

OF COMMUNION WITH GOD THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY GHOST (1)

John Owen, 1657

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Introductory Note

“Experiencing God” is a popular phrase, often misunderstood and abused. In Pentecostalism and Charismaticism, mere emotion and feeling are equated with “experiencing God,” and all forms of doctrinal knowledge are despised as “dead” and “unspiritual.” Even conservative writers often place too great an emphasis on emotions, an emphasis unknown to the church before the rise of Romanticism.

As is always the case, the danger in battling an error is to go to the other extreme. Reformed believers may be uncomfortable with the idea of “experiencing” fellowship or communion with God. Or they may struggle to understand what it means, in practice, to commune with God.

John Owen’s classic work, *Of Communion with God*, is a welcome antidote to all these problems. Richly doctrinal, it is yet intensely practical—as, indeed, all true doctrine is. Unfettered by the modern confusion over “feelings” and “experience,” Owen lays before us the rich, deep and moving doctrine of our communion and fellowship with God.

According to Owen (and Scripture), communion with God, as in all relationships, consists in two parts: God communicating Himself to us and we communicating ourselves to Him. This usage of “communicate” is highly significant: true communion involves not merely the exchange of ideas or information, but the exchange of ourselves, our very persons. Communion is the giving of persons to each other in love.

Owen’s unique contribution springs from this understanding: Communion involves persons. Thus, communion with God consists in communion with the three divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Owen expounds from Scripture not only what communion with God is, but also how this communion involves the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, according to their unique personal properties.

The only correction we make to Owen's work is the following. When dealing with Scripture's teaching on "God and the Son," Owen perhaps does not do sufficient justice to the Mediator being sent not merely by the First Person of the Trinity, but by all divine Persons together. Nevertheless, it is apparent that, in the work of the Mediator, the Second Person is on the foreground; while in the case of "God" and the "Father" who sends the Son, the First Person is clearly in focus, though not to the exclusion of the others.

Finally, let the reader be aware that this work of Owen is addressed to believers. Thus, when Owen argues that "no one" may doubt the Father's love for them, he means "no believer."

May the reader be led, by this work, to a deeper communion with God, by the Holy Spirit, through the Son and to the Father.

Part 1: Introduction

Chapter 1: The Saints Have Communion With God

In I John 1:3, the apostle assures the recipients of his letter that the fellowship of believers "is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ:" and this he doth with such an unusual kind of expression as bears the force of an emphatic statement; whence we have rendered it, "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." The outward appearance and condition of the saints in those days was very mean and contemptible. Thus, inviting others unto fellowship with them, and a participation of the precious things which they did enjoy, seems to be exposed to many contrary reasonings and objections: "What benefit is there in communion with them? Is it any thing else but to be sharers in troubles, reproaches, scorns, and all manner of evils?" To prevent or remove these and the like excuses, the apostle argues that, notwithstanding all the disadvantages their fellowship lay under, yet in truth it was honourable, glorious, and desirable. For "truly," saith he, "our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." This being so earnestly and directly asserted by the apostle, we may boldly follow him with our affirmation, namely, "That the saints of God have communion with Him." And a holy and spiritual communion it is, as shall be declared.

By nature, since the entrance of sin, no man hath any communion with God. He is light, we darkness; and what communion hath light with darkness?

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He is life, we are dead; He is love, and we are enmity; and what agreement can there be between us? Men in such a condition have neither Christ, nor hope, nor God in the world (Eph. 2:12), “being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them” (Eph. 4:18). Now, two cannot walk together, unless they be agreed (Amos 3:3). Whilst there is this distance between God and man, there is no walking together for them in any fellowship or communion. Our first interest in God was so lost by sin, as that there was left unto us (in ourselves) no possibility of a recovery. As we had deprived ourselves of all power for a return to God, so He had not revealed any way of access unto Himself.

