

ONE

How a Number Explains Who You Are, Why You're Here, &
Where You're Going

by

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS

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ISBN:

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Cover art by Jessica Shapiro

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CHAPTER 1: BEGINNING

WHERE YOU ARE

Put your hand on your chest. Keep it there for a few moments. That soft pulsing—do you know what that is? It’s the body’s electricity.¹ Like the rest of your muscles, your heart can conduct electrical impulses. It actually has a natural pace maker that sends out electrical waves. Those waves make the heart muscles contract, first those in the upper chamber, then those in the lower chamber (about a quarter of a second later). This happens about 50–100 times a minute, depending on who you are and what you’re doing.

Of course, we don’t think about this. Instead, we just function. Each week, our bodies waltz through a sequence of seconds, minutes, hours, and days. We’re only aware of our heart beat when we’re scared or covered in sweat, when this four-chambered muscle is thudding like a locomotive to deliver the oxygen we need. In other words, we notice our heart only with trauma—good and bad. When we exert ourselves, we notice ourselves.

“When we exert ourselves, we notice ourselves.”

You might say something similar happens in our spiritu-

¹ “Heart Beat,” Cleveland Clinic, accessed November 4, 2019, <https://my.cleveland-clinic.org/health/articles/17064-heart-beat>.

al lives, only we'd have to replace our heart beat with the life-giving Spirit of God. God's Spirit has put breath in our lungs and vigor in our veins (Gen. 2:7; Job 33:4), but we only notice him when trouble remains, when suffering lingers, when hope dries up. Or, conversely, we notice him when we're full of passion and mirth. When surrounding voices are singing silent night in a dark room with a thousand candles, when the eulogy of our father calls up the phantoms of ambition and regret, when our child hugs us without our asking—that's when we notice the Spirit within our spirit. That's when we feel our soul's heart beating, drumming to a pace set in eternity past, directing our gaze to eternity future. As the writer of Ecclesiastes put it, God buried eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Sometimes it's buried deeper than we wish.

The downside to this truth is simple: When we're *not* exerting ourselves spiritually, we have a hard time noticing God. Without peaks and valleys in the soul's heart monitor, we flatline. And long periods of flatlining can feel like spiritual death, or at least spiritual sleep.

And here's an even darker downside: Most of us are used to flatlining. In fact, we're so used to flatlining that we despise the valleys. We want the highlands of spiritual vigor without the lowlands of spiritual strife. Of course, that's impossible. Peaks can't exist without valleys. If there are highlands, then there must be lowlands. But that doesn't keep our hearts from attempting to jump from peak to peak, from trying to live all of life in the highlands of passion, comfort, and joy.

How are you doing with this, by the way? Are you succeeding, or are you frustrated? The answer probably changes ev-

eryday, maybe even every hour. But one thing is obvious: This isn't sustainable. We can't go peak-jumping through life, not without experiencing a world of frustration.

But far more important than this: the valleys and lowlands are often the places where we're most inclined to spiritual growth, most open to the words of God, most humble to receive rebuke. In comfort, we're close-fisted. In suffering, we're open-palmed. If we make peak-jumping the end-all of our spiritual lives, we'll not just end up frustrated and discouraged; we'll also end up immature. Like unfledged birds, we'll lack the plumage we need to take flight and grow closer to the God of light.²

“In comfort, we're close-fisted. In suffering, we're open-palmed.”

But if we can't go peak-jumping, if we can't live in the highlands, what can we do? The only other option is to keep climbing, to keep moving up and down the terrain God sets before us. And, over time, we might find a way to embrace both directions. How? By finding a constant, something we can always grasp with the hands of hope. In this book, I'm going to argue that this hope-giving constant can be represented more broadly by a number (*one*) and more narrowly by a person (Jesus). In the broader sense, oneness is something Jesus talked about in his high priestly prayer, but we'll get to that in a few pages. In the

² For details on how God uses our suffering and anxiety to draw us closer to him, see my book *Struck Down but Not Destroyed: Living Faithfully with Anxiety*.

narrower sense, the Apostle Paul offers the clearest reference.

