

## The One-Many God and Team Ministry

John Sherwood, DMin  
VP - International Ministries  
CrossWorld, (610) 667-7660

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### Introduction

Like he did every night, Rod Serling fixed his gaze grimly at us to introduce a 1959 episode of the Twilight Zone<sup>1</sup>:

*Witness Mr. Henry Bemis, a charter member in the fraternity of dreamers. A bookish little man whose passion is the printed page but who is conspired against by a bank president and a wife and a world full of tongue-cluckers and the unrelenting hands of a clock. But in just a moment Mr. Bemis will enter a world without bank presidents or wives or clocks or anything else. He'll have a world all to himself - without anyone.*

The short show depicts the fate of a bank clerk, Mr. Bemis. As unobtrusively as possible, Mr. Bemis often used his lunch break to sneak into the bank vault for a few moments of written food, his “bookish” idol. As it so happened in classic Twilight Zone twist, nuclear holocaust explodes while Mr. Bemis remains safe in his shelter. All life is decimated except himself. As he wanders for hours in confusion and despair and considers suicide, he happens upon a huge public library and his despair turns to the smile of a man in paradise. Delicately organizing a stack of his favorites, he prepares for a lifetime feast. But in that Serling twist that we all wait for but never guess, Mr. Bemis briefly stumbles and his thick glasses slip from his nose to the stone pavement and shatter – and with it, the realization of his dream. Henry Bemis despairs as the scene closes, “forever trapping him in a blurry world.”

Serling concludes,

*The best-laid plans of mice and men - and Henry Bemis, the small man in the glasses who wanted nothing but time. Henry Bemis, now just a part of a smashed landscape, just a piece of the rubble, just a fragment of what man has dedded to himself. Mr. Bemis... in the Twilight Zone.*

Mr. Bemis, forever in a world without relationship.

For Jesus, life was all about relationship. Like in no other biblical passage, Jesus captures this One-Many worldview in His John 17 prayer, only a few hours before His death. He communes deeply with His Father while revealing to us the essence of life and mission.

Lest we lose the intimacy of this prayer in its rarified theology, hear Martin Luther’s opinion: “This is truly, beyond measure, a warm and hearty prayer. He opens the depths of His heart, both in reference to us and to His Father, and He pours them all out. It sounds so honest, so simple; it is so deep, so rich, so wide, no one can fathom it”. No wonder that on his deathbed, John Knox craved John 17 read to him which he referred to as “the place where I cast my first anchor.”

As we eavesdrop, four interwoven relationships will become evident through this prayer which provide both the purpose and method of world mission<sup>2</sup>. After surveying those four relationships in Part One, we will consider how those relationships give us the structure and model for team<sup>3</sup> ministry as we do mission in Part Two.

## Part One – Foundational Relationships

### Relationship #1: In the Trinity Community, God Enjoys Glorious Love within Himself.

God spent all eternity enjoying Himself – does that sound odd? Joy, love, unity, oneness, intimacy, transparency, glory celebrated in the Godhead. An active, interactive joy and communication in this relationship of three Persons. This glorious, joyful, intimate, eternal relationship is the core of all life, the ultimate reality.<sup>4</sup>

They talk, They plan together, They cooperate, They love one another, They brag on each other. Eternity past was occupied, not with empty space, but with celebration of Their own splendor. All three work together in the great events of history. They had created the universe together, with Father planning it, Son (Col 1:16; Heb 1:2) and Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2) involved. They had worked together to provide salvation, with Father planning it (Eph 1:3-10), Son carrying it out (Eph 1:5), and the Spirit applying it to our lives (Eph 1:13). They are supremely happy in one another’s presence. They relish community-glory together.<sup>5</sup>

In John 17, that communal pleasure bubbles to the surface several times:

John 17	Comment
1: <i>Father...Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.</i> <sup>6</sup>	The Son and Father are focused on bringing glory to each other in mutual admiration.
4, 5: <i>I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.</i>	This mutual esteem was shown by Jesus through His obedience to Father, and by Father through Jesus’ resurrection and restoration to pre-incarnation glory. One can sense the longing on Jesus’ part to get back to that glorious intimacy where they endlessly admire each other. <sup>7</sup>
21: <i>just as you are in me and I am in you</i>	In some sense, they mutually indwell one another.

Jesus names this Trinity relationship, glory. What does Their mutual glory include?

1. **Their Greatness Glory** – This hits our senses and evokes scenes of brightness and overwhelming majesty. Splendor is our first thought when we think of God’s glory. When we see it, we fall to our faces.

2. **Their Goodness Glory** – This moral goodness relates to righteousness, to truth, and to love. In the Old Testament it was often captured with the terms His love or grace and His faithfulness. This was the primary aspect of Jesus’ glory that we saw while He was on earth: *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth”* (Jn 1:14).

This is also the side of God’s glory that was damaged in the Fall and that His children are being conformed to: *“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory”* (2 Cor 3:18).

3. **Their Three-in-One Glory** – If we stop at God’s greatness and goodness to sum up His whole glory, we stop short. In this prayer and in other biblical passages, we also see that glory sparkles because the Trinity is the great I/We, the Triunity that is somehow both singular and plural. For our purposes, this is where we want to focus. Our God is the “One-Many” God, the Singular-Plural One.

