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**Apparent contradictions
in the divine nature.**

three + one

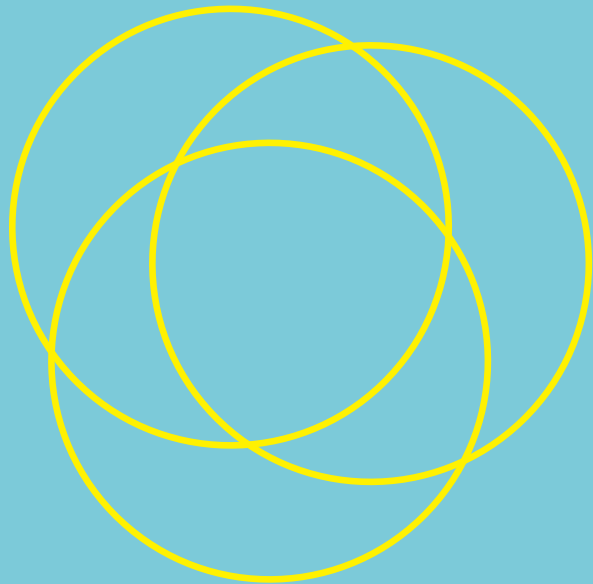
God + man

holy + intimate

angry + merciful

general + specific

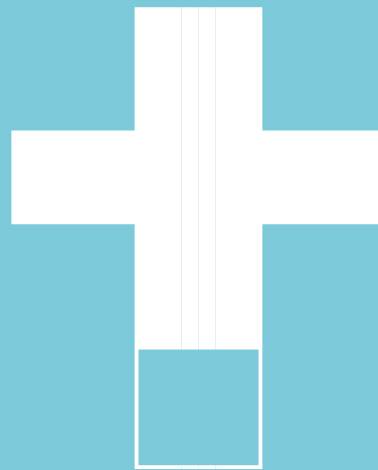
three



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.'