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:10–13)

Paul was a mountain climber like the rest of us. He scaled the lowlands of sorrow, shame, self-pity, loss, and terror—bobbing on the open ocean after shipwreck for days on end, cringing at the faces of Christians he’d persecuted, burying pride beneath the soil of mercy (then digging it up and reburrying). Paul knew the depths. But he also knew the heights. He felt the Spirit push him up the hillsides of grace and gratitude. He sang hymns with brothers and sisters he never knew he had. He saw God’s purpose for his life like a ray of sunshine burning through the fog of doubt. Yes, he knew the heights as well.

But throughout all of his climbing, he found something else to focus on besides the current terrain. He found a constant, his still point in a turning world. He found CONTENTMENT. And as William Barclay put it, “Contentment comes not by finding conditions suitable to us but by God’s fashioning our spirits to our conditions.”³ How does God do that fashioning? Through the Spirit, in conformity to his *Son* (Rom. 8:9–17, 29; Phil. 11:6; Col. 3:3–10; 2 Cor. 3:18). Our ultimate contentment, then, is God himself, especially in the person of Christ. Contentment, in this

3 William B. Barclay, *The Secret of Contentment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 30.

sense, is not so much a general practice as it is a particular *person*. Contentment is found in being united with *Christ*. Paul took Christ with him everywhere—up to every summit and down to every depression. Paul’s contentment was found in an ever-present person. Christ was Paul’s constant.

“A person is our path. A person is
our destination.”

Now, what’s any of this got to do with our spiritual heart beat? Well, if flatlining isn’t an option, and neither is peak-jumping, then we’re bound to be mountain climbers just as Paul was. We need to learn the hard lesson of embracing both directions of spirituality. But, also as Paul, we’re bound to find contentment in Christ, to carry him with us down every dusty road of the ordinary, right on through the gates of eternity.⁴ Where we go, Christ goes. Where Christ goes, we go. A person is our path. A person is our destination.

Before we go barreling forward into the treasure trove of oneness with God and contentment in Christ, let’s back up a moment and look at first things, at who we are in light of the God we profess to know and serve. Then we can see how the idea of “oneness” is central to our identity and the Christian life.

Who are you?

So, that palpitating, muscle-moving, conscious creature that you

⁴ For examples, see Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *Finding God in the Ordinary* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

see in the mirror each morning — *who are you?* Maybe even better: *what* are you? It may seem as if I’m wasting words, but if you don’t fully embrace the answers that Scripture offers to these *who* and *what* questions, then you’ll be severely misguided in a thousand practical ways.

For instance, if you define yourself on empirical grounds, as a collection of nerve cells, body tissue, and platelets all wrapped in skin and buttressed by bones, then you really don’t have a reason to stop and say a kind word to the person making your latte at the local coffee shop. Sure, there’s the “everyone should be a decent human being” argument, but that argument has no ultimate basis. *Why* are we supposed to be decent human beings, again? If your definition of what it means to be human is only empirical (i.e., we are physical beings who respond to stimuli all around us), you have no answers besides selfish ones (e.g., “what goes around comes around” or some other version of social karma). Your answers for all the *why* questions in life ultimately come back to you, because *you* is all that matters: your own satisfaction and fulfillment.

With Scripture, however, we get a God-focused answers (since everything in Scripture is essentially God-focused), and those answers shape every little thing we do. The answers are simple but often get lost on us, perhaps *because* they are so simple.

What are you? *An image bearer of the Trinity.*

Who are you? *A person in Christ.*

Why say a kind word to the disheveled barista struggling to snap the lid on your latte? Because you reflect the character of a kind, generous, thoughtful, compassionate God who called you

out of death-dealing darkness and into life-giving light. Because you have been made new in the image of God’s own Son (2 Cor. 5:17), and now you walk in the works your heavenly Father has prepared for you (Eph. 2:10), at the prodding of an ever-present Spirit (Rom. 8:9–16). There’s a whole ocean of grace-infused purpose behind the order of a morning beverage. That is, if we carry with us a biblical view of who and what we are.