God is normally spoken of in the singular in Scripture, but They are also plural. Because the plural side of God remains thickly translucent to us, and yet has important implications later in this article, we will slow ourselves here to draw out the sense of plurality.

- a. Scholars differ on whether Elohim (plural noun in Hebrew) necessarily contains a plural idea. It certainly does allow for it, especially since the singular form, El, is also used for God.<sup>8</sup>
- b. Scripture occasionally depicts God as a plural in the Old Testament:
  - Gen 1:26 – *“Let us make man in our image.”* Yet in the very next verses Moses switches to singular for God.<sup>9</sup>
  - Gen 11:7 – *“Come, let us go down and confuse their language”*. Man was in danger not only of disobeying the mandate to fill the earth, but also of manufacturing God-less unity or a singularity that God did not want.
  - ???God Himself sometimes seems ambivalent about being the One-Many God. Isa 6:8 – *“Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”*<sup>10</sup> This mention of plurality corresponds to the threefold, “Holy”, earlier in the passage.
  - Some passages even combine God in the singular with a plural verb (e.g. 2 Sam 7:23; Ps 58:11).
- c. The New Testament then explodes in depicting God in the plural. Note the multiple levels of interaction between Father and Son in this John 17 prayer alone:
  - Three times in this prayer Jesus speaks of God as “us.”
  - They talk to each other. God talks to Himself (Themselves?) and it is not unnatural.
  - They glorify each other (1,22,24).
  - Father gave authority to Son (2).
  - Father assigned work to Son (4).
  - They relish each other’s presence (5).
  - Son revealed Father (6).

- Son came from Father (8).
- Father sent Son (8,18,23,25).
- Father gave His message to Son (8).
- Son is coming back to Father (13).
- Father loves Son (23,24,26).
- Father gave disciples to Son (24).

Part of the unfathomable mystery and glory of the Trinity is that God is equally singular and plural. **Relationship is at the essence of who God is.** Nancy Pearcey emphasizes the utter uniqueness of biblical Christianity from any other religion, saying *“The implication of the doctrine of the Trinity is that relationships are just as ultimate or real as individuals”*<sup>11</sup>

This ultimately and complete reality known as God thoroughly enjoys the eternal, exuberant, overflowing, joyous, interactive glory He experiences in relationship with Themselves. But this self-sufficiency begs the question – why create us? →

### **Relationship #2: In Worship, God Invites us into that Glorious Love Enjoyed by the Trinity Community.**

Some years ago, I was hiking a narrow path in Central Pennsylvania when I came upon a porcupine resolutely standing in my way. He did not budge, but seemed to stare at me with a beady eye. I was fascinated so I stared back and even spoke to him. After a few minutes of face-off, I was ready to continue, but didn't know what to do. Finally, as I walked toward him talking, he hustled off the trail. I clearly remember my next thought at that point – I can't wait to tell Rachael, my wife, about the wild porcupine I saw!

I want to share joy with those I love because that is what God does. God extends Their loving community to us. And He designed me to extend that relationship to others.<sup>12</sup> In his outstanding biography of Jonathon Edwards, historian George Marsden distills much of Edward's theology with, *“The very essence of realit...was the intratrinitarian love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The only possible reason for such a perfect being to create the universe was to extend that love to other, imperfect, beings”*<sup>13</sup>. That rich, communal joy was too good to keep to Themselves. They overflowed with it and wanted to share it with us. God created us for His glory, and we do so by entering into the Joy of relationship with Him in worship.

CS Lewis describes this gift of Joy in Worship: *“What we have been told is how we men can be drawn into Christ – can become part of that wonderful present which the young Prince of the universe wants to offer to His Father – that present which is Himself and therefore us in Him. It is the only thing we were made for.”*<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, with death so close, this upward relationship with God occupies Jesus' mind in this magnificent prayer:

John 17 <sup>15</sup>	Commentary
2: <i>“For you granted him authority over all people that he might <b>give eternal life to all those you have given him.</b>”</i>	We are Father’s love-gift to Son, His reward for completing His work. So, we are drawn into that already existing family relationship.
13: <i>“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have <b>the full measure of my joy within them.</b>”</i>	Jesus teaches His followers so that they might experience joy in communion with the Trinity.
24: <i>“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to <b>see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.</b>”</i>	Jesus desires love intimacy with His followers. He looks forward to His disciples being with Him in heaven to experience His glory intimately because He knows that is what we were created for. Our intimacy with God will only fully be experienced in heaven.
26: <i>“I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the <b>love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.</b>”</i>	Jesus reveals God so that man might experience the loving and intimate relationship that is present in the Trinity.

Unlike the animals of the world, humans possess the capacity to have intimate relationship with the Trinity Creator. God designed us for that relationship by casting us into His image, *impressing* Himself on us. Thus, like God, we have in us that which craves restored relationship, though many don’t recognize it and all try to satisfy it in one way or another.<sup>16</sup>

So in the Gospel, God invites us into that Trinitarian love and joy. In his *Confessions*, Augustine describes those times in the present life when glorious joy breaks in, and “*in the flash of a trembling glance*” we see God. Unfortunately, as we know, those times are far too short and too weak, as Augustine goes on to say, “*But I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself, and I returned to my customary condition*” (Book 7, 16, 23). In heaven, we will no longer lose grip of our God-ward vision.

