

A PURITAN  
THEOLOGY

# A PURITAN THEOLOGY

*Doctrine for Life*

JOEL R. BEEKE

AND

MARK JONES



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## Chapter 6

# John Owen on Communion with the Triune God

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*The saints have distinct communion with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

—JOHN OWEN<sup>1</sup>

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was foundational for the theology of John Owen (1616–1683)—as Richard Muller observed to be true among orthodox Reformed theologians generally. Owen asserted that if you take away the doctrine of the Trinity, “the foundation of all fruits of love and goodness is lost to the soul.”<sup>2</sup> Sinclair Ferguson calls Owen “a deeply Trinitarian theologian.”<sup>3</sup> Carl Trueman writes, “Throughout his works—whether those dealing with God, redemption, or justification—the doctrine of the Trinity is always foundational.”<sup>4</sup>

What did John Owen mean by the Trinity? In his lesser catechism, Owen wrote, “Q. *Is there but one God?* A. One only, in respect of his essence and being, but one in three distinct persons, of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.”<sup>5</sup> In his greater catechism, Owen defined “person” as “a distinct manner of subsistence or being, distinguished from the other persons by its own properties.” These distinguishing properties he gave as:

- The Father is the “only fountain of the Godhead (John 5:26, 27; Eph. 1:3).”<sup>6</sup>
- The Son is “begotten of his Father from eternity (Ps. 2:7; John 1:14; 3:16).”
- The Spirit is said “to proceed from the Father and the Son (John 14:17; 16:14; 15:26; 20:22).”<sup>7</sup>

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1. John Owen, *Communion with God*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 2:9. Portions of this chapter have been adapted from Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 173–87; and Paul M. Smalley, “Sweet Mystery: John Owen on the Trinity,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3, no. 1 (2011): 81–112.

2. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Trinity of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 145, 148.

3. Sinclair Ferguson, “John Owen and the Doctrine of the Person of Christ,” in *John Owen: The Man and His Theology*, ed. Robert W. Oliver (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2002), 82.

4. Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 124.

5. Owen, *Two Short Catechisms*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 1:467.

6. Owen often referred to the Father as the “fount” or “fountain” in the Godhead, but not as the “cause” of the other divine persons. In this regard he stood in the same tradition as Thomas Aquinas and the Latin fathers as opposed to Athanasius, Basil, and Theodoret. Aquinas recognized that the language of “cause” could imply that the Son was created, whereas “fount” indicated identical substance. Muller, *Post-Reformation*, 4:46.

7. Owen, *Two Short Catechisms*, in *Works*, 1:472.

In another place, Owen summarized the doctrine of the Trinity as follows: “that God is one; that this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that the Father is the Father of the Son; and the Son, the Son of the Father; and the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of the Father and the Son; and that, in respect of this their mutual relations, they are distinct from each other.”<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the three divine persons, he wrote, “they are distinct, living, divine, intelligent, voluntary principles of operation or working, and that in and by internal acts one towards another, and in acts that outwardly respect the creation and the several parts of it. Now, this distinction originally lieth in this, that the Father begetteth the Son, and the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceedeth from both of them.”<sup>9</sup>

Though Owen defended the doctrine of the Trinity at length,<sup>10</sup> he did not regard it as merely a matter of disputation or confessional fidelity. Carl Trueman wrote, “Owen demonstrates that most delightful aspect of precritical theology: its essentially ecclesiastical and practical purpose.... It was theology done within the church for the benefit of the church.”<sup>11</sup> Trueman observed that this was especially true of the doctrine of the Trinity: “the Trinity stood at the heart of Christian soteriology and thus must stand at the heart of Christian worship as well.”<sup>12</sup>

God had revealed Himself as the Trinity so that men might walk with Him in obedience, love, fear, and happiness as He required of them.<sup>13</sup> Whereas the Remonstrants viewed the Trinity as a doctrine neither fundamental nor profitable,<sup>14</sup> Owen saw it as both fundamental to saving faith and very profitable for the spiritual experience of believers. For Owen viewed Christian experience as communion with the mysterious God, and so his theology was, in Robert Letham’s words, “a superb example of a synthesis of metatheoretical constructs, catholic exegesis and dogma, and practical pastoral piety.”<sup>15</sup> It is likely that Owen influenced the Savoy Declaration (1658) where it added to the text of the Westminster Confession (2.3) this statement: “Which Doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our Communion with God, and comfortable Dependence upon him.”<sup>16</sup>

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.”<sup>17</sup> 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. Owen wrote,

Now, communion is the mutual communication of such good things as wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted, bottomed upon some union between them.... Our communion, then, with God consisteth in his communication

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8. Owen, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity as also of the Person and Satisfaction of Christ*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 2:377.