The manifestation of grace and pardoning mercy, which is the only door of entrance into any communion with God, is not committed unto any but unto Him alone in whom it exists, by whom that grace and mercy was purchased, through whom it is dispensed, and who reveals it from the bosom of the Father, namely His Son Jesus Christ. Hence this communion and fellowship with God are not explicitly mentioned in the Old Testament. The thing itself is found there; but the clear light of it, and the boldness of faith in it, is discovered in the gospel, and by the Spirit administered therein. By that Spirit we have this liberty (II Cor. 3:17-18). Though the Old Testament saints had communion with God, yet they had not a boldness and confidence in that communion as we have. This only followed the entrance of our High Priest into the most holy place (Heb. 4:14; 10:19). The vail also was upon them, such that they had not freedom and liberty in their access to God (II Cor. 3:15-16). But now in Christ we have boldness and access with confidence to God (Eph. 3:12). By Jesus Christ alone, then, on all considerations as to being and full manifestation, is this distance taken away. He hath consecrated for us a new and living way (the old being quite shut up), “through the vail, that is to say, his flesh” (Heb. 10:20); and “through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2:18). “Ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace” (Eph 2:13-14). Upon this new foundation, by this new and living way, are sinners admitted into communion with God, and have fellowship with Him. And truly, for sinners to have fellowship with God, the infinitely holy God, is an astonishing thing.

Our communion with God consisteth in His communication of Himself unto us, with our return unto Him of that which He requireth and accepteth,

flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with Him.

The way and means, then, on the part of the saints, whereby in Christ they enjoy communion with God, are all the spiritual and holy actings and outgoings of their souls in those graces, and by those ways, wherein both the moral and instituted worship of God doth consist. Faith, love, trust, joy, etc., are the natural or moral worship of God, whereby those in whom these exist have communion with Him. Now, these are either immediately acted on God, and not tied to any ways or means outwardly manifesting themselves, such as private prayer and the daily and constant exercise of faith and hope; or else they are farther drawn forth, in solemn prayer and praises, according unto that way which He hath appointed, namely, in the public worship of the church.

Chapter 2: The Saints Have This Communion Distinctly With the Three Persons of the Trinity

That the saints have communion with God, and what communion in general is, was declared in the first chapter. The manner how this communion is carried on, and the matter wherein it doth consist, comes next under consideration. For the first, in respect of the distinct Persons of the Godhead with whom they have this fellowship, it is either distinct and peculiar to each Person, or else obtained and exercised jointly and in common with all the divine Persons. That the saints have distinct communion with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (that is, distinctly with the Father, and distinctly with the Son, and distinctly with the Holy Spirit), and in what the peculiar appropriation of this distinct communion unto the several persons doth consist, must, in the first place, be made manifest.

But first I shall give some observations, necessary to be previously considered. When I assign anything as peculiar wherein we distinctly hold communion with a certain divine Person, I do not exclude the other Persons from communion with the soul in the very same thing. For example, when I say that our communion with the Father is peculiarly in love, I do not exclude our communing with the Son and the Spirit in love, but rather assert that the Father takes the preeminence in this respect. In the same manner, creation is usually assigned to the Father, redemption to the Son, etc., even though all the divine Persons are involved in all these works.

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Furthermore, in each act of communion with a particular divine Person all other Persons are active. Let us take the act of faith. It is bestowed on us by the Father: "It is not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). It is the Father that revealeth the gospel, and Christ therein (Matt. 11:25). Yet this faith is purchased for us by the Son: "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him ..." (Phil. 1:29). Christ bestows faith on us, and increaseth it in us (Luke 17:5). And this faith is wrought in us by the Spirit; He administers that "exceeding greatness of his power," which He exerciseth towards them who believe, "according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead" (Eph. 1:19-20; Rom. 8:11).

All Three Divine Persons Are Distinctly Involved in This Communion

Having given some preliminary considerations, I will now proceed to prove that our communion with God occurs with each of the divine Persons distinctly.

