

Doctrine of the Trinity Part 2-Communion with the Triune God

Why the Doctrine of the Trinity Matters...

- 1. The Bible, God's inspired, inerrant, infallible word clearly reveals God as Triune...** *"the greatest proof of the doctrine of the Trinity is that the authors of the New Testament could hardly explain the Gospel without it," (Ryan McGraw)*
- 2. Christianity is at its very heart Triune, and is distinguished from all other faiths as Triune...** *"Without the Trinity the gospel disappears...We should love the doctrine of the Trinity!...the Triune God is the only Savior. We should cherish this doctrine, study it in the Holy Scriptures, meditate upon it until it inflames our hearts, and teach and defend it with all the resources of the church." (Joel Beeke)*
- 3. God's work of redemption is integrally Triune...** *"it is not sufficient to salvation to have a vague or unbiblical view of God to be saved...we must hold and believe that God the Father is our Father, the Son our Redeemer, the Holy Ghost our Sanctifier and Comforter." (William Perkins)*
- 4. The believer truly has communion with the Triune God...**

"The full original title of Puritan John Owen's treatise is revealing: 'Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace and Consolation.' By grace alone, reconciled sinners are invited to enjoy communion with God, sharing personal communion individually with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We enjoy the Father's love, the Son's grace, and the Spirit's consolation."

Tony Reinke

Communion with God

Charles R Biggs

Have you taken time to commune with God today? Have you beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ by faith? Have you sought the Spirit of God so that you might glorify God in all you do and say today? Are you growing in His power and grace?

“Get communion with God. Your strength to stand, and your strength to withstand all assaults—is from your communion with God. Communion with God is that which will make you stand fast, and triumph over all enemies, difficulties, dangers and deaths. Communion with God will make a person as courageous and bold as a lion....

Communion with God is a reciprocal exchange between Christ and a gracious (grace-filled) soul. Communion with God is Jacob’s ladder, where you have Christ sweetly descending down into the soul, and the soul by divine influences sweetly ascending up to Christ. Communion with God is a shield upon land, and an anchor at sea; it is a sword to defend you, and a staff to support you; it is a balm to heal you, and a cordial to strengthen you.

High communion with Christ will yield you two heavens, a heaven upon earth, and a heaven after death. He enjoys nothing, who lacks communion with God; he lacks nothing, who enjoys communion with God; therefore above all gettings, get communion with Christ, and above all keepings, keep communion with Christ. All other losses are not comparable to the loss of communion with Christ.”-

Thomas Brooks

Psalm 27:4... Have you gazed upon the beauty of the LORD today as He is made sweetly known to you in Christ? Spend time with Him; he calls you near.

Excerpts from A PURITAN THEOLOGY...John Owen on Communion with the Triune God

Joel Beeke and Mark Jones

Sinclair Ferguson wrote that in Owen’s theology, “the Christian life is nothing less than fellowship with God the Trinity, leading to the full assurance of faith.” What did Owen mean by communion or fellowship with God? It is the mutual exchange of spiritual benefits between God and His people based on the bond between them in Christ.

Ian Hamilton commented, “In communion, God gives Himself to His people, and they give to Him what He requires and accepts—their love, trust, obedience, and faithfulness.” Owen carefully distinguished between ***union with Christ (the unchangeable relationship of our salvation) and communion with God (the variable experience of that relationship).***

Owen embraced this idea of enjoying the Trinity and amplified it through the concept of distinct communion with each divine person.

Owen found scriptural support for “distinct communion” in such texts as John 14:23; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 12:4–6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 John 1:3; 5:7; and Revelation 3:20.

J. I. Packer explained, “Communion with God is a relationship in which Christians receive love from, and respond in love to, all three persons of the Trinity.” Believers should relate to each person of the Godhead in a distinctly personal way.

The theme of communion with God was critically important to Owen’s generation of Puritan divines. Their preoccupation with the subject of communion between God and His people was not an attempt to humanize God or to deify man, however. Rather, Owen and his colleagues wanted to explain, within a trinitarian framework, how God deals with needy sinners.

Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) wrote of an intimate connection between assurance of faith and communion with the Trinity:

“Sometimes a man’s communion and converse is with the one, sometimes with the other; sometimes with the Father, then with the Son, and then with the Holy Ghost; sometimes his heart is drawn out to consider the Father’s love in choosing, and then the love of Christ in redeeming, and so again the love of the Holy Ghost, that searcheth the deep things of God, and revealeth them to us, and taketh all the pains with us; and so a man goes from one witness to another distinctly.... We should never be satisfied till all three persons lie level in us, and all make their abode with us, and we sit as it were in the midst of them, while they all manifest their love unto us.”

