

John Owen: Communion with the Triune God

Ian Hamilton

The day before John Owen departed to be with Christ (23 August 1683), he dictated his last letter to a friend: “I am going to him whom my soul has loved, or rather who has loved me with an everlasting love, - which is the whole ground of my consolation.” The following day, William Payne brought him news that his *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, was now ready for printing. Owen replied, “I am glad to hear it; but, O brother Payne! the long wished-for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world”. These death-bed expressions of Owen’s piety, confirm a truth that was, in effect, the pulsebeat of Puritan piety in general - communion with God was “the very heart of Puritan theology and religion.” Whatever else Puritanism was, its animating heart was cultivated fellowship with the Triune God.

In the Bible, fellowship with God, living, personal, mind-engaging, heart-affecting fellowship, is held out to us as the consummating fruit of the gospel. Our Lord Jesus defined eternal life as knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he had sent (Jn.17:3), a knowing that is intimate as well as intellectual, personal as well as cerebral, profoundly spiritual as well as deeply theological. It is this fellowship or communion that John is referring to in 1Jn.1:3. Communion with God is not an “enthusiastic fancy”. It is not something reserved for the especially enlightened. It is the birthright of every believer. The gospel initiates every believer, by the new birth, into “fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ”. This was a prospect the Lord Jesus promised to his disciples. In Jn.14:23, he speaks of his Father and himself coming, by the Spirit’s new covenant presence, to make their home in the lives of his people. It is this intimate, homely picture that is mirrored in the risen Lord’s words to the church in Laodicea: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev.3:20). Owen comments on this verse in his treatise on *Communion With God*: “Certainly this is fellowship, or I know not what is. Christ will sup with believers: he refreshes himself with his won graces to them, by his Spirit bestowed on them. The Lord Christ is exceedingly delighted in tasting of the sweet fruits of the Spirit in the saints.”¹ It is striking, as well as deeply humbling, to hear Owen again and again highlight the Saviour’s delight in his communion with his people. We are so accustomed in this shallow, man-centred age to start with ourselves as we contemplate communion with our holy and gracious God. If we are truly to savour communion with God, we must learn that the initiative in this grace lies with God. As in all true theology, “from him and through him and to him are all things, to him be the glory” (Rom.11:36).

John Owen gives us this definition of communion with God: “Our communion... with God consisteth in his *communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him* of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which In Jesus Christ we have with him”².

¹ *The Works of John Owen* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), Vol. 2. 40

² Owen 2.8-9

Owen picks up this thought of intimate union and writes, “Now, Christ delights exceedingly in his saints: ‘As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee’, Isa.lxii.5....His heart is glad in us without sorrow. And every day whilst we live is his *wedding day*. ...thoughts of communion with the saints were the joy of his heart from eternity”³.

Owen's great contribution to experimental Christianity lies in his teaching on the believer's communion with God being with the various Persons of the Trinity, not exclusively but distinctly. John says as much in 1Jn.1:3. Paul writes of “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship (communion) of the Holy Spirit” (2Cor.13:14), and in 1Cor.1v9 he tells us that God has called us “into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord”. Owen is quick to explain himself. He is well aware of the theological axiom *opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt* (that the external works of the Trinity cannot be divided), so he says, “When I assign any thing as *peculiar* wherein we distinctly hold communion with any person, I do not exclude the other persons from communion with the soul in the very same thing. Only this, I say, *principally*, immediately, and by the way of eminency, we have, in such a thing, or in such a way, communion with some one person; and therein with the others secondarily, and by the way of consequence on that foundation...”⁴

Owen proceeds to show in what way supremely the believer has communion with the Persons of the Godhead. It is striking that Owen devotes 23 pages to Communion with the Father, 182 pages to Communion with Jesus Christ the Son, and 52 pages to Communion with the Holy Ghost. This balance (or imbalance) reflects Owen's concern to highlight the centrality of Christ's mediatorial, saving significance in the economy of God.

First, Communion with the Father is supremely in love cf.1Jn.4:8; 2Cor.13:14; Roms.5:5.

In all these and other texts, it is the Father's love that is highlighted: so Owen writes, “Eye the Father as love; look not on him as an always lowering father, but as one most kind and tender. Let us look on him by faith, as one that hath had thoughts of kindness towards us from everlasting”.⁵ Christians must, therefore meditate on this distinguishing, free, unchangeable love.

For Owen communion with the Father in love required two things: that we ‘receive’ his love and that we ‘make suitable returns unto him’.⁶ The Father's love is received ‘By faith’, through Christ. ‘The soul being thus, by faith through Christ, and by him brought into the bosom of God, into a comfortable persuasion and spiritual perception and sense of his love, there reposes and rests itself.’⁷ But there is more. ‘God loves, that he may be beloved’.⁸ So, we are to make ‘returns’ of love to the Father.

