

## Chapter 5

### Human Communion with the Triune God God's Being and Action Informing Human Response

“Absolutely nothing worthwhile for the practical life can be made out of the doctrine of the Trinity.”

IMMANUEL KANT<sup>1</sup>

“The infinite disparity that is between God and man, made the great philosopher [i.e., Aristotle] conclude that there could be no friendship between them. Some distance in the persons holding friendship he could allow, nor could exactly determine the bounds and extent thereof; but that between God and man, in his apprehension, left no place for it.”

JOHN OWEN<sup>2</sup>

“The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.”

ZEPH. 3:17, KJV

#### Introduction

It has always been a struggle for theologians to construct an orthodox conception of the Trinity that is anything other than a series of confusing abstractions. If the Trinity is central to the Christian religion, why does it often appear irrelevant to the Christian life? In the latter half of the twentieth century Karl Rahner represents a growing concern among contemporary theologians. He argues that while textbooks continue to claim the importance of the Trinity, they seem utterly unable to draw out any practical relevance: “its function in the whole dogmatic construction is not clearly perceived. It is as though this mystery has been revealed for its own sake, and that even after it has been made known to us, it remains, as a reality, locked up within itself. We make statements about it, but as a reality it has nothing to do with us at

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, *Der Streit der Facultaten*, A 50, 57, quoted in Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr., eds. *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Thomas V. Morris, Library of Religious Philosophy, vol. 1 (Notre Dame: UNDP, 1989), 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, 2: 8. Cf. Aristotle *EN*, 8.7 (p. 482), where he writes: “when one party is removed to a great distance, as God is, the possibility of friendship ceases.”

all.”<sup>3</sup> He concludes that this leads to the common misunderstanding that the best we can do is to learn “something ‘about it’ through revelation,” instead of grasping the strong connection between the Trinity and humanity, since after all the Trinity “is a mystery of salvation.”<sup>4</sup> Colin E. Gunton has likewise observed that Trinitarian theology understandably fell into disrepute because it failed “to be the living heart of worship and life.” This is a disastrous consequence stemming from a neglect of right theological reflection that necessarily yields practical implications.<sup>5</sup> Finally, we may note the recent and relevant observations of Thomas Weinandy, who looks further into why this problem has persisted. Weinandy asserts that theologians of the past often de-emphasized the distinct personalities and roles of the three persons. As a result, countless congregants received the common impression that Christians “simply worship and relate to the undifferentiated Godhead,” a problem particularly apparent in the West with its tendency to stress the One substance while neglecting the Trinity of persons.<sup>6</sup>

Given this contemporary discussion, looking back to John Owen’s insistent application of Trinitarian ideas to the believer’s life may prove of interest not only to historians, but systematic theologians as well. Does Owen’s formulation of human communion with the triune God offer insights into how theologians might regain a more dynamic conception of Trinitarian action for the life of the Church and human experience? Owen’s thought on the subject proves to be fairly uncharted territory. By following the structure and argument of one of Owen’s devotional works, we hope to draw attention to how his anthroposensitivity manifests itself throughout his Trinitarian reflections.

In 1657 Owen wrote a treatise exploring how a believer can have a positive and active relationship with the triune God: *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, In Love, Grace, and Consolation; or, The Saints’ Fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost Unfolded.*<sup>7</sup> This work will serve as the heart of our study, noting how Owen’s theological reflections cannot be separated from his pastoral applications. While other writers have discussed this work, it has usually been presented for a popular readership (e.g., Packer and

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 14.

<sup>4</sup> Rahner, 14, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 163.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Weinandy, *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 4, 56.

Ferguson) or as a means to discuss a more narrowly defined topic (i.e., briefly in Beeke's discussion of assurance). Furthermore, although Trueman's recent study extensively interacts with Owen's Trinitarian theology, he only mentions this particular work on two occasions, leaving ample room for further treatment.<sup>8</sup>

We will explore this treatise of Owen's because of its unique ability to fill in the details of Owen's conception of renewed relations between God and humanity. Our analysis begins by laying the necessary groundwork for understanding Owen's emphases, including his interaction with philosophers regarding the possibility of relations between the divine and human. This naturally leads us into his definition of communion which, as we will see, must be understood within its historical context. Since communion with God is distinctly Trinitarian for Owen, we also outline his answer to how a believer approaches the One triune God. Moving beyond these preliminary discussions we follow in detail Owen's development of distinct communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In each section we observe what Owen highlights concerning the divine persons and how he encourages believers to respond appropriately. In the end we see that Owen's work is a resolute attempt to help his readers progress beyond the common human fears of divine anger and distance, and move into a peaceful and empowering relationship with their triune God.

## Laying the Groundwork

### *The Impossible Becomes Possible*

How is any form of personal communion between God and humanity possible? By asking this question yet again, and more importantly by attempting to answer it in some detail, Owen applies his anthroposensitive method, combining deep theological reflection with personal affective application. While discussions of the Trinity can become abstract and philosophical,<sup>9</sup> Owen attempts to provide his readers

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<sup>7</sup> *Works*, 2: 1-274.

<sup>8</sup> Trueman, *The Claims of Truth*, 98, 184. Despite its title, "Communion with Christ: An Exposition and Comparison of the Doctrine of Union and Communion with Christ in Calvin and the English Puritans," Won's study contains surprisingly little interaction with this particular text from Owen's corpus, 266-69. Won is primarily interested in how Owen interprets the Song of Solomon.

<sup>9</sup> By the end of the seventeenth century this tendency becomes more apparent as many mathematicians find themselves writing about the Trinity. E.g., Isaac Barrow (1630-1677), *A Defense of the Blessed Trinity* (1697) and the Unitarian John Wallis (1616-1703), *The Doctrine of the Blessed Trinity* (1693).

with practical insights as to how these profound truths ought to inform their relations with the triune God.

As we have noted elsewhere regarding his book on *Justification*, Owen's work commonly begins with his presuppositions regarding the fallen human condition. A person who remains in the 'natural' state into which he was born is at odds with God, not only alienated from, but also showing enmity toward his Creator.<sup>10</sup> With the effects of the fall upon humanity, each person lives in a state of impotency, unable to please or even respond to God.<sup>11</sup> There is no aspect of man which is untouched by sin; he, as the leper, receives the graphic title of "unclean."<sup>12</sup> Owen's emphasis upon humanity's present condition serves again as the impetus for the reader's realization that he must look beyond himself to God.

One of the best ways for this realization comes from the serious task of self-exploration, which may pave the way for true self-knowledge. Here we see the contradictory nature of self-exploration: it is only in the context of also learning about the God who created humanity that one can rightly learn about oneself. Those who do recognize that something is wrong with them often try to "disentangle the soul" through various answers, like literature and learning – both of which emerged only after the fall.<sup>13</sup> Owen recognizes that God has given a conscience, the law, and ultimately Christ to expose humanity's condition.<sup>14</sup> Each of these divine gifts ought to drive people to despair of themselves and to rely upon God. In Owen's thought, self-examination can serve as a way to turn people back to Christ, making the re-establishment of a positive relationship with the triune God possible.<sup>15</sup> Even so, self-knowledge alone – without an appreciation of divine action – remains insufficient for communion.

No human can experience "walking with God" in his natural condition due to the vast distance between the two parties. Even Aristotle believed that the "infinite disparity" obvious between God and humanity precludes any possibility of friendship.

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<sup>10</sup> *Works*, 2: 6, 106.

<sup>11</sup> *Works*, 2: 101.

<sup>12</sup> *Works*, 2: 204.

<sup>13</sup> *Works*, 2: 80, 111-113.

<sup>14</sup> *Works*, 2: 94 ff.

<sup>15</sup> For a brief discussion of the role of self-examination within the Puritan experience, see Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 9 ff. See also his discussion of the "Puritan Self" 226-239. He rightly claims that "One characteristic of the Puritan approach to these problems [referring to problems of the 'age'] was the way in which a personal identity was formulated primarily through its relationship with God," 227.

When another pagan philosopher granted some form of communion, he was only able to conceive of it in abstract notions of providence, nothing ultimately testifying to personal relations between the divine and human.<sup>16</sup> Calvin makes a similar claim regarding the ancient philosophers, with Plato presented as the best of them even though he remained significantly in the dark.<sup>17</sup> According to Owen, these things are “hid in Christ” and thus only discovered fully through him. In humanity’s natural state outside of Christ, the idea of God’s presence only brings “terror and apprehensions of death.”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, even Old Testament saints who did experience communion with God remained unable to enjoy its fullness: the incarnate Lord adds *παρρησίαν* (‘boldness and confidence’; see Heb. 4:16, 10:19) and *ἐλευθερίαν* (‘freedom and liberty in access to God’; see 2 Cor. 3:17) to the believer’s fellowship with God.<sup>19</sup> Christ not only makes the impossible possible, but he does so in a way that leads to mutual relations between God and believers, as we see in Owen’s definition of communion.

### *Defining Communion*

Since communion and commune can have various meanings we need to explore Owen’s somewhat complex formulation of these ideas. According to Owen, ‘communion’ relates in general 1) to things and persons (c.f., natures), 2) to a state and condition, or 3) to actions.<sup>20</sup> Communion with God cannot be restricted to any one of these, nor can it simply be said to include all of them without qualification. Persons that share the same nature can relate mutually to one another in a way that a rock and a human cannot; this helps explain the incarnation, wherein the Son assumed the same “common nature with the rest of mankind.”<sup>21</sup> Regarding communion through sharing the same condition, this can be either internal or external. The example Owen gives is of Christ with the thieves hanging on the crosses; they all shared the same external condition which had them under a curse, yet one of the

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<sup>16</sup> *Works*, 2: 8. Owen seems to be referring to Cicero, his book *de Nat. Deor.* Bk. 1. For Aristotle reference, see footnote 1.

<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.25.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Works*, 2: 8. Cf. a similar theme in Luther, who argued that the God “known by natural reason was an unapproachable God of wrath: his righteous judgements could only evoke man’s hatred and rebellion,” Christopher B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God: An Historical Study* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982), 96.

<sup>19</sup> *Works*, 2: 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> See *Works*, 2: 7 ff.

<sup>21</sup> *Works*, 2: 7. See Luke 23: 40.

thieves came to share the same internal or spiritual condition with Christ due to his faith.<sup>22</sup> Finally, a sort of communion occurs when two or more join together in action, which may be either good (e.g., worshiping God) or evil (e.g., plotting a murder).

This general discussion yields to his particular concern for the wonder of human communion with God. To begin, this communion between divine and human persons is voluntary rather than something “natural,” since their natures remain distinct. It also requires “consent,” thus protecting the personal and purposeful foundation of the relationship. Communion with God cannot simply be thought of in terms of “state and conditions,” but rather in terms of the action or responsiveness between two parties. Given that there is a difference between the divine and human, interpersonal fellowship seems unlikely. Although taking exception to the skepticism of pagan philosophers regarding the possibility of interpersonal fellowship between the divine and human, the profundity of the relationship does not escape Owen’s notice. This is especially striking since he believes true communion relates to the “mutual communication” of good between two persons, allowing each to delight in the other. An unending monologue or isolated autonomy is ruled out in Owen’s conception of communion. Jonathan and David’s intimate friendship as portrayed in 1 Samuel 20:17 serves as his positive example. Mutuality of love grounds Owen’s formulation, testifying to his persistent unwillingness to speak in abstractions devoid of experiential content.

At this point a careful distinction between union and communion with God must be observed. Within the Calvinist Puritan tradition, union with God is unilateral in that it designates divine movement and action which prompts, secures, and preserves a person in the life of faith. Once united to Christ there can be no final falling away; nothing is able to tear apart what God has brought together – clearly the underlying theology for the doctrine of perseverance. However, communion with God can be deeply affected by a believer’s sin, unresponsiveness to God, and neglect of God’s ordinary means of grace. Struggling believers are never at risk of losing their *union* with Christ, but they surely experience times when intimate *communion*

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<sup>22</sup> *Works*, 2: 7.

with God feels blocked.<sup>23</sup> One must remember that during the seventeenth century ‘to commune’ became associated with spiritual communication, or to use the common language, it describes intercourse with God.<sup>24</sup> Obviously this imagery is not new; it has a long theological history that many Puritans drew from, especially in their use of allegorical readings of Canticles.<sup>25</sup> Only when two people actively participate together can this imagery work. For example, distractions may cause a husband to neglect intimate relations with his spouse just as a Christian may neglect his relationship with God. While such neglect does not nullify the union between the parties, it deeply affects the level of intimacy experienced between them.

Although union and communion are related – one cannot have the latter without the former – they are not synonyms. Even though Puritan writers closely associate the terms union and communion, in most (if not all) instances, union precedes communion. This tendency is not a simple linguistic convention, but rather a theological expression of an underlying truth. When these terms are not carefully distinguished, grave misunderstanding can arise. This may partly explain why William Sherlock – the later dean of St. Paul’s and certainly not of Owen’s Calvinistic leanings – seemed to misread Owen so severely. Attacking Owen’s book *Of Communion* almost twenty years after its publication, Sherlock appears to see a different distinction: union should be understood within a political and ecclesiastical framework, while communion is viewed almost wholly in terms of fellowship between saints.<sup>26</sup> As Sherlock uses them, both of these terms point more directly to horizontal rather than vertical relationships. Behind his attack of Owen is his

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Calvin’s vision of “two communions”: the first (i.e., justification) is “total” while the second (i.e., sanctification) “grows.” See Dennis E. Tamburello, *Union with Christ: John Calvin and the Mysticism of St. Bernard*, *Columbia Series in Reformed Theology* (Louisville: WJKP, 1994), 86-87.

<sup>24</sup> See C. T. Onions, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 196. An older use of commune that was common between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was “to hold intimate (chiefly mental or spiritual) intercourse” with another. Examples include the 1557 Geneva translation of Luke 24:15: “as they communed together and reasoned,” or Milton, who in 1671 wrote in *Paradise Regained*, II. 261: “It was the hour of night, when thus the Son Commun’d in silent walk.” By 1876 when J. Norris writes his book *Rudim Theolo.*, he acknowledges a common unwillingness to speak of spiritual ‘intercourse’ even though it simply means ‘communion with God,’ although the latter appears to him more reverent. See J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, eds. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., vol. III (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 577, 580.

<sup>25</sup> Examples of Puritan reflections on the Song of Songs include: Sibbes, J. Durham, D. Fenner, T. Wilcox, G. Gifford, T. Wilson, H. Ainsworth, J. Collinges, N. Homes, J. Cotton and T. Brightman, etc. See J. D. Williams, “The Puritan Quest,” 177- 203. Owen describes the design of Canticles as “a mystical, allegorical description of the graces and excellencies of the person of Christ, to render him desirable to the souls of believers,” *Works*, 9: 538.

<sup>26</sup> William Sherlock, *Union and Communion with him* (1678, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), 88-119. First edition without corrections was published in 1674. Both editions are used throughout.

tendency towards rationalism and his reaction against elements of Puritan mysticism. Self-consciously taking a sideswipe at Puritan experimentalists, Sherlock complains: “Prayer and Meditation, and such-like Acts of Devotion, are no where called Communion with God, though a prevailing custom hath in our days almost wholly appropriated that name to them.”<sup>27</sup> Sherlock fears that so much experiential language about ‘communing with God’ and loving the ‘person of Christ’ will ultimately lead people away from following Jesus’ moral example, which helps to explain why he so freely accuses Owen of antinomianism.

By redefining the Puritan distinction between union and communion, Sherlock becomes vulnerable to charges of Pelagianism and Socinianism from his opponents.<sup>28</sup> For example, when Sherlock objects to Owen’s emphasis on gaining an “acquaintance with Christ’s person,” he does so because he believes this somehow lowers the gospel or adds something beyond what the scriptures call for. His response shows a very different approach than Owen’s. Whereas Owen’s conception of the gospel causes him to stress loving the person of Christ who fulfilled all righteousness – thus emphasizing personal relations – Sherlock conceives of the gospel more in terms of principles to live by.<sup>29</sup> “All that the Gospel tells us,” explains Sherlock, “is that Christ loved sinners so as to dye for them, and that *he loves good men*, who believe and obey his Gospel so as to save them, and that *he continue to love them, while they*

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<sup>27</sup> W. Sherlock, *Union and Communion with him*, (1678, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), 118-119.

<sup>28</sup> Opponents of W. Sherlock are numerous. For example, Edward Polhill, *An Answer to the Discourse of Mr. William Sherlock, touching the Knowledge of Christ, and our Union and Communion with Him* (London: 1675), attacks Sherlock’s view of justification: “When I read it, [Sherlock’s book] I thought my self in a new Theological World; Believers appearing without their Head for want of a Mystical Union, strip’d and naked for lack of imputed Righteousness...” (To the Reader, unnumbered page). Cf. Henry Hickman, *Speculum Sherlockianum: Or, A Looking Glass in which the Admirers of Mr. Sherlock may behold the Man, as to his Accuracy, Judgement, Orthodoxy* (London: 1674), who argues against Sherlock that “a man’s union to Christ, doth in order of Nature precede his union to the church,” 11. He also thinks Sherlock is mistaken in his belief that union and communion are something easy to understand and not a mystery, 36. See also Robert Ferguson, *The Interest of Reason in Religion* (London: 1675); Thomas Danson, *The Friendly Debate between Satan and Sherlock...* (London: 1676); Samuel Rollè, *Prodromus, or the Character of Mr. Sherlock’s book...* and later *Justification Justified* (London: 1674).