At the age of 31, while meditating on John 17, Blaise Pascal had what he called his “*second conversion*”, and particularly poignant touch from God. He wrote these words on a parchment that he sewed inside the lining of his coat:

*“God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and scholars. Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ. ‘Thy God shall be my God.’ Forgetfulness of the world and of everything, except God. He is to be found only by the ways taught in the Gospel. Greatness of the Human Soul. ‘Righteous Father, the world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee.’”*

*Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.*

*I have separated myself from Him.*

*'My God, wilt thou leave me?'*

*Let me not be separated from Him eternally.*

*'This is the eternal life, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and the one whom Thou hast sent, Jesus Christ.'*

*Jesus Christ.*

*I have separated myself from Him: I have fled from Him, denied Him, crucified Him.*

*Let me never be separated from Him.*

*We keep hold of Him only by the ways taught in the Gospel.*

*Renunciation, total and sweet.*

*Total submission to Jesus Christ and to my director.*

*Eternally in joy for a day's training on earth.*

*Amen.*"<sup>17</sup>

This writing was only found after Pascal's death. After this experience of brilliant joy, he sold most of his belongings and gave them to the poor.

John Piper writes, "*The gospel of Christ is the good news that at the cost of his Son's life, God has done everything necessary to enthrall us with what will make us eternally and ever-increasingly happy, namely, himself.... He sent Christ to bring us to the deepest, longest joy a human can have.*"<sup>18</sup>

Multiply that worship joy by infinity and stretch it over eternity, and that is heaven. David longed for that time when he wrote, "*you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand*" (Ps 16:11). At that point of vision realized, "*we will be like Him because we will see Him as He is*" (1Jn 3:2). Our relationship can be made completely whole, glorious and uninteruptible.

With such a God-ward leaning that is natural to us, it only makes sense that we would also share that same One-Many tandem as the Trinity.<sup>19</sup> Man is God's great metaphor or shadow of His being; we are individuals and we are community. Therefore, we are being conformed into God's image both individually *and* corporately, so that we can better enjoy His glorious joy.

Worship is all about being stuck on God, being obsessed with Him, overwhelmed by Their splendor, Their beauty, Their holiness. And we are stuck there *together*.

**Relationship #3: In Mutual Care, our Fellowship with God makes possible a Supernatural Oneness of Fellowship with God’s Followers.**

John 17	Commentary
22: <i>“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that <b>they may be one</b> as we are one.”</i>	Jesus gave His followers His “One-Many” glory so that they might be united in intimate relationship with each other.
23: <i>“I in them and you in me. May they be brought to <b>complete unity</b> to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”</i>	Jesus’ intimacy with Father and intimacy with His followers can result in our unity that will testify of God’s love for those who do not know Him. When the world sees unity and intimacy of Jesus’ followers, they will believe that Jesus really was from God, that what He claimed was true. They can taste more of God’s love when we experience love for each other. Amazing!
26: <i>“I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me <b>may be in them</b> and that I myself may be in them.”</i>	Jesus made God known to men so that they might experience the love and intimacy that is present in the Trinity. We “ <i>turn up the wattage</i> ” (Piper) on God’s glory when we have unity.

This one came slowly for me. I came to faith as a teen, but did not experience true Christian fellowship at any real depth for a number of years. That time was not wasted as God focused on my relationship with Him and in His Word. Then, while still single in grad school, I was whiplashed into community in an unanticipated way when I lived with a Christian family. There I enjoyed my first pleasure of authentic community and my first sting of loving confrontation. It was painful but God’s image within whispered to me that it was good.

God’s glorious love is shared among His followers. Not only are we saved into relationship with the Trinity, we are saved into similar relationships with one another. For that reason, the measure of my intimacy with God can be seen in my relationship with others. Vertical and horizontal relationships are of the same ilk. Whether he knows it or not, man was likewise designed for relationships or community, and life fractures without them.

Individual believers are thereby joined intimately together. In those close relationships, we reflect God to one another. In fact, most Christian virtues, love, patience, gentleness, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, blamelessness, forbearance, hospitality, are interpersonal – we cannot practice them alone. Yet, just as with the Trinity, we do not lose our individuality when we live in unity.

In one of the more explicit NT passages on the Trinity, 1 Cor 12:4-6, Paul connects our unity within the Body to the Trinity, *“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same **Spirit**. There*

*are different kinds of service, but the same **Lord**. There are different kinds of working, but the same **God** works all of them in all men.”*<sup>20</sup> As we grow in the image of the Trinity, we see a balance of individual ability connected to interdependent oneness within the Body of Christ. He makes that One-Many connection explicit in verse 12, with God-as-Trinity and man-as-community, *“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.”*

Jesus’ craving to be in Father’s presence should not only be found in us, but in some sense should be reflected in our desire to be with one another. We are incomplete alone. Timothy Ware has written, *“The church as a whole is an icon of God the Trinity, reproducing on earth the mystery of unity in diversity. Human beings are called to reproduce on earth the mystery of mutual love that the Trinity lives in heaven”*<sup>21</sup>.

