to stress the radical unity of man's constitutional nature. Men like Murray and Cooper demonstrate this to be true. While they hardly come out as anthropological monists and thus will perhaps not satisfy the Reformed antidualists with whom we have been interacting, theirs is a position stressing the unity of human nature.

Second, we conclude that these Reformed antidualists have transformed an excellent critical tool, namely being sensitive to unwarranted dualisms, into a positive foundation for a whole philosophy. It is our further conclusion that such a philosophy cannot account for the duality of reality, but indeed leads to a denial of essential Christian teachings.

My third conclusion is that these Reformed antidualists have done exactly what they set out not to do; they have made philosophy the arbiter of other sciences. While their examination of the presuppositions of the thinking of others is useful, they have failed either to examine carefully their own presuppositions, or to grasp fully the implications of those presuppositions. The result is a philosophy and theology which reinstitute the medieval method of reading the Bible in the light of philosophical principles. I am convinced that antidualism as a philosophical principle, rather than the actual existence of a false nature-grace dualism, leads to the denial of the bipartite nature of man.

Fourth, this school of thought does offer criticism to historical Reformed theology which needs to be taken seriously. We who are Reformed have often fallen into deceiving and deceived dualisms. Since scholasticism has often been influential in the way that theological questions have been posed, we should be constantly aware of our roots. However, *semper reformanda* should not mean "everything is up for grabs." Wholesale rejection of the theological formulations of the past will lead to chaos and the loss of faith. Speaking the truth in love should be our constant mode of expression and method of seeking progress.

Fifth and finally, we are not finished studying the Bible. Philosophy and theology are only as competent as the men who do them, but God speaks to us in Scripture. Our task is to listen, listen again, and keep on listening.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941; reprint, 1981) 191-201.
- 2 John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 7.
- 3 Herman Dooyeweerd, "Introduction," in *The Idea of A Christian Philosophy*, ed. H. Dooyeweerd (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1973) 6-8.
- 4 This statement was made by Kuyper in his speech at the opening of the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880. It is quoted by Herman Dooyeweerd on page 7 of his "Introduction" to *The Idea of a Christian Philosophy*, the festschrift for Vollenhoven, as the founding principle in their work toward a Calvinistic philosophy.
- 5 H. Dooyeweerd, *The Idea of a Christian Philosophy*, 7.
- 6 John Vander Stelt points out the unacceptability of the dichotomist view of man to Dooyeweerd as explicated in the latter's "Kuyper's Wetenschaapsleer." See "Kuyper's Semi-mystical Conception" in *The Idea of A Christian Philosophy*, ed. H. Dooyeweerd, p. 180. See also D.H. Th. Vollenhoven, *Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1933) 33.
- 7 John Vander Stelt, "Kuyper's Semi-mystical Conception," in *The Idea of A Christian Philosophy*, 181.
- 8 Peter J. Steen, *The Structure of Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought* (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1983) 34.
- 9 J. Vander Stelt, "Kuyper's Semi-mystical Conception," 188.
- 10 Klaas Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 4 vols. (Goes, Holland: Oosterbaan and Le Cointre N.V., 1950), 3:70. In a footnote on this page Schilder refers to page 44 in Vollenhoven's *Het Calvinisme en de Reformatie van de Wijsbegeerte*, and points out that Vollenhoven, "spreekt uitdrukkelijk van de aflegging van het lichaam en de 'hereeniging' van de ziel met het lichaam."
- 11 K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 3:69-73.
- 12 K. Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 3:70.
- 13 J. Vander Stelt, "Kuyper's Semi-mystical Conception," 179.
- 14 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), I, xv, 2, 184.
- 15 Calvin, *Institutes*, I, xv, 3, 186.
- 16 See, for example, Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974; reprint of a 1939 classroom syllabus) 32, 33.
- 17 Terminology is a problem here. We are not attributing a classical ontological monism to the Reformed antidualists at this point. However, their anthropological holism goes beyond that of more classically Reformed holists such as John Murray and John Cooper to the point that they redefine "soul" as being the heart of the living creature holistically conceived, rather than as the separable spiritual aspect of his unified and yet bipartite constitutional nature. This leads them to the conclusion that the "soul" of man as they define it, must perish at the death of the body. A major problem here is that these antidualists are at far greater pains to tell us what they do not believe than they are to synthesize a positive doctrinal statement. See also Cooper's discussion of "The Monism-Dualism Debate about New Testament Anthropology," chapter 5 of *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*.

