GENIUS
OF

ONE

God's answer for <mark>our</mark> fractured world

GREG HOLDER Perhaps the one thing that most hinders the world-changing mission of the church is its lack of unity. Jesus prayed in John 17 that his church would be "one" so that the world would believe that God had sent him. In *The Genius of One*, you'll enjoy Greg's humor and his humility, but your greatest takeaway will be how your influence and leadership in embracing our oneness in Christ is the first step toward changing the world.

RICHARD STEARNS

President of World Vision US and author of The Hole in Our Gospel

Greg Holder is a trusted guide to lead you on a journey to discover God's heart for unity. His instructive encouragement is impeccable. In our divided culture, I can't imagine a more timely and critical message.

GABE LYONS

President of Q Ideas and author of Good Faith and The Next Christians

The Genius of One is a cynic buster. For more than forty years I have been involved in Kingdom matters, and I have suffered enough fools and my own foolishness to guffaw when I consider unity in the body of Christ. I love Greg and respect him enormously, but a book on what it means to be one in the church seemed as unlikely as seventy is the new fifty. His playful, hilarious, heartfelt, theologically profound invitation to risk humbly for unity is a clarion call in a world as fractured and toxic as ours. This compelling book will help you celebrate Jesus' call to reveal him by the way we relate.

DAN B. ALLENDER, PhD

Professor of counseling psychology at The Seattle School and author of *The Wounded Heart*

Greg Holder has written a clear and vivid piece on how we can actually attain peace through *The Genius of One*. This book not only envisions the possibilities of what we are called to be as one body; it also gives us colorful pictures and the practical nuts and bolts of how we can be the answer to Jesus' prayer of true oneness.

DR. DAVID A. ANDERSON

Author of Gracism: The Art of Inclusion

The Genius of One is a practitioner's handbook for how businesses, churches, and individuals can achieve more together than apart. Saturated with wisdom, humility, and lived experience, Holder offers one of the most gritty, earthy, and practical books on how believers can live out their common unity with God and one another in light of our many differences.

DAVE HICKMAN

Author of Closer Than Close: Awakening to the Freedom of Your Union with Christ

A rare book and a rare author. In teaching, who combines insight into Scripture that goes beyond commentary, a flair for the narrative, humor that's funny and not merely amusing, and illustrations that illuminate instead of reiterate? This guy—Greg Holder—that's who. *The Genius of One* is a profound unpacking of a profound thesis—everything worth anything in this world is rooted in the oneness of God. Do we know this? Did we know this and then forget? I'm not sure, but I've never seen it as clearly as I do now. Thanks, Greg. This book is a gem.

RICK JAMES

Publisher of CruPress and author of Watch and A Million Ways to Die

GENIUS OF ONE

God's answer for our fractured world

GREG HOLDER



A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.



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Prologue

WHITE FOLDING CHAIRS

Why This Matters and What to Expect

We have forgotten how to get along. Some will suggest this is nothing new—and they would be right. From the first moment of rebellion against a loving God, the cracks appeared in our relationships. Ever since, our ugly unlovingness has chipped and jackhammered at the beauty of God's creation.

But it's getting worse.

Or so it seems.

Is it because there are now seven-plus billion of us that the planet seems louder? Or that the Web, "the biggest media revolution since the printing press," has left us more connected than ever—but also much angrier? Whatever the reasons—and there are many—the cracks in our broken world are showing: Common ground once shared is shrinking. Slight disagreements now carve deep divides. Conversations instantly polarize. We use technology to bully and bash those we've never met. We have grown insensitive *and* hypersensitive. Life teeters always on the edge of outrage. Shocking violence—in word and deed—shocks us less and less. In disgust and defeat, many now refer to these developments as "the new normal."

But is that our only option? To merely shake our heads at what is happening? Surely there are still those who would forge a different path. If things are truly coming apart, the time for action is now. Harvard professor Dean Williams makes this observation in the opening pages of his book:

What we repeatedly see are systems breaking down—be they institutional systems, economic systems, political systems, or environmental systems, to name but a few—and we all frustratingly ask, "Where is the leadership?"²

Where indeed?