Sherlock is not without his defenders, the most able being Thomas Hotchkis, *Imputation of Christ’s righteousness to us* (1675); Hotchkis’s main concern seems to arise from his fear of antinomianism, claiming many of Owen’s statements are guilty of this charge, 142. See also Hotchkis’s later response, *A Postscript* (1678). Sherlock personally responds to the specific attacks by Owen and Ferguson in his, *A Defense and Continuation of the Discourse concerning the Knowledge of Jesus Christ* (London: 1675).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Works*, 2: 347, where Owen explicitly rejects W. Sherlock’s rationalism, concluding that God does not simply present humans with “objective arguments.”



*continue to be good; but hates them, when they return to their old vices.*"<sup>30</sup> There is no perseverance of the saints in Sherlock's theology since union with Christ is grounded on a person's continual penitence and obedience rather than on the objective work of Christ.<sup>31</sup> When Sherlock speaks of God's immutability, he means that God always loves the good: as long as a Christian does the good, God freely loves them. However, since God remains immutable, when believers fail to live lives of obedience they find themselves no longer under God's love, but under his hatred! An example of the logical conclusion of William Sherlock's theology is found in no better example than the later Bishop of London, Thomas Sherlock – William's son. In one of his Discourses preached at Temple Church, Thomas argues that anyone who is a child of God "may cease to be a child of God."<sup>32</sup> Such a statement is the antithesis of Owen's view of adoption, as we will see later in this chapter, but it is theologically possible when mystical union is disavowed and communion with God designates little more than fellowship with other saints.

Working within his anthroposensitive framework, Owen rejects claims like Sherlock's as theologically and pastorally disastrous. Whereas William Sherlock rejects the imputation of Christ's righteousness because it leads to antinomianism, Owen believes that imputation alone allows the believer to stand secure in God's immutable love. Owen agrees that God's nature is consistent: because he is just he must hate sin. Nevertheless, Owen finds hope for the believer, not in the sincerity of their repentance and ability to sustain unblemished obedience, but rather in the satisfaction accomplished in the death of Christ, whereby "the greatest sins can do us no hurt."<sup>33</sup> Given that Christ's atonement was fully satisfying and complete, that God is immutable, and that the believer is united to Christ, no cessation of the love of God for his elect is possible. God's immutability and a believer's union to Christ were conceived in order to bring lasting freedom for open communion with God, rather than fearful obedience performed with the hope of remaining acceptable to God. Countering Sherlock's accusations, Owen contends that he does not deny the role of

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<sup>30</sup> W. Sherlock, *Union and Communion with him* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), 210. Emphasis mine. For Sherlock "the fundamental design of the Gospel" is clear, it "is to make men good and vertuous, and like to God," (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), 432.

<sup>31</sup> W. Sherlock, *Union and Communion with him* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), 32.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Sherlock, *Discourses preached at the Temple Church*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., vol. 1, Discourse 8 (1754-58), the quote and reference brought to my attention by Howard Watkin-Jones, *The Holy Spirit from Arminius to Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1929), 312. Emphasis mine.

<sup>33</sup> Owen, *A Vindication of Some Passages in a Discourse Concerning Communion with God, from the Exceptions of William Sherlock* (1674), *Works*, 2: 295.

faith and repentance. While attempting to take holiness seriously, Owen wants to distance himself from Sherlock's moralism which runs the risk of making election and redemption dependent on a believer's holiness, rather than on Christ's.<sup>34</sup>

This becomes relevant for our discussion of union and communion with God, since Owen's distinction allows him to deal both with the theological question of God's commitment to his people and the existential reality of every believer's continual battle with sin. One result of Sherlock's almost exclusive emphasis on the horizontal elements of union and communion is that he finds himself without the resources to maintain a distinction between justification and sanctification.<sup>35</sup> Defenders of Owen also thought Sherlock fell into this trap, and Vincent Alsop's accusation that Sherlock is borrowing from the Roman theologian Robert Bellarmine testifies to this observation.<sup>36</sup> This may help explain why Owen's major treatment of justification, written just three years after Sherlock's book was first published, spends far more time attacking Bellarmine than Sherlock. As we noted in our last chapter discussing justification, Owen seems to believe that this is not a new problem, and until theologians have a sufficient doctrine of union with Christ they will be unable to handle the questions related to sanctification. One strategy that Owen uses to maintain his Reformed theology at this point is to keep union and communion closely linked without making them synonyms. Believers united to Christ are enabled and encouraged to commune with God in a suitable fashion.

Here we will simply add one further historical observation. In 1658 a meeting at the Savoy Palace produced "A Declaration of the Faith and Order," slightly revising the Westminster Confession for those within congregationalism. Owen was one of – if not *the* – leading figures at the conference and possibly the author of the preface. With this in mind, several of the minor additions we find to the Westminster text may have relevance for our study. Two such additions are made to the section on the Trinity, one being the creation of a final sentence which provides the opportunity

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<sup>34</sup> Owen, *Works* 2: 296-97, 322.

<sup>35</sup> Another critic of Owen, William Clagett, *A Discourse concerning the Operations of the Holy Spirit* (London: 1680), likewise fails to distinguish between an initial justification and a progressive sanctification, thus also having little room to distinguish between union and communion. For a brief yet fair comparison between Owen and Clagett on related points see, Watkin-Jones, 280-81, 264-66.

<sup>36</sup> N. N. (*aka* Vincent Alsop), *Anti-Sozzo sive Sherlocismus Enervantus* (London: 1675), 545. Ironically Owen's only mention of Bellarmine in his response to W. Sherlock argues that at the end of his life even Bellarmine came to see that "the safest retreat" for the believer inevitably becomes "the merits and righteousness of Christ," Owen, *Works*, 2: 321.

to link this doctrine with communion: “Which Doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our Communion with God, and comfortable Dependence upon him.”<sup>37</sup> Remembering that Owen’s book *Of Communion* was published in 1657, it does not seem unreasonable to hear Owen’s voice whispering in the background for the need to make this formerly implicit connection explicit. In so doing, the necessary link between the Trinity and Christian experience becomes even more prominent. Another apparently insignificant addition to the Westminster text may also point in Owen’s direction. Chapter XIII on sanctification shows a new inclusion of the words “united to Christ” in the first sentence, making it clearer for the reader that only from this starting point can one begin to speak properly of the “the practice of all true holiness.”<sup>38</sup> None at the Savoy Palace would have disagreed with this assertion, but Owen’s sensitivity to the matter may be behind this minor adjustment. These observations fit in with Owen’s handling of such ideas in his *Communion* book.

Fundamental to the gospel, as Owen understands it, is union with Christ, allowing renewed communion with God, which only then is expressed through obedience. To experience the delight of communion between persons, it must be “bottomed upon some union between them,” since union is the “foundation” of experiences of communion.<sup>39</sup> This distinction helps prevent many Puritan theologians from formulating a justification by works doctrine, while at the same time allowing them to place a high value upon human responsiveness for those inside the house of faith. Understood within this historical background and theological framework, Owen’s definition may now be properly understood. “Our Communion . . . with God consisteth in his communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that union which in Jesus Christ we have with him.”<sup>40</sup>

God’s communication of Himself unto us. . .
Union with Christ establishes our relationship to God
Resulting overflow of union is our returning unto God which is both required and accepted by Him (i.e., communion)

<sup>37</sup> A. G. Matthews, ed. *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order 1658* (London: Independent Press, 1959), II.III [p. 79].

<sup>38</sup> *The Savoy Declaration*, XIII.I [p. 92].

<sup>39</sup> *Works*, 2: 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Works*, 2: 8-9.

Divine action is first, union with Christ is the result, and human response is the desired consequence. Here Owen moves between the priority of God's self-revelation to the necessity of human response, the latter assumed possible based on a Christological observation.

As we have seen throughout our study thus far, Owen is quick to apply a methodology that encompasses both 'from above' (i.e., beginning with God) and 'from below' (beginning with humanity) approaches. He accomplishes this by constantly moving between theology and anthropology, between Christology and praxis. Appreciating this dialectic in Owen's thinking helps explain his reflections on communion with the triune God. Since Owen works from the presupposition that all truth about God necessarily has purchase on the believer's life, he will not allow debate and discussion of the Trinity to remain within the academy. Instead, he uses his vast knowledge of scripture and tradition, together with his pastoral sensitivity, to encourage his readers with a central truth of the Christian faith: the triune God has not only established, but also desires intimate fellowship with his people. Examples of this integrated approach will surface in our later discussion of distinct communion with each person of the Trinity.

#### *Approaching the One Triune God*

Having established Owen's view that human communion with God is not only possible, but also mutual and intimate, we may now proceed to his emphasis on the distinction and unity of the divine persons with whom the believer communes. Here we note Owen's attempt to present a Trinitarian conception of communion with God that avoids both tri-theism and modalism.

Possibly the quickest way into Owen's Trinitarian approach comes through a succinct examination of his shorter work, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1669). Owen begins by highlighting three observations for those who seek to discuss Trinitarian questions. First, he advises the inquirer to understand that this is no "ordinary controversy in religion," for the conclusions reached are "immediately and directly" relevant to the "the souls of men."<sup>41</sup> His second observation is that the "majesty, and infinite, incomprehensible nature of God" requires reverence from the human questioner. Accordingly, this is not a subject "to

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<sup>41</sup> *Works*, 2: 368.

be prostituted” before unbelievers for the sake of debate, but rather it should bring about humble worship before the revelation of God. Thus Owen’s third observation: any inquirer who looks into the mystery of the Trinity and its importance for human life must willingly submit to whatever is found in scripture. Clearly Owen thinks the traditional orthodox interpretation of debated texts will persuade all who earnestly seek God in his revelation. Here one sees an example of the standard Reformed hermeneutic of *regula fidei et caritatis*: when governed by this rule ambiguous passages are dealt with in light of the apparently less ambiguous ones, ultimately leading those who love God to the truth of scripture.<sup>42</sup> Just as Owen clearly trusts the testimony found in scripture, he also recognizes the unique tendency within fallen humanity to self-deceit. Therefore, the inquirer’s humility and openness to God are as necessary for his understanding of this doctrine as are his hermeneutical skills. According to Owen, these personal characteristics are part of those skills!<sup>43</sup>

A summary statement of Owen’s conception of the Trinity now deserves our attention. What emerges is a fairly standard orthodox position.

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 relation, they are distinct from each other.<sup>44</sup>

There is no denying sociality in Owen’s conception of the Trinity: the divine persons are “distinct among themselves, by certain peculiar relative properties.”<sup>45</sup> Not only are they distinct regarding “internal acts one towards another,” but also “in acts that outwardly respect the creation and the several parts of it.”<sup>46</sup> Accordingly Owen goes on to develop the root of the distinction between the persons in the traditional language of begetting, begotten, and proceeding. The three divine persons are distinct in their “mutual relation one to another”; this allows them to act distinctly yet as triune – never acting alone, so to speak. Socially the divine persons “know each other, love each other, delight in each other,” and consequently they are distinct and are “represented unto our faith” as such.<sup>47</sup> Owen’s stress on distinction allows him to freely use the third person plural pronoun ‘they’ – as we shall see throughout – when referring to the Father, Son, and Spirit. However, at other times Owen may refer to

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Heppe, *RD*, 34-5.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Trueman, “Faith Seeking Understanding,” 147-62.

<sup>44</sup> *Works*, 2: 377.

<sup>45</sup> *Works*, 2: 405.

<sup>46</sup> *Works*, 2: 405.

the three by employing the third person singular pronoun, 'he.'<sup>48</sup> This is possible because Owen thinks scripture clearly points to one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the three persons being "divine, distinct, intelligent, voluntary, omnipotent principles of operation and working."<sup>49</sup> In other words, Owen's language moves between the three persons and the one divine nature without hesitation.

Does a strong emphasis on distinction endanger the unity of God? Owen unreservedly affirms the oneness of God when it comes to the "nature, being, substance, or essence" of the Godhead.<sup>50</sup> One may wonder if Owen is vulnerable to the recent charge leveled against Augustine and many following in his tradition. Some contemporary theologians fear that Augustine falls into the trap of presenting a God who is beyond the divine persons and who is either known outside of the economy of salvation or is altogether unknowable.<sup>51</sup> Does Owen's comment that "this natural Godhead of God is his substance or essence" expose him to such an accusation? It would seem not. He escapes this danger by never opposing unity and distinction within the Godhead. The nature or substance of God is the nature or substance of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, "one and the same absolutely in and unto each of them," which is simply another way of designating the unity of God. Distinction of the persons lies in their subsisting in the same divine nature:

a divine person is nothing but the divine essence, upon the account of an especial property, subsisting in an especial manner... each person having the understanding, the will, and power of God, becomes a distinct principle of operation; and yet all their actings *ad extra* being the actings of God, they are undivided, and are all the works of one, of the self-same God.<sup>52</sup>

With this basic Trinitarian framework in mind, we may now return to Owen's particular book *Of Communion*, to see how he applies his understanding in more detail.

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<sup>47</sup> *Works*, 2: 406.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., *Works*, 2: 406: "... concerning God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; so as that we may duly believe in *him*, yield obedience unto *him*, enjoy communion with *him*, walk in *his* love and fear, and so come at length to be blessed with *him* for evermore." Emphasis mine.

<sup>49</sup> *Works*, 2: 406.

<sup>50</sup> *Works*, 2: 407.

<sup>51</sup> Gunton, *Trinitarian Theology*, 42, see also 31-57. For a recent defense of Augustine against such charges see, Lewis Ayres, "'Remember That You Are Catholic' (serm. 52.2): Augustine on the Unity of the Triune God," *J ECS* 8, no. 1 (2000): 39-82.

<sup>52</sup> *Works*, 2: 407.

Building from a version of 1 John 5:7 which was still common in seventeenth century scholarship,<sup>53</sup> Owen begins to make a case for distinct human communion with each person of the Trinity. This verse speaks of the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, all bearing testimony in heaven to Christ's Sonship and believers' salvation. Noteworthy here is the idea that there are "three distinct witnesses." Believers are to receive God's testimony with the recognition of distinction. "We are to receive their [referring to Father, Son, and Spirit] several testimonies: and in doing so we have communion with them severally; for in this giving and receiving of testimony consists no small part of our fellowship with God."<sup>54</sup> Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:4-6; Eph. 4:6) speaks of various gifts, administrations, and operations, each coming distinctly from Father, Son, or Spirit, but always from the same God: "so graces and gifts are bestowed, and so are they received."<sup>55</sup> Owen's point is simply that the one true God is the giver of all gifts, yet he gives them distinctly as Father, Son, and Spirit. Consequently, when believers approach God they do so mindful of such distinction, knowing that communion with God comes διὰ Χριστοῦς, ἐν πνεύματι, and πρὸς τὸν πατέρα (cf. Eph. 2:18) – "the persons being here considered as engaged distinctly unto the accomplishment of the counsel of the will of God revealed in the gospel."<sup>56</sup>

The economic Trinity deeply informs how believers are to commune with God, since this is how God has made himself known in special revelation. At times, only the Father and Son are mentioned in scripture (e.g., 1 John 1:3; cf. John 14:23),

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<sup>53</sup> KJV, which Owen here follows, translates 1 John 5:7: "There are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost," *Works*, 2: 10. This textual gloss is now considered a late addition (probably 14<sup>th</sup> century), but in Owen's time the verse was still commonly accepted. E.g., in England Thomas Watson, 108, freely used it and later still Edward Stillingfleet, *A Discourse in Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (1697), 120; on the Continent, Turretin, *Elenctic Theology*, 1: 268-69, not only uses the full text, but displays his knowledge of the controversy by arguing that it can be found in ancient manuscripts, such as in Jerome (*Prologus Septem Epistolarum Canoniarum* [PL 29.870-74]). Turretin blames the Arians for the occasions when the full text is missing in many of the ancient manuscripts. For a recent summary of the textual problems see, Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 716-18.

<sup>54</sup> *Works*, 2: 10. Emphasis mine.

<sup>55</sup> *Works*, 2: 10. Cf. Owen's exegesis of 1 Cor. 12: 3-6 in his work on the *Trinity Vindicated*, *Works*, 2: 402.

<sup>56</sup> *Works*, 2:10. Given that Owen freely moves from 1 John 5:7 to this classic formulation, a recent comment on the textual gloss of 1 John 5: 7 is challenging. The "gloss is not a very happy one, as the threefold testimony of verse 8 is to Christ; and the biblical teaching about testimony is not that Father, Son and Holy Spirit bear witness together to the Son, but that the Father bears witness to the Son through the Spirit," John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2 ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 183.

joined by “the particle ‘and,’” which “is both distinguishing and uniting.”<sup>57</sup> Other times fellowship with God is mentioned with distinct reference to one person in particular, such as the Son or the Spirit (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:9). So, for example, while all three divine persons are mentioned in 2 Cor. 13:14, it nevertheless distinctly connects *κοινωνία* with the Holy Spirit. With the reception from and returning worship to each divine person, the believer does not interact with abstractions, but approaches the persons who are the united Being, remembering their inseparability. Believers worship God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

From this realization Owen concludes that all human encounters with God are encounters with the divine persons; believers do not worship an undifferentiated Godhead. Every act of worship and obedience is necessarily and “distinctly directed unto Father, Son and Spirit.”<sup>58</sup> Only in this way do believers have communion with God, which means it is necessarily and “distinctly” experienced with each person of the Trinity. Again, this is grounded in the revelation of God, whereby he reveals himself as triune. Yet, how can worship take place which preserves both God’s unity and diversity?