But we can be even more specific. After all, what does it really mean to bear God’s image? A classic answer in Reformed theology is that we bear the image of God in our knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.⁵ This is certainly true. But there’s something deeper, something that runs beneath these God-honoring human behaviors. And Geerhardus Vos seems to have put his finger on it: “That man bears God’s image means much more than that he is spirit and possesses understanding, will, etc. It means above all that he is disposed for communion with God, that all the capacities of his soul can act in a way that corresponds to their destiny only if they rest in God.”⁶ Being made in God’s image means that we’re always bent towards communion with him. It’s *God* that we want more than anything. We want an intimate relationship with our heavenly Father. We want to know and be known, to love and be loved by the one who chose us

5 There are variations, of course. Francis Turretin, for instance, suggests that the three prongs of our being made in God’s image are (1) the spirituality and immortality of the soul; (2) our original righteousness; and (3) our dominion over creation. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 1:466. For the classic position, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 203–07.

6 Geerhardus Vos, *Anthropology*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014), 13. I develop my view of this further in *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). We want closeness with the Son, who became incarnate and walked among us so that we might be restored to union with him (John 1:14; 17:21–22). And we want deep fellowship with the Spirit, who groans with us in our suffering and comforts us in our affliction (Rom. 8:26; John 14:26). In other words, we want to be *one* with the Trinity. We want communion—deep, unceasing, unflinching, unbreakable communion with the God who spoke us into motion. We want *oneness* with God.

The Problem: Where We Are

But we don't have it so often, do we? We started this chapter by sensing our heart beat, by becoming more conscious of our physical and spiritual life and the daily terrain we climb. It's time now for confession.

We're out of touch. Oneness with God feels like a rope covered in butter. We grab, and it slips. We grab, and it slips. The iteration breeds fatigue. We just can't seem to hold on to oneness with God. We're constantly overtaken by a thousand distractions or a plethora of idols (usually both). And the result? It's that flatlining we spoke of—the refusal to keep climbing terrain, the absence of lasting contentment in Christ, and the search for contentment everywhere else. Our souls turn to stone. They warm in the light, chill in the darkness, but most often, they just sit, calloused and detached. Sometimes we even forget that oneness with God is possible. We forget that a rapturous and soul-piercing union with the one who *is* love (1 John 4:8) can break through the clouded glass of momentary life and breathe hope and joy into our hollow core. Oh, but it can! It can. And it will.

You see, this yearning for oneness isn't just a human development, something that we all happen to have. It's divinely implanted. God sowed that seed of desire, and no one can take it from the soil of the soul. No one can uproot it. No one can smother it. It's protected by the very hands of God our Gardener.

The Prayer of Prayers

In fact, God himself asked for this in the person of Jesus. Do you remember the high priestly prayer that Jesus spoke in the Gospel of John? That's going to be our foil for this book, so we need to become deeply familiar with it. Read it slowly. These are words for your soul.

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. ⁶ I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. ⁸ For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be

one, even as we are one. ¹² While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. ²⁰ I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. ²⁴ Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵ O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶ I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

There’s a continent of truth here, broader and more expansive than we can fathom. And we’ll take many of the pages that follow to start trekking through the wild country. But for now, know that in this precious prayer that God himself prayed for you, he asked for *oneness* (17:11, 21–23). God wants oneness with you. God (in Jesus Christ) prayed to God (the Father) through the power of God (the Spirit) for *this*. Let that soak in for a few minutes.

There's a purpose for that oneness, and we'll get to that soon enough. In the remainder of the book, we'll be unpacking how this desire for oneness and God's own prayer for our oneness bleeds into every area of life. Here's the general outline I'll be following.

- The God Who Is Three-in-One
- Creatures Made for Oneness
- The Breaking of Oneness
- Searching for Oneness
- God Restoring Oneness
- One with Christ
- One with the Father
- One with the Spirit
- Holding onto Oneness
- The Destination of Oneness

Throughout the book, there will be discussion questions, prayers, and reader resources you can use to apply what you're learning. I encourage you to read this in a group setting, since dialogue and mutual prayer go hand-in-hand with the main theme of the book.

Let us all pray that God would move in our hearts so that we would treasure contentment in Christ and union with the Father, Son, and Spirit above all else.