It is time for the followers of Jesus to lead. With humility and courage, we must enter the chaos. Loving those who struggle in these uncertain times, we must—and here's the point of the book—love one another, too. For we who sing of grace and preach the gospel will not accomplish much if we do not love one another well. As we will see, this way of loving was the plan all along. To a world splintering into pieces, this different way of relating matters. It is not just a better way; it is the ancient—older than ancient—way of loving another. We who have been called by the Father, rescued by the Son, and empowered by the Spirit are now to reflect the love that flows between the three.

This is how we will lead.

This is how the gospel will still be heard in this loud and angry world. We cannot bring an end to all conflict and patch up every difference. But such love is as winsome and healing as anything we humans can imagine.

To some, such talk sounds terribly naive. "The problems of today are more complicated than some lofty ideal." To

others it just sounds too emotional. "Is this going to end in a group hug and s'mores around the campfire?"

No. No group hugs. I promise.

But I am inviting you to let down your guard—just a little. Do you remember a time when you saw Christians reflecting unity? A resilience to their relationships? Even for a season? For most, even a sighting of—dare I say it—community leaves us aching for more, wondering if more is possible. But then there are those who behold such things and are forever convinced this is the way to live.

I saw it happen with fifty white folding chairs.

In the early days of The Crossing, where I now pastor, God began to call me out of the marketplace and into my current role. It was a long, unlikely, and unconventional journey that had begun many years earlier. Robin—my wife—and I had become part of this church that started in a living room and was now gathering each week in the community theater of a YMCA. At the time, I was not the pastor of this barely born congregation. No one was the pastor. Not anymore. For various reasons, this little start-up had never really started—at least not in the way we'd hoped. In some ways, it just seemed as though this particular dream wasn't going to take hold. Not in our community. Not this time. What had started with such promise was seriously stalling.

These were good people—big-heart, big-vision people—but there weren't that many left. And now they were without a pastor. By this time, I'd already sensed God tugging me into ministry, in part because of these people. But I figured I'd just end up someplace else. If this church needed anything, it was a fresh face. A reboot.

Or maybe a memorial service.

I was helping to lead these leaderless gatherings, and a few of us had a crazy idea: Why not have everyone come up on that stage and sit in a big circle? People felt sheepish at first, but it was a lot cozier than being swallowed up by a theater that was never going to fill. We sang. We prayed. We opened Scripture. All the things you'd expect in such a time. However, everyone was wondering the same thing: Are we crazy for caring this much? For praying this hard? Giving this much? Should we keep doing this?

But then quietly, gently at first, people offered words from deep places. Memories of God's mighty work. Stories of forgiveness. Answered prayer and steadfast friendship. Faith in Jesus inspired by the faith of someone on that stage. Neighbors being noticed and loved. A lucrative career opportunity in another city turned down to remain a part of this family. A whole community entering the grief of a couple whose hearts had been shattered with the death of their newborn, and later celebrating the birth of the couple's second child.

Each time, a powerful story. Each time it was God's work, his doing. But each time, another theme emerged: He had given us the gift of one another for this time and this calling.

It was a gut-check moment. Could we predict what would happen next? Not even a little. Would we pull away from this little dream God had given us? Not this crew. We laughed. We cried. We prayed some more. And along the way we remembered that God had not just called us to this work. He had called us to this work together. We looked at one another in that circle of chairs and vowed to pursue God together. We needed him desperately. But now, looking into familiar faces, we were saying that we needed one another.

I said to myself: With friends like these, I can stand against the darkness.

And who knows, maybe even pastor them.

Since that awkward, holy meeting, God has blessed our church in many ways. Most of those people have had frontrow seats for it all—though never again on white folding chairs. Over the years, some of those sitting on the stage that night have moved away. Some have moved on to other churches. A few have now died. But I am forever grateful that on that day, in that unlikely place, those friends reminded me that we who follow Jesus have been called to an extraordinary work. *Together*.

This is how we will lead.

Or not.

I also remember another time. I was a small boy riding home in the back seat of our car. That's when I heard my mom ask my dad through tears, "How can Christians treat one another that way?"

I'm guessing you know what she means. Perhaps as you read this book, you will fight against an old memory or a fresh wound from a fellow believer. Unfortunately, most of us have those stories.

