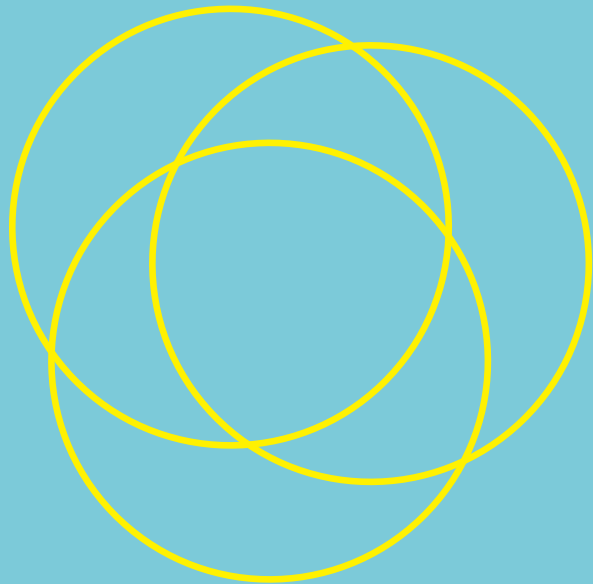


three



And when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'

Matthew 3:16-17

one



Deuteronomy 6:4-5

'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.'

three + one

If you were to pause for a moment and pray to God, to whom would you instinctively direct your prayers? Would your intended recipient be God the Father, God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit—or maybe some broader sense of all three? The question is not designed to catch anyone out, but rather to demonstrate the inherent difficulty we have in grasping the fullness of the one true God. There are no divisions in God, and yet we understand Him in three distinct persons.

A.W. Tozer explains how God's being remains at one with Himself: 'The harmony of His being is the result not of a perfect balance of parts but of the absence of parts. Between His attributes no contradiction can exist. He need not suspend one to exercise another, for in Him all His attributes are one. All of God does all that God does; He does not divide Himself to perform a work, but works in the total unity of His being.'

In that sense, all three persons of God are fully present in everything God does, despite each person having a unique role in each event. This seemingly impossible relationship is established from Scripture (and later clarified in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds) because it captures what the Apostles witnessed first-hand through the life of Jesus and by the illumination of the Spirit.

From these sources, we have discovered the doctrine of the Trinity, which faithfully presents the following three conclusions about God:

1. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three distinct persons.
2. Each person is fully God.
3. There is only one God.

Combining these truths raises the obvious question: how is it possible that God can be both three and one at the same time? How can there be no division in God when He is revealed to us in three distinct persons?

To help us apprehend something of this great mystery, we first need to establish that God isn't three in the same way that He's one. God is one in essence, but three in person; and person and essence are not the same thing. As theologian Norman Geisler explained it: 'while essence is what you are, person is who you are'. So God could, therefore, be seen as one 'what' consisting of three 'who's'. In other words, God's singular divine essence is expressed in a dynamic relationship between three persons.

We can't pretend there isn't still a great mystery in this revelation—not least because we have no other context for such a being. For that reason, any analogy we might use to explain the Trinity falls short of adequately describing the incredible reality. Even though the term 'trinity' doesn't appear in Scripture, the reality of 'trinity'—of threeness in oneness—is present in the Bible from start to finish. That God is one is a foundational Old Testament confession:

'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.' (Deut. 6:4-5)

Because He is Creator of all that is, heaven, earth and sea (Gen. 1:1), and because He rescued the Israelites from their sin, the covenant God is Lord, and there is no other like Him:

Therefore you are great, O LORD God. For there is none like you, and there is no God besides you, according to all that we have heard with our ears. (2 Sam. 7:22)

Only one being can be fully in control of all other beings such that they have this level of authority, or exercise this sort of control. God is one. There is no other. However, this one God is also revealed in Scripture in three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; and while their deity is revealed most clearly in the New Testament, the seeds of this threeness are present from the beginning. When the one God creates, He does so by speaking His Word and sending His Spirit (Gen. 1:2).

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:14)

John's gospel account of creation establishes the remarkable truth that Jesus was the Word; the same Word who was not only with God in the beginning but also 'was' God. The Holy Spirit is also revealed to be God in several passages of Scripture:

No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 2:11)

Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? You have not lied to humans, but to God.' (Acts 5:3-4)

Combining the overall revelation of Scripture then, we are presented with the unlikely model of the triune God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are all the one God, yet in three persons. We see this reality most clearly at

Jesus' baptism: Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all present in this earth-shaking scene as Jesus prepares for His earthly ministry.

And when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.' (Matt. 3:16-17)

Biblical revelation, then, is unmistakably trinitarian, as all of God is present in all that He does.

God is one; God is three. A biblical perspective on such an awesome reality should lead us to the same conclusion as one of the ancient champions of trinitarian theology, Gregory Nazianzen, who put his experience like this: 'I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendour of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.'

This continuous moving back and forward, between two apparently contradictory truths, is precisely the model of thinking advocated throughout this book. To rest only on one truth, at the expense of the other, leads to an impoverished view of God. In history, wrong-thinking of this nature has led to many heresies. At one extreme, dropping God's oneness means that Father, Son and Spirit effectively become three separate Gods, leading to a form of polytheism. At the other extreme, dropping God's threeness results in the demotion of Jesus to a created human being, and the Holy Spirit to merely the tangible 'effect' of God.

Although such simplifications may seem less problematic to our finite intelligence, they are not what Scripture reveals, and serve only to destroy the gospel. They create hierarchies in the Godhead that make the events of the cross untenable. As we'll cover more fully in the next chapter, without Jesus' full divinity, both His sacrifice and our salvation would be incomplete. Furthermore, some of the most misguided conclusions about God have arisen from such wrong-thinking. Some scholars have even presented a terrible caricature of God as a brutal father, acting like some sort of cosmic child-abuser of His Son. Remembering both God's oneness and threeness safeguards us from such abominations. It also points us to a depth of love that resonates with our deepest desires. Within the Godhead is a depth of love that is shared with all who would receive it. As theologian James M. Houston puts it: 'the eternal character of God's love is that of love given, love received and love shared'.

In summary, God—this amazing dynamic relational being—chooses to call us into relationship with Him; that we might share in relationship with a being who is in

perfect relationship. The Spirit then leads us into unity in the church. In so doing, the self-abandoning love of God overflows into the life of His people. We are then called as a body of believers to share this same love in the world. What a joy and a privilege to be connected to the source of all love!

God is one, and God is three—uniquely glorious in majesty—a dynamic relational God beyond our full comprehension, worthy of our wonder, love and praise.