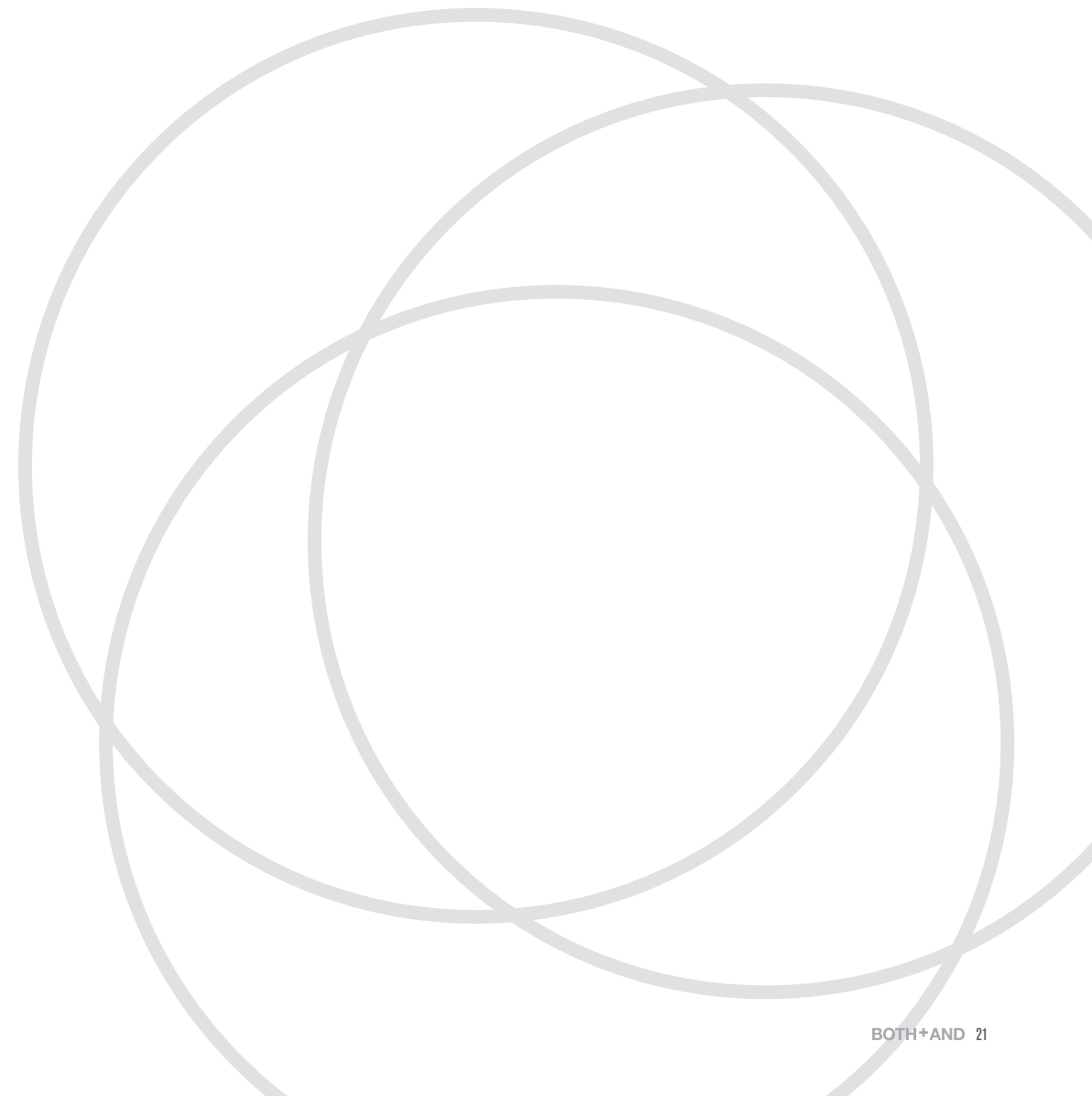
This continuous moving back and forward, between two apparently contradictory truths, is precisely the model of thinking advocated throughout this book. To rest only on one truth, at the expense of the other, leads to an impoverished view of God. In history, wrong-thinking of this nature has led to many 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

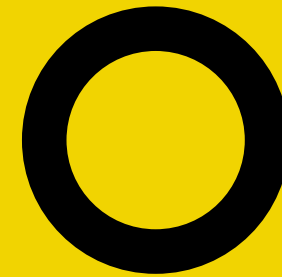
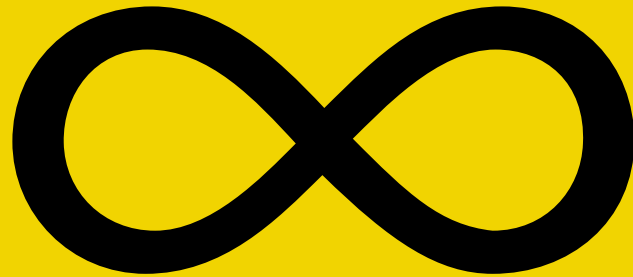
perfect relationship. The Spirit then leads us into unity in the church. In so doing, the self-abandoning love of God overflows into the life of His people. We are then called as a body of believers to share this same love in the world. What a joy and a privilege to be connected to the source of all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



God

man



Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.'

John 8:58

1 Timothy 2:5

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

God + man

In the early church, there was almost no controversy around the claims of the deity of Christ. In the gospels, we see that Jesus claimed to be God and then backed His claim up with actions.

Jesus said: ‘Truly, truly, I say to you; before Abraham was, I AM.’ (John 8:58)

And [Jesus] awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea: ‘Peace! Be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. (Mark 4:39)

Taking [a dead girl] by the hand, he said to her ‘Talitha cumi’ which means ‘little girl I say to you, arise.’ And immediately the girl got up and began walking. (Mark 5:41-42)

John records Jesus using about Himself the covenant name of God (‘I AM’), and then Mark recounts Him, amongst other things, commanding the creation and raising the dead; acting with divine authority. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he affirms Jesus’ deity as follows:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. (Col. 2:9)

Where the early church had problems was in accepting the humanity of Jesus. So impressed were they by His life and words, by His evident divinity, it seemed impossible that He was truly human. Many argued that Jesus only ‘seemed’ to be human. These people were called ‘docetists’ (from the Greek word ‘dokeo’, meaning ‘to seem’). They believed that despite His body having the appearance of humanity, He was, in fact, a purely spiritual being.