We are now in a position to explore Owen’s twofold defense of his thesis about the distinct communication of the Deity to the believer. First, he argues that “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,” one cannot collapse the distinctions for the sake of unity.<sup>59</sup> While interpreting Revelation 1:4-5 as referring distinctly to each person (i.e., Father, Son, and Spirit) as giving grace and peace unto the believer, these verses also testify to the fact that God alone gives such blessings. Owen believes it is significant that Revelation nevertheless mentions each, instead of simply saying God, for it emphasizes that each distinctly gives these gifts to the believer.

Second, Owen believes that scripture attributes the same thing “severally and singly unto each person” of the Trinity.<sup>60</sup> Here again the Puritan highlights both distinction and union between the Father, Son, and Spirit. In so doing he remains faithful to the Augustinian dictum ‘*opera ad extra sunt indivisa*’ while emphasizing

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<sup>57</sup> *Works*, 2:11.

<sup>58</sup> *Works*, 2: 15.

<sup>59</sup> *Works*, 2: 15.

<sup>60</sup> *Works*, 2: 15.



distinction.<sup>61</sup> The divine persons are not divided, but they are certainly distinct; the alternative is a subtle shift away from three persons, identities, energies, etc. into a modalistic tendency, denying any real distinction between the three. Scripture seems to hold onto a clear distinction and the teaching of God serves as Owen's example. From the Father comes all spiritual teaching: "him we hear, of him we learn, by him are we brought unto union and communion with Jesus Christ."<sup>62</sup> God the Father is the one who draws people to himself through his Spirit. Functioning as prophet and king, the Son's revelation is that of a "life-giving, a spirit-breathing teaching."<sup>63</sup> Here Owen moves from the close connection between the Father and Son, to the vital link between the Son and Spirit. These cannot be separated even though Owen acknowledges that scripture describes each as distinct in their teaching the people of God. Finally, the Spirit is described as the comforter who makes all things known to believers. In sum, God is the great teacher, yet he only teaches distinctly as Father, Son, and Spirit. Since God communicates grace distinctly "from the several persons of the Deity" the obvious implication for Owen is that "the saints must needs have distinct communion with them."<sup>64</sup> Such a pattern of God's communication, Owen believes, would follow in various other examples besides teaching, including both the quickening and persevering of saints.

We may now ask again, how does one properly worship a triune God? Is it inappropriate to worship each person of the Trinity distinctly, or is this even possible? Does this type of discussion necessarily drive a wedge between the divine persons, ultimately separating them? Owen's exploration into these mysteries brings him to the following conclusion: "The divine nature is the reason and cause of all worship; so that it is impossible to worship any one person, and not worship the whole Trinity."<sup>65</sup> He goes on to explain further:

Our access in our worship is said to be 'to the Father;' and this 'through Christ,' or his mediation; 'by the Spirit,' or his assistance. *Here is a distinction of the persons, as to their operations, but not at all as to their*

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<sup>61</sup> See *Works*, 2: 15, 18, 227, 269, 407. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*: 1: 326: "We need not surrender the basic truth that the Father, Son, and Spirit work together in creation, reconciliation, and redemption because we accept the possibility of distinguishing the persons in these works."

<sup>62</sup> *Works*, 2: 16.

<sup>63</sup> *Works*, 2: 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Works*, 2: 16. Cf. Ames, 93: "The distinct manner of working consists in each [divine] person working according to the particular form [*ratio*] of his subsistence."

<sup>65</sup> *Works*, 2: 268. Cf. *Works*, 12: 380.

*being the object of our worship.* For the Son and the Holy Ghost are no less worshipped in our access to God than the Father himself; only, the grace of the Father, which we obtain by the mediation of the Son and the assistance of the Spirit, is that which we draw nigh to God for. So that *when, by the distinct dispensation of the Trinity, and every person, we are led to worship . . . any person, we do herein worship the whole Trinity; and every person, by what name soever, of Father, Son, or Holy Ghost, we invoke him.*<sup>66</sup>

Owen's conception of prayer is deeply informed by the above presupposition. Since he believes that in worshipping any one divine person the Christian is worshipping the whole Trinity, he does not hesitate to endorse the view that prayers may be made to each divine person, including the Holy Spirit.<sup>67</sup>

Along similar lines Owen's Continental contemporary Francis Turretin likewise argues that the distinction of the three does not take away from the One, rather it ensures a full understanding of worship. Turretin believes that the worshipper is not dividing his worship between different Gods, but instead worshipping the One true God. The Christian "ought to be convinced that, on the ground of the unity and consubstantiality (*homoousia*) of the persons, the Son and the Holy Spirit are invoked by the same act of invocation which is addressed to the Father." At this point Turretin reminds the worshiper of Gregory Nazianus' statement: "I cannot think of one without being instantly surrounded with the splendor of three; nor can I discern the three without being suddenly attracted to one."<sup>68</sup> Owen also cites this particular comment of Gregory's, though he does so in an untranslated footnote, not citing the particular work from which it comes.<sup>69</sup> Such historical observations remind the reader that – contrary to popular belief – twentieth century

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<sup>66</sup> *Works*, 2: 269. Emphases mine. In his work on ΧΡΙΣΤΟΛΟΓΙΑ, Owen makes a similar observation: "1. That the divine nature, which is individually the same in each person of the holy Trinity, is the proper formal object of all divine worship, in adoration and invocation; wherefore, no one person is or can be worshipped, but in the same individual act of worship each person is equally worshipped and adored. 2. That it is lawful to direct divine honour, worship, and invocation unto any person, in the use of his peculiar name – the Father, Son, or Spirit – or unto them altogether; but to make any request unto one person, and immediately the same unto another, is not exemplified in the Scripture, nor among the ancient writers of the church," *Works*, 1: 20-21. Owen sees this rule in many of the Fathers, including Augustine in *Enchirid.* xxxviii: "Quando unus trium in aliquo opere nominatur, universa operari trinitas intelligitur." ET: "When one person of the three is named in any work, the whole Trinity is to be understood to effect it."

<sup>67</sup> E.g., *Works*, 2: 229-30: "Now the Holy Ghost, being God, is no less to be invoked, prayed to, and called on, than the Father and Son." Owen is not alone in this assertion among his Puritan contemporaries who built upon a tradition within the Reformation. See also *Works* 2: 271-2. Cf. Philip Melancthon, *Loci Communes 1555*, trans. Clyde L. Manschreck (New York: OUP, 1965), 37-8.

<sup>68</sup> Turretin, *Elenctic Theology*, 1: 272. Quote from *On Holy Baptism* 41 [NPNF2, vol. 7: 375].

<sup>69</sup> *Works*, 2: 10: "Ὁὐ φθάνω τὸ ἔν νοῆσαι, καὶ τοῖς τρισὶ περιλάμπομαι, οὐ φθάνω τὰ τρία διελεῖν, καὶ εἰς τὸ ἔν ἀναφέρομαι."

theologians did not discover the insights of Gregory: the Protestant scholastics had long used them as a means to promote distinct worship of the triune God.<sup>70</sup>

Underlying Owen's thought, and Turretin's for that matter, is the classic Western conception of the economic Trinity. Owen conceives of the grace of God as communicated distinctly from the Father through Christ in the power of the Spirit. The Father is viewed in terms of "original authority," the Son as the one who communicates this grace "from a purchased treasury," and the Spirit communicates "by immediate efficacy."<sup>71</sup> Given this presupposed framework, it is a mistake to accuse Owen of general heretical ideas. For example, he would not endorse any form of modalistic monarchianism. These are distinct persons, not mental abstractions of the believer, nor simply different masks worn by the hidden God; neither the Father nor the Spirit becomes incarnate and suffers on the cross. Owen does not fall into the trap of tri-theism either. While Sherlock and others would later attack elements of Owen's thought in this particular work, it is significant that tri-theism is never a charge leveled against him.<sup>72</sup> Though these three, Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct, they nevertheless remain as triune "in that one divine essence" most clearly declared in the Shema.<sup>73</sup> Here plurality is found within a monotheistic conception of the Godhead.

Of primary concern for Owen is the believer's ability to commune fully with God, and if scripture – as he understands it – speaks in terms of both distinction and unity, then he believes the minister is bound to do the same.

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<sup>70</sup> Such appreciation does not disappear even within later Reformed writers, e.g., George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed., The Ninth Series of the Cunningham Lectures (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 6, who likewise quotes Gregory on this point.

<sup>71</sup> See *Works*, 2: 16-17.

<sup>72</sup> During the Trinitarian controversies at the end of the seventeenth century, W. Sherlock is the one who faces the charge of tritheism: Robert South strongly reacts against Sherlock's conception of three Minds with self-consciousness which are understood as the Trinity in Unity. W. Sherlock's, *A Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity and the Incarnation* (London: 1690) and *A Defence of Dr. Sherlock's Notion of a Trinity in Unity* (London: 1694), are attacked by South in his *Animadversions upon Dr. Sherlock's Book, entitled a Vindication of the Holy and Ever-Blessed Trinity* (1693) and *Tritheism charged upon Dr. Sherlock's New Notion of the Trinity, and the charge made good* (1694).

<sup>73</sup> *Works*, 2: 381. See Deut. 6:4.

## Communion with the Father

### *The Father and Human Psychological Hesitations*

Some have observed that the Puritan emphasis on sinful humanity, inherited largely from the line of Augustine and Calvin, lends itself to deep personal despair. While this tradition allows God to receive all praise and glory for human salvation, it can also produce the by-product of feelings of “unworthiness” and “a constant preoccupation with the need to assuage God’s wrath.”<sup>74</sup> It is argued that those prone to obsessive analysis of their own unworthiness – a common phenomenon among many English Puritans – often ended in “deep depressions and extremes of self-loathing.”<sup>75</sup> Such observations, however, did not first appear in the writings of twentieth century social historians: many Puritan pastors understood this problem in one form or another. Yet they usually viewed this phenomenon not as the result of an improper view of humanity, but arising from *an improper view of God*. Despair and anxiety arise in believers when they fail to perceive the true character of their heavenly Father.

Precisely along these lines Owen shows his concern for the improper psychological tendencies which believers’ often have in their view of God the Father. His involvement in pastoral care – including his time as a congregational minister in Coggeshall, as an army chaplain, and even as a spiritual mentor to Oxford students – informs his understanding of how many saints envisioned their heavenly Father. Apparently these misconceptions were not simply learned from others, but had been a part of his own life as well. It is helpful to remember that as a younger man Owen struggled with feeling God’s acceptance and assurance of salvation even after being a chaplain and preaching for some time.<sup>76</sup> Thus Owen’s treatise reflects a keen awareness of this widespread human experience.

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<sup>74</sup> Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales, eds. *The Culture of English Puritanism 1560-1700* (London: MacMillian Press, 1996), 10, esp. 9-13. But see J. D. Williams, “The Puritan Quest,” who complains: “historians, far more obsessed with sin and salvation than the original Puritans, have generally concentrated on preparation, conversion and assurance rather than union and communion with God, resulting in an impoverished view of Puritan devotion,” 90.

<sup>75</sup> Durston, 11. Cf. Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559-1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 114.

<sup>76</sup> See Beeke, (1991), 239-40. Cf. *Works*, 6: 324.

A common human tendency is to view God as only distant, wrathful and angry about sin.<sup>77</sup> This tendency constructs a God who is “always angry” and so “implacable” that no creature would dare to draw near to him.<sup>78</sup> While it is understandable for those outside of the faith to fear God in this way, it is inappropriate to incorporate such emotions into the believer’s conception of the Father. “It is misapprehension of God that makes any run from him, who have the least breathing wrought in them after him.”<sup>79</sup> This “misapprehension” comes as a result of meditating solely on the Father’s known characteristics of “terrible majesty, severity, and greatness,” all of which will overwhelm the soul seeking any personal communion with the Father.<sup>80</sup> These images largely come from a person’s “natural expectations” of what God will be like, yet a believer’s communion with God produces a different experience, one of loving “intercourse with him.”<sup>81</sup>

If the Father ought not to be viewed by the believer as simply wrathful and angry, why is this a common experience among Christians? Owen argues that much of the problem stems from believers’ uncertainty about the Father’s attitude toward them. An example of this may be seen in the disciples’ response as they are learning of Jesus’ coming departure (see John 16:26-28). Although they are secure in Jesus’ compassionate commitment to them, with his coming ascension the disciples’ thoughts turn toward the Father, and in this situation Jesus perceives uneasiness. Owen deduces that this reality is why when Jesus prays to the Father for his disciples, he adds the clarification, “for the Father himself loveth you.”<sup>82</sup> Jesus is assuring his disciples that the Father does not need to be persuaded to love them, for indeed love is the Father’s “peculiar respect towards you.”<sup>83</sup> While Jesus does pray and the Spirit brings comfort, these are not the causes but the fruit of the Father’s love. Since the idea of “love itself, free love, eternal love,” comes from the Father who is this fountain of love himself, “there is no need of any intercession for that.”<sup>84</sup> However, Owen claims that until this truth is fully grasped, disciples in all ages will hesitate to hold communion with the Father.

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<sup>77</sup> *Works*, 2: 19.

<sup>78</sup> *Works*, 2: 34.

<sup>79</sup> *Works*, 2: 32.

<sup>80</sup> *Works*, 2: 32.

<sup>81</sup> *Works*, 2: 24.

<sup>82</sup> *Works*, 2: 20. See John 26:26,27. Owen later restates this observation when discussing Christ’s oblation, *Works*, 2: 198.

<sup>83</sup> *Works*, 2: 20.

<sup>84</sup> *Works*, 2: 20.

Not only is the tendency to think negatively of the Father common to natural man, it is also stirred up by satanic powers. Satan uses “hard thoughts of God” to prevent and disrupt human communion with the Father, beginning in the garden by arguing that God threatens death to Adam and Eve for no good reason.<sup>85</sup> This kind of distortion, according to Owen, is still used effectively by the evil one against God’s people. Only when believers are reminded of the true love of God and his compassionate disposition towards them will they be psychologically free to commune with the Father. These “hard thoughts” are grievous to God since he knows “full well what fruit this bitter root is like to bear, – what alienations of heart, – what drawings back, – what unbelief and tergiversations in our walking with him.”<sup>86</sup> Just as a child avoids an encounter with his angry father, so a believer will avoid the heavenly Father if his presence represents wrath and fear.

At this point Owen also makes an observation which he presumes is rather common among believers. He notices that while believers can imagine God as angry and willing to punish those who die in their sins, they fail to conceive of God’s peculiar love for them, or as Owen writes, they “are afraid to have good thoughts of God.”<sup>87</sup> Such thoughts of God’s goodness, tenderness, and love seem difficult for saints to hold onto. This reaction is a result of “soul-deceit from Satan,” who brings such fearful thoughts. In contradistinction, Owen argues that the Father is the fountain of love, and must be viewed as such for communion to take place between himself and the believer. Therefore, we must now turn to Owen’s conception of the Father.

### *The Reality of the Love of the Father*

Turning to the Father’s attitude toward the saints, it seems appropriate to remember that in the twentieth century Owen himself has been heavily attacked for presenting an angry and wrathful God void of compassion. R. G. Lloyd argues that the most significant problem in Owen’s theology appears in his construction of a God who is simply “the embodiment of the Moral Law.” Consequently, Owen’s theology presents a Deity that “was bound by His own Nature to punish sin and to uphold righteousness, but that [God] possessed no inherent quality that compelled Him to be

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<sup>85</sup> *Works*, 2: 35.

<sup>86</sup> *Works*, 2: 35.

<sup>87</sup> *Works*, 2: 35.

merciful.”<sup>88</sup> A similar view espoused by James B. Torrance interprets Owen’s doctrine of God and the atonement as driven primarily by Aristotelian logic and presuppositions (e.g., the divine as *actus purus*). Torrance argues that this inevitably led Owen to conclude “that justice is the essential attribute of God,” whereas God’s love is dismissed as arbitrary or accidental.<sup>89</sup> Do such statements have merit?

As a Puritan preacher in the Reformed tradition of his day, Owen did not hesitate to speak about the holiness and justice of God, by which God in his purity could not simply dismiss sin as insignificant. However, to conclude that justice is more important or fundamental to God than love is to completely misunderstand Owen – and the Reformed scholasticism of the day. Although Owen believes in particular atonement, this does not place justice before love, since both love and justice are inseparable to God’s being. Neither love nor justice is accidental. According to Protestant scholastics, “The attributes are distinguished neither from the essence nor from each other but only by our conceiving.”<sup>90</sup> Such division of attributes is a result of human limitation rather than a hierarchy within God’s being. If love were not essential to God then humanity would have been lost in their sins, never able to re-establish any right relationship with their Creator. Instead of this being the case, Owen portrays a God who, while perfectly holy and just, is a God of love, and this love is found particularly in his discussions of God the Father.

