

PRAISE FOR ONE WITH GOD

“A subject as wondrous as our Creator God and as breathtaking as the fact that we can experience true oneness with him deserves a treatment this inspiring, this biblically grounded, and this beautifully written.”

– **Tim Challies**, Christian pastor, blogger, and author of several books, including *Visual Theology*, *Epic*, and *Seasons of Sorrow*

“One reason the modern emphasis on the self is so sinister is God made us for union with him. Union with the living God in Christ — almost too good to be true! — is a powerful tonic against the subtle, destructive spells of our age. Drink deeply of this book. That is, slowly, without hurry, and, as much as you’re able, without distraction. And do what God made us, as humans, uniquely for: meditate on God and marvel.”

– **David Mathis**, senior teacher, desiringGod.org; pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Workers for Your Joy: The Call of Christ on Christian Leaders*

“*One with God* is a personal, poetic, practical and potent primer for spiritual growth. Herein Pierce Hibbs imparts theological nourishment to refocus, refresh and restore souls by deepening our understanding and experience of union with Christ.”

– **Dr. Peter A. Lillback**, president, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“This book is a wonder-filled, thoughtful combination of rich theology, poetic expression, personal sensitivity, and spiritual devotion. It unfolds how to pursue God in the light of his pursuit of us. Read it and taste the love of God.”

– **Vern S. Poythress**, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Biblical Interpretation, and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“*One with God* presents the reader with 12 concise chapters of meditations by Pierce Hibbs on Jesus’s great prayer of John 17. Each chapter takes up a theme of being One with God that Hibbs then develops. Most profitable is that every chapter concludes with reflection questions, prayer, and reader resources that allow the reader to apply what he has learned. A very beautiful series of meditations on Jesus’s High Priestly prayer, suitable for individual or group discussions.”

– **Rev. Dr. Alfred Poirier**, Professor of Pastoral Theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary, PA

“In some ways, this book’s thesis is simple: *Chase after God*. What could be sweeter or more relevant at a time when we seem to be chasing anything and everything else. This is the message that can change our life and Pierce Hibbs has articulated it so thoughtfully here.”

– **Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor, Westminster Seminary California

“Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.” So writes the sage in Proverbs 16:24. In *One with God*, Pierce Hibbs provides such wise and winning words for your faith. Like a chef de cuisine, Hibbs takes the life-giving doctrines of the Holy Trinity and union with Christ, adds pinches of life’s seasoning and fresh illustrations, to produce a scrumptious, nutritious meal. No more will the Triune God and union with Jesus remain on an upper shelf as surely-important but out-of-reach sustenance. In *One with God*, you will join Hibbs in feast and fellowship around a table of grace, complete with rich, relevant, and rewarding truth. Pull up a chair and join in this delightfully accessible meal; enter into sweet and dynamic communion with the One who is himself our life.”

– **David B. Garner**, Vice President of Global Ministries and Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

“There could be no more important virtue than being one. Pierce Hibbs helpfully argues that the essence of biblical oneness is love. He names and resolves the many obstacles to unity, be they psychological or philosophical. Readers will be pleasantly surprised to discover there are fresh ways to describe a tried and true gift from God. Rich and deeply satisfying, *One with God* should be read, slowly and carefully. In that great blessings await.”

– **William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

ONE WITH GOD

FINDING YOUR IDENTITY, PURPOSE, AND
DESTINY IN THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

PIERCE TAYLOR HIBBS



TRUTH ABLAZE

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For Bonz Hart, whose faithfulness to the Lord in the midst of cancer has only given me a greater yearning for my eternal oneness with God. Thank you, my friend, for lifting high the torch of hope.

FOREWORD

One with God is a short book, but it is no “quick read”—because the author, who is a careful theologian and wordsmith, has taken the time to approach a complex and pulsing subject and make it memorably clear for the head and the heart. Slice the book’s pages almost anywhere and the reader will find lines like “to soar on the thermals of grace” and “Our oneness with God is the beating heart of our existence, thudding to a rhythm that has no end.” So, be prepared for an engaging read! Pierce has also given careful attention to crafting the structure of the book’s eleven chapters, so as to enhance the impact on his readers. Each chapter ends with reflection questions, a crafted prayer, and some with the author’s poems or further Reader Resources.