Reflection Questions and Prayer

1. How are you at mountain climbing? What do you tend to do in the valleys? What do you tend to do at the peaks?
2. What have been particular challenges for you in trying to find contentment in Christ? What other things in your life seem to take priority before your prayerful relationship with him?
3. Jesus Christ prayed for you! Read John 17:20–21 again. What do you think it means to be “one” with Jesus and the Father? (We’ll be exploring this throughout the book.)
4. What is the purpose of our being one with God? Have a look at the end of v. 21. What are some practical ways in which you think God might be sending you out to proclaim the gospel of Christ in your everyday life?

PRAYER

Oh God of hope and glory,
Light unceasing,
I was made for oneness with you.
My separation from you is a travesty,
And everyday I’m reminded of it.
But I’m also reminded of Christ.
In him, through the power of your Spirit,
I am one with you again.

I don’t always feel as if I’m one with you,
But feelings are never final.
Draw me to gaze at you,
To fall in love with your character,
To dream of you,
My life-giving, self-sacrificing shepherd.

Help me to find a way today
To show others that this oneness
Is worth living and dying for,

That you're the most precious,
 The most costly,
 The most rapturous joy
 We could ever find.
 Thank you for bringing *me*
 Into *you*.

Reader Resource: A Oneness Poem

I'm an open room for you.
 Turn the handle. Enter, please.
 There's nothing else I can do
 But bow down on my tired knees
 And ask for truth.

Countless wicks of thought are lit.
 All around distractions burn.
 Quell the flames as you see fit.
 In the rising smoke I'll turn,
 Face you, and sit.

You in me and me in you—
 I want only to be close,
 Bonding with the favored few,
 Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
 Who make me new.

Lesser things grasp at my will
 To pull me out the door again.
 You quiet every noise and thrill,
 Whispering our eternal *when*,
 And make me still.

CHAPTER 2: THE GOD WHO IS THREE-IN-ONE

In the last chapter, I said we should begin where we are, feeling our heart beat and taking stock of our status as mountain climbers. In truth, that's not really the best starting point. After all, how can we possibly define who we are and what we long for without knowing who God is and what character he possesses? And if we're going to talk about oneness with God, don't we need to know who this God is? It's hard to be one with someone you don't know intimately.

So, let's start again.

Who God Is

Who is God? That question is like a coin striking the bottom of a well. The sound comes up from the depths and fills our ears with some ancient echo, something priceless, something mysterious and almost too beautiful to believe. Could we really know the nature of God?

One of my favorite theologians put it simply. “The Bible begins with the account that God created man after His own image and likeness, in order that he should know God his Creator aright, should love Him with all his heart, and should live with Him in eternal blessedness.”¹ *In order that he should know God*—we

1 Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confession*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 8.

were created to *know*. We were custom-made for a divine-human relationship based on knowledge that God himself would give us.

The obvious follow-up question is, What do we know about him?² Many things! Because this is a book about oneness with God, I'm going to focus there: God's oneness and unity. Scripture is replete with references to the oneness of God, but it's a special kind of oneness, unique to God. Drawing together the wealth of Scripture, Bavinck moves from observing the world around him to observing the nature of the God who made it:

The unity and diversity in the works of God proceeds from and returns to the unity and diversity which exist in the Divine Being. That Being is one being, single and simple. At the same time that being is threefold in His person, in His revelation, and in His influence. . . . Therefore the article of the holy trinity is the heart and core of our confession, the differentiating earmark of our religion, and the praise and comfort of all true believers of Christ.²

Trinitarian oneness—that's what we're dealing with; that's the core of our confession, the dog ear on every page of our faith. And we'll see later why it is the "praise and comfort" of all true believers. Bavinck's words do little more than reverberate biblical truth (as all good theology should). In Scripture, God tells his image-bearing creatures *both* that he is one (Deut. 6:4) and that he is three (Matt. 28:19).³ He is, in other words, three-in-one. You might be wondering why I'm harping on this. Why the

2 Ibid., 127–28.

3 I will not go into the biblical evidence for oneness and threeness, since that has already been done well by others. I recommend Robert Letham's *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*, rev. and exp. ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), 3–86.

sudden focus on theological doctrine? Because it has everything to do with what it means for us to be *one* with God. God's oneness comes with an invitation for communion because God *is* a communion of divine persons. This is often what it means when theologians say that God is *relational*.