Throughout Owen’s discussion of the Father, he often employs the specific imagery of a fountain.<sup>91</sup> This is not unusual, but has patristic roots and was employed freely among Protestant scholastics.<sup>92</sup> According to Owen, the “great discovery of the gospel” is realized in finding out that “the Father, as the fountain of the Deity” is to be known not as wrathful, but as the One who has revealed himself “peculiarly as love.”<sup>93</sup> As the fountain the Father serves as the “spring of all gracious

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<sup>88</sup> R. G. Lloyd, “Life and Work of John Owen,” 333.

<sup>89</sup> James B. Torrance, “The Incarnation and ‘Limited Atonement,’” 33, 37. The same charge is leveled against Jonathan Edwards, 37.

<sup>90</sup> J. Henricus Hottingerus, *Cursus theologicus Methodo Altingiana* (Heidelberg, 1660), cited by Heppe, *RD*, 59, see also 57-104.

<sup>91</sup> E.g., *Works*, 2: 19, 21-23, 28, 35-36, 38.

<sup>92</sup> See Muller, *DLGTT*, 44, who notes that when applied to God the Father, it communicates the idea that “the First Person of the Trinity is the *fons totius divinitatis*, the source or ground of the whole Godhead,” 44, 123.

<sup>93</sup> *Works*, 2: 19.

communications and fruits of love” which are revealed in Christ.<sup>94</sup> The analogy of the fountain unites the activities of the Father and the Son: “though all our refreshment actually lie in the streams, yet by them we are led up unto the fountain.” The Father is the fountain of love, and though the worshiper sips from the stream (i.e., Jesus Christ), he is continually directed back to the source of “eternal love itself.”<sup>95</sup>

This remarkable love coming from the divine fountain provides the center for Owen’s understanding of the Father. Love emerging from the Father is not limited, liable to increase or decrease, or based on whim, but rather it is “eternal,” “unchangeable,” “immutable,” and “infinitely gracious.”<sup>96</sup> Owen provides the image of an “infinite ocean of love” without beginning or end; such love does not “grow to eternity” but is “constant” and will not diminish.<sup>97</sup> Believers’ actions cannot merit the Father’s love, for it is a “compassionate” and “free love,” and as such it is an “undeserved” love of “kindness.”<sup>98</sup> Instead of only being a God of justice, as if justice were an attribute exclusive of love, Owen unquestionably declares that “God is love,” for he has a “loving nature.”<sup>99</sup> Encouraging the imagination of his readers, Owen asks them to picture anything that appears to have “a loving and tender nature in the world,” and after imagining away any imperfections or weaknesses, the love of the Father becomes easier to conceive: “He is as a father, a mother, a shepherd, a hen over chickens.”<sup>100</sup> While all earthly manifestations of love serve as pointers to the source of love itself, they should not be confused with the perfect love of the Father.

Divine love may be thought of in a twofold manner, as both *beneplaciti* and *amicitiae*. The former refers to a love of “good pleasure and destination,” while the latter communicates a love “of friendship and approbation.”<sup>101</sup> The *beneplacitum Dei* was common language used by Reformed Protestant scholastics to convey the idea of God’s voluntary, free, and sovereign plan.<sup>102</sup> Acknowledging this element of God’s

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<sup>94</sup> *Works*, 2: 23.

<sup>95</sup> *Works*, 2: 23. Owen also uses his familiar analogy of the sun and its beams to make the same point.

<sup>96</sup> *Works*, 2: 19-20, 23, 29, 30, 36.

<sup>97</sup> *Works*, 2: 27, 30.

<sup>98</sup> *Works*, 2: 19-20, 23, 32, 34, 36.

<sup>99</sup> *Works*, 2: 19. Cf. 1 John 4: 8, Exodus, 34: 6-7.

<sup>100</sup> *Works*, 2: 22. He cites Ps. 103:13; Isa. 63:16; Matt. 6:6; Ps. 23:1; Isa. 40:11; Matt. 23: 37. Noticeably Isa. 66: 13, which reads, “As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you,” saith the Lord” is used twice by Owen (cf. 38), revealing a willingness to extend motherly traits toward the Father. For a similar use in Calvin see William J. Bouwsma, “The Spirituality of John Calvin,” in *Christian Spirituality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 323-4.

<sup>101</sup> *Works*, 2: 21.

<sup>102</sup> See Muller, *DLGTT*, 57.



love, Owen seeks to ground the incarnation, and by implication the reconciliation of the world to God, in the Father's eternal love. On the other hand, Owen speaks of divine love as that of friendship (*amicitiae*), significantly referencing Martin Bucer rather than Aristotle.<sup>103</sup> This is because Owen's assumptions run contrary to Aristotle's regarding the friendship between parties who are truly unequal, especially in terms of "acts of justice."<sup>104</sup> Aristotle argues that when a great difference develops between parties (e.g., virtue, vice, wealth), "they are no longer friends, and do not even expect to be so. And this is most manifest in the case of the gods; for they surpass us most decisively in all good things."<sup>105</sup> The gods are far too distant from humanity to be considered friends for Aristotle. Opposed to this, Owen sees the Father's own free love overcoming the distance and reestablishing friendship by sending his Son. Whereas Aristotle may speak of friendship normally restricted to equals, Owen's Trinitarian theology drives him to a completely different conception of friendship – personal friendship with the triune God. Paraphrasing John 14:23, in which to love Christ is taken as loving the Father, Owen further interprets Jesus' language of "we" as fully Trinitarian, meaning that "even the Father and Son. . . by the Spirit" will come to dwell in believers. No divine person is excluded from the renewed relationship. Yet again, this promise and reality stems from the "peculiar prerogative" of the Father's love, though it is the undivided love of God.<sup>106</sup> Whereas Aristotle claims the "better should be more loved than he loves," Owen claims God's love for humanity far exceeds humanity's love for God.<sup>107</sup>

The Father's love is bounteous, and while there may be some similarities between a believer's love for God and God's love for them, there are also significant dissimilarities. We may begin by looking at the parallels.

First, there is a similarity between God's love and the believer's in that for both it is a "love of rest and complacency."<sup>108</sup> Although he cites both Augustine and

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<sup>103</sup> He quotes Bucer: "Diligi a patre, recipi in amicitiam summi Dei; a Deo foveri, adeoque Deo esse in deliciis." *Works*, 2: 21. ET: "To be loved by the Father, to be welcomed into the friendship of the most high God; to know God's favor, this is what it is to be in the delights of God." Friendship with God is a common theme among Puritans. Cf. Paul Blackham, "The Pneumatology of Thomas Goodwin" (Ph.D., King's College London, 1995), 210.

<sup>104</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 8.7.

<sup>105</sup> For Aristotle's full discussion on friendship, see *EN*, Bk 8.

<sup>106</sup> *Works*, 2: 21.

<sup>107</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 8.7.

<sup>108</sup> *Works*, 2: 25.

Aquinas,<sup>109</sup> Owen turns primarily to scripture which displays the rest of God in terms of God's remarkable silence regarding believers' faults: he will not "complain of any thing in them whom he loves, but he is silent on the account thereof. . . he will not seek farther for another object" for his love, but is satisfied. Regarding God's delight or complacency, Owen cites scriptural statements which portray both inward affections of God and outward demonstrations of that delight. God exceedingly delights in his church, rejoicing (i.e., tripudiare) in the same way "as men overcome with some joyful surprisal."<sup>110</sup> So overflowing is the Father's love that "He sings to his church."<sup>111</sup> Believers also discover God to be their rest and delight. While the soul has looked for a place to rest from its wanderings, nothing it has loved satisfies its longing until it embraces God, who alone fills the soul with "present and eternal rest."<sup>112</sup> We will pick this theme up in chapter six in our discussion of the Lord's day. Owen describes communion with God as sweeter than life itself, and thus the believer finds ultimate delight in this relationship.

Second, Christ is the only means by which to communicate this love. "The Father communicates no issue of his love unto us but through Christ; and we make no return of love unto him but through Christ."<sup>113</sup> Although the Father's love is grounded in his grace and will, it is accomplished in and through his Son. Using the vivid image of an "infinite ocean of love" that is the Father, Owen claims that believers "are not to look for one drop from him but what comes through Christ."<sup>114</sup> Since the Son uniquely provides the way to understand the love of the Father – for the Father to work apart from his Son is unthinkable – the believer's approach to the Father is also only viewed in terms of Christ. Jesus is the sacrificial offering as well as the means through which prayers become pleasing incense to God. As Owen portrays it: "Our love is fixed on the Father; but it is conveyed to him through the Son of his love. He is the only way for our graces as well as our persons to go unto God;

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<sup>109</sup> Aquinas, *ST* 1a2ae.25.2. "Effectus amoris quando habetur amatum, est delectatio." ET: "But the effect of love, when the beloved object is possessed, is pleasure." Augustine (without reference): "Amore est complacentia amantis in amato. Amor est motus cordis, delectantis se in aliquo." ET: "The delight in love is that of the lover in his beloved. Love is the beat of the heart that delights itself in something."

<sup>110</sup> *Works* 2: 25.

<sup>111</sup> *Works*, 2: 25-26. He gets this idea from Zeph. 3:17; Isa. 27: 2,3; Ps. 147:11, 149:4.

<sup>112</sup> *Works*, 2: 26.

<sup>113</sup> *Works*, 2: 27. Cf. Alsop, *Anti-Sozzo*, 718. For both Owen and Alsop, the Covenant is the key.

<sup>114</sup> *Works*, 2: 27. He also gives the image of the Father as the "honey in the flower; –it must be in the comb before it be for our use. Christ must extract and prepare this honey for us."

through him passeth all our desire, our delight, our complacency, our obedience.”<sup>115</sup> We will explore these ideas more fully in the section on communion with the Son.

Given these similarities between the love of the Father and humanity’s love, we can now turn to the apparent dissimilarities. The dissimilarities may be summarized: 1) God’s love is bounteous, humanity’s is a duty, 2) the Father’s love is antecedent, humanity’s is consequent, 3) the love of God is immutable, humanity’s is mutable. Each of these differences highlights the supremacy of the Father’s love. Like a fountain overflowing with water, or the clouds so full that they must pour forth rain, so the Father’s love is “out of its own fullness.”<sup>116</sup> His love is prior, whereas the believer’s love is one of response and gratitude. His love is not caused by anything outside of himself because, before there is anything “lovely” in people, God sets his affections on them. As a result, believers are captured by God’s “excellency, loveliness, and desirableness” which causes their response of love to the Father. Furthermore, each party’s love reflects their character. Since the Father is immutable, so is his love. Since humanity is mutable, so their love tends to waver. Using a favorite illustrative image, Owen claims the Father’s love is like the sun which is always full and does not change, whereas the changing “enlargements and straitenings” of the moon better reflects the unsteady love of believers. Here again Owen highlights the comforting fact that believers’ behavior will not “heighten” nor “lessen” the Father’s unchanging love. This does not mean that God never chastens his children, but rather that he only does so from a position of unflinching love and commitment to them.<sup>117</sup>

One final observation of particular importance for our overall study needs to be made concerning the character of the Father’s peculiar love. As a whole we have noted Owen’s anthroposensitive method which seeks to understand theological conclusions in light of anthropological observations. Such a concern extends to his views about God’s very nature. Whereas fallen humans are called *θεοστυγεῖς* (haters of God), the word Owen chooses to describe the nature of God is *φιλόανθρωπος* (lover of humanity).<sup>118</sup> Although this term has only minor biblical attestation (esp. Titus 3:4, cf. Acts 27:3; 28:2), it has a rich theological history. For example, it was one of Athanasius’ choice words used to describe God’s active love, most clearly seen

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<sup>115</sup> *Works*, 2: 27-28.

<sup>116</sup> *Works*, 2: 28.

<sup>117</sup> *Works*, 2: 30.

in the incarnation.<sup>119</sup> Behind this idea one finds Owen's reading of 1 John 4:10, by which God loved his people before they loved him. This allows him to make a distinction: God loves "his people, –not their sinning"; if this were not the case then salvation could never be secure.<sup>120</sup> Again, taken within a Trinitarian conception, Owen emphasizes the eternal and free love by which the Father delights in his people together with the Son who rejoices in the opportunity to fulfill the Father's desire. Here the Son is like a mirror of the Father, so that the Father looks to the Son and sees not only "the express image of his person and the brightness of his glory," but also his "love and delight in the sons of men."<sup>121</sup> The Father and the Son are φιλόανθρωπος, and to divorce this truth from the character of God is to misunderstand the God who seeks true communion with his children. Later in his treatise Owen briefly explores the rich language used in Titus 3:4-7 to describe God's love.<sup>122</sup> The vocabulary in this section is easily viewed in chart form.

Χρηστότης	God's goodness and desire to profit us
Φιλανθρωπία	His love, propensity to help, assist, and relieve those towards whom he is so affected
Ἐλεος	Mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and tenderness to those suffering
Χάρις	Free pardoning bounty, undeserved love

All of these attributes are ascribed to the Savior God (τοῦ Θεοῦ σωτήρος). Here Owen follows the biblical text which he thinks operates in an overtly Trinitarian manner: God's redemptive activities arise out of the love and kindness of the Father, procured by the Son, and communicated by the Holy Spirit who is as water poured out abundantly on believers. The nature of God is one of love, mercy, compassion, and goodness; these are characteristics clearly seen in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

#### *Believers' Response to the Father*

Given Owen's pastoral observations regarding common misconceptions of the Father by believers, what response should a corrected view of the Father's love elicit

<sup>118</sup> *Works*, 2: 29.

<sup>119</sup> See T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 74, 147-48.

<sup>120</sup> *Works*, 2: 31.

<sup>121</sup> *Works*, 2: 33.

from them? According to Owen, only by “eyeing” the Father’s love will the believer be able to rest from his fears in the midst of the storms of life.<sup>123</sup> Problematically most Christians cannot “carry up their hearts and minds to this height by faith,” failing to see the Father’s true love, and thus failing to find rest for their tired souls. By neglecting the Spirit’s prompting to approach the Father through the Son, Christians who should be free feel heavy, and those who should rejoice find themselves anxious about the Father’s disposition toward them.<sup>124</sup> Only when believers meditate on the kind of love displayed by the Father will they be prompted to commune with him.<sup>125</sup>

Readers are reminded that the triune God is self-sufficient, “infinitely satiated with himself and his own glorious excellencies and perfections.” The Father has begotten the Son from all eternity and fully delighted in him, and yet, for some reason, the Father has shown that he freely and immutably “loves his saints also.”<sup>126</sup> Such an observation aims to bring believers assurance that they can have confidence in the Father’s love for them. Indeed, the most unkind reaction Owen imagines believers responding with is a failure to trust that the Father does desire communion with his people.

Nevertheless, this must be a mutual communion, as noted above, and so it requires not simply one party, but two. Although the Father is the ground and source of all love and the believer’s obedience thus “begins in the love of God,” it “ends in our love to him.”<sup>127</sup> Four characteristics summarize a believer’s communion with the Father: rest, delight, reverence, and obedience.<sup>128</sup> Believers who have received the love of the Father are encouraged to make “returns,” showing their love and delight in the Father.<sup>129</sup> In typical Owen fashion, this response to God should be a holistic one, including the mind, will, and affections. Having an eye on the Father the believer in faith must openly accept these revelations of the Father as true. “When the Lord is, by his word, presented as [loving] unto thee, let thy mind know it, and assent that it is so; and thy will embrace it, in its being so; and all thy affections be filled with it.” He

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<sup>122</sup> *Works*, 2: 190.

<sup>123</sup> *Works*, 2: 23.

<sup>124</sup> *Works*, 2: 32.

<sup>125</sup> *Works*, 2: 33-34, 19.

<sup>126</sup> *Works*, 2: 32-33.

<sup>127</sup> *Works*, 2: 24.

<sup>128</sup> *Works*, 2: 28-29.

<sup>129</sup> *Works*, 2: 19.

concludes, “Set thy whole heart to it; let it be bound with the cords of this love.”<sup>130</sup> Every human faculty is involved in responding to God.<sup>131</sup> Any dialogue lacking the full attention of one participant fails to actualize Owen’s conception of intimate communion.

Finally, Owen expects his opponents to ask: does such an emphasis on God’s love negate human responsibility? Antinomianism is not an issue because anyone who has truly tasted of the love of God would not support such a perversion of the gospel: “the doctrine of grace may be turned into wantonness; the principle cannot.”<sup>132</sup> Rather, God’s love endears the soul not only to delight in the Father, but also to abide in him. Here we see a direct correlation between Christians’ view of God and their willingness to commune with him: “So much as we see of the love of God, so much shall we delight in him, and no more.”<sup>133</sup> Therefore, Owen encourages his readers to return to the source of love and acceptance; in doing so he believes they will be transformed.