The thrust of the book (in a *reductionist* nutshell) is the dizzying reality that we Christians have been granted *oneness* with God, and that Christ has petitioned the Father that our *oneness* be brought to full fruition (John 17: 11, 21-23)—and that this *oneness* (when lived out) will draw the world to Christ (17:23) and, further, that

our *oneness* will deepen our joyous certitude of Christ's words as to our ultimate destiny.

As an exacting trinitarian theologian, the author has written elsewhere on the Trinity,¹ and here he focuses his understanding on the subject of oneness. The Trinity is profoundly one because each person of the Godhead lives in the others. Of this Pierce beautifully writes: "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." From all eternity there has always been continual exchange, sharing, ultimate fellowship, and oneness.

This is the dazzling background for Jesus's petition to the Father, "that 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" (John 17:23). It is an intra-trinitarian prayer. God prays to God—that's all! Trinitarian certitude. This means that our oneness, and our heart's desire for oneness, is divinely ordained and implanted. All God's children are endowed with an ineluctable longing for oneness.

Midway through the book, the author gives practical reasons for the absence of oneness in the lives of believers, focusing on the theological causes: *disobedience*, *fear* and *shame*, along with their biblical antidotes. He then lists practical down-to-earth causes beginning with *hurry* as a "corrosive disease," listing ten penetrating symptoms of "hurry sickness." Next is *distraction*, identifying the smartphone as the ubiquitous culprit: "the average American

checks his phone once every ten minutes. That's 96 times a day." He then deals with *lesser loves*, lesser lights that detract us from the Father of light. And then, of course, *lies* regarding the reality and presence of God, a problem as old as the Garden.

The book then moves from diagnosis to a prescription for oneness, providing a road map to monitor our own steps on the path, beginning with a map for the private life ("Oneness in Private: Cultivating Communion") and then a map for the public life. The result of cultivating both private oneness and public oneness is evangelism: "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). The gospel will go forth in both its drawing-saving power and repelling-condemning power. Our lives will radiate gospel power.

Reading and re-reading *One with God* was good for my head and my heart. The fact that as Christians we have been granted to share in the eternal oneness of the Holy Trinity, a oneness without beginning and without end, and of unparalleled intimacy, is hard to get into my head. But, what I do understand is mind-blowing, and the more I understand the more my heart is filled with awe and love. And this, coupled with Jesus's prayer (God praying to God for our oneness) has enhanced my soul's certitude and longing for oneness and, of course, the will to chase after it.

Indeed, this little book is no quick read, but rather a book to slowly and prayerfully read again and again.

– R. Kent Hughes

CHAPTER ONE

YEARNING FOR ONENESS

The sun is rising. The pale and glorious gold is turning whiter behind the swaying arms of the maple trees. The robins—they keep singing, as if their songs were lifting light up from the horizon, pushing it through the tiny windows of the canopy, pouring gold over the green. Above the trees, the clouds are scudding silent and serene, like children content not to speak. They're going somewhere. My heart wishes it could travel with them, fall into the flock of mist and morning mirth, drift above the rambling Pennsylvania countryside. Two blue jays yell over the yard, and a truck engine churns through the quiet. The world is awake. The rhythm of Monday is stepping into the foreground. Soon I'll be moving. Soon I'll be speaking. Soon I'll be lifting and pulling and typing. But before the day gets on, I sit here with my pen, waiting for a thermal.

I've always envied birds. I think it's because I have a deep-seated belief that souls were meant to soar. I love watching the robins and the wrens dart across the treetops, flapping with their hollow-boned freedom from pine bough to maple limb. But it's the red-tailed hawks that capture me most. I see them open-armed and circling as they rise up. They don't even need to flap because thermals lift them. They rise on invisible shoulders. They rise on unseen grace. They rise on gifts.

As I sit at the table with dawn peering over my shoulders, I realize that's what I'm waiting for—a thermal. I'm waiting for the unseen Spirit to give me some words. And in that giving, I know I will rise to new heights. I'll be raised. All I need to do is keep my arms out.