A number of years ago, I was talking with a brother ahead of me in the faith. We were at a Men’s’ Retreat together, and after an afternoon of fun on the lake, the two of us ended up in long conversation on the rustic cabin porch. After much catching up about life, experiences, and good times, he offered, “You know, John, the best times in life are spent with others.” Those simple words of a wise saint touched me deeply. In contrast, the person wrapped up in himself becomes a shrunken package.<sup>22</sup>

Looking back, I’m amazed that this community principle has become so vitally important to me. I enjoy my time alone. I love to hike alone in the mountains. A fulfilling day for me involves reading and study at home. I have repeatedly taken personality tests that, among other characteristics, show whether a person is people-oriented. Each time I take one, I wonder if I will have grown in my people orientation. Much to my chagrin each time it ranks my people skills as lowest.

Yet theologically and experientially, I have learned so much about the Community called God through rich relationships with brothers and sisters also part of that same Community. There is no turning back to pitiable isolation.

The implications of these truths for team ministry in mission are many and significant, but we must first finish building our foundation.



**Relationship #4: In Mission, Jesus’ Followers Invite those outside of God into that Fellowship of Love with God and His Followers.**

God’s glorious love is proclaimed to the lost world in mission.

John 17	Commentary
15: <i>“My prayer is not that you take them out of the world”</i>	We who worship God are left in the world to draw people out of the world and into relationship with the Trinity.
18: <i>“As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.”</i>	Just as Jesus entered the world to make relationship with God possible, we enter our world to invite people to join us in that relationship. We are inviting people to return to what God designed them for. We can have a foretaste now of what heaven will be like living in Father’s joy.

Two words loom large for Jesus in this prayer. First, used seven times, the word, “sent”, captures the purpose of His incarnation. In an etymologically happy development, its translation from Greek to Latin gave us the word "mission" and "missionary" - one sent on a mission or task. Jesus was sent on mission. He left Their glory in order to bring us into Their glory. Jesus leaves us in the world and sends us with the task of drawing many into God’s glorious joy with us.

Secondly, Jesus uses the word, “world”, an amazing eighteen times in this single prayer. Why, in the midst of His prayer captivation with rich relationships tied to the Trinity, does Jesus pray so much for those yet outside? Clearly, as those already inside, we are looking for those still part of the unbelieving world in whose hearts God has created a desire to worship in truth, a desire for relationship. Because they have God’s image within, we should expect to see that desire, albeit in distorted forms as man is more or less successful in worship. We want others to know for the sake of their joy, for the increase of our joy, and for the fulfillment of God’s glory and joy.

Like happy wives and mothers who seek to arrange marriage matches, we choose a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle courses to introduce the unconnected to their rightful Spouse and fellow bride-mates. The glorious joy was too good for God to keep it to Themselves. Likewise, it is too good to keep for ourselves.

**Part Two – Implications for Mission**

So in His final hours, Jesus calls us to a series of love-relationships. I will restate each borrowing the remarks of others:

- 1) **Eternally, They Love:** Foremost, God is composed of relationship.

CS Lewis - *“All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that ‘God is love.’ But they seem not to notice that the words ‘God is love’ have no real meaning unless God contains at least Two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.... the living, dynamic activity of love has been going on in God for ever and has created everything else.”*<sup>23</sup>

2) **Upwardly, We Worship:** Our connection to God embraces Their prior connection.

Again, CS Lewis captures it: *“Now God designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing.”*<sup>24</sup>

3) **Inwardly, We Love:** Intratrinitarian love can be seen in our love for one another.

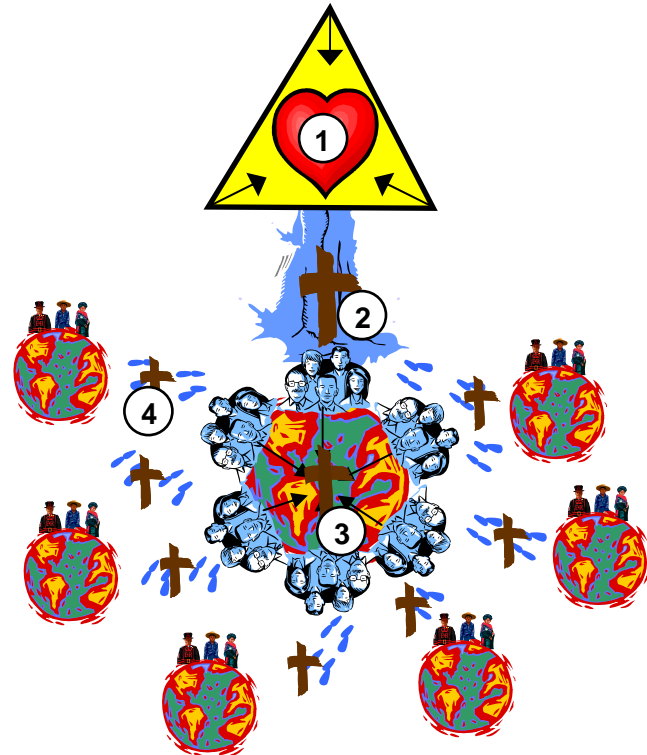
This time, DA Carson: *“The unity of the disciples, as it approaches the perfection that is its goal, serves not only to convince many in the world that Christ is indeed the supreme locus of divine revelation as Christians claim (that you sent me), but that Christians themselves have been caught up into the love of the Father for the Son, secure and content and fulfilled because loved by the Almighty himself, with the very same love he reserves for his Son.”*<sup>25</sup>

4) **Outwardly, We Go:** There are so many yet to know God’s love.