We have to admit the sad truth: We have forgotten how to get along. Whether we've read through the reams of research that really are piling up³ or have simply eyeballed the situation, most of us are willing to admit that something is often missing within the Christian community: The way we do life together isn't working. People of all ages are becoming disillusioned with shallow community, disrespectful tones, and the inability to get much done together.

Great. Here we go. Am I just one more voice telling

you that the church is broken and three weeks from next Tuesday the whole thing is going to fall apart, leaving hollowed-out cathedrals and frightened pastors foraging on the forest floor for food? Um, no. I hope not. This is not some hypernegative, "let's all pile on because Christians are the problem" book.

Does "the church" need some fixing? Do we followers of Jesus need to change? Sure. But that shouldn't surprise us. The church has always been in need of repair. As long as broken people keep stumbling into the Kingdom and notfully-arrived Christians keep following Jesus, this is going to be messy. We will be in constant need of fixing and healing and even reforming. But for God's grace, the church wouldn't have made it out of the first century, much less to three weeks from next Tuesday.

So there will be no piling on. Just a few honest admissions. We Christians are certainly a part of the problem, but we also have a unique opportunity to be a radical part of the answer—an answer that bridges the gaps of generation, denomination, race, economics, culture, and even politics. That seems like too much to hope for, but it's not if Jesus knew what he was talking about.

In this book, we're going to journey together through many experiences converging on one painfully obvious, life-changing, team-building, relationship-healing principle. These various experiences include a lifetime of observing human behavior; a sermon that challenged me to think deeper about the Hebrew word for *one*;⁴ the written work of several authors (N. T. Wright regarding the Shema as the foundation for community and John Ortberg regarding pretty much everything);⁵ the privilege of leading a fledgling,

now-established church with droves of volunteers; the teaching and training of gifted leaders and mentors across the spectrum; and the making of a boatload of mistakes.

It's important for me to say that last part at the outset of this journey. As you read these pages, you will be tempted to say things such as, "I'll bet he doesn't always do it that way" or "There's no way his church practices what he preaches." And you know what? On certain days and in certain circumstances, you'd be absolutely right. I wish I were better at this. I wish the team I'm so grateful to lead were better at this. While writing this book, I wish I hadn't been haunted by the silly and serious mistakes I've made along the way. I am not speaking as one who has mastered this completely. As you've no doubt figured out by now, this isn't my genius we'll be celebrating and considering. It is the sheer and wondrous genius of God.

That's why, even with that confession, I make no apologies for what's to follow. This is how a team, a community, a church works. How it's supposed to work. And on the good days, it does. On one of those not-so-good days when your humanness unleashes its ugliness, this vision of relationship is also how you get back on track. The deeper into this thoroughly biblical idea you go, the more top of mind it becomes, the faster you actually start to make those midcourse or midday or sometimes midconversation corrections. Because this is the better way. The older-than-ancient way of loving.

And it works. And I hope this book, broken into three sections, will help. Here's how.

We first need to tackle "The Mystery"—the mystery and genius of God—before we delve into the practical moments

lived out in real time. (For those who are more "nuts and boltsy," your section is coming later.) We will consider one of the mind-bending realities of our faith. But don't despair—this doesn't mean it will be mind-numbing. This could actually be interesting!

(At this point I feel like the middle-school math teacher trying to keep the back row awake: Algebra is cool! If you put enough exclamation points behind a statement, it does sound exciting! Theology can be fun!!! Section one will be fun!!!)

A deeper understanding of God will give us a clearer view of why the way we treat one another matters so much and how our lives fit together. Therefore, section one is definitely worth your attention.

The next section, "Nuts and Bolts," will explore the various aspects of what it will mean to live out the mystery. Each chapter addresses a particular value found in Scripture that is key to us living differently in these fractured times. For example: a healthy culture, humility, the power of words, what it means to collaborate, and entering the chaos and hurt of another. It's not an exhaustive list by any means, but it's a place to begin.