3 Owen 118

4 Owen 18

5 Owen 32

6 Owen 22

7 Owen 23

8 Owen 24

Because he never ceased to think and feel as a pastor, Owen anticipates a query: "I cannot find my heart making returns of love unto God. Could I find my soul set upon him, I could then believe that his soul delighted in me."⁹ To this Owen responds,

"This is the most *preposterous* course that possibly thy thoughts can pitch upon...`Herein is love`, saith the Holy Ghost, `not that we loved God, but that he loved us` first, 1John iv.10,11. Now thou wouldst invert this order, and say, `herein is love, not that God loved me, but that I loved him first`...This is a course of flesh`s finding out that will never bring glory to God, nor peace to thy own soul. Lay down then, *thy reasonings*; take up the love of the Father upon a *pure act of believing*, and that will open thy soul to let it out unto the Lord in the communion of love."¹⁰

Owen was deeply concerned that many Christians failed to grasp the grace of the Father's love in Christ: "How few of the saints are experimentally acquainted with this privilege of holding immediate communion with the Father in love! With what anxious, doubtful thoughts do they look upon him! What fears, what questionings are there, of his good-will and kindness! At the best, many think there is no sweetness at all in him towards us, but what is purchased at the high price of the blood of Jesus"¹¹.

Owen never wearies of impressing on us that the Father's love 'ought to be looked on as the fountain from whence all other sweetnesses flow'.¹²

It might surprise many faithful ministers of the gospel to discover how many of their congregations think just like this. We need the greatest care not to suggest in our preaching that the cross in any way merited the Father's love for sinners. It was because the Father 'so loved the world' that he gave his one and only Son!

Second, communion with the Son is supremely in grace.

We have communion with Christ as "Mediator"¹³, and as Mediator he meets us "in GRACE".¹⁴ Owen highlights a number of biblical texts to make his point: John.1:14,16,17; 1Cor.1:9; 2Cor.13;14; 2Thess.3;17-18; Canticles5:10. So he writes, "This, then, is that which we are peculiarly to eye in the Lord Jesus, to receive it from him, even grace, gospel-grace..."¹⁵

Owen considers communion with Christ to focus on his "personal grace" and his "purchased grace":

⁹Owen 37

¹⁰Owen 37

¹¹Owen 2.32

¹²Owen 22

¹³Owen 40

¹⁴Owen 47

¹⁵Owen 47. See the most helpful exposition of this in S.B.Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Banner of Truth, 1987), pp77ff

a) Christ's personal grace. For Owen, Christ's personal grace is nowhere better described than in the Song of Songs. Owen's exposition is deeply, even exclusively, Christological¹⁶. Christ is the believer's husband, so responding to this personal grace involves, "The liking of Christ for his *excellency*, grace and suitableness, far above all other beloveds whatever, preferring him in the judgment and mind above them all," and "*accepting* Christ by the *will*, as its only husband, Lord and Saviour. This is called 'receiving' of Christ, John.i.12 ; and is not intended only for that solemn act whereby at first entrance we close with him, but also for the constant frame of the soul in abiding with him and owning him as such."¹⁷

So Owen characteristically continues, "Let believers exercise their hearts abundantly unto this thing. This is choice communion with the Son Jesus Christ. Let us receive him in all his excellencies, as he bestows himself upon us; - be frequent in thoughts of faith, comparing him with other beloveds, sin, world, legal righteousness; and preferring him before them, counting them all loss and dung in comparison of him...Let us tell him that we will be for him, and not for another: let him know it from us; he delights to hear it, yea he says, "Sweet is our voice, and our countenance is comely"; and we shall not fail in the issue of sweet refreshment with him."¹⁸

b) Christ's purchased grace.¹⁹ Owen explains what he means by "purchased grace": "By purchased grace, I understand all that righteousness and grace which Christ hath procured, or wrought out for us, or doth by any means make us partakers of, or bestows on us for our benefit, by anything that he hath done or suffered, or by any thing he continueth to do as mediator".²⁰ How are we to enjoy communion with our Saviour in this grace?²¹

First, we do so by approving and embracing the divine way of salvation. In the gospel we see our utter depravity, spiritual poverty and just condemnation; but we also see, by God's grace, that Christ is our "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption". So, in the gospel we find peace for our souls and glory to Christ.

Second, the Christian enjoys fellowship with Christ in holiness²². On Christ's part this involves interceding with his Father "by virtue of his oblation...that he would bestow his Holy Spirit on them." The Spirit comes as the Spirit of holiness, who is "the efficient cause of all holiness and sanctification, - quickening, enlightening,

16 You do not need to agree with Owen's exclusively Christological exposition of The Song to appreciate the great biblical truths he finds in the text. The modern (though it is actually not so modern) interpretation of The Song as a prose-poem exclusively celebrating the creation ordinance of marriage, fails to take account of the NT's linking of the marriage relationship to the relationship of Christ with his church (Eph.5:25ff) and the distinct echoes of The Song's evocative language in such passages as Rev.3:20.

17 Ibid, 58

18 Ibid, 59

19 See Ferguson, pp.86ff

20 Owen, 2.154

21 See Ferguson, p.88ff

22 Owen, 2.197ff

purifying the souls of his saints”.²³ Thus, because of our union with Christ, we receive Christ’s own holiness. On our part, the believer receives by faith, the gracious blessings of Christ, who “as the great Joseph...hath the disposal of all the granaries of the kingdom of heaven committed unto him...”²⁴

Third, we have communion with Christ in “the grace of privilege before God”, the highest of which is adoption.²⁵ Says Owen, “The privileges we enjoy by Christ are great and innumerable; to insist on them in particular were the work for a man’s whole life, not a design to be wrapped up in a few sheets. I shall take a view of them only in the head, the spring and fountain whence they all arise and flow,- this is *our adoption*.”²⁶

Third, communion with the Holy Spirit is supremely in comfort.