In true “Sweet” style, Leonard Sweet tells us why God’s relational Gospel will resonate in today’s West: *“A postmodern ‘me’ needs ‘we’ to ‘be.’ In the modern world, it was ‘I think, therefore I am.’ The postmodern sensibility loops back to the premodern before it becomes post-modern. Among the Xhosa people of southern Africa, it has always been: ‘I am because we are.’”*<sup>26</sup>

**We Worship, We Love, We Go.** This triad of relationships summarizes our reality.

Great theology! How does it impact mission? I will lay out three dialectic principles with a few starter applications. Many more need to expand this.<sup>27</sup>



***1. We cannot accurately image God to the world alone; we must also proclaim God in our oneness with one another.***

Christ can be watched in us as individual children of God, but that video plays in three dimensional color in community. As we reflect Jesus to the world individually *and* corporately, we show something of the One-Many glory of the Trinity, oneness in plurality. With our propensity toward individualism in our culture and approach to ministry, I will make some comment on what plurality implies.

According to Jesus, our body relationships are one of our most powerful apologetics for the Gospel. We can expect to find a craving for relationship in unredeemed man, because God created him for that. Moreover, an initial desire for horizontal relationship with people mirrors an unrecognized desire for vertical relationship with God.

While I pull unbelievers into relationship with me, I need to find ways to introduce them to *us*. When they see Christ in redeemed individuals *and* in unified community they will learn about God. So Jesus prayed, “*May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*” (Jn 17:23).

Early church apologist Tertullian saw this in action: “*But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'See' they say, 'how they love one another,' for they themselves are animated by mutual hatred; 'see how they are ready even to die for one another,' for they themselves will rather put to death*” (circa AD 200). So pagans beat the gates down, as it were, to get inside, and in spite of persecution.

The relationships of unity that we can enjoy with each other are unlike anything the world can know. But, we can be certain that something within them (*Imago Dei*) recognizes what they do not have. The unity they can observe in us thrusts their attention back to Trinity unity. Let's expand that point a bit further with a question of application.

*Excursus #1: In what ways should our personal and ministry oneness be the same as the Oneness of the Trinity?*

- **Oneness in spite of differences:** As the Trinity shows us, diversity doesn't contradict oneness, whether in function, skill, or personality. We must not fabricate homogeneous teams with overtly compatible personalities in a misguided effort to preserve unity.<sup>28</sup> The power of the Gospel to unify natural human differences will be lost. Differences in teammates, whether national, racial, personality, or gifting, do not cause strife, our heart's sinful responses to those differences do.

What does this look like? A few years ago, a young husband began attending our church fellowship. His wife was a believer and he came primarily to please her. Initially, as I tried to engage in conversation with him, he was rather cold. However, he kept coming.

After more than a year of attending, I asked him more directly about his relationship with God. He quickly acknowledged that he was not a believer and realized that those in our fellowship were different from him. He is a bright guy, an engineer and successful businessman, but he couldn't figure out why he felt on the outside looking in. He reflected that when he first started coming, he was skeptical about the deep joy and unity he saw, but he grew to want it. With such an indisputable wordless apologetic, he readily believed the Gospel that had produced such relationship with further Bible study.

- **Oneness in spite of levels of authority and tasks assigned:** If levels of authority imply superiority, the Persons of God are not equal to One Another. Every member of our ministry teams hold equal status before God (1 Cor 3:8 – “*Now he who plants and he who waters are one*” - NAS).
- **Oneness in cooperation in God’s work:** The Trinity works together to create, to redeem, and to judge the world. Ministry team members have varied functions and skills. Diversity in human skill and gifting allows a richer product when we work in teams.
- **Oneness in mutual admiration:** The Father glories in the Son, and the Son in the Father (Jn 17:2,5). We should rejoice when our brother’s ministry flourishes even when ours flatten.
- **Oneness in Godlike transparency:** God fully knows One another – no secrets remain (Lk 10:22) as They mutually indwell each other. That level of transparency is likewise possible for us. It becomes one of the ornaments of our relationships not truly known in the world.
- **Oneness in delight:** Mutual pleasure that rises above description fills eternity for God. We can delight in one another in full-orbed relationships of work and play, family and community. “*It is the Divine unity of love that is referred to, all wills bowing in the same direction, all affections burning with the same flame, all aims directed to the same end – one blessed harmony of love.*”<sup>29</sup>
- **Oneness in humility:** Both the Son and the Spirit set aside their right to glory. The Son incarnated His glory into subdued tones in obedience to His Father. The Spirit plays background music to the Son. We can unite in ministry and life only as we practice mutual submission to the desires of others and submission to those in authority over us.

**2. Yet human oneness will be hard because the world opposes us and our own sin betrays us.**

*Excursus #2: What forces of our cultural world and our own sin work against oneness?*

**Western Culture**

Jesus knew that we would need protection while we remain in the world to experience oneness. In fact, Jesus uses a series of prepositions to describe a most perilous and squeezed position:

We must remain *in* the world (□□ - Jn 17:11),  
 are even sent *into* the world (□□□ - 17:18),  
 yet we must not become part *of* the world (□□ - 17:14,16,17), and  
 are not yet withdrawn *out of* the world (□□ - 17:15).

