

When the Many Are One: The Trinity, Man, and Marriage

by D. Matthew Brown

When confronted with the thought of oneness as addressed by Scripture, several paradoxes often seem to emerge. God is one being, and yet he is a trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit; humans are one being and yet many; husbands and wives are one and yet distinctly two; the Church is one Body, and yet many parts. This oneness of plurality is foundational to every aspect of Christian life and doctrine, and yet it is that which is the least understood and dismissed as one of the doctrines which we in our finite state cannot grasp. I believe however that our grasp of this Doctrine of Oneness is absolutely essential and to dismiss it as unintelligible is detrimental to how we conduct our lives. I do not claim here that I have a firm grasp on such a difficult doctrine, but I do believe that such things that are written for us in Scripture should be pondered at the least. Here then are my ponderings—if they are beneficial, praise be to God and use them, if they are not, cast them aside.

I. The Triune God: Perfect Oneness

If there is one doctrine that is absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith, it is that there is one God and one God alone. Judaism (and Christianity, which is true Judaism) distinguished itself from the pagan world by this teaching, for pagan men could not comprehend that the world in its entirety was formed and governed by One Being. To concede to such a belief would be to acknowledge a God so powerful that nothing could thwart his will. This however is the God we serve—An all powerful, all knowing, and all present being

While we acknowledge that God is one there is another teaching that seems to contradict that teaching, namely that God is three distinct persons. We say it this way:

In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided: the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him (*1689 London Baptist Confession II.3*).

The Doctrine of the Trinity is a very difficult doctrine—sway one degree in the wrong direction and you will be a heretic. To dismiss the distinctiveness of each Person of the Godhead, i.e. each Person of the Godhead is indeed distinct from the other, is the sin of the Modalist; to dwell on their distinctiveness and disregard the Oneness of God is tritheism, not monotheism.

This is the point where most throw up their hands and say that it is impossible to comprehend the doctrine of the Trinity. I am however not so willing to concede that, perhaps more out of foolishness than wisdom, but here I delve nonetheless. I think that before we begin, we need to make sure that our definition of oneness matches the Scriptural definition of oneness. I believe that we tend to define oneness wrongly as that which cannot be reduced into parts. If we define oneness in such a way, what really can exist as one? We say there lies one block of wood, but that wood is made of several molecular compounds. We then say there is one molecular compound, but that compound is made of several atoms; and so on and so on. I am by no means saying that we break God into three lesser parts, but I am saying that our definition of one is not quite as unambiguous as we would like it to be.

I believe that our grasp of oneness can come best by looking at ourselves, so this section may be better elucidated by the next section on man. Oneness, as in that of the Triune God, is, but not limited to, oneness in purpose. We see this most clearly in the life of Christ. Prior to his death, Christ prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; *yet not as I will, but as You will*" (Matthew 26:39, emphasis added). Christ's oneness with the Father consisted of his total submission to the Father. Indeed, this is the essential aspect of oneness—that wills are conformed. The Father sent the Son, the Son perfectly obeyed and glorified the Father, and then the Spirit came testifying about and glorifying the Son. The Triune God is the perfection of Oneness, the true picture of a house united. The essence and strength of the Godhead is in his unity, for even Christ said that a house divided against itself will not stand (Mark 3:25).

II. The Triune Man: Striving for Oneness

One will assume by the title of this section that I believe that man is three just as God is three. I believe that when God created man in his own image, he did so in the image of the Trinity. Notice the number of the personal pronouns in this verse: "Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness" (Genesis 1:26, emphasis added). Unlike any other act of creation, God refers to himself as a plurality when speaking man into existence out of dust in his image. Here also is another interesting verse to ponder, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is 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). It is almost as if the writer is saying, "Just as the Lord our God is many and yet one, so should you be many (heart, soul, and might) and yet one by loving God with all your being.