Each of the gospels, however, tell a very different story. Again and again, these eyewitness accounts record Jesus experiencing emotions and actions that are exclusively human: He gets tired (Matt. 14:13), hungry (Mark 11:12), distressed (Luke 22:44), sad (John 11:35), and He experiences the pain of physical punishment. These are uniquely human, physical experiences. John leaves us in no doubt when he says:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:14)

The Word translated ‘flesh’ here has an earthy simplicity to it. John is using earthy language to describe a very earthly reality. Jesus, just like Adam before Him, came to be a true man. Theologian John Frame comments: ‘Like Adam and Adam’s

descendants, Jesus lived in a body that was made of dust, part of the creation. In that body, he lived, ate, drank, suffered, died, and was buried. In that body, he was raised from the dead.’

The fact of the incarnation is evident in the gospels, but what does it mean? In the early debates around the issue, the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) explained it as a union of divine and human natures in one person:

‘... one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognised in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation: the distinction in natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ...’

The second person of the Trinity comes to earth, taking to His divinity a human nature. In Jesus, humanity and divinity co-exist. Where God is one essence in three persons, Jesus Christ is one person with two natures.

So the Bible reveals Jesus as fully God and fully man—but what are the implications for us? Why is it important that Jesus was both infinite and finite, invisible and visible, eternal and temporal, all-knowing and yet, as we read in Matthew 24:36, appears unsure about the future? The answer is because, without both natures, our salvation would otherwise be void. When we consider God’s wider plan of salvation for humanity, we see clear biblical evidence that in order for Jesus’ sacrifice to be effective, He had to have both natures present at the cross. His human nature was necessary so that He could be like the people He would redeem:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Gal. 4:4-5)

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Heb. 2:17)

While on earth, Jesus chose to limit Himself (concerning certain divine attributes) in order to redeem a sinful humanity and restore our broken cosmos. Just as Adam, the man, plunged the earth into chaos, so it took Jesus Christ, the man, to bring restoration and redemption. In His earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrated that He had access to His Father’s power (Matt. 26:51-54), and was ministering entirely as a man under the law (Gal. 4:4-5), doing miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit.

He embraced self-limitation and became completely human, completely dependent upon God in order to be a perfect sacrifice for sin. So Jesus' humanity is essential to our salvation.

But what about His divinity? Why did He also need to be the God-man? The New City Catechism puts it like this:

‘That because of his divine nature his obedience and suffering would be perfect and effective; and also that he would be able to bear the righteous anger of God against sin and yet overcome death.’

Clearly, the accomplishment of salvation could not be borne by someone merely human. Something beyond our human limitations was required in order to be able to bear the wrath of God. Thus Jesus' divine nature was also critical to the effectiveness of His sacrifice.

God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. (Acts 2:24)

In conclusion, the Bible explains how our restoration depends on this glorious truth that Jesus was both fully man and fully God. He needed to be fully man to stand in our place as an appropriate sacrifice for humanity; He needed to be fully God to do the impossible and triumph over death. Furthermore, it's not just our restoration that required the God-man—all aspects of God's redemptive plan required this incredible duality of nature.

Jonathan Edwards summarises the following achievements in God's great work of redemption: conquering evil (1 John 3:8); restoring the world (Isa. 65:17); uniting all things (Eph. 1:11); beautifying the elect (Eph. 5:14); and, glorifying the Godhead (John 13:31-32). All this through His incredible atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Jesus, the God-man—our perfect redeemer—making all things new and bringing glory to God in the highest.