We must not be naïve about the attack by the world’s values on our unity. Western cultures worship their own set of idols as does every culture, Like a giant centrifuge, they drive us away from one another.<sup>30</sup>

1. **Distraction:** We are at a time in Western history when we live indoors more than at any other time (a lá climate control, phones, computers, entertainment systems, etc.). Yet walls

do not protect us from ever-increasing interruptions into our time and space, most of which we invite warmly.

2. **Fear of man:** The world drives us to conform to the lowest common denominator morally.
3. **Opposition:** Ironically, as Colin Gunton observes, “Modern individualism breeds homogeneity.”<sup>31</sup> We like people to be like us, and when they do not cooperate, we pull away.
4. **Selfish ambition:** This ambitious side of Western individualism drives us apart in our rush to get ahead of one another. Earlier in this very John 17 eve before Christ’s death, the disciples had wrangled about who was the greatest. In ministry teams, highly motivated missionaries are sure of where they want to go in spite of the vision of teammates.
5. **Life for the moment:** *Carpe Diem* for myself eliminates the long-term, the eternal, and the selfless.
6. **Materialism:** The machines of materialism deceive us away from others’ lives by offering us a surrogate life.
7. **Comfort:** The passion to avoid pain chases others away who threaten that comfort. We pull close to problem-free relationships instead working through painful conflict that builds a richer oneness.
8. **Control:** The Tech Age has bestowed us with a form of control while denying us its power. Messy relationships with their time-consuming pain leaves us feeling out of control.
9. **Shame:** We rugged individuals are not safe from this fear of being cut off from our community due to something we’ve done or become.<sup>32</sup> But, that very self-protective desire can lead to a breakdown of community because we avoid those before whom we feel shame.

We are between heaven and earth, and these corporate sins of the Western world stand ready to shatter the One-Many balance we were designed to live. Yet within that very tension, Jesus expects us to cling to unity.

### **Our Personal Sin**

Jesus must also protect us from ourselves. James highlights the enemy within us that results in conflict with his vivid motivational language: “*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your **desires** that battle within you? You **want** something but don't get it. You kill and **covet**, but you cannot have what you **want**. You quarrel and fight.... When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong **motives**, that you may spend what you get on your **pleasures**.*” (4:1-3). Our fights originate with our own sinful desires colliding with the desires of others.

The mission world is famous for anecdotes about interpersonal conflict.

“One missionary blithely told us, oblivious to the significance of his own statement, ‘Our mission policy is to only assign one couple per country, since two couples can never get along.’ We have to ask, ‘What kind of gospel are these people able to model?’”<sup>1</sup>

“Missionaries are like manure, a little goes a long way, but gathered together they just stink.”<sup>1</sup>

One of our own missionaries remembers the embarrassing question of a national unbeliever, “Why can’t your missionaries get along?”

How often do mission leaders decide to transfer a missionary from a conflicted situation to alleviate the interpersonal problem? I recently encountered one of our own veteran workers, a team leader and pastor, who still sizzles with the unresolved conflict of a past team from which he had been allowed to transfer.

These sinful assaults on our oneness (and therefore assaults on the Oneness of God as portrayed to the world) include:

1. **Elevated personal opinion:** Rooted in pride, our cherished opinions produce disunity.
2. **Personal expectations:** With expectations elevated to the point of greedily gripped dreams, our focus becomes making my dream into our dream.
3. **Injured pride:** When we are not heard or have our ideas summarily rejected, we are tempted to resentment.
4. **Judgmental spirit:** Judging the motives of others leads to wrong conclusions when read through my own selfishness.
5. **Jealousy or competitive spirit:** In the milieu of ministry, fruit is shared by team members. That leaves no place for competition. Rather we can depend on the strengths and specialties of each member because we were not designed to be the complete picture alone.
6. **Critical spirits:** When we fail to give others grace or the benefit of the doubt, brittle egos are easily hurt.

Clearly true oneness depends on our ongoing sanctification (17:17). Jesus has all this in mind and more when He prays that the Father would “*protect them by the power of Your name... so that they may be one as We are one.*” (17:11).

### 3. **Therefore, oneness should be part of our mission strategy.**

One could imagine Peter thinking out loud after Jesus’ prayer trying to grasp its truths:

Peter: “*OK, let me get this straight: You are leaving us in this world that hates us, and yet You don’t want us to pull away, but engage it like You did. You are sending us to represent You, and Your Spirit will continue to shape us to look more like You and give us boldness.*”

Jesus: “*Right. But one more thing - don’t try this alone. I’m sending you together. You will need each other to stimulate growth, to protect against living as the world does, and to present a more accurate likeness of Us. So stick together.*”

Just as the Divine Trio does its mission work into the world in tandem (17:18a - “As you sent me into the world”), so He plans for us (17:18b - “I have sent them into the world.”). Rudolf Bultmann writes of John 17, “The community takes over Jesus’ assault on the world ... – the assault which is at the same time the paradoxical form of his courtship of the world (3:16), and which continually opens up for the world the possibility of faith (vv21, 23).”<sup>33</sup>

The double effect of verse 18 alongside of verses 21, 23, is that not only should the world hear of redemption in Christ leading to unity with the glorious joy of God, but see its representation in oneness of the community of Christ.

As we consider practical implications of these Gospel truths to our ministry teams, we should note a couple of reactionary errors. We might err in the direction of over-dependence, of too much pleasure or too much security in one another’s company. This might result in the worst of the “missionary compound” mentality. Conversely, lone ranger, independent missionaries avoid the pains of relationships and want the freedom to pursue personal agendas.<sup>34</sup> Both of these are corruptions of the one-many balance that best depicts God.