9. Owen, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, in *Works*, 2:405.

10. Owen, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, in *Works*, 2:366–419; *Vindiciae Evangelicae; or, The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated and Socinianism Examined*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 12:169–333.

11. Trueman, *John Owen*, 128.

12. Trueman, *John Owen*, 123.

13. Owen, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, in *Works*, 2:378, 406.

14. Muller, *Post-Reformation*, 4:154–55.

15. Robert Letham, “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Trinity in Its Catholic Context and Its Significance for Today,” in *Where Reason Fails* (London: Westminster Conference, 2006), 14.

16. Savoy Declaration, chap. 2, sec. 3, cited in Kelly M. Kopic, *Communion with God: The Divine and the Human in the Theology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 156.

17. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 74.

of himself to 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.”<sup>19</sup> Owen carefully distinguished between union with Christ (the unchangeable relationship of our salvation) and communion with God (the variable experience of that relationship).<sup>20</sup>

Owen picked up on a theme found in Augustine, namely, communion as the “enjoyment,” or possession of and delighting in the *triune* God. In Augustine’s “On Christian Doctrine,” one chapter is titled, “The Trinity the true object of enjoyment.” There, Augustine wrote, “The true objects of enjoyment, then, are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are at the same time the Trinity, one Being, supreme above all, and common to all who enjoy Him.”<sup>21</sup>

Owen embraced this idea of enjoying the Trinity and amplified it through the concept of distinct communion with each divine person.<sup>22</sup> 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. Sinclair Ferguson wrote of Owen’s use of such passages, that “Owen adds the axiom that all the activity of faith has reference to one distinct person of the Trinity, as do all receptions of grace. This is what he means by fellowship or communion. Thus the Father communicates by original authority, the Son from a purchased treasury, and the Spirit in immediate efficacy. This is the classical doctrine of *Appropriations*.”<sup>23</sup> Owen carefully guarded the unity of the Godhead by clarifying that distinct communion is not exclusive communion with any one person, but communion primarily *appropriated* by that person according to his distinct property and role.<sup>24</sup>

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.”<sup>25</sup> In this regard, Owen avoided the problematic tendency of Christians especially in the West to stress the “undifferentiated Godhead” over against relating to each of the persons of the Trinity.<sup>26</sup> Rather than trying to relate to an impersonal essence or, worse, an abstract collection of attributes, believers should relate to each person of the Godhead in a distinctly personal way.

Owen developed his view of communion with the Trinity at some length in one particular treatise known as *Communion with God* (1657). In this chapter, we will examine this treatise in its historical and theological setting and then explore Owen’s specific teaching on communion with each divine person of the Trinity.

18. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:8.

19. Ian Hamilton, “Communion with God,” in *Reformed Spirituality*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa Jr. and J. Andrew Wortman (Taylors, S. C.: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2003), 63.

20. Kelly M. Kopic, “Communion with God by John Owen (1616–1683),” in *The Devoted Life: An Invitation to the Puritan Classics*, ed. Kelly M. Kopic and Randall C. Gleason (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 169.

21. Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine” (1.5), in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, ed. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), 9:10.

22. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:9.

23. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 75–76.

24. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:18–19.

25. J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990), 204. Cf. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:10–16.

26. Kopic, *Communion with God*, in *The Devoted Life*, 148.

### ***Communion with God in Historical Context***

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.<sup>27</sup> Rather, Owen and his colleagues wanted to explain, within a trinitarian framework, how God deals with needy sinners. The divines were not so much concerned with religious experience as an end in itself as they were with religious experience as a revelation of God and His astonishing grace. Packer rightly states, "In modern spiritual autobiography [for example], the hero and chief actor is usually the writer himself; he is the centre of interest, and God comes in only as a part of his story. His theme is in effect 'I—and God.' But in Puritan autobiography, God is at the centre throughout. He, not the writer, is the focus of interest; the subject of the book is in effect 'God—and me.'"<sup>28</sup>

Owen's theme of communion with each of the divine persons was likewise a familiar one in Puritan literature.<sup>29</sup> In *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, for example, 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.<sup>30</sup>