Mystical, isn't it? I used to think these dreams were the result of a boy's mind being trapped in a man's body (maybe that's still true). But now I believe it's more than that. It's about longing. It's about living. It's about . . . destiny. I dream of flying with the birds because my heart has tasted the wildness of God. I want *him*, and he is high. Above the sky. Above the scudding clouds—light beyond light. On this earth, my neck will always be craning upwards. I'll always stare at the birds because I'm in love with the one who cares for them. I want to get higher, closer. I want to go, as C. S. Lewis said, "further up and further in."² I want to go so high and so deep that I'm one with the God of red-tails. *One*. That's what this book is about.

Made for Oneness

We were made for oneness with God. It's who we are, not just what we want. Everything in us, as Geerhardus Vos put it, is "disposed for communion."³ Communion is relational oneness with God. There's no running from this, no more than a house could run from its foundation. It's in the marrow of our bones. It's silently dwelling among every synapse of thought. It's in our eyes as we gaze at the teeming world around us. It's in every knuckle bend and muscle movement. Everything that is you is somehow longing for, reaching for, hoping for oneness with God.

Our world raves about identity, about the unbound freedom to create and define ourselves. But they have missed this. Our identity is not primarily about us—what we do, what we think, what we like. It's primarily about the God who made us for himself. Sounds strange, I know. But that's because most people are what John Calvin might have called letters Cs. They're curved in on themselves. And when you're curved in on yourself, you can't see the horizon your soul is sailing towards. There is something beyond us that defines us. And I believe that thing is oneness with God.

Destined for Oneness

But being one with God isn't only about identity. It's also about *destiny*, about where we're going. That's a hard concept to grasp in the ordinary moments of the day, isn't it? When you're folding dish towels. When you're writing an email. When you're paying

bills. String enough of those routine moments together, and a concept like *destiny* turns into a vapor, evaporating in the burning light of the immediate. Destiny seems at home in epic fantasy, but a strange ghost in our daily lives.

That doesn't mean it's not there. We need to think of destiny as the sun behind our clouds. Just because we don't see it doesn't mean it's not there, that it's not pulling all things toward itself, that it's not illuminating every blade of grass and every dust fiber of our ordinary moments. Our destiny is like the sun. We're mostly unaware of it, and yet it engulfs and surrounds all that we do, all that we are.

What, more plainly, is our destiny? It's oneness with God, but what does that even mean? We'll unpack that in this book, but for now, think of it this way: *Our destiny is to speak with God and see his face without interruption.* Speech and sight, communion and presence, sharing and staring at the one who *is* love, the one who knows you better than your mother or father, better than you know yourself. Our destiny is to speak and see our heavenly Father, his eternal Son, and the life-giving Holy Ghost. *Here*, we search for the three in great frustration. *There*, we'll be with them as our destination. It's a destination with a beginning but no end, a conversation that starts but never stops, a love-gaze with an inception but no conclusion. It's, as Lewis had it, "Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read."⁴ What could a human imagination do to honor such a Great Story but build a block tower or cover a piece of paper with crayon scribbles? Before

this destiny, we're all children. We're all tiny. We don't even know how to dream of it.

But do we know how to *yearn* for it anymore? And if not, what are we doing here? How can we walk through the world without gripping our destiny with both hands?

The short answer: we create counterfeits.⁵ And we're *very* good at it. The greatest counterfeiters are masters of deception. They take what *isn't* and offer it as what *is*. And we believe them, even if the counterfeiter is our own soul. John Calvin wasn't being hyperbolic when he said our hearts are idol factories.⁶ He might also have said that we're master counterfeiters.

A counterfeit, spiritually speaking, is anything that absorbs our attention other than God and his work. I say "absorbs" because a counterfeit isn't designed to be "mostly substitutionary." It's designed to take the place of the original. Like a dry sponge, it soaks up all of our attention and energy. There's no remainder. We're left without yearning, without a passion for oneness with God.

