



Communion with 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.

Fellowship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit

350TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

John Owen

CHRISTIAN
HERITAGE





‘God is love’ (1 John 4: 8).

‘Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest’ (S. of S. 1: 7).

‘Make haste, my beloved’ (S. of S. 8: 14).

‘Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption’ (Eph. 4: 20).

‘Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God’ (1 Cor. 12: 4–6).







THIS 350TH
ANNIVERSARY EDITION

Communion with God was first published in 1657. Three hundred and fifty years later, many readers struggle with some of the language in the original edition. Owen uses certain words now so rare that they are not listed in the largest single-volume dictionaries. His most likely intended meanings for some of those words are therefore displayed near their first occurrence. In addition, words such as ‘unto’ become ‘to’ and ‘doth consist’ becomes ‘consists’.

Beyond this, the text is unchanged except where the following features, designed to make the book more user-friendly, required minor changes:

1. Subheadings, sometimes extending to four levels and largely based on the original numeric structure, have been inserted. The contents pages include primary and secondary subheadings to aid navigation.
2. Sentences enumerating more than five or six items, lists of more than one sentence, selected notes, and some ‘short digressions’ are broken off from the main text and displayed.
3. The style and placement of biblical references have been made consistent with modern practice and Roman numerals have been changed to Arabic.







INTRODUCTION

The collected works of the great Puritan theologian John Owen expand into twenty-four volumes comprising some seven million words. It is hard to conceive the amount of labour involved in such a mammoth undertaking, not least given the writing instruments available in the seventeenth century. While the book you now hold in your hand comprises less than two per cent of this library of Christian instruction, *Communion with God* is certainly one of the most important things Owen ever penned.

By any standard, Owen was a remarkable man who combined great intellectual genius with extraordinary self-discipline. But more than that, he could touch both the heights of Christian theology and the depths of the human heart. To an almost unparalleled degree (Augustine and a handful of others are in the same league) he married a profound understanding of the gospel to a penetrating grasp of the needs, sins, and deceitfulness of the human heart—including the Christian heart.

Underlying all of Owen's work, whether as a minister, an academic, an administrator (he was Vice-Chancellor—essentially President or Principal—of the University of Oxford), or as a political adviser (he was at one time a confidant of Oliver





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Cromwell), was a concern to promote genuine, consistent, God-honouring, Christian living.

Nowhere is this more evident than in this book, *Communion with God*. As Daniel Burgess (who wrote the original publisher's 'blurb') noted, this is 'angel's food'. Indeed, Owen himself seemed to recognize that it was a work that could help Christians enormously. In a rare comment on his own work, he wrote nearly twenty years after the publication of *Communion With God* of the help he had learned his book had been to many Christians:

Of what use and advantage it hath been to any, as to their furtherance in the design aimed at therein, is left unto them to judge by whom it hath been perused with any candid diligence; and I do know that multitudes of persons fearing God, and desiring to walk before him in sincerity, are ready, if occasion require, to give testimony unto the benefit which they have received thereby;—as I can also at any time produce the testimonies of as learned and holy persons, it may be, as any I know living, both in England and out of it, who, owning the truth contained in it, have highly avowed its usefulness, and are ready yet so to do.¹

Perhaps the somewhat roundabout way in which Owen expressed himself was an indication not only of his disposition to write English as though it were Latin (which he wrote with perfect fluency), but also his self-consciousness in drawing attention to the value of his own work in the face of criticism.

It is a great privilege to commend this book as someone included among those 'multitudes of persons' who could 'give testimony unto the benefit which they have received.' I owe an incalculable debt to these pages. I look back now with deep gratitude for its republication in 1966 when, as a late-teenaged university student, I was on the hunt for books that would help me grow as a Christian. I bought a 'damaged' copy of

¹ John Owen, 'A Vindication of Some Passages in a Discourse Concerning Communion with God', in *The Works of John Owen*, 1850-53, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 2, 277.





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the second volume of Owen's *Works* for what was then fifteen shillings in 'old' money (seventy-five pence, or one dollar fifty cents!). For forty years now it has been a favourite volume to which I continue to return for more 'angel food'.

How could a treatise published so long ago possibly make such an impact? After all, it was written by an academic employing a vocabulary that requires the occasional sidebar explanation in this contemporary edition! Perhaps a few paragraphs of personal testimony may be the best way to introduce the contents of this remarkable volume and to encourage you to read on...and on...and on.

In these pages Owen helped me to understand that the 'doctrine' of the Trinity is not what it is often thought to be—academic, obscure, impractical and, of all doctrines, the most speculative. In fact the truth is virtually the reverse, for the doctrine of the Trinity is really an exposition of the identity, personal existence, and glorious character of our God. It is the most practical as well as the most fundamental of doctrines, and it constitutes a pathway to knowing, trusting, loving, worshipping, and serving him. As I read *Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* I began to feel that I was coming home spiritually.