Let me draw out the relational nature of God's oneness a bit more. As my friend and former teacher noted, "Within God, the persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—have rich personal relations with one another. We are made like God, and that is why we can enjoy personal relationships. When we relate to one another, we rely on resources and powers that find their origin in God."⁴ Echoing the same sentiment, he writes,

The New Testament indicates that the persons of the Trinity speak to one another and enjoy profound personal relations with one another. . . . God establishes a personal relationship with us, but, in addition, the persons of the Trinity have personal relations to one another. Personal relationships exist not solely among human beings, but also in divine-human relationships, and even in divine-divine relationships.⁵

Pause here. Give yourself a few moments of silence, open the pores in the skin of your soul, and let that truth enter slowly. God has the deepest of personal relationships in *himself*. In one sense, we can even say that God *is* a relationship. That's profoundly personal, isn't it? We're not dealing with a generic or abstract deity when it comes to the God of the Bible. We're deal-

4 Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 15.

5 *Ibid.*, 24.

ing with the hearth of intimacy and communion.⁶ This is perhaps easiest for us to grasp when we think about God as a being who speaks. As one theologian wrote, “there is—and has been from all eternity—talk, sharing and communication in the innermost life of God. The true God is not silent; He talks.”⁷

Being one with this sort of God means that communication will always be primary because *love* is always primary. Love is a relational behavior interwoven with communication. We can’t be one with God when we don’t speak with him and when we don’t hear him speaking to us. Love requires a living, communicative relationship. Many of us would have a far stronger relationship with God if we implemented that basic truth throughout each day. Communication with the God who speaks is not a fringe benefit of the Christian life; it’s the core.

“Communication with the God
who speaks is not a fringe benefit
of the Christian life; it’s the core.”

Theologians throughout Christian history have always known and treasured this truth. It’s the gold coin pressed into every Christian’s palm—the currency of communion. Recent works of the last twenty to thirty years have brought it to the

6 For more on God and communion, I direct readers to my book *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

7 Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology: Grounded in Holy Scripture and Understood in Light of the Church*, vol. 1, *The God Who Is: The Holy Trinity* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2008), 487.

surface once again.⁸ But note this: We should prioritize communication with God not just because it results in our spiritual growth, but because loving communication is central to the character and identity of God himself. As Michael Reeves put it, God is “the Father, loving and giving life to his Son in the fellowship of the Spirit. A God who is in himself love, who before all things could ‘never be anything but love.’ Having such a God happily changes everything.”⁹ Indeed. It *does* change everything.

A Oneness of Fellowship

The fact that God is three-in-one and communicates with himself in an eternal orb of divine love means that oneness with him has certain qualities.

When we become one with God, we’re not absorbed like a raindrop in a proverbial ocean of being. We don’t dissolve and disappear. Oneness with God doesn’t eclipse our personhood, just as the oneness of God’s being doesn’t eclipse the personhood of the Father, Son, and Spirit. When we talk about oneness with God, we’re talking about a *oneness of fellowship*. What exactly does that mean? Here are three points that will help us wrap our minds around this.

1. *A oneness of fellowship requires distinction.* You can’t talk

8 For a history on the teaching of perichoresis, the mutual interpenetration of persons in the Godhead, see Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 192–93; 279–80; 422–25; 439–40. See also Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “Closing the Gaps: Perichoresis and the Nature of Language,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 78 (2016): 299–322.