For Owen, communion between a believer and any person of the Trinity represented a living relationship of mutual exchange. This mutual communication must be in and through Christ, for without Christ no communion between God and man can exist. Dewey Wallace wrote that, for Owen, all such “communion is entered only through the ‘door’ of ‘grace and pardoning mercy,’ purchased for the elect by the merit of Christ.”..He said fellowship, or 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.”

Owen taught distinct roles or economies for the Father, Son, and Spirit. He said the First Person, the Father, is initiator, who chooses whom He will save, and how.

The Second Person is the Son and Word of God, who images the Father’s nature and does His will as Mediator to redeem sinners. The Third Person proceeds from the first two as their executive, conveying to God’s elect their sure salvation.

Since all three persons are active in salvation, conferring distinct benefits according to their roles, the believer should distinctly acknowledge each person.

Distinct Communion with God in Three Persons

In formulating the distinct manner of communion believers enjoy with each person of the Trinity, Owen drew upon 2 Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.”

Communion with the Father: Love

The saints have particular communion with the Father in “his love—free, undeserved, and eternal love” (1 John 4:8–10; 2 Cor. 13:14; John 16:26–27; Rom. 5:5–6). The Father’s love is “the fountain from whence all other sweetnesses flow,” and the source of all grace. **Owen highlighted the sovereign, divine quality of the Father’s love as exalted above all human love, describing it in these ways:**

Eternal. It was fixed on us before the foundation of the world. Before we were, or had done the least good, then were his thoughts upon us.

Free. He loves us because he will; there was, there is, nothing in us for which we should be beloved.

Unchangeable. Though we change every day, yet his love changeth not.

Distinguishing. He hath not thus loved all the world.... Why should he fix his love on us, and pass by millions from whom we differ not by nature...?

Thus, Owen said, the Father's love is different from ours, even our spiritual love for Him. Owen wrote, "It is the love of him who is in himself all-sufficient, infinitely satiated with himself and his own glorious excellencies and perfections; who hath no need to go forth with his love unto others, nor to seek an object of it without [outside] himself.... He had his Son, also, his eternal Wisdom, to rejoice and delight himself in from all eternity." The Father does not love the saints out of loneliness or need, but out of his abundant all-sufficiency and joy in His Son.

The Father's love is "a love of bounty," but our love for God is "a love of duty." The love of the Father is "antecedent love," always going before ours; our love for the Father is "consequent love," always our response to Him. Even when God rebukes and disciplines His children, He loves them the same. "What then?" Owen anticipated the objection, "loves he his people in their sinning? Yes; his people, not their sinning."

Careful not to present Christ's love as winning over a reluctant Father's love, Owen insisted that divine love has its deepest roots in the bosom of the Father. The Father delights to bestow divine love on the elect (Phil. 1:28), Owen said. And Scripture's references to the love of God most frequently mean the love of the Father.

For Owen, the love of the Father is the impetus for the whole plan of salvation, including his sending of the Son. The Father's love calls for a response in believers "to complete communion with the Father in love" by receiving his love and making "suitable returns unto him." They receive it "by faith".

Looking to the Son we see the Father, as we see the sun by the beams of light which shine from it. Owen wrote, “Jesus Christ in respect of the love of the Father, is but the beam, the stream, wherein though actually all our light, our refreshment lies, yet by him we are led to the fountain, the sun of eternal love itself [i.e., the Father]. ***Thus believers are always to trust the Father as benign, kind, tender, loving, and unchangeable therein . . . as the Father, as the great fountain and spring of all gracious communications and fruits of love.***”

When the Christian encounters obstacles in loving God, he must contemplate the nature of the Father’s love, Owen said. ***First, the believer must remember not to invert God’s order of love, thinking that the believer’s love comes first. Second, he should meditate on the eternal quality and unchangeableness of the Father’s love. Third, he should remember that the cross of Christ is the sign and seal of God’s love, assuring him that the Father’s antecedent love wins his consequent love through the Mediator. He who returns to the Father with such meditations will find assurance of the Father’s love.***

Communion with the Son: Grace

How do the saints enjoy communion with Christ? Owen turns again to 2 Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.” ***Whereas believers commune with the Father in love, they commune with the Son in “grace.”*** Christ is the Mediator of the new covenant, and the new covenant is the covenant of grace. Grace is in Him and everywhere ascribed to Him (John 1:14). The believer receives grace by receiving Christ. As John 1:16 says, “Of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.” ***Christ’s mission is the essence of grace.***

Christ invites believers to commune with Him. Owen quoted the words of Christ, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20).