The point Owen made—once seen—is so simple, and yet endlessly profound. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one God. Since each person in the Trinity has participated in a unique way in accomplishing my salvation and blessing, my knowledge of and relationship with each Person will take on the 'flavour' of who that Person is and what he has done for me. So the fellowship we enjoy with the first Person is fellowship with the Father, and so on. More than that, while each Person of the Trinity is always involved in everything God does, there is a sense in which each also plays a special and unique part. The Father alone sends the Son; the Son alone dies on the cross and is raised again; the Spirit alone indwells us and applies Christ's work within our lives; the Father adopts me into his family; the Son is praised for





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bearing the wrath of God; the Spirit is thanked for producing his fruit in me.

Of course there is much more to be said—and Owen says it! But even this volume helps to explain why—for a young Christian—knowing God became a much bigger, grander, richer, far more glorious reality than I had imagined. Now the exclamation of the apostle John was one I found (and find!) myself often echoing: ‘our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ’—and this, of course, was through the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit. No wonder John said that he was ‘writing these things so that our joy may be complete’ (1 John 1: 3–4).

What I did not realize as a youngster was that Owen was essentially picking up and elaborating on the themes with which earlier theologians had wrestled (we think of them collectively now as the Church Fathers). Indeed a by-product for me of reading Owen was that, almost by accident, he brought me to appreciate and love those early Christians who had worked so hard to find ways of expressing biblical truth, and who had been prepared to suffer hardship and loss, and even exile, for the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Church Fathers had long ago taught what it means to have fellowship with God, and had developed their own terminology and maxims to help us understand and enjoy the Trinity. They had written that whatever God does outside of himself he does in such a way that all three Persons are involved (*opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*, the external works of the Trinity are indivisible, was their fine Latin phrase). They also taught what came to be known as the doctrine of *perichoresis* or *circumincessio/circumincessio*—how the Father, Son, and Spirit engage with and dwell in one another in an eternal fellowship of mutual affection and holy devotion, fully, personally and satisfyingly exercising all of the divine attributes. And they understood what came to be known as the doctrine of appropriations—that each Person of the Trinity has his own special, personal role in creation, providence, redemption, and consummation.

What Owen does so marvellously in these pages is to take these doctrines and show how what was the lifeblood of





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earlier Christians can have a powerful transforming effect on Christians today.

Much more might be said by way of introduction to this great book. Suffice it simply to add that while the exact origin of *Communion with God* is not completely clear its roots lie in a series of addresses Owen gave around the years 1650 or 1651. His hearers had, understandably, been deeply impressed, and urged him to put his thoughts into print.

Several years on—July 10 1657 to be precise—having given the theme further consideration in the interim, and having developed it in various ways, Owen committed these pages to the press.

Now, three hundred and fifty years later (almost to the day), *Communion with God* reappears in this new format as a treasure for twenty-first century Christians. For some it will be a challenging read; for many there will be things here that are new and striking—whether that be Owen's extended digression on the Song of Songs, or his exposition of the various graces of Christ in which we have fellowship. Whatever is of particular help to each reader, all readers will feel a debt to Philip Ross for his skill in helping to make yet another volume of Owen a little more accessible for today.

As Owen sent his book to the printer, he added one final word of assurance:

Know only, that the whole of it hath been recommended to the grace of God in many supplications, for its usefulness unto them that are interested in the good things mentioned therein.

If these prayers are answered for you, as I feel they have been answered for me, you will be richly rewarded for your reading!

Sinclair B. Ferguson
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PREFACE

Christian Reader,

It is now six years past since I was brought under an engagement of promise for the publishing of some meditations on the subject which you will find handled in the ensuing treatise. The reasons of this delay, being not of public concern, I shall not need to mention. Those who have been in expectation of this duty from me, have, for the most part, been so far acquainted with my condition and employments, as to be able to satisfy themselves as to the deferring of their desires. That which I have to add at present is only this—having had many opportunities, since the time I first delivered anything in public on this subject (which was the means of bringing me under the engagements mentioned), to re-assume the consideration of what I had first fixed on, I have been enabled to give it that improvement, and to make those additions to the main of the design and matter treated on, that my first debt is come at length to be only the occasion of what is now tendered to the saints of God. I shall speak nothing of the subject here handled; it may, I hope, speak for itself, in that spiritual savour and relish which it will yield to them whose hearts are not so filled with other things as to render the sweet things of the gospel bitter to them. The design of the whole





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treatise you will find, Christian reader, in the first chapters of the first part; and I shall not detain you here with the perusal of anything which in its proper place will offer itself to you: know only, that the whole of it has been recommended to the grace of God in many supplications, for its usefulness to them that are interested in the good things mentioned therein.

J. O. Oxon. Ch. Ch. Coll., July 10, 1657.