However, Owen's *Communion with God* was unique in working the idea of communion with distinct persons of the Trinity into a complete systematic treatise. That is what prompted Daniel Burgess to write, "This treatise...is the only one extant upon its great and necessary subject."<sup>31</sup> Brian Kay says, "Owen breaks new ground...by showing how the Christian's devotional response to God takes on a distinctively trinitarian shape."<sup>32</sup>

*Communion with God* was favorably received from the time of its 1657 printing, but the 1674 reprinting prompted a rather inept attack from William Sherlock (c. 1641–1707).<sup>33</sup> Owen

27. Dale Arden Stover, "The Pneumatology of John Owen: A Study of the Role of the Holy Spirit in Relation to the Shape of a Theology" (PhD diss., McGill University, 1967), 304–5.

28. J. I. Packer, "The Puritan Idea of Communion with God," in *Press Toward the Mark: Papers Read at the Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 19th and 20th December, 1961* (London: n.p., 1962), 7.

29. See any Puritan commentary on the Song of Solomon (Richard Sibbes, John Dove, Nathaniel Homes, James Durham, and John Collinges). The latter wrote 909 pages on chapter 1 and 530 on chapter 2 on the communion of Christ and His church as represented by the communion of the bridegroom and his bride (John Collinges, *The Inter-courses of Divine Love betwixt Christ and the Church* [London: A. Maxwell for Tho. Parkhurst, 1676]).

30. Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, ed. Thomas Smith (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1864), 8:378–79.

31. Daniel Burgess, "To the Reader," in *Of Communion with God*, by John Owen, in *Works*, 2:4.

32. Brian K. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 113–14.

33. William Sherlock, *A Discourse Concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ and Our Union and Communion with Him* (London: J. M. for Walter Kettily, 1674). Sherlock later published other works on the Trinity as well as a very popular book, *Practical Discourse Concerning Death* (London: for W. Rogers, 1689).

responded with *A Vindication*<sup>34</sup> but seemed genuinely surprised that this work should be subject to such an attack, since it was “wholly practical, designed for popular edification, without a direct engagement into things controversial.” He added, “I do know that multitudes of persons fearing God, and desiring to walk before him in sincerity, are ready, if occasion require to give testimony unto the benefit which they received thereby.”<sup>35</sup>

*Communion with God* was popular among Dutch Reformed Christians as well. It was translated into Dutch by J. H. Hofman and published in 1717.<sup>36</sup> For many of English and Dutch descent, the work merited Daniel Burgess’s commendation: “The very highest of angel’s food is here set before thee.”<sup>37</sup> No doubt this book was also angelic food for Owen, who was at the time of its writing extremely busy serving as vice chancellor at Oxford University.<sup>38</sup>

Andrew Thomson’s criticism that Owen carried the idea of distinct communion between the believer and each of the persons of the Godhead beyond Scripture<sup>39</sup> did not do justice to Owen’s careful, biblical scholarship. Reginald Kirby’s assessment was more accurate: “Owen is but setting forth what is the experience of those who do enter into communion with God, and shows that the doctrine of the Trinity has its basis in human experience as well as Divine revelation.”<sup>40</sup>

Owen’s concept of communion with “distinct persons” was innocent of Dale Stover’s charge that “when God is known in this philosophical way, then epistemology is inevitably detached from soteriology.”<sup>41</sup> As we shall see, Owen’s *Communion with God* actually merged the knowledge of God and the history of God’s saving acts spiritually and biblically. His treatise was much more a sermon than a philosophy lecture.

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.”<sup>42</sup> From the outset, Owen established a christological focus for his trinitarian framework. 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.”<sup>43</sup> Ferguson observed that for Owen “both the union with Christ which gives the Christian his status before God, and the communion with God which is the fruit of that status, are thus subsumed under the notion of communion, and this is the sense in which Owen generally employs the expression.”<sup>44</sup>

34. Owen, *A Vindication of Some Passages in a Discourse Concerning Communion with God*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 2:275–365.

35. Owen, *Vindication... Concerning Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:277.

36. J. van der Haar, *Van Abbadie tot Young. Een Bibliografie van Engelse, veelal Puritaanse, in het Nederlands vertaalde Werken* (Veenendaal: Uitgeverij Kool, 1980), 89.