In I John 5:7 the apostle tells us, "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost." In heaven they are, and bear witness to us. And what is it that they bear witness unto? Unto the sonship of Christ, and the salvation of believers in His blood. Of the carrying on of that, both by blood and water, justification and sanctification, is the apostle there treating. Now, how do they bear witness hereunto? As three distinct Witnesses. When God witnesseth concerning our salvation, surely it is incumbent on us to receive His testimony. And as He beareth witness, so are we to receive it. Now this is done distinctly: the Father beareth witness, the Son beareth witness, and the Holy Spirit beareth witness; for they are three distinct Witnesses. So, then, are we to receive their several testimonies: and in doing so we have communion with each of them; for in this giving and receiving of testimony consists a large part of our fellowship with God.

Furthermore, in I Corinthians 12:4-6, the apostle, speaking of the distribution of gifts and graces unto the saints, ascribes them distinctly, according to the source of their communication, unto each of the three Persons. "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit ... that one and the self-same Spirit;" that is, the Holy Ghost, verse 11. "And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord," the same Lord Jesus, verse 5. "And there are diversities

of operations, but it is the same God,” etc., even the Father, verse 6. In this manner graces and gifts are bestowed, and so are they received.

And not only in the emanation of grace from God, and the falling of the Spirit on us, but also in all our approaches unto God, is the same distinction observed. “For through him [i.e., Christ] we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2:18). Our access unto God (wherein we have communion with Him) is through Christ, in the Spirit, unto the Father; the Persons being here considered as engaged distinctly unto the accomplishment of the counsel of the will of God revealed in the gospel.

All Our Acts of Communion Are Directed to Each of the Three Divine Persons

As was previously mentioned, we have communion with God when we exercise faith, love, obedience, hope, etc. The Scripture doth distinctly assign all of these unto the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. Thus, all of these acts of communion are directed not only toward God in general, but to each of the divine Persons distinctly as follows.

To the Father. Faith, love, obedience, etc., are peculiarly and distinctly yielded by the saints unto Him; and He is peculiarly manifested in those ways as acting peculiarly towards them: which should draw them forth and stir them up thereunto. He gives testimony unto, and beareth witness of, His Son, I John 5:9: “This is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son.” In His bearing witness He is an object of belief. When He gives testimony (which He doth as the Father, because He doth it of the Son), He is to be received in it by faith. And this is affirmed, verse 10: “He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself.” To believe on the Son of God in this place, is to receive the Lord Christ as the Son, the Son given unto us, for all the ends of the Father’s love, upon the credit of the Father’s testimony. So it follows in the next words, “he that believeth not God” (that is, the Father, who bears witness to the Son) “hath made him a liar” (v. 10). “Ye believe in God,” saith our Saviour (John 14:1), that is, the Father as such, for He adds, “Believe also in me;” or, “Believe you in God; believe also in me.” It is true that God, as the *prima veritas*, upon whose authority is founded all truth, and whereunto all divine faith is ultimately resolved, does not refer exclusively to only one divine

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Person, but comprehends rather the whole Deity. But in this particular instance it is the testimony and authority of the Father (as the First Person) that is on the foreground, of which we speak, and whereupon faith is distinctly fixed on Him; if it were not so, the Son could not add, "Believe also in me." The like also is said of love in I John 2:15, "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him;" that is, the love which we bear to Him, not that which we receive from Him. The Father is here placed as the object of our love, in opposition to the world.