Interspersed throughout are stories: shark diving; a scary moment in a train station in India; sitting in a refugee tent on the Syrian border; staring into a cobra's eyes; even some of the behind-the-scenes moments working in Ferguson, Missouri, before, during, and after the grand jury announcement regarding the shooting of Michael Brown. These stories are all true, and God is still teaching me through each of them. But they are my stories. Hopefully, they will stir your imagination and start conversations around that next step God is calling you to take.

Then, finally, the last section: "The Rest of the Dream." It's only one chapter because there's still much to be written—stories yet to live and tell. But if what has preceded makes any sense at all, this chapter will offer specific ideas for how each of us can take this wild vision of God's even further. It is time for a revolution of sorts. And this will involve some risk. But those God-ordained, faith-fueled steps you take could change the world. I really believe this. I'm not suggesting this *book* will change the world. But I do think it can encourage partnerships between people and organizations, who by the grace of God and of his Spirit working through them could still change the world.

I know that what I've just described sounds overwhelmingly global, but in the end, this journey will be intensely personal. This is how we will lead—by how we love.

Before the great I Am spoke blazing galaxies into existence, there was (and still is) something confronting us. And the sheer beauty of this truth—the genius of it, if you will—won't just change you and me (though it most certainly does that). It actually begins to shape the world around us. You might even say that this is one of the ways in which God is still repairing this fractured world. It is perhaps one of the most tangible ways that others will hear his voice—or at least begin to listen for his voice. It is how we will reflect the glorious transcendence of our God into the dark corners and deep chasms of our day.

Now it is time to scoot to the edge of our own white folding chairs and listen. To think hard and stay honest. To pray big prayers. For the moment is coming soon for us to act—to live and love differently. Our gracious God is summoning us to a different, better, older-than-ancient way,

and this way will not be boring because, essentially, none of this is about us. It is about the infinite, all-powerful God who cannot be contained by our three-pound brains. *That's* where the genius comes in. It's him. Always him.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

What divisions do you see in our world today?

What has been your experience with Christian community?

In your own words, why is unity within the church important?

THE **MYSTERY**

1

THE WORST NIGHT OF SOMEONE ELSE'S LIFE

The Prayer Prayed for Us

What I know about loving and living with others has taken too long to find its way into my stubborn, struggling heart. The lessons learned from friendships and exfriendships, from fellow pastors and those in our church, from leading and following, from forgetting and regretting, from trusting and then watching the timeless God work in real time in the real world—these lessons have little by little taken hold. For this does not happen all at once, this new way, this not-of-this-world way.

And yet, in this frustrating slowness, some truths shoulder their way in suddenly, demanding to be noticed. Not so much in, as one man in my church puts it, "a fork in the brain" moment (which you simply must not try at home) but more in an "ah, of course" moment. Something so right,

so perfectly true, that it seems to have been there all along (it probably was), and you wonder how you'd missed it for so long (the reasons are many). But now that it has crashed into the crowded room of your thoughts, it must be faced. It must be dealt with.

For me, this sudden, almost blinding awareness of the obvious happened on the worst night of someone else's life.

THICKENING LAYERS OF SADNESS

There is so much swirling in the room this evening that no one can keep up with his own emotions, much less have the margin to deal with another's. No one except the host. He has welcomed his friends warmly.

That part isn't new. But something is different. By the end of the evening, even the slowest to notice has finally caught up. Thickening layers of sadness weigh on his soul. Something very personal lurks in the shadows of the near future.

Have you ever been near such a thing? Maybe it was a surgery for which the odds were so poor that you couldn't say them out loud. Maybe it was a solitary sentencing before the judge. Or an appointment with the attorney. Or the boss. Or the funeral home. Stand with someone at the edge of a singular storm like that and you'll hear: "Dear God, I don't want to walk through that door . . . but I have to." And he or she does. By God's grace, that person does.

This night is that kind of night.

For Jesus.

The days leading up were a whirlwind of controversy. It is the week of Passover, the great feast of Israel, which always draws huge crowds to Jerusalem. On Sunday, Jesus

symbolically declared his Messiahship by riding into the city on a donkey. The impromptu parade had been laced with celebration and danger. The religious leaders opposing Jesus looked on with disgust and fear, but they did nothing. When later he cleared the Temple and called out their corruption, they made up their minds: They began looking for a way to kill him. But how would this happen?