Sit down a little at the fountain, and you will quickly have a farther discovery of the sweetness of the streams. You who have run from him, will not be able, after a while, to keep at a distance for a moment.<sup>134</sup>

### Communion with the Son

While the Father is the fountain from which the believer drinks, he does so only through the Son, for though the Father and the Son cannot be separated, they can be distinguished. Since communion with God implies communion with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Owen moves on to describe peculiar communion with the Son. Significantly, this section of his treatise is more than twice as long as the sections on the Father and Spirit combined – clearly even his Trinitarian approach has a Christocentric framework. In order to appreciate this emphasis we will focus on three particular themes around which Owen structures this part of his work. First, we look

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<sup>130</sup> *Works*, 2: 34. The imagery here must be understood in light of Old Testament binding of sacrifices with cords taken to the altar. See Susan Hardman Moore, “Sacrifice in Puritan Typology” in *Sacrifice and Redemption*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 182-202.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Henry Scougal, *Life of God in the Soul of Man* (London: 1677), “Love is that powerful and prevalent passion, by which all the faculties and inclinations of the soul are determined, and on which both its perfection and its happiness depend,” 92. Cited by G. S. Wakefield, *Puritan Devotion: Its Place in the Development of Christian Piety* (London: Epworth, 1957), 31. Emphasis mine.

<sup>132</sup> *Works*, 2: 31.

<sup>133</sup> *Works*, 2: 36.

<sup>134</sup> *Works*, 2: 36.

at the character of the Son, his excellencies and “personal grace.” Second, the Son’s affections for believers are described in detail. Third, communion with the Son through “purchased grace” is developed. Throughout this exploration, and especially in the second and third points, we will see Owen’s anthroposensitive theology at work in the form of a dialogue between truths discovered about the Son and how believers should respond to these realities. Here again Owen’s anthropological insights as portraying humanity wholly relating to God arise from reflection on God rather than through detached introspection.

### *The Character of the Son*

When describing communion with the Father Owen stresses the idea of love. In so doing, he was not denying the Son or the Spirit’s love, since he freely ascribes this attribute to the other persons of the Trinity elsewhere.<sup>135</sup> His point is to stress what believers ought to think specifically of the Father, without taking away from the Son or Spirit. Likewise, in his discussion of the Son, he highlights the idea of grace, although this consistently moves him back to observations about Christ’s love. It is not that the Father and Spirit are without grace – for we remain speaking of the one God; nevertheless, “peculiar communion” with the Son is through grace. He interprets John 1 as fully attesting to this reality: Jesus came in “grace and truth” and believers receive “grace for grace.” Likewise the apostolic benediction emphasizes this truth by speaking of the “grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>136</sup> This distinction is also sprinkled throughout Paul’s salutations and prophetically in Old Testament texts which pointed to the uniqueness of Jesus. Given these observations, Owen deduces that, while believers are to view the Father peculiarly in his love, they are peculiarly to “eye” in and receive from the Son grace, “revealed in or exhibited by the gospel.”<sup>137</sup>

Yet gospel grace only makes sense for Owen when it is grounded in the person of Christ – an emphasis we have seen consistently surfacing throughout our

<sup>135</sup> E.g., *Works*, 2: 35, 62, 63, 118, 342; 6: 466; 9: 522, etc.

<sup>136</sup> *Works*, 2: 47. The scriptures he uses are John 1:14, 16,17; 2 Cor. 13:14.

<sup>137</sup> *Works*, 2: 47. Just as the believer is encouraged to keep his eye on the Father, so he should continually eye Jesus as well. See also *Works*, 2: 203-06.

study.<sup>138</sup> By looking to Jesus as truly God and truly man one encounters his excellencies. Contemplating these truths will inevitably excite believers and encourage them to “give up themselves to be wholly his.”<sup>139</sup> First, one may consider Jesus’ deity. Because he is not merely man – contrary to the Socinian description of him as *purus homo* (merely human) – Jesus is able to be an “endless, bottomless, boundless” source of grace and compassion.<sup>140</sup> Since Jesus as the Son of God does not have a beginning, his love and grace are based in eternity rather than something that arose in first century Palestine. Because this love is eternal and unchangeable, believers are comforted that Christ will not grow weary and abandon them. The love and grace of Jesus is based in his character, and this presents a sharp contrast between his love and that normally expressed by the rest of fallen humanity. “Our love is like ourselves; as we are, so are all our affections.”<sup>141</sup> As Owen sees it, the common phenomenon among humanity is that their expressions of love are noticeably fickle and transient, one day loving deeply, the next day showing hatred for the same person. Not so with Jesus, whose character, and thus his love, remains the same (as we already noted with the Father), never having a beginning nor an ending. At this point we may move from noting Jesus’ excellencies as displayed in his deity to those displayed in his humanity.

As with his deity, appreciating Jesus’ humanity quickens a believer’s heart toward communion with the Son. Jesus was free from sin as the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. This is an amazing truth to Owen since, while morally Jesus appears like Adam, his earthly situation was entirely different from Adam’s. Adam was created “immediately from the hand of God, without concurrence of any secondary cause,” thus securing his purity.<sup>142</sup> As we noted in chapter three, Jesus was not born in paradise, but as Owen here vividly argues, he was “a plant and root out of a dry ground, a blossom from the stem of Jesse, a bud from the loins of sinful man, – born of a sinner, after there had been no innocent flesh in the world for four thousand

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<sup>138</sup> W. Sherlock aggressively attacked Owen’s emphasis on “person” as running the risk of divorcing Christ from the “gospel,” W. Sherlock, *Union and Communion with him* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.), *passim ad nauseam*. Owen defends himself throughout his response to Sherlock, e.g., *Works*, 2: 328-331.

<sup>139</sup> *Works*, 2: 59.

<sup>140</sup> *Works*, 2: 61, 68. Cf. Lech Szczuchi, “Socinianism,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Oxford: OUP, 1996), esp. 85-6.

<sup>141</sup> *Works*, 2: 62.

<sup>142</sup> *Works*, 2: 64.



years, every one upon the roll of his genealogy being infected therewithal.”<sup>143</sup> It is not a problem, he explains, to imagine a flower growing in paradise, but to have a “spotless bud” arise out of the woods or in the “wilderness of corrupted nature” is enough to cause angels to desire an understanding of this great mystery. All born after Adam were not only defiled, accursed, and unclean, but also guilty of his transgression, since all sinned in him: “That the human nature of Christ should be derived from hence free from guilt, free from pollution, this is to be adored.”<sup>144</sup> Since Jesus was “never federally in Adam” he escapes the liability of the imputation of sin which is reckoned to the rest of humanity; sin is only imputed to the one who ‘was made sin’ by means of his voluntary covenant whereby he is the Mediator.<sup>145</sup>

Not only was Jesus free from sin, but in his human nature he was full of grace. Such an observation is firmly established, for Owen, on a Trinitarian basis. He claims that the incarnate Christ received from the “fountain of grace” the Holy Spirit without measure, since the Father was pleased so to fill the Son. As such Jesus was full of grace and truth, enabling “a certainty of uninterrupted communion with God.”<sup>146</sup> The Spirit was the guarantee of the relationship. This fullness allows Jesus uniquely to supply others with the grace and truth they need.

Most astonishing to Owen regarding the excellencies of Jesus’ divine and human natures, is that they are united in one person. In this section Owen’s reasoning resembles classic formulations, with his obvious indebtedness to Leo whom he twice quotes at length. Owen, apparently trying to model his interpretation on early Patristic (and one might also argue Anselmian) reasoning, concludes: “Had he not been man, he could not have suffered; – had he not been God, his suffering could not have availed either himself or us, – he had not satisfied; the suffering of a mere man could not bear any proportion to that which in any respect was infinite.”<sup>147</sup> Given

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<sup>143</sup> *Works*, 2: 64. Throughout *ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑ ΠΑΝΤΟΔΑΠΗΙΑ*, e.g., *Works* 17: 183 (*BT*, 247), Owen’s familiarity and general agreement with the dating of his contemporary James Ussher’s (1581-1656) infamous *Sacred Chronology* is apparent. See Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Catholics, Anglicans, and Puritans: Seventeenth Century Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987), esp. 156-61. Owen would clearly have been familiar with Ussher’s work, since the appendix added to it after Ussher’s death was created by Thomas Barlow (Owen’s former tutor), at that time the Bodleian Librarian, appointed to this position by Owen.

<sup>144</sup> *Works*, 2: 64. He goes on to say that such pollution “was prevented in him from the instant of conception,” 65.

<sup>145</sup> *Works*, 2: 65.

<sup>146</sup> *Works*, 2: 66.

<sup>147</sup> *Works*, 2: 67. He cites Leo: “Deus verus, et homo verus in unitatem Domini temperatur, ut, quod nostris remediis congruebat, unus atque idem Dei hominumque mediator et mori possit ex uno, et resurgere possit ex altero,” Sermon 1 [see v. 12 in *NPNF2*]. ET: “True God and true human

these reflections, Jesus is a fit mediator, for one cannot understand his grace apart from his person. It is not enough simply to think of his deity, nor only to think of his humanity, but the “treasure of Christ’s work” must always be marveled at in light of his *person* which perfectly unites his divine and human natures.<sup>148</sup>

Remembering that for Owen these reflections are under the heading “personal grace,” we again see his unwavering commitment to a united Christ, for only through him does humanity gain spiritual understanding. All true knowledge comes only through Christ, including 1) knowledge of God, 2) of ourselves, and 3) knowledge of how to walk in communion with God. All of this knowledge is Christologically based and leads to experiential application.

While creation itself does reveal and testify to many of God’s “properties,” only in Christ does one learn of God’s pardon and mercy. Owen believes that to know the wisdom of God one must look to the crucified Christ.<sup>149</sup> God’s particular “love unto sinners” is only discovered in the gospel.<sup>150</sup> The Spirit communicates this truth in scripture – when referring to 1 John 4:8, 16 Owen claims “the Holy Ghost says” – by revealing that God is love, so much so that he sent his Son to die on behalf of sinners.<sup>151</sup> Thus in Christ, sinners learn of God’s love and the Spirit of Christ continues to testify to this reality. Beyond simply the property of God’s love, one sees more clearly and “savingly” God’s vindictive justice<sup>152</sup> in the punishment of sin, his patience, wisdom, and all-sufficiency.<sup>153</sup> In sum, to have a true knowledge of God one must look specifically to Jesus.

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meet in the unity of our Lord, so that, as befitting a remedy for us, one and the same mediator between God and humans was both able to die in virtue of the one nature, and able to rise again in virtue of the other.”

<sup>148</sup> See *Works* 2: 48, 68.

<sup>149</sup> *Works*, 2: 79.

<sup>150</sup> *Works*, 2: 81.

<sup>151</sup> *Works*, 2: 81-2. It is common for Owen to employ variations of this formula, “the Holy Spirit says” (cf. Heb. 3:7; 4: 7 [esp. *Works*, 21: 305]; 10:15,16 and Owen’s reflections on these verses found in his *Exposition of Hebrews*). Nevertheless, the contemporary commentator should not too quickly read back into Owen an unsophisticated dictation theory. Owen freely acknowledges the different personalities, styles, and emphases of the various authors of scripture. Cf. Gundry, “John Owen on Authority and Scripture,” 189-221; idem, “John Owen’s Doctrine of the Scriptures: An Original Study of His Approach to the Problem of Authority” (S.T.M. thesis, Union College of British Columbia, 1967); McKim, 195-207.

<sup>152</sup> See Trueman, “John Owen’s *Dissertation on Divine Justice*,” who rightly argues that Owen’s mature understanding of vindictive justice is rooted in God’s being rather than a free act of the divine will. “God’s hatred of sin must manifest itself in an act of God’s will to punish sin. Not to do so would involve a contradiction in God’s being,” 98. This is most clearly revealed in the atoning work of Christ.

<sup>153</sup> See *Works*, 2: 83-91.

Similarly, only through Christ does a person gain a true knowledge of self, which includes a deeper knowledge of sin, righteousness, and judgement. The Christ who sends his Spirit convinces the world of sin in a way which surpasses the conviction caused by the law and conscience.<sup>154</sup> Human sin and rebellion against God is so serious that the death of Jesus Christ became necessary for fellowship between the divine and human to be reestablished. It should not be thought that the Father delighted in the blood, tears, and cries of his Son any more than he delights in the anguish of any one of his creatures (an idea Owen outrightly rejects). However, since God's justice needed to be satisfied and his law needed fulfillment, the Father, moved by his love, sends the Son who voluntarily seeks to make atonement for a lost people.<sup>155</sup> Thus, by looking to Christ, humanity is confronted by the self-realization that it is unable to make atonement for sin. Apart from Christ there can be no "true saving knowledge of sin," for "in him and his cross is discovered our universal impotency, either of atoning God's justice or living up to his will."<sup>156</sup> Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection sinners learn not only of their need to be freed from guilt, but also of their need to be "actually righteous." Just as clearly as Jesus on the cross demonstrates the reality of human sin, so through his life of obedience does he demonstrate true human righteousness. This righteousness, according to Owen, is made available to those who through faith enjoy the imputation of Christ's righteousness, a theme we have already discussed in chapter four.

Reflecting on the knowledge of God and of oneself gained through Christ naturally leads Owen to apply these ideas to a consideration of how, in Christ, one gains a knowledge of "walking with God." To begin with, just as in any relationship, to walk with God necessitates an agreement between the two parties to walk together. Such agreement, however, would be impossible had not Christ first taken away the cause and continuation of enmity, bringing reconciliation and establishing lasting peace with God. Since God remains wholly loving and just, one cannot approach the Father outside of the blood of Christ – to attempt such a thing would be to undervalue the incarnation and death of Jesus.<sup>157</sup>

Beyond simply agreement, there must be an acquaintance between the two who desire to walk together. Whereas William Sherlock thought Owen's ideas of

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<sup>154</sup> *Works*, 2: 95.

<sup>155</sup> *Works*, 2: 96.

<sup>156</sup> *Works*, 2: 101, 105.

“acquaintance” were suspect to abstract mysticism, Owen correctly understood, uses this language to protect the concrete relational nature between God and his people found in Christ. General revelation and even scripture itself, apart from Christ opening it up, are insufficient: “all the world cannot, but by and in him, discover a path that a man may walk one step with God in.”<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, since Christ is the “medium of all communication between God and us” he alone provides the way to walk with God.<sup>159</sup> Believers find strength and confidence to carry on this walking in Christ, keeping their aim the desire to bring glory to God.<sup>160</sup> Walking with God becomes all the more desirable when one’s focus moves away from one’s own failings and the temptation of legalism to the captivating affections displayed by the Son for believers, a subject to which we now turn.

### *The Son’s Affections for Believers*

A common misconception of Puritan theology has suggested that they focused on one’s own subjective internal disorders to the neglect of an assurance gained through the person and work of Christ. Usually Calvin is contrasted at this point with later Calvinism, claiming the former was Christocentric while the latter was dangerously anthropocentric.<sup>161</sup> While Owen serves as an example of a Puritan who highly valued Christian experientialism, yet, for the believer, he usually calls for the movement to go *from* Christ *to* himself *back* to Christ, rather than remaining in introspection. Indeed, introspection itself was normally encouraged only from a Christocentric framework in order to avoid moralism. What is clear for our purpose is Owen’s emphasis on the objective reality of the Son’s affections for believers, a truth he believes brings liberation.

There are four particular expressions of the Son’s love for believers: delight, valuation, pity and compassion, bounty. By realizing how Christ graciously gives himself and his love, the natural response of believers is to give and love in return – thus mutual communication is maintained even though it is grounded in and secured

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<sup>157</sup> See *Works*, 2: 107-8.

<sup>158</sup> *Works*, 2: 108, 109.

<sup>159</sup> *Works*, 2: 109.

<sup>160</sup> *Works*, 2: 109-111.

<sup>161</sup> The classic statement expressing this line of argument is found in Kendall’s work. For more particular accusations against Owen on this front, see my review of Stover in chapter one.

by divine action.<sup>162</sup> An exploration of each expression of Christ's love will reveal Owen's design.

### I. DELIGHT

The depth of the Son's delight in the believer is the basis of any returned delight the believer might express in the Son. Even as we noted regarding the Father, Christ also freely sings and rejoices over the Church.<sup>163</sup> An intimacy is possible between the believer and Christ because the Son of the Father so delights in the children of God. Thus, Christ reveals his "secrets" to his saints and makes it possible for them to reveal the "secrets of their hearts to him."<sup>164</sup> Christ calls believers his friends and so reveals his mind and heart unto them by his Spirit in a way he does not do for those outside the fold. To believers, Christ reveals both himself and his kingdom, which is known through the "government of his Spirit in their hearts."<sup>165</sup>

While communion with the Son must ultimately be mutual, believers communicate with the Son only through divine aid. Here the Spirit of Christ enables believers to commune with God, otherwise their efforts would be futile. When believers go to God expressing their desires, they must always approach with the Spirit's *assistance* and by *way* of the Son. Due to the person and work of the great high priest, believers are enabled not only to approach God, but to do so *boldly* – a theme Owen discusses at length in his Hebrews commentary.<sup>166</sup>

Although this may sound good theoretically, Owen's pastoral experience reminds him that such unhindered communion is the exception rather than the rule. So how should believers respond to these assertions? Owen acknowledges that sin will always try to disturb the rest that believers have when they commune with the Son. Here he makes an important distinction: the problem is not that *Christ's love* fades or lessens with the believer's struggle against sin, but rather the soul becomes distracted or entangled in sin and thus avoids communion. While communion is not purely a human act, it nevertheless takes seriously the human response to God's love; otherwise it ceases to meet the definition of *mutual* relations which Owen established from the beginning. Once the restless soul again allows itself to ponder and accept

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<sup>162</sup> *Works*, 2: 118, 132.