37. Burgess, “To the Reader,” in *Communion with God*, by John Owen, in *Works*, 2:4.

38. See Andrew Thomson, “Life of Dr. Owen,” in Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 1:lxvii–lxxiii; Reginald Kirby, *The Threefold Bond* (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d.), 25.

39. Thomson, “Life of Dr. Owen,” in Owen, *Works*, 1:lxvii.

40. Kirby, *Threefold Bond*, 25.

41. Stover, “The Pneumatology of John Owen,” 304.

42. Dewey D. Wallace Jr., “The Life and Thought of John Owen to 1660: A Study of the Significance of Calvinist Theology in English Puritanism” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1965), 265.

43. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:8.

44. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 75.



Owen did not stress Christ at the expense of the Father and the Spirit, however, in a false, imbalanced Christomonism. For Owen, theocentricity and Christocentricity walked together as friends, not as rivals. F. R. Entwistle noted, “It is sometimes suggested that modern, Christological theology is more honouring to Christ than the older Trinitarianism, and in such a suggestion lies its appeal to the Christian. But this is not so. Owen’s full Trinitarianism is not less honouring to Christ: to give glory to the Father and the Spirit does not detract from the glory of the Son.”<sup>45</sup> As Richard Daniels commented, “True Trinitarian thinking, it would seem, must be Christocentric, and Christocentric thinking, Trinitarian.”<sup>46</sup>

Within that framework, 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.

Repeatedly Owen taught that there is a divine economy of operation where each person takes a role in the work of God, a role that reflects the personal relations in the Trinity. The Father acts as origin, authority, fountain, initiator, and sender; the Son acts as executor of the Father’s will, treasury of His riches, foundation, worker, purchaser, and accomplisher; the Spirit acts as completer, finisher, immediate efficacy, fruit, and applier. This is not to divide God’s works and distribute them among the three persons—the external works of the Trinity are undivided—but rather to recognize that in every work of God all three persons cooperate in distinct ways.<sup>47</sup>

Since all three persons are active in salvation, conferring distinct benefits according to their roles, the believer should distinctly acknowledge each person. “There is no grace whereby our souls go forth unto God, no act of divine worship yielded to Him, no duty or obedience performed, but they are distinctly directed unto Father, Son and Spirit.”<sup>48</sup>

Having set Owen’s treatise in its context, we will next examine Owen’s specific teaching regarding communion with the triune God.

### 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 4:8–9; 2 Cor. 13:14; John 16:26–27; Rom. 5:5–6).<sup>49</sup> The Father’s love is “the fountain from whence all other sweetnesses flow,” and the source of all grace.<sup>50</sup> Owen highlighted the sovereign, divine quality of the Father’s love as exalted above all human love, describing it in these ways:

45. F. R. Entwistle, “Some Aspects of John Owen’s Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ,” in *Faith and a Good Conscience* ([London]: Puritan and Reformed Studies Conference, 1962), 51.

46. Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 5.

47. Owen, *Works*, 1:219–20; 2:15–19, 198–99, 228; 3:92–94, 393; 10:163–79.

48. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:15.

49. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:19.

50. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:22.

- “*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...?”<sup>51</sup>

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.”<sup>52</sup> 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.”<sup>53</sup>

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. Christ’s words, “The Father himself loveth you” (John 16:27), assure the believer of God the Father’s role in his salvation.<sup>54</sup> Kay writes, “The Father does not first love his people because of Christ’s mediation, rather, Christ’s mediation is the outworking of the Father’s prior love. For Owen, the love of the Father is the impetus for the whole plan of salvation, including his sending of the Son.”<sup>55</sup>

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.” Here Owen carefully qualifies his statement so as not to encourage “an immediate acting of faith upon the Father, but by the Son,” citing John 14:6.<sup>56</sup> His trinitarian theology remains Christ-centered by constantly acknowledging Christ as the only Mediator between God and man.

But 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]. The soul being thus by faith through Christ... brought unto the bosom of God, into a comfortable persuasion, and spiritual perception and sense of his love, there reposes and rests itself.” Thus believers are always to trust the Father as

51. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:33–34.

52. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:32.

53. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:28–30.

54. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:20.

55. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, 127.

56. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:22.