Anything can be a counterfeit because anything can be an idol, and counterfeits are the latest in idol technology. With ancient idols, it was obvious people were worshiping something other than the invisible God, that they were giving their lives to something else. But the power of the counterfeit comes in its suggestion of being harmless, of being "just a thing." Coffee. Exercise. Ambition. Sex. Clothes. These aren't idols; they're just things, right? . . . Right?

If any one of these little things gives you more energy and passion and joy than being one with God does, you have an idol,

a counterfeit. And we take idol currency without even checking for authenticity. “It’s just coffee!” we say with an eye-roll. But we spend a great deal of time with our pour-over technique, our coffee bean subscriptions, our routine grinding and brewing. More time, perhaps, than we give to think about the God who grew the coffee plants, who shaped the harvesters after his own image, whose common grace lends us the machinery for roasting and the planes for shipping.

In vs. Elsewhere

“So, I can’t be a coffee connoisseur?!” No. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that there’s a difference between *in* and *elsewhere*. You can find God *in* coffee; you can see him *in* the details—his nature and grace. That is, you can see God’s nature reflected in all the things that he’s made (Rom. 1:20).⁷ Or you can decide, even tacitly, that he can only be seen *elsewhere*. If you decide that God can only be seen elsewhere, then you see your coffee passion as “just a coffee thing.” You see it as detached from or even void of God-reflection. And that’s where the power of the counterfeit lives.

See, our counterfeits aren’t claiming to be gods, as the ancient idols did. No—they’re claiming instead to be “just things.” But they take from us the exact same resources that ancient idols did: our time, energy, passion, and praise. Do you see it? Do you see how the latest in idol technology pulls us so effectively away from our yearning for oneness with God?

We take these counterfeits—almost every day—and block our own view of God-given destiny. We say flippantly, deep down in our hearts, “This is why I’m here.” Or, if you think that’s too strong, we keep saying, “I’ll find God *elsewhere*, not right now. Not in this. I’ll just enjoy this for what it is.”⁸

And then two problems take root. First, we never find a place for “elsewhere.” God becomes practically irrelevant to us. We say he’s our destiny, but we don’t live like it. Second, we believe the lie that *anything* could be what it is apart from God. God has created the world so that everything reflects something of his divine nature (Rom. 1:20; Ps. 19:1–4). Everything. There’s no such thing as “just coffee.” God is revealing himself in every stage of the plant growth, the harvesting, the drying, the roasting, the brewing. God upholds every coffee bean by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3). There’s no such thing as “just coffee.” Do you see the counterfeit now?

We’re daily counterfeiters. We live for a thousand tiny gods. Throughout the day, we functionally express the little claim, “This is why I’m here.” But “this” never seems to be oneness with God.

We’re going to reclaim our identity, purpose, and destiny in this book. We’re going to assault the practice of counterfeiting. Watch your back, Satan.

The Path to Oneness

But how? Oneness with God doesn’t just tell us who we are and where we’re going. It also tells us how we’ll get there. And so now

we have the three points from the subtitle of the book: *identity*, *purpose*, and *destiny*. If you want question words, it would be *who*, *why*, and *where*.

Whenever you're traveling somewhere, you need a place to stay. You need a home away from home. You need somewhere to dwell, an abode to abide in. And we have that home not in a place but in a *person*. Jesus said, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4). Jesus calls us to *live* in him. That's deeply mysterious, isn't it? He's not saying, "Think highly of me" or "worship me," though we're called to do that, too. He's saying, "*live* in me." If our destiny is oneness with God, Jesus is saying, "Live in me until you get there." What could this possibly mean? How do we explain this mystery?

I find myself agreeing with Rankin Wilbourne. "Explaining a mystery is like explaining a joke. If you do that, you kill it."⁹ But he also says, "You are more and most yourself when united to Christ. He covers you, he shields you, he represents you before the Father. He also fills you, illuminates you, and animates you, making you more yourself and more human than you could ever be on your own."¹⁰ There's still mystery here. Trying to get away from the mystery of living *in* another person is sort of like trying to get away from the air while you breathe it. You can almost imagine what that's like, but even while you try, the air is around you and inside you. Maybe a poem would help.

Christ, you told me that I live in you.