9 Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 38. Ralph Smith notes, “To conceive of a god who does not know love, a god who has never shared, a god for whom a relationship with another is eternally irrelevant, is to conceive of an abstraction, an idea or a thing more than a person.” Ralph A. Smith, *Trinity & Reality: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2004), 18.

about the “fellowship” of raindrops in an ocean. The ocean is an undifferentiated mass of liquid.¹⁰ For fellowship to hold, there has to be distinctness. We can talk about Christian fellowship with our brothers and sisters precisely because we’re *not* our brothers and sisters. We’re distinct, and yet that distinctness doesn’t threaten the unity of love that binds us in the Spirit of Christ. In fact, it’s the opposite: our uniqueness as creatures made in God’s image enhances and beautifies the communion we have with each other and with God. The richness of our fellowship lies in the harmony of unity and diversity. Such unity and diversity is actually rooted in the very nature of God, which makes perfect sense: we can’t possess, enjoy, or reflect anything good that doesn’t have its origin in him.¹¹

2. *A oneness of fellowship means unparalleled intimacy.* God is intimate with himself, in ways we can’t even fathom. In speaking of the Father, Son, and Spirit, Abraham Kuyper once put it this way:

The Love-life whereby these Three mutually love each other is the Eternal Being Himself. This alone is the true and real life of love. The entire Scripture teaches that nothing is more precious and glorious than the Love of the Father for the Son, and of the Son for the Father, of the Holy Spirit for both. . . . Before God created heaven and earth with all their inhabitants, the eternal Love of Father, Son, and Holy

10 I speak generally here, since upon closer inspection, we would find much differentiation in ocean water.

11 On the unity and diversity in the Trinity, see Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 348, 353; *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 45–53; Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 57–58.

Spirit shone with unseen splendor in the divine Being.¹²

A river of love runs bottomless in God. We cannot speak of its depth. And yet, while our lips can only part in worship, God tells us we've been invited in. We've been called into the exchange of love.

There are many implications of this mysterious truth, but one that we'll revisit throughout this book is the need for *dialogue*. You cannot be intimate without mutual communication. There is no love without dialogue or expressive giving of some kind. Now, on God's part the giving is lopsided. He's poured out the inkwell of his thought and life on the pages of history and pressed down in Scripture all that we need to know about him. God is a giver, and his self-revelation is the greatest gift. It's always before us. The question is, Are *we* giving ourselves to *him*? The simplest way to give ourselves to God is through prayer, the unrestrained outflow of our souls. Everything—the beauty and the blindness, the passion and the pain, the sweetness and the swill. We may not even have words to pray. That's okay. Groans are accepted and interpreted by God's Spirit (Rom. 8:26). But we have to talk. Without dialogue, oneness of fellowship wanes.

3. *A oneness of fellowship means that we're bound for the home of God.* And that, my friends, is *eternity*. I know it seems too good to be true, like the shadow of a childhood dream. But it's repeated all throughout Scripture. Our dwelling will be *with* God. There is nothing and no one who can push us off the road leading to our heavenly homestead. We're going there—regardless of how

12 Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Chattanooga, TN: AMG, 1995), 542.

we feel or what we think. Once we have trusted Christ as savior, our room is prepared (John 14:2). I can't wait to see the bedding.

Now that we have a sense of what this oneness of fellowship entails, we're ready to begin looking at God's own prayer for us. This will set the tone for the chapters ahead, and we'll revisit it frequently.

Jesus's Prayer for Our Oneness

Start with something fairly basic: The oneness of fellowship is something that *God* wants for us. It's not just something we long for; it's something that God wills. That's precisely why Jesus prays for it in John 17. In that passage, the Son of God is asking God the Father for oneness with us in the power of God the Spirit. God is praying to God by the power of God for oneness with God. If that doesn't blow your mind, I don't know what will.

But what exactly does Jesus mean when he asks for us to be "one" with him and the Father (and, by necessary extension, the Spirit)?

We can begin answering that question by focusing on a few verses, but it's essential that we understand this plea for oneness in context. That context is a *witnessing* context. In John 17:8, Jesus says, "For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me." Believing that Jesus has been sent by God is a recurring motif in John's Gospel. In verse 18, Jesus confirms that he is sending the disciples into the world just as he was sent. Then in verse 20 he focuses on "those who will believe in me through their word" (that's you and me), which again is given in the context of wit-

nessing to what God has done in sending the Son. And again in verses 21 and 23, Jesus prays for this oneness “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” and “so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” Clearly, our oneness with God has a *witnessing* or missional purpose. Though our oneness with God has eternity in store for us, while we’re walking this earth, that oneness has a *missional* purpose. Our oneness with God is meant to be a testimony, a light drawing others to gaze and grasp at the God of communion.