Owen analyzed the grace of Christ more specifically in terms of, first, “personal grace,” focusing on the person of Christ and, second, “purchased grace,” focusing on the work of Christ.

Communion with Christ in His Personal Grace...

By “personal grace,” Owen did not mean Christ’s deity considered abstractly or the physical appearance of His human body, but **the spiritual beauty of the God-man as our grace-filled Mediator (cf. Ps. 45:2).**

Christ woos and wins His bride in an ever-deepening relationship. In this spiritual marriage, believers guard their enjoyment of Christ by guarding their hearts against resting in anything other than “the Lord Our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:6). **Owen wrote, “This does he who hath communion with Christ: he watcheth daily and diligently over his own heart that nothing creep into its affections to give it any peace or establishment before God, but Christ only.”**

Communion with Christ in His Purchased Grace...

Purchased grace for Owen is “all that righteousness and grace which Christ hath procured . . .by any thing that he hath done or suffered, or by any thing he continueth to do as mediator.”

In particular, “purchased grace” consists of the three graces of (1) “acceptation with God” (justification), (2) “sanctification from God,” and (3) “privileges with and before God” (adoption and its benefits). To purchase our acceptance with God, Christ obeyed not for His own sake but for us; He suffered not for His own sins but for ours. Presently Christ offers the “very precious” promises of the gospel in “much kindness,” and sends His Holy Spirit so that the dead hear His voice and live.

The saints respond by grieving over sin, abandoning hope in their own righteousness, rejoicing in Christ's righteousness, and consciously exchanging the one for the other.

They look to His blood shed at Calvary not only for atonement but also for purification from all uncleanness; they look to His blood sprinkled on their souls through the promises; and they look to His Spirit to dwell in them, continually to quicken or vivify them, and act through them in every holy motion of the soul.

Through Christ the Christian experiences liberty from sin's penalty and its enslaving power. He also experiences liberty in his new family privileges such as the lively power to obey with delight, the rights to the ordinances of the household of faith, the hope of a future inheritance, the provision of a loving Father, boldness with God, and correction through fatherly discipline. **Though adoption is an act of God the Father (1 John 3:1), Owen included it under communion with Christ because the believer obtains adoption by union with Christ.**

Owen wrote that with the Son of God we have the following:

Fellowship in name...we are (as he is) sons of God

Fellowship in title and right...we are heirs, co-heirs with Christ

Fellowship in likeness and conformity...we are predestinated to be like the firstborn of the family

Fellowship in honour...he is not ashamed to call us brethren

Fellowship in sufferings...he learned obedience by what he suffered, and every son is to be scourged that is received

Fellowship in his kingdom...we shall reign with him.

Two-thirds of Owen's treatise on communion with God is taken up with the topic of distinct communion with the Son. Though all communion between God and man involves all three divine persons, the Son is especially prominent. This fits with Owen's understanding of the Son as the appointed Mediator in the covenant.

Christ is the God-man, and all communion with God was purchased by Him and is mediated through Him alone.

“Upon the payment of the great price of his blood, and full acquittal on the satisfaction he made, all grace whatsoever becomes, in a moral sense, his, at his disposal; and he bestows it on, or works it in, the hearts of his by the Holy Ghost, according as, in his infinite wisdom, he sees it needful. How glorious is he to the soul on this consideration!

That is most excellent to us, which is suits us in a wanting condition – that which gives bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty, mercy to the perishing. All our reliefs are thus in our Beloved. Here is the life of our soul, the joy of our hearts, our relief against sin and deliverance from the wrath to come.”

Communion with the Spirit: Comfort

Owen wrote, The foundation of all our communion with the Holy Ghost [consists] in his mission, or sending to be our comforter, by Jesus Christ.”

Owen understood the title *parakletos* to mean “comforter,” Christ’s answer to the disciples’ sorrow over His imminent departure (John 16:6–7).