Now I argue that man is a trinity (or trichotomy for those who are uncomfortable calling themselves a trinity) because it is almost unnatural for us to think ourselves as being anything other than one. Our mind, heart, and body are so intimately intertwined that we do not often think of them as distinct entities, but we think of them as comprising the whole. However, each part is fully us just as we would say that Christ is fully God and yet one of the three. Let me use an illustration. When we die (unless you believe in some form of soul sleep) our imperishable existence (mind and heart) will ascend to Heaven to be with Christ while our body remains on earth. Now would you say that when we are in Heaven prior to the resurrection of our bodies that two-thirds of ourselves are with the Lord? Of course not! When somebody sees our dead body lying in a coffin do they immediately think, "There lies one-third of my beloved?" No! In this way we are one and yet three just as God is One and Three.

Unlike God however, we are not perfectly one as he is. There has been and always will be perfect harmony between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit because the Son and the Spirit are perfectly submissive to the Father. We, on the other hand, while acting as one are oftentimes at war within ourselves. As Christians, we have been miraculously transformed by God's giving to us a new heart that longs and strives to do his will. While we bear this new heart, we also have a mind that needs to be renewed (cf. Romans 12:1) and a body that oftentimes desires that which is carnal. We see then that there is a strife within ourselves until the recreation of our mortal bodies that threatens our oneness and thus our ability to stand (cf. Mark 3:25). How then are we supposed to accomplish oneness within our being? One word: submission. As God is one by means of the Son and Spirit perfectly submitting to the Father, so too are we to be one by submitting our minds and our bodies to the heart that God has given to us to delight in him. There is no other way. If we submit our being to our body, we will turn our lives with every whim of our desires; if we submit our being to our mind, we will turn to a crude rationalism that has no compassion for others. Indeed, there is only one way to Godward unity in our body and that is by submitting to our new heart and thereby submitting to God.

III. Marriage: Two Become One

Perhaps the greatest example of two equal beings becoming/being one being is the union of a man and woman in marriage. In marriage, two distinct persons join together to form a mystic one, so as to make them a being that they once were not. Now while I must admit that the union and oneness of marriage is mystical and incomprehensible to a degree, there are some aspects that must be understood in order for oneness to take place within the framework of marriage. As a house that is divided against itself cannot stand, so a marriage that is divided cannot stand. This is why the roles of men and women are so vital to the institution of marriage. Even though a couple in the best of circumstances is equally yoked and aligned similarly theologically, there will always arise disagreements on various issues. The answer to this, as you might have guessed, is submission. Wives are to be submissive to their husbands, not because they are inferior to their husbands, but because God ordained that oneness in marriage should be achieved by it. If a woman decides that she will not be submissive to her husband, their house, as it were, will be divided against itself and will fall. Women should not look at their submission to their husbands negatively, but they should look at it as Christ did his submission to the Father. The Father's will was perfect, loving, and good and so submission to it by Christ was for him a joy. So too when a wife submits to her husband (who by grace fully submits to the Lordship of Jesus Christ), she knows that his intentions toward her are always loving and good and it is therefore for her a joy. This is why in Ephesians 5 after Paul instructs wives to be subject to their husbands he instructs husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church by giving himself up for her. I have heard from many married women that it is their joy to submit to a husband that loves them so much that he is willing to die for her. In submitting to the good will of their husbands they find, not that they have lost their individuality, but that they are more themselves by becoming one with the husband who God has given to them.

IV. The Church as One Body / Conclusion

Likewise, the Church of Christ is composed of numerous individuals and yet is one Body. As with the previous three, the Church is one Body only when she submits to who

she ought—Jesus Christ. Christ is her head and her husband and when she submits to any other, she loses her oneness. Much of what was said in the previous section on husbands and wives can be rightly applied to Christ and the Church because marriage ultimately is a shadow of the greater reality between Jesus Christ and his Bride.

Oneness therefore is achieved perfectly only when perfect submission is present. Not to undermine the mystical aspects of the oneness of the Trinity, man, and marriage, but in each of those cases one or more party's submission to the God-ordained head creates oneness in the many. I hope that you find these thoughts of mine to be biblical and, if you do find them so, to be beneficial to becoming who God meant for you to be.