“Our oneness with God is meant to be a testimony, a light drawing others to gaze and grasp at the God of communion.”

Within this missional context, what exactly does it mean for us to be “one” with God? The verses that demand our attention are the following:

- 17:11, “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be **one**, even as we are **one**.”
- 17:21, “that they may all be **one**, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”
- 17:22, “The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be **one** even as we are **one**”
- 17:23, “I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly **one**, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved

them even as you loved me.”

We might start by nodding to the words of Andreas Köstenberger: “Such unity is beyond human ability and is the result and gift of divine grace.”¹³ We cannot get this oneness or unity for ourselves. It doesn’t come from human grasping; it comes only from divine giving.

But what does John (and Jesus) mean more specifically? The Greek word John uses is *eis*, meaning *one* “in contrast to the parts, of which a whole is made up.”¹⁴ In other words, we’re not talking about an undifferentiated mass. This is not ocean water oneness. It is a oneness of distinct persons that make up a community, or a communion of persons. And Jesus is clear that there is a hierarchy at play here.

The unity between Son and Father will serve as the foundation and wellspring for the unity among believers; this, in turn, will make it possible for the world . . . to see through and beyond the mission of believers to the one who sent them (Jesus), just as Jesus’ contemporaries were enabled to see past Jesus to the one who sent him, God the Father.¹⁵

Richard Baukham echoes the same:

The general sense (not precisely stated, as is typical of Johannine discourse) is that from the loving communion between the Father and the Son flows the love with which Jesus loved his disciples, a love that

13 Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 492.

14 “εἰς,” *BDAG*, 230.

15 Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 248–49.

enables them to enjoy an intimate, “in-one-another” relationship with Jesus and his Father, and it is from this overflowing of divine love into the world that the oneness of believers among themselves stems.¹⁶

Our oneness with God and with each other is based upon the oneness of the Father and Son (and Spirit, though John does not emphasize that point here). That’s to say, our oneness with God has a foundation: a oneness of love rooted in God himself. Remember that the oneness we are called into is a *oneness of fellowship*. This truth provoked Herman Ridderbos to write that our goal as believers is not some sort of abstract unity, “but ‘unity *in us*, being one ‘*as we are one*,’ where ‘even as’ not only indicates resemblance between the church’s unity and the unity between the Father and the Son, but also gives the church’s unity its ground and character. Accordingly, the theme of this passage can only be ‘that they may all be one *in us*.’”¹⁷ We are dealing here with an overwhelmingly *personal* unity, an *in-us* unity where “us” refers to the Father, Son, and Spirit.

In this unity, we don’t lose our distinctness. Again, this is based on the truth that the Father and Son don’t lose their distinctness in light of their unity. In our distinctness, we are “to be one in purpose, in love, in action undertaken with and for one another, in joint submission to the revelation received.” Christians are to be “so identified with God and dependent upon him for life and fruitfulness, that they themselves become the locus of

16 Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 36.

17 Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John: A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 560.

the Father's life and work *in them*."¹⁸

This is a lot to take in. Let's not rush to wade through a holy torrent of truth. Start with the first component: the unity of the persons in the Trinity. The oneness of the Father, Son, and Spirit in love, power, and joy burns brighter than a thousand suns . . . in eternity. There is no such thing as a time when this was *not*. This is infinite oneness with unparalleled intimacy. And as humans on this side of paradise, we simply can't fathom it. It's beyond us. That doesn't mean we should bypass it. Quite the contrary: this should be the impetus for passionate worship. More than anything else, we want to be known and loved. Yet here is the God who intimately knows and loves himself from all eternity: the hearth of holiness and the wellspring joyous communion. Praise God for being who he is!

The love I need is yours already,
 My Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
 Guide my steps and keep me steady
 Since you are the oneness I want most.

The second component of this rapturous, divinely rooted unity is that we can be one with this God and with each other. Our oneness rests on a divine building block that can't crack or corrode. We can trust in our oneness with God and with each other because God is beneath it all.