<sup>163</sup> *Works*, 2: 118.

<sup>164</sup> *Works*, 2: 119.

<sup>165</sup> *Works*, 2: 120.

<sup>166</sup> E.g., *Works*, 21: 428-38.

Christ's goodness toward it, a new level of rest and alertness materializes, with a renewed obedience as the natural outflow. Christians tasting such communion seek to avoid temptations which can cause "disturbance of that rest and complacency" found in Christ, avoiding sin not out of fear, but out of a growing desire to have nothing between themselves and their Lord. "A believer that hath gotten Christ in his arms, is like one that hath found great spoils, or a pearl of price. He looks about him every way, and fears every thing that may deprive him of it."<sup>167</sup> The fear of the believer in this quotation is not that Christ is desperately trying to escape their grasp and they must tightly hold on to him – for this is the Son who delights in his people. Rather, believers fear their own waywardness, knowing how often they have been lured by the world and distracted from Christ, only to realize much later how far they have gone from the one they once held so dear.

One must not confuse this discussion of disrupted *communion* with that of undisturbed *union*. At no time is the believer's union with Christ at risk. However, the experiential communion with the Son does wax and wane as commonly attested to in Christian spirituality. Again Owen's realism about human nature prior to glorification prompts him to encourage his readers to be careful in their communion with the Son – not because the Son will arbitrarily depart, but because the human heart so easily strays even from the one who most satisfies it. For the believer, neglecting communion with Christ is like the night, and even when he has tasted communion with the Son he always longs for an even "nearer communion."<sup>168</sup> During times of darkness the believer must willingly engage in self-examination, seeking to discover where he may have gone wrong. Owen is here basing his reflections on the common allegorical reading of Canticles. The woman of the story wanders about seeking the source of her spouse's absence: "have I demeaned myself, that I have lost my Beloved? Where have I been wandering after other lovers?"<sup>169</sup> Sometimes during this lonely season one must show resolution and diligence in seeking Christ afresh. Beyond private introspection, use of the public means of grace (prayer, preaching, and the sacraments) is encouraged. Furthermore, since this is not a question of objective reality – God remains lovingly disposed toward and delighted in the believer who is united to Christ – but of subjective experience, the despairing

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<sup>167</sup> *Works*, 2: 126. Cf. Song of Songs, 3: 4.

<sup>168</sup> *Works*, 2: 128, 126.

<sup>169</sup> *Works*, 2: 129.

soul may also turn to a “faithful watchman” who may advise the struggling believer.<sup>170</sup> Here we find classic Puritan pastoral counseling, as the troubled believer explains his condition and gains assistance from one further along in their pilgrimage. These are the ordinary means God employs to redirect his straying sheep.

## II. VALUATION

Besides simply delighting in believers, the Son deeply values them. Owen deduces this from several observations. To begin, the fact of the incarnation must proclaim the value placed on believers, otherwise there would never have been any ‘exinanition’ (*exinanitio* = emptying of the Son).<sup>171</sup> Without the Son’s valuing believers he would never have become a servant. Even less would he have done the unthinkable by becoming obedient to death, which ultimately testified that “He valued them above his life.”<sup>172</sup> While it appears throughout Owen’s corpus that Christ’s love is particularly for the Church, that emphasis is strikingly clear in this section. The Son loves his “garden” far more than the “wilderness”: “all the world is nothing to him in comparison to them.”<sup>173</sup> Employing this idea as a comfort, Owen immediately adds that the weakest believer in the world is still prized by Christ “more than all the world besides.” If believers grasped this, Owen explains, they would experience great consolation.

In response to Christ’s valuing of believers, they are to value him. Quoting Luther’s statement that Jesus is the most beautiful lord (*pulcherrimus dominus Jesus*),<sup>174</sup> Owen argues that Christ should be valued above all else, including one’s own life. When believers discover Christ and the value he has placed on them they should willingly part with whatever brought inappropriate delight to them in former times; “Sin and lust, pleasure and profit, righteousness and duty, in their several conditions, all shall go, so they may have Christ.”<sup>175</sup> One must be willing to give up everything to enjoy Christ, otherwise Christ is not one’s highest value – a position only the Son of God deserves.

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<sup>170</sup> *Works*, 2: 131. See Timothy J. Keller, “Puritan Resources for Biblical Counseling,” *JPP* 9, no. 3 (1988): 11-43.

<sup>171</sup> *Works*, 2: 134. See Heppel, *RD*, 488-94; Muller, *DLGTT*, 110.

<sup>172</sup> *Works*, 2: 135. He concludes: “a death accompanied with the worst that God had ever threatened to sinners, –argues as high a valuation of us as the heart of Christ was capable of.”

<sup>173</sup> *Works*, 2: 136.

<sup>174</sup> *Works*, 2: 137.

<sup>175</sup> *Works*, 2: 140.

## III. PITY AND COMPASSION

By looking to the incarnate Christ one further sees the Son's affection of pity and compassion toward the believer. Sent by the Father, the Son assumed human nature and gained a "fellow feeling" with humanity, facing temptations and afflictions just as they do. This enables Jesus to have the heart of a sympathetic high priest, one who "grieves and labours with us."<sup>176</sup> Owen nevertheless does admit "there is something in all our temptations more than was in the temptation of Christ," a theme we have already discussed in chapter three.

Because resisting temptation promotes communication with God, Owen describes ways in which he sees the Son aiding believers in their continuing struggle.<sup>177</sup> Christ gives them "a strong habitual bent against sin" and fortifies their hearts with his grace. Sometimes he will give a "strong impulse of actual grace" which will help protect them when they are on the edge of sin. At other times he will actually take away the temptation itself before it overwhelms the soul. When temptations grow Christ will send "fresh supplies of grace" to bring strength to the weary. Wisdom is also often given in order to know how to combat temptation, usually by learning more about oneself. Finally, when overcome by temptation Christ does not hesitate to be there "in his tenderness," bringing relief and pardon.

Not only did the incarnate Son face temptations, he also endured afflictions. From these experiences the Son is able to intercede to the Father on behalf of believers for their relief, "not only in respect of our sins, but also our sufferings."<sup>178</sup> Believers facing afflictions are to respond faithfully to God by not allowing their affections to cling to anything but Christ, and during the difficulty they are to cherish the Spirit whom Christ sent for believers' sanctification and consolation, themes we will discuss below. Therefore it makes sense that they should avoid grieving the Spirit through their unbelief, placing "comforts and joys in other things, and not being filled with joy in the Holy Ghost."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> *Works*, 2: 141.

<sup>177</sup> See *Works*, 2: 143-45.

<sup>178</sup> *Works*, 2: 145.

<sup>179</sup> *Works*, 2: 150, 149.



## IV. BOUNTY

Finally, Christ's love and grace toward the saints is expressed in the rich bounty he provides for them. Here we discover what Owen considers to be a great sin of believers: they do not make "use of Christ's bounty as they ought to."<sup>180</sup> Trying to base his conclusions of the character of God in scripture, Owen argues that "whatever he gives us, –his grace to assist us, his presence to comfort us, –he doth it abundantly." For example, believers should not run from Christ, for his grace is like the oil that never runs out. Only from the perspective of the bounty of the Son's resources are believers in a position to seek holiness and obedience "unto Jesus Christ." Obedience is understood in light of the Son, not in order to gain justification, but because the Son has already secured the believer's good standing before God. Since God in Christ accepts believers, their obedience is pleasing to the Son who honors the Father. There seems to be a peculiar relationship, however, between the believer's obedience and Christ. Thus the believer is encouraged in his obedience to view Christ in his bountiful love. As Philippians 1:29 and Hebrews 12:1-2 testify, Jesus is the author not only of faith but also of obedience, since he "adds incense to their prayers, gathers out all the weeds of their duties, and makes them acceptable to God." By obeying Christ believers honor him and show the Son to be equal to the Father, "to whom all honour and obedience is due."<sup>181</sup> Such obedience is possible because of the bountiful resources made available in Christ. Only out of the bounty of Christ's love and grace can the believer seek the fruits of holiness, a quest that will not be fully satisfied until heaven.

*Communion with Christ through Purchased Grace*

Throughout Owen's writings one often comes across the terms 'purchased' and 'grace,' but only in this book does he put them together as a unit. This phrase serves as a basic summation of the work of Christ, particularly his obedience, his suffering of death, and his continued heavenly intercession.<sup>182</sup> As the second Adam, Jesus needed to live a life of active obedience in order that he might take away believers' unclean robes and replace them with garments of righteousness. This must be understood as a voluntary and active work of Christ, which makes Owen wary of

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<sup>180</sup> *Works*, 2: 152.

<sup>181</sup> *Works*, 2: 153.

employing the classic division of active and passive obedience, for all “obeying is doing.”<sup>183</sup> In this way, Jesus is truly the second Adam and not simply a puppet.

Purchased grace is subdivided into three graces. First, since outside of Christ there can be no communion with God, Owen believes that purchased grace removes the alienation caused by sin and provides the *grace of acceptance with God*. Second, the Son does not simply remove believers' sins, but through the *grace of sanctification* “He makes us not only accepted but acceptable.”<sup>184</sup> Third, *the grace of privilege* – simply another way of speaking of *adoption* – is discovered by communion with the Son through purchased grace. Since sanctification and obedience are implicitly discussed in other sections, we may skip Owen’s second point and focus on his conceptions of acceptance and adoption with God, especially since these two are so closely related and integral to the theme of renewed communion with God.

#### I. ACCEPTANCE WITH GOD

Although Owen spends a great deal of time on the theme of acceptance before God, for our purposes we will concentrate on his Trinitarian framework and the response he envisions for believers.

Even though only the Son assumed a human nature and suffered on behalf of God’s people, Owen does not want believers to mistakenly think that this means the Son loves believers more than the Father or the Spirit. We have already noted this fear of Owen’s in our discussion concerning communion with the Father, and here a similar explanation follows. Given that the purpose of the “dispensation of grace” is to “glorify the whole Trinity,” each divine person acts in a distinct yet united way. Employing language of emanation, which might sound reminiscent of Neoplatonism but more likely comes from his studies of the early Fathers, Owen sees the overflow of love moving from Father through the Son and Spirit. “The emanation of divine love to us begins with the Father, is carried on by the Son, and then communicated by the Spirit; the Father designing, the Son purchasing, the Spirit effectually working: which is their order.”<sup>185</sup> Here we are reminded of Owen’s respect for the idea of the

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<sup>182</sup> See *Works*, 2: 154-68.

<sup>183</sup> *Works*, 2: 163.

<sup>184</sup> *Works*, 2: 170.

<sup>185</sup> *Works*, 2: 180. Jonathan Edwards will later write along similar lines: “There is a natural decency or fitness in that order and oeconomy that is established. It is fit that the order of the acting of the Persons of the Trinity should be agreeable to the order of their subsisting. That as the Father is first

order of subsistence within the Trinity, which is how he explains that the Son became incarnate rather than the Father or the Spirit. Even as the love of God moves as a stream from the Father through the Son by the Spirit, so a believer returns to God by traveling back upstream, rather than trying to jump straight into the river's source. Thus he explains, "our participation is first by the work of the Spirit, to an actual interest in the blood of the Son; whence we have acceptation with the Father."<sup>186</sup> Quickening a person to faith, the Spirit creates an "interest" in the Son and the benefits he secures for believers. One should not become overly chronological at this point because, even though the Spirit begins the movement in a person's heart, this does not occur outside of a Trinitarian structure, for even this work of the Spirit serves as "a fruit and part of the purchase of Christ."<sup>187</sup> The Spirit awakens the believer to the benefits which have already been accomplished for them through Christ's atoning work, and this ultimately leads to the Father's glory with whom they now experience true peace and acceptance. "And thus are both Father and Son and the Holy Spirit glorified in our justification and acceptation with God; the Father in his free love, the Son in his full purchase, and the Holy Spirit in his effectual working."<sup>188</sup> He emphasizes that while it is solely through Christ's death that reconciliation with God is accomplished, one must always seek to make that affirmation within a Trinitarian framework whereby the "whole Trinity" receives glory, and this is protected by acknowledging the triune God's movement in terms of economic ordering. To neglect such reflections will inevitably lead to a false conception of the Father and the Spirit – as if the Son were working alone. This misconception creates not only theological but also pastoral problems that can only be overcome by a renewed Trinitarian emphasis which makes 'purchased grace' understandable.

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in the order of subsisting, so He should be first in the order of acting. That as the other two Persons are from the Father in their subsistence, and as to their subsistence naturally originated from Him and are dependant [*sic*] on Him; so that in all that they act they should originate from Him, act from Him and in a dependence on Him," in *RR*, 71-2.

<sup>186</sup> *Works*, 2: 180.

<sup>187</sup> *Works*, 2: 180.

<sup>188</sup> *Works*, 2: 180. Cf. Wollebius, 164: "The efficient cause of justification, that is, the agent that does it, is the entire Holy Trinity."

In response to the triune God's redeeming activity, believers are to yield obedience unto Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>189</sup> This is because obedience is not concerned primarily with an arbitrary set of rules established in nature, but rather obedience is the triune God's will for his people, based on God's undivided being. Here Owen can speak of the one will of God without shying away from distinguishing between the divine persons. Each appoints and ordains the obedience of believers: Father by way of origin, Son as Mediator, and Spirit as the one who calls believers. Out of his "electing love" the Father chooses some to be holy; from the Son's "exceeding love" some are purified to do good works; and "the very work of the love of the Holy Ghost" is to enable believers to bring forth fruit as he transforms them.<sup>190</sup> So while God does require obedience of his children, he personally makes such a response possible. Christian obedience

is an eminent immediate end of the distinct dispensation of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, in the work of our salvation. If God's sovereignty over us is to be owned, if his love towards us be to be regarded, if the whole work of the ever-blessed Trinity, for us, in us, be of any moment, our obedience is necessary.<sup>191</sup>

Obedience in response to God glorifies each person of the Godhead. By walking with God in this way others will see a believer's life and glorify the Father as a result of what they observe; the obedience offered to the Son is manifested by believing in him, so that others will learn that the Christ was sent by the Father; when one falls into disobedience it grieves the Holy Spirit, but he is glorified when the fruits of obedience are displayed in a Christian's life.

Given this complex understanding of how believers relate to the triune God, it is fascinating to remember Owen's emphasis upon humanity as created in the image of God. Recognizing his Trinitarian emphasis in this treatise, it is fitting that Owen connects the "image" with the triune God. He notes simply that "the Holy Ghost communicates unto us his own likeness; which is also the image of the Father and the Son."<sup>192</sup> Since man reflects the image of the *triune God*, he ought to relate to the different persons of the Trinity distinctly, yet as one (i.e., the trinity of God). Furthermore, all obedience must ultimately be considered "gospel obedience," lest it

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<sup>189</sup> Cf. Works, 17: 418 (BT, 605): "Evangelium doctrina est de Deo Patre, Filio, et Spiritu Sancto ejusque cultu, notsrâque obedientiâ ei debitâ." ET: "The gospel is the teaching about God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and about the worship and obedience due to God."

<sup>190</sup> Works, 2: 182-83.

<sup>191</sup> Works, 2: 183.

<sup>192</sup> Works, 2: 243.

fall into legalistic moralism. No obedience may truly honor God outside of the purchased grace of Christ, the empowering of the Holy Spirit, and a knowledge of the Father's love. When obedience is sought after in light of the gospel, the result is a renewal of the image of God in believers, whereby they are conformed to God. This transformation begins when one moves from hostility toward God and into his family, a miraculous event discovered in the idea of adoption.

## II. ADOPTION

Communion with the Son includes the privilege of adoption received through grace. Theologically Owen defines adoption as "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>193</sup> Here the paradigm shift is monumental; he who once was bound in the chains of an oppressive family and existence is freed and brought into the caring household of God. Consequently the believer discovers God as Father, the Son as an elder brother, other saints and even angels becoming fellow children in this kingdom family.<sup>194</sup> In light of this significant shift, the adoption is not only declared to Satan in a judicial manner, but experientially the Spirit of Christ moves in the believer's conscience and heart, testifying to his new familial position with a new name, which is "a child of God."<sup>195</sup>

With adoption comes not only freedom from previous bondage, but a new sense of rights and privileges. Two significant ones are *liberty* and *title*.<sup>196</sup> Beginning with liberty, we see Owen proceed within his Trinitarian framework. Basing his argument on Isa. 41:1 and 2 Cor. 3:17, Owen makes the connection between the idea of the Spirit's presence and the reality of liberty. Only by the anointing of the Spirit was Jesus able to proclaim freedom to the captives. Likewise the Spirit of Christ is the Spirit of adoption: those formally outside of God's family are not only engrafted, but enabled to make the intimate and heartfelt cry "Abba, Father."<sup>197</sup> The Son comes

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<sup>193</sup> *Works*, 2: 207.

<sup>194</sup> *Works*, 2: 209.

<sup>195</sup> *Works*, 2: 210. Owen's idea of a new name is based on Rev. 2: 17.

<sup>196</sup> Owen mentions four originally: liberty, title, boldness, and affliction, but he fails to develop the final two of the list. See *Works*, 2: 221.