Farther: these graces as acted in prayer and praises, and as clothed with instituted worship, are peculiarly directed unto Him. "Ye call on the Father" (I Pet. 1:17). Or Ephesians 3:14-15: "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." Bowing the knee compriseth the whole worship of God, both that which is moral, in the universal obedience which He requireth, and those peculiar ways of carrying it on which are by Him appointed. The workings, then, of the Spirit of grace in that duty are distinctly directed to the Father as such, as the fountain of the Deity, and of all good things in Christ, as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." And therefore the same apostle doth, in another place, expressly conjoin, and yet as expressly distinguish, the Father and the Son in directing his supplications: "Now God himself and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our way unto you" (I Thess. 3:11). The like precedent, also, have you of thanksgiving in Ephesians 1:3: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is so also in reference unto the Son. In John 14:1 Christ says, "Ye believe in God, believe also in me." In other words, "Believe also, act faith distinctly on me; faith divine, supernatural, that faith whereby you believe in God, that is, the Father." The distinct affixing of faith and confidence on the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God, as the Son of God, is most frequently pressed. John 3:16: "God" (that is, the Father) "so loved the world ... that whosoever believeth in him" (that is, the Son) "should not perish." The Son, who is given of the Father, is believed on. "He that believeth on him is not condemned" (verse 18). "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life" (verse 36). "This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent" (John 6:29, 40; I John 5:10). The foundation of the whole is laid in John 5:23: "That all men should

honour the Son, even as they honour the Father. He that honoureth not the Son honoureth not the Father which hath sent him.” For love, I shall only add that solemn apostolical benediction in Ephesians 6:24: “Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity,” that is, with divine love, the love of religious worship; which is the only incorrupt love of the Lord Jesus.

Farther: that faith, hope, and love, acting themselves in all manner of obedience and appointed worship, are peculiarly due from the saints, and distinctly directed unto the Son, is abundantly manifest from that solemn doxology in Revelation 1:5-6: “Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” Which yet is set forth with more glory in chapter 5 verse 8: “The four beasts, and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints;” and verses 13-14, “And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.” The Father and the Son (He that sits upon the throne, and the Lamb) are held out jointly, yet distinctly, as the adequate object of all divine worship and honour, for ever and ever. And therefore Stephen, in his solemn dying invocation, fixeth his faith and hope distinctly on Him: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit;” and, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge;” for he knew that the Son of man had power to forgive sins also (Atcs 7:59-60). And this worship of the Lord Jesus the apostle makes the discriminating character of the saints (I Cor. 1:2): “With all,” saith he, “that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours;” that is, with all the saints of God. And invocation generally comprises the whole worship of God. This, then, is the duty owed to our Mediator, though as God, the Son; not as Mediator.

Thus also is it in reference unto the Holy Spirit of grace. The closing of the great sin of unbelief is still described as an opposition unto, and a resisting of that Holy Spirit. And you have distinct mention of the love of the Spirit in Romans 15:30. The apostle also peculiarly directs his supplication to Him in that solemn benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of

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God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all” (II Cor. 13:14). And such benedictions are originally supplications. He is likewise entitled unto all instituted worship, from the appointment of the administration of baptism in His name (Matt. 28:19).

Now, of the things which have been delivered this is the sum: there is no grace whereby our souls go forth unto God, no act of divine worship yielded unto Him, duty or obedience performed, but they are distinctly directed unto each of Father, Son, and Spirit. Now, by these and such like ways as these, do we hold communion with God; and therefore we have that communion distinctly, as hath been described.

All God’s Acts of Communing With Us Involve All of the Divine Persons Individually

This also may farther appear, if we consider how distinctly the Persons of the Deity are revealed to act in the giving of those good things, wherein the saints have communion with God, such as grace and peace. As all the spiritual ascendings of saints’ souls, such as faith, hope, and love, are assigned unto the three Persons respectively, so all the saints’ internal receiving of the communications of God unto them are held out in such a distribution as points at distinct sources and fountains of these blessings unto us. Now this is declared in two ways.

First, when the same thing is, at the same time, ascribed jointly and yet distinctly to all the persons in the Deity, and respectively to each of them. So are grace and peace in Revelation 1:4-5: “Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness.” The seven Spirits before the throne are the Holy Spirit of God, considered as the perfect fountain of every perfect gift and dispensation. All are here joined together, and yet all mentioned as distinguished in their communication of grace and peace unto the saints. “Grace and peace be unto you, from the Father, and from,” etc.