It is the special ministry of the Spirit to bring to us the great and gracious promises and blessings of the gospel, to shed abroad God’s love in our hearts and to glorify Christ. Says Owen, “The soul is never more raised with the love of God than when by the Spirit taken into intimate communion with him in the discharge of this duty.”²⁷ He continues, the Spirit’s ministry as the Comforter focuses on “his bringing the promises of Christ to remembrance, glorifying him in our hearts, shedding abroad the love of God in us, witnessing with us as to our spiritual estate and condition, sealing us to the day of redemption...confirming our adoption, and being present with us in our supplications. Here is the wisdom of faith, - to find out and meet with the Comforter in all these things; not to lose their sweetness, by lying in the dark [as] to their author, nor coming short of the returns which are required of us.”²⁸

What should our response then be to this “communion of the Spirit”? Owen tells us first that we must not “grieve him, in respect to his person dwelling in us” (cf.Eph.4:30); secondly, we must not “quench the Spirit” (1Thess.5:19); thirdly, we must not be like the Jews who “resisted the Holy Ghost” in the ministry of Stephen (Acts7:51-52); “Now, the Holy Ghost is said to be resisted in the contempt of the preaching of the word, because the gift of preaching of it is from him”.²⁹ More positively, we are to respond to the communion of the Spirit in “faith” - “faith closeth with him in the truth revealed...worships him, serves him, waits for him, prayeth to him, praiseth him”.³⁰ Owen urges every Christian who knows the comfort of the Spirit to say, “This is from the Holy Ghost, he is the Comforter, the God of all consolation...that he might give me this consolation, he hath

23 Owen 2.199

24 Owen 2.203.

25 Owen 2.207

26 Owen 2.207

27 Owen,2.249

28 Quoted in Packer 271-272

29 Owen.2,267

30 Owen 2.270

willingly condescended to this office of a comforter...he is sent by the Father and Son for that end and purpose...What price now, shall I set upon his love! how shall I value the mercy that I have received!"³¹ Unceasing praise to the Spirit should be the hallmark of the believer's communion with him.

Fourth, communion with God is experienced in a special way in the Lord's Supper.³² In his *Sacramental Discourses*, Owen wrote that there is, "in the ordinance of the Lord's supper, an especial and peculiar communion with Christ, in his body and blood, to be obtained....We have this special communion upon the account of the special object that faith is exercised upon in this ordinance, and the special acts that it puts forth in reference to that or those objects..."³³ The special and peculiar object of faith that Owen is referring to is "The *human nature of Christ*, , as the subject wherein mediation and redemption was wrought."³⁴ Owen, in keeping with almost all the Puritans, and particularly Calvin, did not see the Supper as purely commemorative. It was commemorative, but it was also "eucharistical" and "federal", "in that God confirms his covenant (he has no need to renew it) and believers renew themselves in covenant obligations."³⁵ What then is the communion the believer enjoys, supremely with Christ, in the Supper? It "becomes a matter of acknowledging his presence in the power of his reconciling sacrifice and of observing the ordinance with reverent confidence that in it Christ comes to pledge his saving love to each one personally, so that `we sit down at God's table as those who are the Lord's friends...there being now no difference [contention] between him and us."³⁶ So, in our sacramental communion with Christ, we come to the Supper in a spirit of meditation, self-examination, supplication and expectation³⁷, that God will surely "meet us according to the desire of our hearts. We should look to meet God, because he hath promised to meet us there, and we go upon his promise of grace...He hath placed his name upon his ordinances, and there he is"³⁸

Such, in brief, is the believer's communion with God. It is, as it has often been said, "better felt than telt"! Let Thomas Goodwin have the last word. In vol.7 of his *Collected Works*, Goodwin considers the love of Christ, who died to make us his friends, though "he could have created new ones cheaper".³⁹ He continues, "Mutual communion is the soul of all true friendship...(and) friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits; and these, the more free and less occasioned by urgent business...the more friendly they are...we use to check our

31 Owen 271

32 See again Sinclair Ferguson's excellent summary of Owen's teaching, 220ff

33 Owen 9.523

34 Owen 9.524

35 Ferguson 221

36 Quoted in Packer 281

37 Owen 2.558-563

38 Owen 2.562

39 Thomas Goodwin, *Works* (James Nicol, 1863), 7.193 , quoted in Packer, 273

friends with his upbraiding, You still come when you have some business, but when will you come to see me?... The very sight of a friend rejoiceth a man...Personal communion with God is the end of our graces...And as for duties, the journey's end of them is fellowship with God."⁴⁰

May the Lord bring us all into a truer, deeper, more heart-engaging communion with him, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁰Thomas Goodwin, Works (James Nicol, 1863), 7, 197ff