18 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 568.

“We can trust in our oneness with God and with each other because God is beneath it all.”

And our oneness is brought under a *name*.¹⁹ This may seem less important. Isn't the oneness in focus here? Yes, but just as the oneness has a missional purpose (to spread the good news that God sent his Son into the world), it also has a identifying marker: the name of God. Ridderbos writes,

What constitutes and qualifies this unity of the coming community and its incorporation into the fellowship of the Father and the Son is its having been brought and kept under the rule of the word and name of God, which the Father has given to his Son, and the Son has revealed to his own (vss. 6–8, 11–12).²⁰

The name of God—given to the Son and revealed to God's people—is no mere sequence of sounds. It is the fortress of their union. It is the place where God's people gather and stand in power, united to their maker and their members. Where once in Babel we strove to lift up our own names and became dispersed, now in Christ we strive to lift up God's name and grow

19 On the importance of naming, see Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—a God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 30–33; and Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Speaking Trinity & His Worded World: Why Language Is at the Center of Everything* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 87–101.

20 Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel according to John*, 561.

together.²¹ Our oneness with God—built upon the sure foundation of oneness among the Father, Son, and Spirit—is the answer to the three questions posed in the subtitle of this book.

ONENESS QUESTIONS

- **Who are you?** *A creature made for oneness with the Trinity and with God's people.*
- **Why are you here?** *To stand in oneness with God as you lift up God's name in testament to the sending of his Son.*
- **Where are you going?** *To an eternal home of oneness with God and his image-bearing creatures.*

That, I believe, is why “Jesus’s concern for his followers’ unity is his greatest burden as his earthly mission draws to a close.”²² Our oneness with God is not a fairytale fancy. It’s the pulsing heart of our existence, thudding to a beat that has no end. We are mountain climbers (recall the previous chapter) because oneness is in our bones and it’s at the top of the tallest mountain: uninterrupted union with God. With every step into the rocky earth of adversity, we push upward towards our eternal destiny of oneness. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Last Battle*, our call as Christians is clear and simple: “Further up and further in.” Closer to God. Deeper with God. That’s what oneness is all about. It’s a wild journey. Are you in?

21 See Pierce Taylor Hibbs, “Language and the Trinity: A Meeting Place for the Global Church” in *Redeeming the Life of the Mind: Essays in Honor of Vern Poythress*, ed. John M. Frame, Wayne Grudem, and John J. Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 181–197.

22 Köstenberger, *John*, 497.

PRAYER

Good God,
 Father, Son, and Spirit,
 All I want is fellowship with you.
 A million distractions
 Rain down on me.
 I get lost in the woods of earthly desire.
 The trees look so beautiful . . .
 But there is something deeper,
 Something greater.

Dig this hope for oneness
 From the dirt of my soul.
 Uncover what you've planted.
 Raise up the small, wilted stem
 Of my desire for you.
 And weed around my feet
 So that every root
 Stretches farther down.

Make my desire for oneness
 More than a daydream.
 Help me to invest in you,
 As you have invested in me,
 And now have taken up residence.
 I long to sense you living in me
 And smile at where you're taking me.
 Help my oneness with you be a light
 That shows others how to get on the path of union.

Reader Resource: 7 Questions Deep

I've done a very revealing exercise that I learned from a pair of motivational speakers. I'm adapting it here for our purposes. It's called "7 Questions Deep." Start with the question I provide, and then ask the *why* question yourself six more times. By the time you get to the seventh level, you'll be surprised by what you discover. I've provided my own answers for a reference. Do it yourself and enjoy the revelation.

Why?	My Answer	Your Answer
Why is oneness with God important to you?	Because I never feel completely at peace here.	
Why?	Because I know that death is going to bring an end to many things that I love.	
Why?	Because when I was 18, I sat in the same room with my father as he died.	
Why?	Because I loved him and couldn't fathom a world in which he was absent.	
Why?	Because he represented all I knew about strength and stability.	
Why?	Because he was a man after God's own heart. He tried to live a Christ-honoring life.	
Why?	Because God moved his heart long before I came around.	