“benign, kind, tender, loving, and unchangeable therein... as the Father, as the great fountain and spring of all gracious communications and fruits of love.”<sup>57</sup>

In receiving the Father’s love through Christ, the believer returns the Father’s love in his heart to the heart of the Father, from whom it originated. This returned love consists of rest, delight, reverence, and obedience.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> He who returns to the Father with such meditations will find assurance of the Father’s love. As Owen wrote: “Never any one from the foundation of the world, who believed such love in the Father, and made returns of love to him again, was deceived.... If thou believest and receivest the Father as love, he will infallibly be so to thee.”<sup>60</sup> Owen’s warmth in expounding the love of the Father should explode the caricature that Reformed theology is a sterile exercise in Aristotelian logic where God’s love is marginal.<sup>61</sup>

### *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.<sup>62</sup>

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). To sit at the table with Christ, Christ enjoying His graces in the saints, and the saints feasting on Christ’s glory—this for Owen was the height of spiritual delight, worthy of the most sensual poetic expressions of the Song of Songs.<sup>63</sup> Fellowship with Christ feeds the soul with sweetness, delight, safety, and comfort.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup>

### 1. 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

57. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:23. The sun and the fountain are rare examples of Owen making use of patristic trinitarian metaphors. Cf. Kacic, *Communion with God*, 169–70.

58. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:28.

59. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:29.

60. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:36–37.

61. Kacic, *Communion with God*, 168.

62. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:47; 3:414.

63. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:40.

64. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:44.

65. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:47–48. Later in this treatise Owen referred back to the “two heads” of the grace of Christ, namely, “the grace of his person, and of his office and work.” *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:263.

Mediator (cf. Ps. 45:2).<sup>66</sup> He then proceeded to illustrate from the Song of Solomon Christ's incarnation and "fulness to save...by the unction of the Spirit" (citing John 1:16; 3:34) and "his excellency to endear, from his complete suitableness to all the wants of the souls of men."<sup>67</sup>

The saints enjoy communion with Christ in His personal grace "by the way of a conjugal relation...attended with suitable conjugal affections"—that is, as spiritual husband and wife.<sup>68</sup> It begins when "Christ gives himself to the soul," and the saints "receive, embrace, and submit unto the Lord Jesus, as their husband, Lord, and Savior."<sup>69</sup> This stirs the affections of mutual delight, mutual "valuation" (esteem). Christ's "pity, or compassion," evokes the church's response of "chastity," Christ's "bounty," the church's response of "duty" or a life of holiness.<sup>70</sup> One remarkable facet of this Puritan's teaching is his emphasis on the Lord's enjoyment of His people: "The thoughts of communion with the saints were the joy of his heart from eternity."<sup>71</sup>

Just as is true with regard to his exposition of the Father's love, Owen's treatment of communion with Christ in His personal grace should destroy any misconception of Reformed orthodoxy as an emotionally desiccated, hyper-intellectual endeavor. Kay says, "Owen wants to somehow emphasize that the forensic and covenantal actions of Christ are, in the end, in service of a personal, face-to-face dealing between two lovers, a groom and his bride."<sup>72</sup> Owen employed doctrine to stir up the affections into flames of love for Christ.

In explaining the conjugal relationship between Christ and His people, Owen drew upon the poetry of the Song of Solomon. Owen wrote of the Song, "The more general persuasion of learned men is, that the whole is one holy declaration of that mystically spiritual communion, that is between the great Bridegroom and his Spouse, the Lord Christ and his church, and every believing soul that belongs thereunto."<sup>73</sup> This is not to say that Owen based his Christology or even its experimental aspects on the Song of Solomon. Rather, he saw its poetry as illustrating the believer's experience of communion with Christ. This experience is defined by other Scriptures, especially those revealing the objective work of redemption. Ferguson noted, "He does not subjectivize Christ to the point of mysticism, but rather tries to describe the subjective experience of the objective Christ to whom the rest of Scripture bears witness."<sup>74</sup>

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."<sup>75</sup>

66. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:48.

67. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:51–52.

68. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:54. Owen cited Song of Solomon 2:16; Isaiah 54:5; 61:10; 62:5; Hosea 2:19–20; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25.

69. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:56, 58.

70. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:118. Cf. pp. 118–54 for Owen's full explanation of each element of affection.

71. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:118.

72. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, 161.

73. John Owen, "To the Reader," in *The Song of Solomon*, by James Durham (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 21.

74. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 78.

75. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:146.