<sup>197</sup> *Works*, 2: 211, based on Gal. 4: 6-7. Cf. *Works*, 2: 179 for a Trinitarian emphasis on adoption.

to set the captives free by the Spirit which awakens the heart to sweet intimacy with the Father.

In light of this change, obedience is not sought after because one is a servant, but much more, because one enjoys the reality that “Sons are free.”<sup>198</sup> Here Owen sees a difference – somewhat idealized – between slaves and children. Slaves experience freedom from duty, whereas children enjoy freedom in it. While slaves may experience some outward freedom, children enjoy inward spiritual liberty toward God. Whereas slaves might obey in order to avoid punishment, children see obedience as desirable. Here again, Christians are described in response to the triune God. They look at the Father and call out to him, “not in the form of words, but in the spirit of sons.” This is possible because the Father always keeps the Son before the believer, knowing that one’s whole soul can endlessly delight in Christ.<sup>199</sup>

From this emerges a pattern for obedience which is very different from the stereotyped legalism often alleged of Puritan thought. Children of God are enabled to obey and respond to God *only* if they have first encountered divine love: “From an apprehension of love, [believers] are effectually carried out by love to give up themselves unto him who is love. What a freedom is this!”<sup>200</sup> The movement is *from* God’s love for them *to* their love for God and others. In response to God’s love manifested on the cross obedience can be done willingly and freely.

Adoption as children not only includes liberty, but also the privilege of a new title. This new title allows believers to partake and have an interest in the family of God. The primary purpose of the preached word is the gathering of the family of God “unto the enjoyment of that feast of fat things which he hath prepared for them in his house.”<sup>201</sup> Believers obtain the title of membership in Abraham’s family and thus are entitled to the future fulfillment of the inheritance. This title seals Christians as heirs to the promises of God, to righteousness by faith, and final salvation.

Besides the “principal” rights noted above, there are also “consequential” rights for the children of God that pertain to the “things of this world.” An Irenaean form of recapitulation seems to surface here as Christ acts as the second Adam over creation. Sin’s entrance into the world reversed the whole order of the original

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<sup>198</sup> *Works*, 2: 213. He adds: “there is liberty in the family of God, as well as a liberty from the family of Satan.”

<sup>199</sup> *Works*, 2: 215.

<sup>200</sup> *Works*, 2: 215.

<sup>201</sup> *Works*, 2: 216.

creation and humanity forfeited their right to and title of the land. This ushered in chaos and upset the primitive order. However Hebrews 1:2 claims that “Christ was the ‘heir of all things’” who has come to undo the curse to which the land was given over. Fallen humanity has lost all title over the creation and so cannot “lay any claim” unto any part of it. “But now the Lord, intending to take a portion to himself out of the lump of fallen mankind, whom he appointed heirs of salvation, he doth not immediately destroy the works of creation, but reserve them for their use in their pilgrimage.”<sup>202</sup> The language of a ‘lump of fallen humanity’ could have several patristic roots, although Owen gives no indication of his source.<sup>203</sup> Not only that, but whereas this language is usually tied up with discussions of the human nature assumed by the Son, Owen here applies it as a relevant bit of data for the rest of creation. Now those who are adopted and find themselves ‘in Christ’ become by implication “fellow-heirs with Christ.”<sup>204</sup> Christ is sovereign and supreme ruler over creation; believers have title to the things of creation, but are also accountable to their Lord.

At this point Owen makes an illuminating deduction: as a result of the fall, only those who are in Christ have any title to creation, and those outside of the faith are “*malae fidei possessores*, invading a portion of the Lord’s territories, without grant or leave from him.”<sup>205</sup> In God’s patience, he allows those who are not adopted to enjoy the land and they are protected in God’s providence by civil government. Although believers have a *spiritual* right to the things of creation, they have no *civil* right except that which God has allowed them to acquire through normal means. There can be no seized property in name of the Lord. Nevertheless, all should see creation redeemed in Christ; thus, it is the inheritance of believers who should in turn seek the greater welfare of society by their governance of it to the degree they have opportunity. Whatever God does give believers is theirs by right “as it is re-invested in Christ” and not as it is under the curse. Believers enjoying this privilege are “led unto a sanctified use of what thereby they do enjoy,” since these things redeemed in Christ attest to the Father’s love. On the other hand, Owen goes as far as to claim that unbelievers “have no true right unto any thing, of what kind soever, that they do

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<sup>202</sup> *Works*, 2: 219.

<sup>203</sup> E.g., T. F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 153, referencing Basil, *Letter 261.2 f.*, in *NPNF2*, v. 8; Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, 32-33, citing Augustine, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, in vol. 7 *NPNF1*, Tractate 4.10. See also Kacic, “The Son’s Assumption,” 158.

<sup>204</sup> *Works*, 2: 219.

possess.”<sup>206</sup> Surely they have a civil right to their possessions, but no “sanctified right.” Given this reality, unbelievers will one day be asked to give account for how they used the gifts of God, and Owen sees little hope for their answer.

Owen concludes his reflections on communion with the Son by outlining the fullness of fellowship with the Son made possible through adoption.<sup>207</sup>

<i>Fellowship</i> in name	We are (as he is) sons of God
in title and right	We are heirs, co-heirs with Christ
in likeness and conformity	We are predestinated to be like the first-born of the family
in honour	He is not ashamed to call us brethren
in sufferings	He learned obedience by what he suffered, and every son is to be scourged that is received
in his kingdom	We shall reign with him

This simple chart, which captures the consequences of adoption, quickly illustrates the centrality of Christology as it informs Owen’s overall approach to human communion with the triune God. Apart from Christ no union or communion can take place. In Christ, the believer has the privilege to commune with God and to be transformed into his image, preparing to reign with him. Understanding this transformation takes us to our next section, where our focus will be upon communion with the Holy Spirit.

### Communion with the Holy Spirit

In the twenty-first century, few would consider an emphasis on the Holy Spirit to be a particular strength of Reformed theology, but this has not always been the case. Calvin himself has been called the “Theologian of the Holy Spirit,” a distinction that later Calvinists sought to maintain.<sup>208</sup> B. B. Warfield, the same author who crowned Calvin with this memorable title, elsewhere uses inflated rhetoric in his claim that “the work of the Holy Spirit is an exclusively Reformation doctrine, and more particularly, a Reformed doctrine, and more particularly still a Puritan doctrine.”<sup>209</sup> Writing before the expansive literature spurred on by the charismatic

<sup>205</sup> *Works*, 2: 220, 221.

<sup>206</sup> *Works*, 2: 220: “They have a right and title that will hold plea in the courts of men, but not a right that will hold in the court of God, and in their own conscience.”

<sup>207</sup> *Works*, 2: 222.

<sup>208</sup> See B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia: P & R, 1980), 21.

<sup>209</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Introduction,” in Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), xxxviii.



movement in the twentieth century, this Princeton theologian goes as far as to posit that Puritan thought and imagination, which was so captured by the person and work of the Spirit, possibly represents the doctrine's "highest expression in dogmatico-practical expositions."<sup>210</sup>

Warfield is not alone in his exalted assessment of the importance placed on the Holy Spirit by Puritans. Many have argued that a rediscovery, or at least a renewed zeal for exposition on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, took place in the seventeenth century.<sup>211</sup> In his lengthy essay on William Ames (1576-1633), John D. Eusden makes a similar observation. Eusden argues that a relatively accurate way to begin understanding any major theologian or movement surfaces by asking the following question: *Into which person of the Trinity do they pour most of their creative energies in explorative discussion?* For Augustine, one may think of the role of the Father, whereas for Luther, the incarnate Son on the cross comes foremost to one's mind. But for Calvin and Puritan Reformed theologians, the "Holy Spirit was central; they were concerned especially with the present action of God in the lives of men; they were physicians of the soul analyzing symptoms of spiritual decay and prescribing ways in which religious experience and renewal could take place."<sup>212</sup> While Eusden may rightly see William Ames as a significant figure within this tradition, arguably no seventeenth century Reformed theologian exemplifies this pneumatological focus to the extent of John Owen.

Many others in seventeenth century England wrote on the Holy Spirit, but none so exhaustively as did the 'Calvin of England.' Throughout Owen's life, he penned well over a thousand pages on different aspects of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. These are principally found in Volumes 2-4 of the Goold edition of Owen's *Works*, although one cannot read *any* volume of his expansive writings without his thoughts on pneumatology breaking through. For our purposes, we will maintain a narrow focus primarily on his treatise, *Of Communion*, looking at his view of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and ending with a review of how believers are to respond to the third person of the Trinity.

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<sup>210</sup> Warfield, "Introduction," xxviii.

<sup>211</sup> E.g., Andrew A. Davies, "The Holy Spirit in Puritan Experience," in *Faith and Ferment*, The Westminster Conference (London: 1982), 18-31; Roger Nicole, "New Dimensions in the Holy Spirit," in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*, ed. David S. Dockery (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 331; Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit*, 1-19; Packer, 179-89.

<sup>212</sup> John D. Eusden, "Introduction," in William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 36. Cf. *RR*, 239.

*God the Holy Spirit*

Speaking of the Father and the Son as *persons* is hardly as conceptually difficult as referencing the Spirit in this fashion. During the seventeenth century a new skepticism was growing among many theologians regarding classical understandings of the Spirit. Some were opting for the old Pneumatomachian heresy of a created Spirit, rather than the eternal third person of the Trinity.<sup>213</sup> Along similar lines, theologians like Episcopius believed that faithfully following biblical testimony pointed not only to an economic, but actually to an ontological subordination which left the Spirit's position somewhat ambiguous.<sup>214</sup> Others reevaluated the biblical language and decided that  $\pi\nu\epsilon\hat{\omicron}\mu\alpha$  referred to a "virtue" of God, rather than to any sort of divine person. According to Owen, all of these conclusions were unacceptable and ultimately damaging to Christian experience.

The Holy Spirit is a person, and rightly acknowledged as such only within a proper Trinitarian theology. Weak or mistaken understandings of the triune God surface most often when discussions of the Spirit arise. To deny the person of the Spirit is actually a denial of the triune God, and thus the end of positive theological reflection. Two exegetical examples from Owen will demonstrate his position on this point. First, Owen follows the classical reading of Acts 5:3-4, arguing that Ananias' lie was particularly to the Holy Spirit (not vaguely to the undifferentiated Godhead). Ananias lied to a distinct divine person, and in so doing, he lied to God.<sup>215</sup> We will discuss below the relation of the Spirit to the other divine persons, but for now we must simply note Owen's acknowledgement of the Spirit's distinct personhood.

At this point, it is useful to draw attention to the importance of pronouns in this discussion, especially considering how seventeenth century Puritans' use of them varies widely when they are referring to the Holy Spirit. For example, Richard Hollinworth interchangeably refers to the Spirit as both "he" and "it."<sup>216</sup> Thomas

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<sup>213</sup> Cf. *RC*, IV.1 [p. 75 note].

<sup>214</sup> Watkin-Jones, 57-9. Episcopius' view was clearly not shared by most of the Remonstrants and is best considered as an extreme, rather than the norm, within early Arminianism.

<sup>215</sup> *Works*, 2: 270.

<sup>216</sup> R. Hollinworth, *The Holy Ghost on the Bench, Other Spirits at the Barre* (1656). Apparently John Bunyan was also not particular about using personal and impersonal pronouns when referring to the Spirit, Watkin-Jones, 136.

Goodwin and John Howe normally refer to the Spirit as “him.”<sup>217</sup> Geoffrey Nuttall similarly adds that Richard Sibbes also tends to refer “to the Holy Spirit as both ‘it’ and ‘him’; Baxter appears usually to call the Spirit ‘it’; Owen always ‘him’.”<sup>218</sup> While we agree with Nuttall’s assessment in general, there is an exception to this rule in Owen’s writings. Even Owen’s precise mind is open to slippage on this point. The fact that he so often works with Greek texts and thus thinks of πνεῦμα as neuter rather than masculine may also help explain the rare inconsistency. Surfacing within this discussion regarding Ananias one reads: “The person of the Holy Ghost, revealing *itself*,” but by the next sentence Owen jumps back into his modus operandi of referring again to the Spirit as ‘he.’ Applying a hermeneutic of generosity, it seems best to take Owen’s standard phraseology (i.e., ‘he’) as his preferred manner of referring to the Spirit. As such, this slip is best read as an inadvertent inconsistency rather than a conscious restatement. Such an observation, however, highlights far more than Owen’s standard vocabulary: it also signifies his insistence on always treating the Spirit as a *person* rather than a thing or vapor. Applying the personal pronoun seems useful in maintaining this distinction. Accordingly, when Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, “he [Ananias] sinned peculiarly against him [Holy Spirit].”<sup>219</sup> By deduction, to sin against the Holy Spirit is to sin against a divine person, and to sin against a divine person is to sin against the triune God.

This takes us to the second exegetical example: the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 12:31-32; Mk. 3:29; Lk. 12:10). In this treatise Owen is less concerned with *what* this sin is, focusing instead on *why* it is unpardonable. His answer is simple: when you sin against the Spirit you uniquely sin against the triune God. Let us follow his logic. The Spirit does not come *only* by his own will or in his own name (though this is not to deny his will and name), but rather “in the name and authority of the Father and Son, from whom and by whom he is sent.” Owen adds,

to sin against him is to sin against all the authority of God, all the love of the Trinity, and the utmost condescension of each person to the work of salvation. It is, I say, from the authoritative mission of the Spirit that the sin against him is peculiarly unpardonable; – it is a sin against the recapitulation of the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> E.g., Thomas Goodwin, *The Work of the Holy Ghost in Our Salvation*, ed. John C. Miller, 12 vols., *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1861-66); John Howe, *The Living Temple*, 8 vols., *The Works of John Howe*, vol. 3 (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1862).

<sup>218</sup> Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit*, 141.

<sup>219</sup> *Works*, 2: 270.

<sup>220</sup> *Works*, 2: 229.

In other words, to sin against the Holy Spirit is to deny God's loving movement toward fallen humanity. It is to accuse the triune God of not caring enough for his creation, to deny the outward operations of the "whole Trinity," in the end demonstrating "contempt" toward "their [i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] ineffable condescension to the work of grace."<sup>221</sup> In sum, it is to deny God's redemptive activity in reconciling the world to himself. Such a rejection of God seems to Owen, not only unthinkable, but unpardonable as well.

A brief look at the Spirit's relation to the Father and Son will lay the groundwork for Owen's particular concern of distinct communion with the Spirit. As we noted in the beginning of this chapter, even though Owen is seeking to explore "distinct" communion with the persons of the Trinity, he is theologically cautious in this endeavor. We see this caution arise most clearly at the beginning and end of the book. When discussing the Spirit he recognizes the heightened opportunity for debate and misunderstanding; thus he attempts to protect his work from objection by defining his parameters.

Owen affirms the Western conception of the *filioque*, since he believes the Spirit is sent from both the Father and the Son. The Father is the fountain of the Spirit's coming in a twofold procession: in respect to 1) the Spirit's personality or substance, and 2) the οἰκονομική concerning the work of grace.<sup>222</sup> In this context, Owen simply states, rather than defends, the first of these, which refers to the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. Moving to the topic of the Spirit's work in the economy of salvation, Owen adds some reflective remarks which attempt to hold together the Spirit's personality, his relationship to the Father and Son, and implications for the believer's view of the Spirit.

Christ promises to send the Spirit, which is thus commonly called the 'Spirit of Christ.' Coming from the Son, the Spirit's comforting presence among the Church should be viewed as "better and more profitable for believers than any corporeal presence of Christ," since the once-for-all sacrifice has been offered.<sup>223</sup> With this in mind, the Spirit moves to continue the work of the triune God by testifying to the

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<sup>221</sup> *Works*, 2: 229.

<sup>222</sup> *Works*, 2: 226.

<sup>223</sup> *Works*, 2: 226. Cf. Thomas Goodwin, *The Heart of Christ in Heaven, Towards Sinners on Earth...* in *Works of T. Goodwin*, who, putting words into the mouth of Jesus, claims that the Spirit,

person and work of Christ. This testimony of the Spirit should not be viewed in terms of “his eternal procession, but of his actual dispensation.”<sup>224</sup> Owen finds John 16:7 – which speaks of Christ’s coming departure to make room for the Spirit’s condescension – helpful in seeing the connection between the so-called ontological and economic Trinity: “this relation *ad extra* (as they call it) of the Spirit unto the Father and the Son, in respect of operation, proves his relation *ad intra*, in respect of personal procession.”<sup>225</sup> Here we see how Owen’s logic moves backward, from the external works of God to the internal, establishing the Spirit’s ontological relationship to the Father and Son. This connection is what allows for the believer’s communion with the Spirit, since the only appropriate worship is worship of God.<sup>226</sup>

According to Owen, one danger in pneumatological discussions is the tendency to reduce the Spirit into something created, or inferior in divine essence, or simply “a mere servant.” Such portrayals downplay the Spirit’s “will” in the work of salvation. Here Owen is unhesitant to speak of the Spirit’s will, just as elsewhere he speaks of the will of the Father and the will of the Son. The reason for this language comes from Owen’s respect for the freedom of God in redemptive activity. Just as the Father freely sends, so the Son is free even though he is sent, enabling him to voluntarily lay down his life for others. Likewise, “the Father’s and Son’s sending of the Spirit doth not derogate from his [i.e., the Spirit’s] freedom in his workings, but he gives freely what he gives.”<sup>227</sup> By making such a claim, is Owen moving toward tritheism? He would certainly deny the charge. Although he uses language that points toward three wills, he grounds such a discussion in the following presupposition: “The will of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is essentially the same; so that in the acting of one there is the counsel of all and each freely therein.”<sup>228</sup> So the Spirit comes not reluctantly, but “He, of himself and of his own accord, proceedeth.”<sup>229</sup>

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“who by reason of his office, will comfort you better than I should do with my bodily presence,” 4: 101.