You said you are the vine.
 I'm still me, and you're still you.
 I'm still human; you're divine.
 But you are now a home to me.
 I live inside your walls.
 You shelter as you set me free
 To answer holy calls.

Well, maybe that doesn't help so much, if by "help" we mean "explain." *Help* in a deeper sense, however, doesn't mean rationalization. *Help* doesn't mean we wrap our minds around it. *Help* means we worship. We glory in the truth. We smile in the secret.

We'll explore this mystery later in the book. For now, my point is that oneness with God—living *in* Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit—is how we get to oneness with God. See the circularity? The gospel is full of that. Want an example? The *Word* took on flesh to save us, who rejected God's *words*, so that we might live in God's *Word* again and be joined with the God who spoke us. Circularity. It's not ridiculous; it's mysterious. And there's a difference. Something ridiculous gets us nowhere and leaves us with nothing. Something mysterious gets us somewhere and leaves us with everything. Think of it as a couplet:

Ridiculous makes no sense and lets us roam.
 Mysterious opens a fence and points us home.

Somehow the mystery of being one with God is our identity, our destiny, and our path. That's what this book is about.

I start with an invitation, a call. Why should you read this book? Why might you even (dare I say?) *re-read* it? If you long for a deeper relationship with the God who speaks, this book is for you. If you're tired of living as if your faith is just a set of ideas that you agree with, this book is for you. If you want to have confidence and security in your identity, if you want to reclaim your sense of purpose, if you yearn for something to help you live closer to God on a daily basis, then this book is for you. I'll be candid with you. *I* want all these things, so this book is for *me* too. Let's start this conversation in pages with a prayer.

God, we want you.

Really. Just you.

We want you to illuminate

And define us.

We want you to give us

Passion and purpose for you.

We want to be one with you,

Just as Jesus prayed for.

Give us the eyes to see it,

The ears to hear it,

And the heart to grasp it.

May we never let it go,

As you never let us go.

Now, we can start our conversation together by delving more deeply into what oneness with God really is. Then we'll be in a good place to talk about who we are, who God is, and where we're going as "the world spins madly on" (The Weepies).

Reflection Questions and Prayer

1. What are some things that you *yearn* for today? Make a short list. Why do you yearn for them? What value do they offer you?
2. Think of a "counterfeit" in your own life. What does that counterfeit offer you but not ultimately give you?
3. How do you think oneness with God grows in your daily life?
4. What do you think of when you hear the word "destiny"? How do you think most people respond to that word? Why do you think they respond that way?
5. Write down one thing you hope to get from this book, a change you hope to see. Return to this when you reach the end.

Prayer

God, we're out of practice in simply yearning for you.

Our identity blurs at the edges.
Our purpose evaporates among a million details.
Our destiny is a light eclipsed by clouds.
We need you.
We want to be *one* with you.
We want closeness to be our calling.
Help us to focus our hearts
So that we magnify you,
So that your beauty grows like a garden,
Surrounding our ordinary moments.
Keep us in the garden of your greatness.

Reader Resource: The Original and the Counterfeits

I mentioned in this chapter the idea of *counterfeits*. Our lives are filled with counterfeits, and we're mostly unaware of them. That's because counterfeits are designed to go undetected; they're made to be invisible. Satan, the master counterfeiter and father of lies (John 8:44), doesn't want us to see what he's up to, how he's tricking our hearts to fall into relationships that promise and never deliver. You might use the table below to identify the counterfeits in your own life. Note in the first row what God says we should focus on. I've offered an example of a counterfeit and then given you space to track some of your own.

THE ORIGINAL OR COUNTERFEIT	WHAT IT OFFERS	WHAT IT DOES	WHERE IT LEADS US
THE TRIUNE GOD	Eternal love and value, peace beyond understanding, and an identity rooted in holiness	Makes us more like Christ, the image of the invisible God	To God himself, who is our ultimate destiny
MATERIAL POSSESSIONS	Temporary enjoyment and a sense of satisfaction, a vapor of peace, a disappearing identity	Trains us to seek out more things, to embrace a never-ending cycle of seeking and getting, helping us to ignore our mortality	To exhaustion and frustration as we realize the cycle never ends