It wasn't long before they had their answer: Judas, one of the Twelve, would deliver Jesus to his enemies away from the crowds and any danger of a riot. As the others would soon learn, on this night, evil would have its moment. But first, one last night for Jesus with his beloved friends.

By the time we get to John 17, so much has already happened that evening. So much has been said. An already important supper, the Passover, was now drenched with new meaning by this one who spoke as if death were waiting outside the door. Of course it was. There was always a cross at the end of this last visit to Jerusalem, but this night it is closer than ever before, this death beyond all deaths.

Then a confrontation with Judas brings awkward closure: blunt words, a gesture, and perhaps one final look from Jesus that broke the heart of heaven, if not the hardened Judas. The betrayer leaves the table for the last time. It has begun.

The unholy kiss, the unjust arrest, the scattering of these overmatched friends, the travesty of his trials, blasphemy in the air, and blood on a cross. It's all coming and soon.

The supper is over. Peter, thinking too highly of himself, receives a haunting prediction of his threefold denial. The glorious truths of John 14 are shared. And then Jesus says, "Come now; let us leave."

A conversation that began around the table appears to have spilled over into another walk with Jesus through the streets of Jerusalem.⁴ Something is happening; a darkness is gathering—you can see its shadow on Jesus' face. You can almost feel it creeping its way through the city, trying to find them. After the safety of being together in that upper room, even stepping into the street seems dangerous. They stay close to Jesus.

In those fleeting moments now flying past them all, before all hell is going to break loose, what does Jesus do? When there is nothing else to say to them or at least nothing else their hearts could stand to hear, what does Jesus do?

He prays. Somewhere before crossing the brook of Kidron and making his way up that hill to a grove of olive trees called Gethsemane, he looks toward heaven.

The relationship between God the Father and God the Son is best seen in these moments of prayer. Often, others did not even hear those prayers—they just observed from a distance. Who knows, perhaps this communion between Jesus and his Abba was more than we mortals could handle. But this time, for our sake, we hear the prayer and catch a glimpse of the inner workings of eternity.

FATHER, THE TIME HAS COME

In the sovereign mind of God, this sliver of time to which all of eternity is tethered has finally come. This night Jesus faced, and the darkness that would follow, were not some shocking developments. This was no surprise. Instead, all the details and storylines, all the prophecies and longings, are rushing together, arriving on time, just as God intended. For quite a while, these disciples had heard Jesus talk about his mission. Why he had come to them. Why he was sent by his Father. But never have the words seemed more urgent. Every breath matters. Every second, one tick closer. All of eternity has been counting down to a moment in time on which everything will turn, and now, on this night, the time has come. So Jesus prays. He prays for himself. He prays for his followers—those with him and those yet to come. And ever present is this grand and glorious mission to rescue humanity and restore creation. It is front and center on this horrible, holy night. But woven into that very big plan is the most intimate of threads holding it all together: the love between this Son and his Father.

"Father . . ."

So often we talk of this tender term and think of how Jesus taught us to pray. But let's not forget that Jesus and his Abba enjoyed this intimacy before the foundations of the earth were laid. Before we look to how much God loves us, we must begin with the love going on within the Trinity—the love between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Everything flows out of this love. So close are they, so unified in, well, everything.

Though Father and Son are different persons, there is such a sameness to their nature that Jesus had just told the disciples around the supper table, "When you see me, you've seen the Father." The connection between them was so strong, so vital, so safe and wholly pure, that Jesus would pray, "All I have is yours and all you have is mine." Different persons and yet so together that it defies description. We are on the edge of an eternal truth that the writers of Scripture could only begin to imagine.

"Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."

The disciples are overhearing Jesus as he reaches into eternity past, speaking of wonders too great for their mortal minds. This is the way things were "before the world began," the way things will be again when Jesus returns to his Father's side. But is it too much to think the disciples heard a longing, perhaps an ache, in Jesus' voice? Soon the prayer of Gethsemane will be on his lips. He must face a reality as darkness closes in. Do not forget: This is the worst night of his life. Only this closeness with the Father sustains him. The return to his Father's side calls him. But first, the godforsakenness of the cross awaits.