*Excursus #3: What specific plans can we make for reflecting Trinity relationship on our ministry teams? How can this community dynamic intentionally be made part of our ministry strategy?*

Both Jesus and Paul invariably worked in teams.<sup>35</sup> How can we create opportunities for unbelievers to “catch” us fellowshiping? Where can we invite unsaved image-bearers into environments of Christlike unity? This, of course, is a great argument for team ministry, whether in formal church planting, or simple outreach into our neighborhoods or work environments. If we can introduce our unbelieving friends to other believers connecting, we can expect that their idea of God will stretch. And as they see us relating to each other with levels of depth and authenticity that they have not enjoyed, space will grow for them to better understand the One-Many God.

The Gospel is at stake. Unity warrants time and resources because it lies at the heart of what the Gospel accomplishes. We can’t presume upon it. As mission agencies, pursuing unity should inform our marketing, recruiting, fund-raising, ministry training, and ongoing team ministry. We must see community as the means, the content and the goal of our ministry.

What might this look like? Here are some of the steps we have taken as an agency:

- We have structured our agency into about 80 ministry teams beginning with the Executive leadership throughout the mission. We wanted a structure that complements the “One-Many” unity of a Triune God.
- Over a period of several years, we taught the Peacemaker©<sup>36</sup> conflict resolution seminar on all of our teams, to our home staff and presently to all new missionaries. Likewise, we incorporated a statement on biblical conflict into our Policy Manual signed by all members. This has provided us a shared vocabulary and commitment.
- We have sought to give ongoing training to team leaders on how to build strong ministry teams, teams that Worship Together, Care for One Another, and Align Ministry together.
- We have designed materials and facilitated study of Christian life and growth on the team context to enhance practice of biblical one anothers.

- We consciously model open and sturdy team relationships from executive and administrative leadership. We look for opportunities to invite our missionaries into our own team settings. We have tried to be open as leaders to share personal testimony related to our own conflicts and resolution.
- We have included questions related to relational conflicts in annual evaluations and in tools for team evaluation.
- We have designed *an* extensive Team Leaders Training Manual with many tools to build teams in the areas of Worship, Care, and Ministry.

Other recommendations include:

- Appoint someone(s) in your agency, ministry area or team to be the guardian of missionary unity. This person should have facilitating biblical community as part of his/her job-description.
- Challenge and equip team leaders to recognize that building the strength of team members and the unity of the team is part of his calling.
- Where appropriate to the culture, make social gatherings and outings for couples and families a part of outreach and discipleship strategy.
- Equip team and agency leaders to ask questions and lead discussions related to conflicts and peacemaking as part of regular interviews and field visits.
- Invite non-believers into holiday and social gatherings among believers to model body relationships.
- Work to develop full-orbed relationships as member of the team, not strictly working relationships. Become friends so that friendship can be noticed by unbelievers. While we must be careful in cross-cultural settings not to associate exclusively with our own nationality, conversely, nationals would think it strange if other compatriots were not our friends.
- Seek out biblically strong pastors or elders who can come alongside of your leadership to feed and care for ministry teams.
- Encourage ministry teams to brainstorm ways of exposing unbelievers to believing communities. Cultural issues must be remembered here.

Our agency still experiences interpersonal conflict and attrition due to sin and conflicts. However, as we give deliberate attention to building the strength of our missionaries as individuals and as ministering communities, we are trusting God for three outcomes: 1) a decrease in attrition due to sin and conflict; 2) an attraction of new members who value robust community; 3) an effectiveness in establishing church communities that model unity in culturally appropriate ways.

One missionary in South Asia captured this for me as we sipped *chai* from little clay cups in a crowded marketplace. Stepping back to embrace the breadth of what he envisioned for his church planting team, he stated, “We want to be a church to start a church.” We have focused a great amount of time, resources, and training to building teams because individuals-living-and-working-in-community is how we are designed to glorify a 3-in-1 God.



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<sup>1</sup> *Time Enough at Last*, November 20, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly this attempt to outline these relationships separately and even sequentially will limit the accuracy of such a comprehensive, whole life arena.

<sup>3</sup> The word, “team”, appears a mere three times in the NIV Bible, always of a team of horses and never of a team of people, much less a ministry team. The word is merely a metaphor for a thoroughly biblical concept of believers working together to serve God.

<sup>4</sup> By my count, Jesus touches on this eternal relationship at least 36 times in these 26 verses.

<sup>5</sup> I will assume the historic and orthodox view of the Trinity.

<sup>6</sup> NIV throughout unless otherwise stated.

<sup>7</sup> So in Luke 24:26: “*Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?*”

<sup>8</sup> Thus the very passage that appears to stress God’s unity so adamantly, Deuteronomy 6:4, “The LORD your God (Elohim), the LORD is one”, may allude to Their plurality as well. However, I must acknowledge that Elohim, the plural, is also used at times for pagan gods (1Sa 5:7; Jdg 9:27; 11:24, 1Kg 18:24,27; Dan 1:2).

<sup>9</sup> The implication this has on the image of the One/Many God in man, the context of this passage, will be expanded later.

<sup>10</sup> God may be speaking with His cohort of angels here, as He does in Job 1,2 when angels came to present themselves before the Lord.

