

The Battle Within: Soul or Spirit—Who Is Leading Your Life?

A Theological Reflection on Soul and Spirit

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Have you ever wondered whether the soul and the spirit are one and the same, or whether they are distinct? I have heard many theologians use the expression "the inner self" to avoid the differing views on this subject. We know that God created us in His own likeness, and we also know that He is a Triune God—three Persons, yet one God. It may therefore be argued that this likeness follows a similar pattern: body, soul, and spirit—the theological view known as Trichotomy. The subject is both profound and complex, but let me attempt to present it in simple terms.

The soul is the seat of our thoughts, emotions, desires, and personal ambitions. It is where our reasoning, preferences, and feelings reside. The spirit, however, is that innermost part of our being through which we commune with God and discern His voice. Much of the struggle in the Christian life arises when the soul seeks to lead while the spirit longs to follow the will of God. The soul asks, "What do I want?" The spirit asks, "What does God desire?"

A decision may appear sensible to the mind, attractive to the emotions, and beneficial to personal interests, yet still be contrary to God's purpose. The soul seeks comfort, recognition, and control; the spirit seeks obedience, truth, and surrender. Perhaps the most important question we can ask ourselves is not whether we are religious, active, or even successful, but whether our lives are being directed by the soul or by the spirit. When the soul rules, we are guided by human wisdom; when the spirit rules, we are guided by divine wisdom. The mark of a mature believer is not a stronger soul, but a spirit increasingly attuned and surrendered to the voice of God.