- 18 John Vander Stelt's "Kuyper's Semi-mystical Conception," (cited above) is very critical of Kuyper's efforts. See particularly the paragraph on page 186 which begins with the sentence, "The lifestyle which results from semi-mysticism can hardly be called Christian."
- 19 Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, third edition, revised 1967) 35.
- 20 Ps. 97:7; Ps. 57:11; Is. 40:22. Cf. also Gen. 1:1; Neh. 9:6; Acts 14:15.
- 21 God is called the "most high God," (Gen. 14:18, 19, 20; Num. 24:16; Psalm 7:17; Mark 5:7; etc.) and himself declares that his thoughts are "higher" than man's (Is. 55:8, 9).
- 22 Note also at this point that where Scripture teaches that there will be no marriage in the resurrection, it does not require us to believe that we will not be male and female (Matt. 22:30). What it means to be "as the angels in heaven," is not clear. It could perhaps mean the obliteration of sexual differences and roles outside of marriage, but that is not a necessary conclusion from what the text says. Indeed, the facts that humans are "created" male and female and that Christ's body was recognizable after his glorification seem to imply a continued existence as male and female in eternal life, even though marriage will not be a part of that economy.
- 23 See particularly Rom. 1:21-25.
- 24 As outlined below, our preference is for the word "spirit" rather than "soul" in reference to the spiritual aspect of man.
- 25 See Matt. 10:28; Rev. 6:9, 20; Rev. 20:4; Luke 16:19-31 (we agree with Calvin that this last reference is an illustrative story, not a parable, as is often inferred).
- 26 Howard Van Till, *The Fourth Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) Table 10-1, 198.
- 27 Van Till, 15-16.
- 28 This point should not be missed. If human beings are to understand general revelation rightly, they must have their hearts regenerated and the eyes of their understanding opened through the teachings of special revelation prior to their attempts to understand general revelation. "Natural theology" is for fallen creatures an oxymoron, just as is "objective science."
- 29 I am uncomfortable with the Dooyeweerdian dualism of "naive thought" and "theoretical thought," as though these were qualitatively distinct. I conclude with John Frame that the parallel claim that Scripture "grips the heart," but does not speak to theoretical thought, is a "speculative claim" which "compromises the sufficiency of Scripture." (Frame, *The Amsterdam Philosophy: A Preliminary Critique* (Phillipsburg, N.J., undated) 34. This whole critique is well worth reading by those interested in these questions.
- 30 "We think first of all of the impossibility of substituting our later ideas of soul for the biblical word 'soul,' which hold both for the 'nephesh' of the Old Testament and for the 'psuche' of the New Testament, since the biblical 'soul' not only can be used in very differing senses, but also in completely different relationships than the 'soul' of later substantial dichotomy." G.C. Berkhouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962, 1978) 200, 201.
- 31 Berkhouwer, 264-65.
- 32 I believe that this is an important matter. While the Reformed antidualists generally wish to maintain their own adherence to the teachings of the Reformed creeds, it should be pointed out that many of those teachings lose their biblical foundation when the minimalist hermeneutic they espouse is applied to the texts traditionally used to undergird those doctrines.
- 33 J.H. Becker, *Het begrip nefesh in het Oude Testament* Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1942).
- 34 J. N. Sevenster, *Het begrip Psyche in het Nieuwe Testament* Assen: Van Gorcum and Comp. N.V., 1946).
- 35 Berkhouwer, 214, 227, 256-264.
- 36 John Murray, *The Nature of Man*, a cassette tape, (Philadelphia: Westminster Media, no date).
- 37 John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh, Scotland and Carlisle, PA: 1977), vol. 2 "Select Lectures in Systematic Theology."
- 38 Even though a spiritual "substance" is difficult to define positively, there are spiritual realities, and "substance" is perhaps just as good a word as any to convey the reality of these spiritual realities. This word has served the church well in its doctrine of God, and unless a better candidate is brought forward, it will have to do for our description of man.
- 39 John Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:14, 20.