<sup>11</sup> *Total Truth*

<sup>12</sup> This extension anticipates the third and fourth relationships of this article.

<sup>13</sup> *Jonathon Edwards: A Life*, p. 91. Marsden expands further: “*The triune God had an essential disposition to communicate his love to other persons. So he created creatures whose purpose was to return his love yet who had the power to resist. That rebellious resistance led to even higher expression of God’s love as God the Son took on the guilt of sin and God’s wrath and died for absolutely undeserving human rebels.*” (488).

<sup>14</sup> *Mere Christianity*.

<sup>15</sup> Twenty-one of twenty-six verses mention this relationship with God.






<sup>16</sup> Such attempts receive many names in Scripture, such as false worship, idolatry, spiritual adultery, broken cisterns, etc.

<sup>17</sup> *Pensées*.

<sup>18</sup> *The Passion of Jesus Christ*.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, from a missiological perspective, cultures often err on one side or the other of this singular-plural tension. Individualistic cultures stress the singular side of God’s image in us. As only one example, we normally celebrate the Eucharist as a refresher on what Christ has done for *me*. Only rarely or secondarily are we reminded of its depiction of our relationship with one another, in God’s new community.

Collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, emphasize our plurality, our communal identity. One can also see the same two tendencies in individual personalities, the individualist and the crowd-pleaser. A rich understanding of the Trinitarian balance can lead to a proper balance. The table below gives a simplified overview of that one/many cultural divide:

  <b>THE ONE</b>	 <b>THE ONE/MANY GOD</b>	  <b>THE MANY</b>
SINGULARITY		PLURALITY
EITHER/OR	Choices	BOTH/AND
EXCLUSIVE	Response to difference	INCLUSIVE
INTOLERANT	Response to differences	TOLERANCE
PRODUCTIVITY	Criterion for success	FAITHFULNESS
LOW	Power distance of authorities	HIGH
INDIVIDUAL	Identity	GROUP SOLIDARITY
GUILT	Sin	SHAME
FORENSIC	Solution for sin	RELATIONAL
INNOCENCE	Righteousness	HONOR
PROGRAM/FUNCTION	Orientation	PEOPLE
TIME	Focus	EVENT
DEMOCRATIC	Government	AUTHORITARIAN
LOW	Social context	HIGH
MONOCHRONIC	View of time	POLYCHRONIC
COGNATIVE	Effective apologetics	RELATIONAL
PERFORMANCE	Goal	HARMONY
ABSOLUTE	Behavior	GROUP THINK
DO	Ontology	BE
<i>The image of God in man creates the potential for balance of the one and many while sin throws its weight to one side of the other.</i>		

<sup>20</sup> The preceding verse, 12:3, makes the reference to the Spirit, Son, and Father clear, “Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>21</sup> *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> C.S. Lewis names this the “*shriveled self*”, one whose world has shrunk to the pintsize of himself or herself.

<sup>23</sup> *Mere Christianity*, p151.

<sup>24</sup> *Mere Christianity*, p54.

<sup>25</sup> DA Carson speaking on John 17 at the Bethlehem Pastors Conference on Post-Modernism, available online at [www.desiringgodministries.org](http://www.desiringgodministries.org). (??)

<sup>26</sup> *Postmodern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century Church* (B&H Publishing Group (July 15, 2000)

<sup>27</sup> The last couple of decades has shown a resurgence of writing on the Trinity, although I found little written on its relationship with missions.

<sup>28</sup> One of our earliest and richest team experiences included five nationalities and four mission agencies.

<sup>29</sup> Milligan and Moulton comment on John 17:11.

<sup>30</sup> What might be the counterfeit “one anothers” of the Western world?

- 
- Defeat one another
  - Sue one another
  - Surpass one another
  - Take advantage of one another
  - Use one another
  - Manipulate one another
  - Control one another
  - Impress one another

<sup>31</sup> Gunton explains why individualism leads to sameness: “When God is displaced as the focus of the unity of things, the function he performs does not disappear, but is exercised by some other source of unity” namely imposed homogeneity.

<sup>32</sup> My dissertation: *Biblical Ministry in a Shame-based Culture*.

<sup>33</sup> *The Gospel of John*, p. 510. In both John 17:21 and 23, Jesus repeats all four relationships we have studied. All are crucial to the very purpose of His incarnation, not only to save us as individuals, but to unite us into a body.

<sup>34</sup> I still remember the comment of a missionary husband when we invited his family for a social visit: “I guess my wife and kids would enjoy that.”

<sup>35</sup> I have seen this list of Paul’s teams from Acts in several places:

- Barnabas and Saul 11:25-30
- Barnabas, Saul, Mark 13:4-13
- Paul, Barnabas and companions 13:13-14:20
- Paul, Barnabas, Judas, Silas 15:22-24
- Barnabas, Mark 15:37-39
- Paul, Silas 15:40ff
- Paul, Silas, Timothy 16:1-9
- Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke 16:10ff
- Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke, Aquila, Priscilla 18:2-23
- Timothy? Luke? Aquila, Priscilla, Apollos 18:24-28
- Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke, Erastus 19
- Paul, Silas? Timothy, Luke, Sopater, Gaius, Aristarchus, Secundus, Tychicus, Trophemus 20:4

<sup>36</sup> *Peacemaker*, Ken Sande.