<sup>224</sup> *Works*, 2: 227.

<sup>225</sup> *Works*, 2: 227.

<sup>226</sup> Cf. *Works*, 2: 270: “the formal reason of our worshipping the Holy Ghost is not his being our comforter, but his being God.” He then adds that worship directed to the Holy Spirit “is no less directed, on that account, to the other persons than to him.”

<sup>227</sup> *Works*, 2: 235.

<sup>228</sup> *Works*, 2: 235.

<sup>229</sup> *Works*, 2: 227. One wonders if recent attempts to reformulate a basic Trinitarian approach that more clearly accents the equality of the Spirit stems from previous theologians’ failure to keep the

Working from within a covenant framework which extends into eternity, Owen sees the order of subsistence inform the economic workings of the Godhead: God's electing love springs from the Father's eternal purpose (πρόθεσις) and love, the Son's requesting (ἑρώτησις) that his death might benefit the Church, and the Spirit's "willing proceeding" (ἐκπόρευσις) to apply the work of Christ to believers, bringing needed comfort to them until the day of glory. From this basic structure we can finally complete Owen's outline of distinct communion: "our peculiar communion with the Father in *love*, the Son in *grace*, and the Holy Ghost in *consolation*."<sup>230</sup> Having briefly looked at the person of the Holy Spirit, we may now proceed to an analysis of the Spirit's work.

### *The Work of the Spirit*

When describing the work of the Holy Spirit Owen discusses various ideas at length.<sup>231</sup> For our purposes we shall focus on how his presentation remains Christologically grounded and experientially sensitive. Along the way we shall draw attention to Owen's guidance on how believers may "test the spirits."

While the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Son, this distinction should not cause a chasm between the two. When the Spirit came after the incarnate Son's departure he came to enable the remembrance of the things of Christ, overcoming frail minds and disjointed memories.<sup>232</sup> Only when this testimony to the Son is recognized can the Spirit's role as Comforter be accomplished, for there is no true rest and consolation outside of Christ. Moving powerfully in believers' lives, the Spirit overcomes their despair when the "heavens are black over them, and the earth trembles under them," reminding them of the promises of Christ.<sup>233</sup> But there is no magic spell or incantation to guarantee the Spirit's movement, for as already noted, the Spirit retains true freedom even in consolation. This allows him to bring comfort freely, even when it is not expected, which may partly explain the seasonal nature of Christian experience. Nevertheless, when comfort arrives there is no mistaking it, for

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kind of emphasis on divine freedom that Owen strives to maintain. Cf. Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship*.

<sup>230</sup> *Works*, 2: 228.

<sup>231</sup> Nine themes of the Spirit's activity, covering everything from the Spirit as Teacher to being anointed and sealed by the Spirit, are covered in Owen's exposition. See *Works*, 2: 236 ff.

<sup>232</sup> *Works*, 2: 236.

<sup>233</sup> *Works*, 2: 238.

it will inevitably come in the form of the promises of Christ, which are the “breasts of all our consolation.”<sup>234</sup>

Since the Spirit’s work is *always* to glorify Christ, this provides a clear way to test the spirits. Does the spirit bring the person and work of Christ, as attested to in scripture, to one’s mind? Does he glorify Christ? If a spirit gives “new revelations” which subtly, or not so subtly, point away from Christ and the written word, then he is a false spirit.<sup>235</sup> The Spirit of God will *never* draw worship away from Christ, and if a spirit does, one may confidently assert that he is not the Holy Spirit: “we may see how far that spirit is from being the Comforter *who sets up himself in the room of Christ.*”<sup>236</sup> Again, although Owen holds to distinct communion, he is grounded in the conviction of no *separation* within the Godhead. And if a spirit draws attention and worship away from Christ, he simply cannot be the true Spirit; as we noted in the beginning, any true worship of one divine person is worship of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If this is not the case one moves toward tritheism and away from biblical monotheism, which explains Owen’s uncompromising position regarding the relationship between the Spirit and the Son.

By persuading believers of God’s love expressed in the promises of Christ, the Spirit convinces them of God’s particular kindness toward them. Capturing all of one’s “faculties and affections” with this revelation, the Spirit brings delight to the weary soul.<sup>237</sup> Again, the Christian is equipped to test the spirits. The result of the Spirit’s movement of “shedding God’s love abroad” in one’s heart is *freedom* in Christ, whereas a false spirit only brings *bondage*. Here Owen is taking a sideswipe at the Enthusiasts of his day, who “make men quake and tremble; casting them into an un-son-like frame of spirit, driving them up and down with horror and bondage, and drinking up their very natural spirits, and making their whole man wither away.”<sup>238</sup> One must remember that William Sherlock includes Owen in the enthusiasts’ camp

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<sup>234</sup> *Works*, 2: 239. Thomas Goodwin also uses this vivid expression when discussing communion with God, *Of the Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *Works of T. Goodwin*, 8: 393. For an interesting exploration by a neo-Freudian who attempts to make sense of such explicit language, see David Leverenz, *The Language of Puritan Feeling: An Exploration in Literature, Psychology, and Social History* (New Brunswick: RUP, 1980).

<sup>235</sup> *Works*, 2: 257.

<sup>236</sup> *Works*, 3: 239. Emphasis mine.

<sup>237</sup> *Works*, 2: 240.

<sup>238</sup> *Works*, 2: 258. For an excellent sampling of 17<sup>th</sup> century Enthusiasm, see Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Studies in Christian Enthusiasm: Illustrated from Early Quakerism* (Wallingford, Penn.: Pendle Hill, 1948). The early Quakers are the most famous of the ‘Enthusiasts.’ See also Hugh

because of the intimate and somewhat mystical language the Puritan uses to describe intimacy with God. But here is the fundamental difference: contrary to the tendency among 'Enthusiasts,' Owen's mysticism affirms human faculties and sees communion only occurring by their proper operation. For Owen, the Holy Spirit engages all of a believer's natural faculties as created in the image of God, whereas false spirits move against them. This helps explain why Owen reacted so harshly against two Quaker women, Elizabeth Fletcher and Elizabeth Homes, who came and caused a major stir at Oxford while Owen was vice-chancellor. Both women seemed to act completely irrationally, according to Owen; Fletcher even removed her clothing, and "walked semi-naked through the streets proclaiming the terrible day of the Lord."<sup>239</sup> Such behavior indicated, not a person acting like an Old Testament prophet, but someone following a false spirit. Those who follow after false spirits are forced to deny their true humanity by suppressing their mind, will, and affections, showing little physical control, and therefore attempting to commune with God in a manner outside of the original created order. Part of the Spirit's sanctifying work in believers is to renew their damaged faculties so that they are restored in a God-ward direction. Mutual communication between God and humanity assumes the believer's active participation which encompasses, rather than suppresses, his whole being. In Owen's mind, these false spirits inevitably bring cruelty and bondage rather than the freedom experienced when a believer is fully engaged – *via* his natural faculties – in communion with God.

Prior to glorification believers experience their freedom in Christ because the Spirit is given as an earnest (ἀρραβών).<sup>240</sup> Owen defines an earnest, or a pledge, as something given to someone, assuring the full and final payment to come. Even as an earnest must be of the "same kind and nature" as the final promise, so believers receive the Spirit who enables enjoyment of God even in the midst of continued battles with sin. By receiving the Spirit, believers gain an "acquaintance with" both the love of God and their inheritance. Enjoyment of God is found in recognizing the Spirit's movement in one's life, preparing one for eternal and unhindered communion with God. Such communion grows in intimacy through prayer, which helps explain why the Spirit stirs the heart in this devotional discipline. Consequently, another sign

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Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven: YUP, 1964); Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1985), esp. 35-37.

<sup>239</sup> Toon, *God's Statesman*, 76.



of a false spirit is that he does not show himself as the Spirit of supplication. Whereas the false spirit belittles “such low and contemptible means of communion with God,” acting as if there is a higher avenue, the Holy Spirit helps one carry out the spiritual duty of prayer, “exalting all the faculties of the soul for the spiritual discharge” of this exercise.<sup>241</sup> Prayer is the appointed means of maintaining communion with God whereby the soul receives God’s love through the intimacy of being in the Father’s bosom. “The soul is never more raised with the love of God than when by the Spirit taken into intimate communion with him in the discharge of this duty.”<sup>242</sup> Owen’s conviction that the ‘mystical’ experience of communion with God must be realized *in* – rather than *against* – the ordinary means of grace (e.g., prayer, preached word, and sacraments) is clearly demonstrated in this context.

He does not deny human intimacy with the divine, but instead defines the parameters for experiencing true fellowship with God. Owen’s clear motive is to avoid what he thinks are the extremes that the Church must always resist when discussing the Holy Spirit. Satan has consistently used excesses to point the Church away from the true Spirit. The first extreme Owen mentions concerns those who “decry” the “gifts and graces” of the Holy Spirit, especially in public worship, by employing “an operose form of service.”<sup>243</sup> In this way, dependence on the Spirit’s ministry and gifting is lessened, leaving instead a sophisticated liturgy devoid of spiritual power. One result of this extreme is that the Spirit is neglected, and those who seek the Spirit or claim to be full of the Spirit are scorned. Apparently Owen believes that this was a significant temptation to previous generations of the Church. Instead of responding with fear and mistrust toward the spiritual, Owen boldly proclaims: “Let us be zealous of the gifts of the Spirit, not envious at them.”<sup>244</sup> On the other hand, Owen believes another extreme was growing rapidly in his own day, whereby Satan’s tactic moved from outrightly opposing the Spirit to masquerading as him.<sup>245</sup> This is why Owen provides reflections on how to test the spirits, as we noted above. He wants Christians to be open to the Spirit without being drawn away by imposters. Looking at Owen’s contrasting of the two approaches of Satan

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<sup>240</sup> *Works*, 2: 245-46.

<sup>241</sup> *Works*, 2: 258, 249.

<sup>242</sup> *Works*, 2: 249.

<sup>243</sup> *Works*, 2: 255.

<sup>244</sup> *Works*, 2: 256.

<sup>245</sup> *Works*, 2: 256.

demonstrates his desire to acknowledge the continued active work of the Spirit without embracing seventeenth century extremes of enthusiasm.<sup>246</sup>

<i>Satan's working of extremes</i>	
Then:	Now:
Cry up ordinances without the Spirit	Cry up a spirit without and against ordinances
A ministry without the Spirit	A spirit without a ministry
Reading of word enough, without preaching or praying by the Spirit	The Spirit is enough, without reading or studying the word
Allowed a literal embracing of what Christ had done in the flesh	Talks of Christ in the Spirit only, denying he came in the flesh

Owen concludes: "Thus hath Satan passed from one extreme to another, – from a bitter, wretched opposition to the Spirit of Christ, unto a cursed pretending to the Spirit; still to the same end and purpose."<sup>247</sup> Believers must carefully avoid following Satan's extremes, instead relying on the Spirit of Christ who draws his people into deeper fellowship with God.

#### *Response to the Spirit*

Having spent time reflecting on the person and work of the Spirit, what implications does Owen draw for human experience? Just as one needs to make a distinction between union and communion with God, Owen calls on his readers to distinguish between receiving the Spirit of sanctification and of consolation. While one and the same Spirit, there remains a distinction. Using Ezekiel's imagery of the valley of dead bones, Owen claims that the "Spirit of sanctification" makes live what was dead, and in doing so the recipient is necessarily and merely passive, "as a vessel receives water."<sup>248</sup> Once made alive in this manner, the Spirit acts for believers' consolation, but in so doing there is an "active power put forth in his reception."<sup>249</sup> What Owen means by this activity is an exercise or "power of faith," a believing in the Spirit promised in the covenant (cf. Eph. 1:13). Once enlivened, the believer cannot be a mere passive participant, but rather is called on to actively seek the Spirit.

<sup>246</sup> See *Works*, 2: 257.

<sup>247</sup> *Works*, 2: 258.

<sup>248</sup> *Works*, 2: 231.

<sup>249</sup> *Works*, 2: 231.

Recognizing this dynamic of communion with the Spirit, one is now able to discuss the consequences of this relationship.

The primary characteristic of the Spirit's movement is consolation. Consolation from the Spirit should be *abiding* because it is based on God's everlasting faithfulness; *strong*, since it comes from the sovereign God who overcomes all; *precious*, since it is experienced in relationship to Christ.<sup>250</sup> Therefore, while Christ is the Redeemer and Saviour of the Church, the Spirit is her Comforter. From this consolation comes peace and friendship with God – experiencing divine acceptance remains impossible without the Spirit. Peculiar communion with the Spirit comes when he comforts believers during their afflictions, grief over sin, and through their efforts toward obedience. Afflictions are unavoidable for everyone, and while people tend towards extremes when faced by them – either despising them as if they were not from God, or sinking under their weight – through the Spirit, such times should drive one to a sweet communion with God.<sup>251</sup> When one tries to “manage” situations apart from the Spirit, Owen believes there can be no true rest for the soul. Similarly, sin appears as an unbearable burden apart from the movement of the Spirit: “Our great and only refuge from the guilt of sin is the Lord Jesus Christ; in our flying to him, doth the Spirit administer consolation to us.”<sup>252</sup> Here again, Owen's awareness of extremes is apparent; apart from the Spirit, sin will either harden a person or cause them to neglect the means to resist temptation. In other words, with or without the Spirit, the same experiences come to all. The only question is whether one seeks the Spirit's consolation during these times.

Another consequence of communion with the Spirit is joy. The Spirit may work immediately or mediately to bring this about. *Immediately* signifies times when the Spirit himself comes with intensity, “without the consideration of any other acts or works of his, or the interposition of any reasonings, or deductions and conclusions.”<sup>253</sup> These experiences, which usually arise unexpectedly and overwhelmingly, give renewed consideration to the love of God. On the other hand, the Spirit also works *mediately*, bringing a fresh sense of God's love through a renewed consideration of the believer's acceptance as a child of God. Even so, rational consideration of the promises of God apart from the Spirit's movement will

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<sup>250</sup> *Works*, 2: 251.

<sup>251</sup> *Works*, 2: 259-60.

<sup>252</sup> *Works*, 2: 261.

fail to affect the heart, thus leaving it without joy and peace. Whether immediately or mediately, the action of the Spirit is the pivotal issue. The Spirit arouses hope in the heart of the believer who expectantly waits in assurance, bringing a sense of boldness to an otherwise fearful soul.

Finally, Owen observes that scripture uses negative commands to express communion with the Spirit, although always accompanied by positive duties. He is referring to three pronounced warnings in the New Testament: do not grieve the Holy Spirit, (Eph. 4:30), do not quench him (1 Thess. 5:19), and do not resist him (Acts 7:51).<sup>254</sup> “Grieving” refers to the Spirit’s person who dwells in believers, whereas “quenching” the Spirit refers more particularly to his “motions of grace.” Similarly “resisting” refers primarily to the Spirit’s work through the word of God, and as such manifests itself in those who show contempt for the preached word. To avoid these obstacles to communion with the Spirit, one must seek “universal holiness” in response to the love of the Spirit who “is striving with us” through one’s growth in grace, since all movement in grace stems from the action of the Spirit.<sup>255</sup> Humbly placing oneself under the normal means of grace also promotes continued growth in communion with the Spirit.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have covered considerable ground by following Owen’s attempt to employ Trinitarian reflections for the encouragement of believers. Whereas we began by quoting Kant’s belief that “absolutely nothing worthwhile for the practical life can be made out of the doctrine of the Trinity,” Owen’s entire book is motivated by the belief that this doctrine speaks powerfully about a person’s relationship to God. Since God has revealed himself, not as an undifferentiated Godhead but as triune, Owen calls for believers to consider how they may commune with the three persons without abandoning the unity of God. We found him arguing against a distant deity unconcerned with the affairs of the world, instead presenting a triune God whose loving movement toward humanity brings about the possibility of communion between the divine and human. Rather than angry and arbitrary, Owen portrays the Father as the fountain or ocean of love, overflowing not simply to the

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<sup>253</sup> *Works*, 2: 252.

<sup>254</sup> *Works*, 2: 264-68.

<sup>255</sup> *Works*, 2: 266.-67.

other persons of the trinity, but to the world. As the Son delights in the Father, he willingly comes as the 'sent one' whose unique person makes it possible for him to act as the Mediator. Consequently the Son, out of his own delight, acceptance, and love for his people is able to secure the redemption of the Church. Deserving of equal honor and worship with the Father and the Son, the believer also communes with the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity constantly works to draw believers to Christ where they may find comfort during their earthly pilgrimage. In sum, we have focused on Owen's hope that believers equipped with a proper Trinitarian appreciation of the love, grace, and consolation of God will find themselves in intimate communion with him. With this background we turn now to our final chapter in which we explore the theme of signs which point to continuing communion with God.