Second, when the same thing is attributed severally and singly unto each Person. There is, indeed, no gracious influence from above, no falling of light,

life, love, or grace upon our hearts, but proceedeth in such a manner. I shall give only one instance, which is very comprehensive, and may be thought to comprise all other particulars; and this is teaching. The teaching of God is the real communication of all and every particular emanation from Himself unto the saints whereof they are made partakers. That promise, “They shall be all taught of God,” inwraps in itself the whole mystery of grace, as to its actual being given unto us, so far as we may be made real possessors of it. Now this teaching is assigned to the three divine Persons as follows.

The accomplishment of that promise is peculiarly referred to the Father in John 6:45: “It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me.” This teaching, whereby we are translated from death unto life, brought unto Christ, unto a participation of life and love in Him, is of and from the Father: Him we hear, of Him we learn, by Him are we brought into union and communion with the Lord Jesus. This is His drawing us, His begetting us anew of His own will, by His Spirit; and in which work He employs the ministers of the gospel (Acts 26:17-18).

Regarding the Son, the Father proclaims Him from heaven to be the great teacher, in that solemn charge to hear Him, which came once and again from the excellent glory: “This is my beloved Son; hear him.” The whole of His prophetic office, and no small part of His kingly office, consists in this teaching. Herein is He said to draw men unto Him, as the Father is said to do in His teaching (John 12:32), which He doth with such efficacy that “the dead hear his voice and live.” The teaching of the Son is a life-giving, a Spirit-breathing teaching; an effectual influence of light, whereby He shines into darkness; a communication of life, quickening the dead; an opening of blind eyes, and changing of hard hearts; a pouring out of the Spirit, with all the fruits thereof. Hence He claims it as His privilege to be the sole master: “One is your Master, even Christ” (Matt. 23:10).

As to the Spirit, John 14:26 says, “He [i.e., the Comforter] shall teach you all things.” “But the anointing which ye have received of him,” saith the apostle, “abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him” (I John 2:27). That teaching unction

which is not only true, but truth itself, is the Holy Spirit of God Himself: so that He teacheth also; being given unto us “that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God” (I Cor. 2:12). I have chosen this special instance because, as I told you, it is comprehensive, and comprises in itself most of the particulars that might be added, such as quickening, preserving, etc.

This, then, farther drives on the truth that lies under demonstration; there being such a distinct communication of grace from the several Persons of the Deity, the saints must needs have distinct communion with them.

How the Three Divine Persons Are Each Uniquely Involved in God’s Communion With Man

It remaineth only to intimate, in a word, wherein this distinction lies, and what is the ground thereof. Now, this is, that the Father doth it by the way of original authority; the Son by the way of communicating from a purchased treasury; the Holy Spirit by the way of immediate efficacy.

The Father communicates all grace by the way of original authority: He quickeneth whom He will (John 5:21). “Of his own will begat he us” (James 1:18). Life-giving power is, in respect of original authority, invested in the Father by the way of eminency; and therefore, in sending of the quickening Spirit, Christ is said to do it from the Father, or the Father Himself to do it. “But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send” (John 14:26). “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father” (John 15:26); though He be also said to send Him Himself, on another account (John 16:7).

The Son, by the way of making out a purchased treasury: “And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace” (John 1:16). And whence is this fulness? “It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell” (Col. 1:19). And upon what account He hath the dispensation of that fulness to Him committed you may see from Philippians 2:8-11. And with this fulness He hath also authority for the communication of it (John 5:25-27; Matt. 28:18).

The Spirit doth it by the way of immediate efficacy: “But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in

you” (Rom. 8:11). Here are all three comprised, with their distinct concurrence unto our quickening. Here is the Father’s authoritative quickening, “He raised Christ from the dead, and he shall quicken you;” and the Son’s mediatory quickening, for it is done in “the death of Christ;” and the Spirit’s immediate efficacy, “He shall do it by the Spirit that dwelleth in you.”

And thus is the distinct communion whereof we treat both proved and demonstrated. Next, we will discuss the saints’ communion with the Father.

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