## 2. 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.”<sup>76</sup> We have communion with Christ in His work because “there is almost nothing that Christ hath done, which is a spring of that grace whereof we speak, but we are said to do it with him”—whether suffering crucifixion, dying, being made alive, rising, or sitting in the heavenly places.<sup>77</sup>

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).<sup>78</sup> 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.<sup>79</sup> 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.<sup>80</sup> In this way, as Hamilton writes, they are “approving and embracing the divine way of salvation” revealed in the gospel of Christ.<sup>81</sup>

For the grace of “sanctification,” the Lord Jesus intercedes with the Father to obtain the Holy Spirit for His own on the basis of His purchase, and sends forth that Spirit into the hearts of the saints to produce in them habitual grace and every actual good work.<sup>82</sup> The saints look to Christ as their “great Joseph,” who dispenses heaven’s food to them.<sup>83</sup> 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.<sup>84</sup> Owen said Christ “is to be himself in them as a well of water springing up to everlasting life.... This is their way, this their communion with Christ; this is the life of faith, as to grace and holiness.”<sup>85</sup>

In the purchased grace of “privilege” Christ leads His followers into the enjoyment of the spiritual liberties of the sons of God.<sup>86</sup> Owen wrote, “Adoption is the authoritative translation of a believer, by Jesus Christ, from the family of the world and Satan into the family of God, with his investiture in all the privileges and advantages of that family.”<sup>87</sup> 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, bold-

76. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:154. For Owen’s usage of and safeguards on the expression “purchased grace,” see Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 86–88.

77. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:155. He cited Romans 6:4; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:5–6; Colossians 2:12–13; 3:1, 3; 2 Timothy 2:11.

78. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:169. The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 32) similarly defined the principal benefits in this life of effectual calling to be “justification, adoption, and sanctification.”

79. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:173–75.

80. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:187–94. Pages 176–87 consist of Owen’s answers to objections against substitutionary atonement and the imputed righteousness of Christ.

81. Hamilton, “Communion with God,” in *Reformed Spirituality*, 68.

82. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:197–202.

83. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:203.

84. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:203–7.

85. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:206.

86. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:207–15. Cf. 2:173; Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 89–90, 97.

87. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:207.

ness with God, and correction through fatherly discipline.<sup>88</sup> 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.<sup>89</sup>

In the conclusion of his treatment of communion with the Son, Owen outlined what Kelly Kapic called “the fullness of fellowship with the Son made possible through adoption.”<sup>90</sup> 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.”<sup>91</sup>

Owen elsewhere explained that the Lord’s Supper offers a special opportunity for believers to commune with their Lord. He wrote, “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.”<sup>92</sup> The Supper is designed by God to focus our faith specifically on the human sufferings and death of God’s Son, sent by the Father’s love, required by God’s justice, and planned to make known the glory of God.<sup>93</sup>

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.

#### *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.”<sup>94</sup> 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).<sup>95</sup> Thus believers have a responsibility to seek the Spirit.

Owen cataloged the effects of the Comforter in believers, showing repeatedly that the Spirit teaches believers about the love and grace of God toward them. Owen identified nine ways in which the Spirit communes with the believer: (1) the Spirit helps the believer remember the

88. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:211–22.

89. Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Doctrine of the Christian Life in the Teaching of Dr John Owen (1616–83)” (PhD diss., University of Aberdeen, 1979), 175–76.

90. Kapic, *Communion with God*, in *The Devoted Life*, 177.

91. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:222, emphasis original.

92. Owen, *Sacramental Discourses*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 9:523.

93. Owen, *Sacramental Discourses*, in *Works*, 9:525–26.

94. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:222.

95. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:224–25, 231–32.

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.<sup>96</sup>

These works of the Holy Spirit produce consolation, peace, joy, and hope in believers.<sup>97</sup> The Holy Spirit produces real effects in the experience of believers, experience revolving around Christ as revealed in Scripture. Thus Owen rejected both the rationalists who dismissed the experiential work of the Spirit and the fanatics whose "spirit" disregarded the Word and Christ.<sup>98</sup>

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 courtroom 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).<sup>99</sup>

Owen explained that the court case may last long before it is settled—even years, as Owen himself experienced<sup>100</sup>—but when "the Holy Ghost by one word stills the tumults and storms that are raised in the soul, giving it an immediate claim and security, it knows his divine power, and rejoices in his presence."<sup>101</sup>

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). He 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."<sup>102</sup> God gives believers the Holy Spirit as the earnest

96. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:236–49.

97. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:250–53. He cited Acts 9:31; Romans 14:17; 15:13; Galatians 5:22; 1 Thessalonians 1:6.

98. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:254–58.

99. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:241.