Though the elect experience the Spirit’s regeneration passively as so many dry bones (Ezek. 37:1–14), believers put their trust in the promises of the comfort of the Spirit and pray for Him and His work in them (Gal. 3:2, 14; John 7:37–39; Luke 11:13). Thus **believers have a responsibility to seek the Spirit.**

Owen identified nine ways in which the Spirit communes with the believer:

(1) the Spirit helps the believer remember the words of Christ and teaches what they mean; (2) the Spirit glorifies Christ; (3) He pours out the love of God in the Christian’s heart; (4) He witnesses to the believer that he is a child of God; (5) He seals faith in the Christian; (6) as the earnest of our inheritance, He assures the believer of salvation; (7) He anoints the believer; (8) as the indwelling Spirit He sheds the love of God abroad in the believer’s heart; and (9) He becomes to him the Spirit of supplication. These works of the Holy Spirit produce consolation, peace, joy, and hope in believers.

One example of the work of the Spirit is His witness in “the court of conscience,” testifying that the believer is a child of God (Rom. 8:16). Owen described this by way of the drama of court-room prosecution and defense:

The soul, by the power of its own conscience, is brought before the law of God. There a man puts in his plea, that he is a child of God, that he belongs to God's family; and for this end produceth all his evidences, every thing whereby faith gives him an interest in God. Satan, in the meantime, opposeth with all his might; sin and law assist him; many flaws are found in his evidences; the truth of them all is questioned; and the soul hangs in suspense as to the issue. **In the midst of the plea and contest the Comforter comes, and, by a word of promise or otherwise, overpowers the heart with a comfortable persuasion (and bears down all objections) that his plea is good, and that he is a child of God.... When our spirits are pleading their right and title, he comes in and bears witness on our side; at the same time enabling us to put forth acts of filial obedience, kind and child-like; which is called "crying, Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6).**

Consider also Owen's description of how the Holy Spirit is an earnest to the believer (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13–14). **Owen defined an earnest as "part of the price of any thing, or part of any grant, given beforehand to assure the person to whom it is given that at the appointed season he shall receive the whole that is promised him."** God gives believers the Holy Spirit as the earnest of their inheritance of eternal life. Owen explained, The full inheritance promised, is the fullness of the Spirit in the enjoyment of God."

The Spirit is given to us now "for the fitting of us for enjoyment of God in some measure," thus a portion and foretaste of our inheritance. In the Holy Spirit, our present grace is integral with our future glory.

Given all the manifold work of the Holy Spirit in God's elect, what does it mean to have communion with the Spirit? What is the essence of His consolation and comfort? The Spirit comforts believers by bringing them into fellowship with the Father and the Son. **Owen wrote,**

All the consolations of the Holy Ghost consist in his acquainting us with, and communicating unto us, the love of the Father and the grace of the Son; nor is there any thing in the one or the other but he makes it a matter of consolation to us: so that, indeed, we have our communion with the Father in his love, and the Son in his grace, by the operation of the Holy Ghost.

Owen said that God’s grace descends to us from the Father, through the Son, and finally in the Holy Spirit’s work within us.

In this way, the Holy Spirit communes with believers according to the promise of the Lord Jesus in John 16:14–15: “He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you.” Owen explained this text: “Thus, then, is he a comforter. He reveals to the souls of sinners the good things of the covenant of grace, which the Father hath provided, and the Son purchased.” Owen presented three general ways a man should respond to the Spirit. He should not “grieve” the Spirit (Eph. 4:30; Isa. 63:10), but instead “pursue universal holiness” to please Him. Neither should he “quench” the Spirit’s gracious operations in his soul (1 Thess. 5:19), but be “careful and watchful to improve them all to the end aimed at.” Finally, he should not “resist” (Acts 7:51) the Spirit’s “great ordinance of the word,” but instead humbly subject himself to the gospel ministry of the church—that is, “fall low before the word.”

In this way, the believer offers a depth of submission to the Holy Spirit that can only be called true worship.

In conclusion, consider these words by Owen concerning our fellowship with the Spirit,

“His work we look for, his fruits we pray for; and when any effect of grace, any discovery of the image of Christ implanted in us, gives us a persuasion of our being separated and set apart for God, we have a communion with him therein”

Conclusion: The Sweetness of a Personal Relationship with the Trinity..

The Trinity is therefore a doctrine to be savored in personal Christian experience.

Packer aptly summarized Owen’s teaching by writing, “This, then, according to Owen, should be the pattern of our regular communion with the three persons of the Godhead, in meditation, prayer, and a duly ordered life. We should dwell on the special mercy and ministry of each person towards us, and make our proper response of love and communion distinctly to each. Thus we are to maintain a full-orbed communion with God.”