Jesus was sent here on a mission, and he's now about to take the last painful, glorious step. Looming in the background is what? Love. It was the backdrop for everything that night. It is why Jesus did what he did. It's how he did what he did. His mission was rooted in the intimate goings-on of the Trinity. Would it be too big a surprise to learn that what we do and how we do it should somehow be rooted in the same love going on between Father, Son, and Spirit?

A DIFFERENT PEOPLE

The disciples lean in, for now Jesus is praying for them: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world." He prays for their protection from the one who hates everything that God is doing to redeem people and restore his creation. This evil one would use whatever means possible to disrupt and destroy the work and people of God. These precious ones were a gift from the Father. Jesus knows them and loves them. He had protected and guarded them,

and they belonged no longer to this world. They belonged to him. They were now set apart as different people with different motives, different ethics, a different mission, a different life. Jesus prays for their continued protection. Why? So that they may be one as Jesus and the Father are one.

Soon it would be their mission, and Jesus prays for them to be one.

Soon they would turn Rome on its ear. They were about to do what God called them to do in this world—they would get their hands dirty in this world, loving and serving this world, conversing and sharing with this world without being mistaken for this world.

Remember that for a couple of chapters, will you? The people of God are not to be mistaken for this world. Even as the story pushes deeper and deeper into the world. Even as people "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" become a kaleidoscopic sea of faces that will now form the family of God. This family will now have its share of differing opinions, backgrounds, and perspectives. The people of God will in some ways be just like the world around them.

Only different.

For Jesus now sets his gaze past that dark night to the coming day when this movement would jump the rails and enter the Gentile, non-Jewish world, speeding across the Roman Empire, moving into people groups and languages and cultures and spreading across the ages and continents. With the sovereign plan of a loving God in mind, he keeps praying.

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message."

EAVESDROPPING

Have you ever heard someone pray for you?

Depending on the setting and the status of your heart, it could be unnerving or humbling or empowering or healing. Sometimes it's all of the above. But when someone starts to speak to God about you, at the very least you ought to listen in. If someone is beseeching the sovereign Lord on the worst night of his or her life and drops your name into that prayer, you'll probably want to listen carefully.

That's exactly what happens at the end of this prayer. Jesus prays for himself and his own mission. Then he prays for his disciples and the trajectory of his movement as it begins to push across the empire. But then he prays for you and me. Of course he doesn't mention us by name, but it's pretty obvious we were on his mind that night—we to whom the testimony of the crucified and risen Savior would one day come. And what is it he wants for us? When his world is crashing in around him, what does Jesus take the time to pray for us?

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. 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.¹¹

What is it that matters so much to Jesus in that moment? What is his dream, his longing, his prayer for us? That we will be one as he and his heavenly Father are one. This thread running through the whole prayer now wraps itself around us. He's already prayed this exact thing for those first disciples, but now he asks the Father the same for us.

WHEN SOMETHING MATTERS TO JESUS

With time running out, Jesus didn't pray for his disciples to be brave or persevering. He prayed that they would be one. He didn't pray that we would be clever or compassionate, relevant or intelligent. He didn't pray that we'd win debates or end world hunger. He prayed that we would be one. It must have mattered an awful lot to pray those words on that night. Jesus intentionally lashed this "being one" business to everything he has done and is still doing in this world.

No matter how big and beautiful and colorful and messy the people of God will become, it now comes back to something close and intimate. Jesus prayed for unity. He didn't ask his Father for a bland, homogenized unity but rather for this hodgepodge of redeemed humanity to show the world something outrageously, wonderfully different—so distinctly different that it would cause the world to take notice of God's offer of redemption.

And to do this we must be one.

If that's true, then why do we treat this so casually? Apparently, how we treat one another is directly connected to the very mission of Jesus and the goings-on within the Trinity itself. We can give the world a glimpse into what has always been and what is yet to come.

When we realize that Jesus prayed for this one thing on the worst night of his life, it's going to be awfully hard to not take it seriously.

But to take it seriously, we must first answer a key question: What does it really mean to be one?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

How has prayer helped you in the midst of trial?

What jumps out at you from Jesus' prayer?

What types of behavior keep Jesus followers from living as one?