100. Owen remarked, "I myself preached Christ some years, when I had but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my spirit by a powerful application of Psalm 130:4, 'But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared; from whence I received special instruction, peace, and comfort, in drawing near to God through the Mediator.'" Quoted in prefatory note to "A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX," by John Owen, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 6:324.

101. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:242. The court of conscience image was also used by Dutch theologians like Alexander Comrie (1706–1774).

102. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:243–44.

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.<sup>103</sup> In the Holy Spirit, our present grace is integral with our future glory.

The subjective earnest of the Spirit complements the objective promises of the Scriptures in promoting the assurance of believers.<sup>104</sup> Owen wrote, “So is he in all respects completely an earnest,—given of God, received by us, as the beginning of our inheritance, and the assurance of it. So much as we have of the Spirit, so much we have of heaven.”<sup>105</sup>

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.<sup>106</sup>

This explains the *binary* description of communion in the Scripture with which Owen opened this treatise on *trinitarian* communion: “Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3b; see also John 14:23; 17:3). The Holy Spirit is implied, and not excluded; He is the immediate agent of fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Although Owen does not explicitly say so, this seems to take up the third element of the Scripture he has quoted regarding communion with the Father and with the Son, 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 we have communion with the Father in His “love,” and with the Son in His “grace,” communion with the Spirit is simply called “communion,” for in the Spirit believers commune with the Father and the Son. Thus, as Ferguson says, the Spirit enables prayer to the Father through the Son, so that Christian prayer penetrates “into the very nature of the economic Trinity, and the character of the inter-Trinitarian relationship.”<sup>107</sup> Ontologically, the Spirit’s operation of bringing believers into fellowship with the Father and the Son derives from His eternal procession or being breathed forth (John 20:22), as it were, from both persons.<sup>108</sup> The Holy Spirit comes to us as the Spirit of God the Father and the Spirit of God the Son.

We might picture this principle in terms of descent and ascent, as Owen did in his discourse on the Holy Spirit. 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. Likewise, the work of the Spirit in believers is the beginning of their ascent through the Son to the Father. The believer cannot rest merely in the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit leads him to cry, “Abba! Father!”<sup>109</sup> These steps of descent and ascent

103. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:245.

104. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:245.

105. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:246.

106. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:262.

107. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, 228.

108. Owen, *Pneumatologia, or, A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 3:55.

109. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:200.



should not be viewed as levels of being within the Godhead, or stages in time, but as an order in relationships within the Trinity as all three persons cooperate in the divine enterprise of salvation.

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.”<sup>110</sup>

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.”<sup>111</sup> In this way, the believer offers a depth of submission to the Holy Spirit that can only be called true worship.

Owen called believers to “ask [for the Spirit] daily of the Father in the name of Jesus Christ. This is the daily work of believers...to ask him of the Father as children do of their parents daily bread [cf. Luke 11:11–13].”<sup>112</sup> Owen continued, “And as, in this asking and receiving of the Holy Ghost, we have communion with the Father in his love, whence he is sent; and with the Son in his grace, whereby he is obtained for us; so with himself, on the account of his voluntary condescension to this dispensation. Every request for the Holy Ghost implies our closing with all these. O the riches of the grace of God!”<sup>113</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Sweetness of a Personal Relationship with the Trinity**

The Trinity is therefore a doctrine to be savored in personal Christian experience. Owen wrote, “What am I the better if I can dispute that Christ is God, but have no sense or sweetness in my heart from hence that he is a God in covenant with my soul?”<sup>114</sup>

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.”<sup>115</sup>

Furthermore, the experience of God as the Trinity confirms and strengthens faith in the doctrine of the Trinity. Owen wrote,

And this is the nature of all gospel truths, they are fitted and suited to be experienced by a believing soul. There is nothing so sublime and high...but that a gracious soul hath an experience of an excellency, reality, power, and efficacy in it all.... What is so high, glorious, and mysterious as the doctrine of the ever-blessed Trinity? Some wise men have thought meet to keep it veiled from ordinary Christians, and some have delivered it in such terms as that they can understand nothing by them.

110. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:239.

111. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:264–68.

112. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:272.

113. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:272.

114. Owen, “The Preface to the Reader,” in *Vindiciae Evangelicae*, in *Works*, 12:52.

115. Packer, “The Puritan Idea of Communion with God,” 12.

But take a believer who hath tasted how gracious the Lord is, in the eternal love of the Father, the great undertaking of the Son in the work of mediation and redemption, with the almighty work of the Spirit creating grace and comfort in the soul; and hath had an experience of the love, holiness, and power of God in them all; and he will with more firm confidence adhere to this mysterious truth, being led into it and confirmed in it by some few plain testimonies of the word, than a thousand disputers shall do who only have a notion of it in their minds.<sup>116</sup>

On the other hand, Owen insisted that the Christian's experience of God be molded by God's trinitarian self-revelation. Why is the biblical doctrine of the Trinity crucial for Christian experience? First, the doctrine of the Trinity regulates our *worship* of God. If our worship is to please God, then it must be our faithful response to what God has spoken about Himself. This is our spiritual worship of God, communion with the three divine persons. As Owen expanded Ephesians 2:18, "Through him (that is, Jesus Christ, the Son of God) we have access by one Spirit (that good and holy Spirit the Holy Ghost) unto God, that is the Father."<sup>117</sup> He warned, "If either we come not unto it by Jesus Christ, or perform it not in the strength of the Holy Ghost, or in it go not unto God as Father, we transgress all the rules of this worship."<sup>118</sup>

Second, trinitarian spirituality is the only truly *evangelical* spirituality. While we might be able to conceive of a Creator without reference to the Trinity, the economy of salvation immediately brings to light the interactions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit because the Son has come uniquely as the incarnate Mediator. God's works in general (such as creation), Owen said, "are all effects of the essential properties of the same divine nature, which is in them all, or rather, which is the one nature of them all."<sup>119</sup> The persons of the Trinity necessarily cooperate in the works of creation and providence but are not outwardly manifested in trinitarian relationships. But this is not the case in the gospel of our salvation. Christ's office as Mediator both reveals the Trinity and regulates our response to the gospel according to the Trinity. We cannot draw near to the Father except through the Son by the enablement of the Spirit.<sup>120</sup> Owen says, "And these things ought to be explicitly attended unto by us, if we intend our faith, and love, and duties of obedience should be evangelical."<sup>121</sup> In other words, spirituality without the Trinity is spirituality without the gospel—mere natural religion.<sup>122</sup>

Third, the doctrine of the Trinity makes spirituality profoundly *relational* and guards it from becoming a mystical experience of an impersonal, even pantheistic deity. This doctrine of one God in three *persons* makes our relationship with God deeply *personal*. This is essential for true communion, for Owen defined communion as the sharing of good and delightful things between

116. Owen, "A Practical Exposition upon Psalm CXXX," in *Works*, 6:459.

117. Owen, "The Nature and Beauty of Gospel Worship," in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 9:57. For the ease of the reader we have removed Owen's quotation marks around the biblical phrases.

118. Owen, "The Nature and Beauty of Gospel Worship," in *Works*, 9:57.

119. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, 3:198.

120. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, 3:199–200. See the discussion of this text in Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, 103–6.

121. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, 3:200.

122. Owen argued that since present human knowledge of God apart from special revelation is "but a tiny particle of the knowledge enjoyed by newly-created man in his first state of innocence," and since Adam before the fall knew only the covenant of works and nothing of the promise of Christ, "then it follows with certainty that salvation cannot come from natural theology." John Owen, *Biblical Theology*, trans. Stephen P. Westcott (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1994), 45 (1.6).

persons united with one another.<sup>123</sup> Owen's doctrine of divine communion highlights the mutual interactions between God and His people. In these interactions, the sovereign Lord leads and believers respond, yet both God and men move together in personal embrace.

John Owen's doctrine of trinitarian communion presents us with an excellent model of a Reformed Christianity that is richly and warmly biblical, doctrinal, experiential, and practical. Kay described it with the perhaps surprising phrase, "devotionally exercised Protestant Scholasticism," writing that Owen's covenant theology was pregnant with emotional interactions with God.<sup>124</sup> As Owen said,

There was no more glorious mystery brought to light in and by Jesus Christ than that of the holy Trinity, or the subsistence of the three persons in the unity of the same divine nature.... And this revelation is made unto us, not that our minds might be possessed with the notions of it, but that we may know aright how to place our trust in him, how to obey him and live unto him, how to obtain and exercise communion with him, until we come to the enjoyment of him.<sup>125</sup>

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123. Owen, *Communion with God*, in *Works*, 2:8.

124. Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality*, 124.

125. Owen, *Pneumatologia*, in *Works*, 3:158.