

OF COMMUNION WITH GOD THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY GHOST (2)

John Owen, 1657
Edited and abridged by Manuel Kuhs

Part 2: Communion with the Father

Chapter 3: The Peculiar and Distinct Communion Which the Saints Have With the Father

I come now to declare what it is wherein peculiarly and eminently the saints have communion with the Father; and this is love, free, undeserved, and eternal love. This the Father peculiarly fixes upon the saints; this they are immediately to see in Him, to receive of Him, and to make such returns thereof as delight Him. This is the great discovery of the gospel: for whereas the Father, as the fountain of the Deity, is not known any other way but as full of wrath, anger, and indignation against sin, nor can the sons of men have any other thoughts of Him (Rom. 1:18; Ps. 5:4-6; Eph. 2:3), here in the gospel He is now revealed peculiarly as love, as full of it unto us, the manifestation whereof is the peculiar work of the gospel (Titus 3:4).

I John 4:8 reads, “God is love.” That the name of God is here taken personally, and for the person of the Father, not essentially, is evident from verse 9, where He is distinguished from His “only begotten Son” whom He sends into the world. Now, saith he, “The Father is love;” that is, not only of an infinitely gracious, tender, compassionate, and loving nature, according as He hath proclaimed himself (Ex. 34:6-7), but also one that eminently and peculiarly giveth Himself unto us in free love. So the apostle sets it forth in the following verses: “This is love,” I John 4:9; “This is that which I would have you take notice of in Him, that He makes out love unto you, in sending His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.” So also, verse 10, “He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” And that this is peculiarly to be eyed in the Father, the Holy Ghost plainly declares, in making it the cause of the sending of Christ and of all the mercies and benefits we receive through Christ.

So it is in that distribution made by the apostle in his solemn parting benediction (II Cor. 13:14): “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.” Ascribing sundry things unto the distinct persons, it is love that he peculiarly assigns to the Father. And the fellowship of the Spirit is mentioned with the grace of Christ and the love of God, because it is by the Spirit alone that we have fellowship with Christ in grace, and with the Father in love, although we have also peculiar fellowship with the Spirit, as shall be declared.

In John 16:26-27, our Saviour saith, “I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you; for the Father himself loveth you.” But how is this, that our Saviour saith, “I say not that I will pray the Father for you,” when He saith plainly in chapter 14, “I will pray the Father for you”? The disciples, with all the gracious words and comfortable and faithful promises of their Master, with most heavenly discoveries of His heart unto them, were even fully convinced of Jesus’ dear and tender affections towards them; as also of His continued care and kindness, that He would not forget them when bodily He was gone from them, as He was now about to depart: but now all their thoughts are concerning the Father, how they should be accepted with Him, what respect He had towards them. Our Saviour answers their fears, “Take no care of that, nay, impose not that upon me, of procuring the Father’s love for you; but know that this is His peculiar respect towards you: He Himself loves you! It is true, indeed (and as I told you), that I will pray the Father to send you the Spirit, the Comforter, and with Him all the gracious fruits of His love; but yet in the point of love itself, free love, eternal love, there is no need of any intercession for that: for eminently the Father Himself loves you. Resolve of that, that you may hold communion with Him in it, and be no more troubled about it. Yea, as your great trouble is about the Father’s love, so you can no way more trouble or burden Him, than by your unkindness in not believing it.” So it must needs be where sincere love is questioned.

The apostle teaches the same in Romans 5:5: “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” God, whose love this is, is plainly distinguished from the Holy Ghost, who sheds abroad that love of His; and, verse 8, He is also distinguished from the Son, for it is from that love of His that the Son is sent: and therefore it is the Father of whom the apostle here especially speaketh. And what is it that Paul ascribes to the Fa-

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ther? Even love, which also, verse 8, He commendeth to us by setting it forth in such a signal and eminent expression, that we may take notice of it, and commune with the Father in it. To carry this business to its height, there is not only most frequent peculiar mention of the love of God, where the Father is eminently intended, and of the love of the Father explicitly, but He is also called “the God of love” (II Cor. 13:11), and is said to be “love,” so that whoever will know Him (I John 4:8), or dwell in Him by fellowship or communion (v. 16), must do it as He is love.

Yea, and as this love is peculiarly to be eyed in Him, so it is to be looked on as the fountain of all subsequent gracious gifts. Christians walk oftentimes with exceedingly troubled hearts concerning the thoughts of the Father towards them. They are well persuaded of the Lord Christ and His good will; the difficulty lies in what is their acceptance with the Father, what is His heart towards them? “Show us the Father, and it sufficeth us” (John 14:8). Now, such thinking ought to be so far from us, that the Father’s love ought to be looked on as the fountain from whence all other sweetnesses flow. Thus the apostle sets it out: “After that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared” (Titus 3:4). It is of the Father of whom He speaks; for, verse 6, He tells us that “He makes out unto us,” or “sheds that love upon us abundantly, through Jesus Christ our Saviour.” And this love He makes the hinge upon which the great alteration and translation of the saints doth turn; for, saith He in verse 3, “We ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.” Whence, then, is our recovery? The whole rise of it is from this love of God, flowing out by the ways there described. For when the kindness and love of God appeared, that is, in the fruits of it, then were we saved. To assure us hereof, there is not any thing that hath a loving and tender nature in the world, and doth act suitably thereunto, which God hath not compared Himself unto. Separate all weakness and imperfection which is in them, yet great impressions of love must abide. He is as a father, a mother, a shepherd, a hen over chickens, and the like (Ps. 103:13; 23:1; Isa. 40:11; Matt. 23:37).

I shall not need to add any more proofs. This is that which is demonstrated: There is love in the Person of the Father peculiarly held out unto the saints, as wherein He will and doth hold communion with them.

Now, to complete communion with the Father in love, two things are required of believers: that they receive this love of Him and that they make suitable returns unto Him.

The Believer's First Duty: To Receive the Father's Love

Communion consists in giving and receiving. Until the love of the Father be received, we have no communion with Him therein. How, then, is this love of the Father to be received, so as to hold fellowship with Him? I answer, By faith. The receiving of it is the believing of it. God hath so fully, so eminently revealed His love, that it may be received by faith. "Ye believe in God" (John 14:1), that is, the Father. And what is to be believed about Him? His love, for He "is love" (I John 4:8).

It is true, there is not a direct acting of faith upon the Father, except it be through the Son: He is the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by Him (John 14:6). Jesus is the merciful high priest over the house of God, by whom we have access to the throne of grace: by Him is our path unto the Father; by Him we believe in God (I Pet. 1:21). But this is what I say: When by and through Christ we have an access unto the Father, we then behold the Father's glory also, and see His love that He peculiarly bears unto us, and act in faith thereon. We are then, I say, to eye the love of the Father, to believe it, to receive it as in the Father, the issues and fruits thereof being made out unto us through Christ alone. Though there be no light for us but in the beams, yet we may by beams see the sun, which is the fountain of it. Though all our refreshment actually lies in the streams, yet by them we are led up unto the fountain. Jesus Christ, in respect of the love of the Father, is but the beam, the stream; wherein though actually all our light and our refreshment lies, yet by Him we are led to the fountain, the sun of eternal love itself. Would believers exercise themselves herein, they would find it a matter of no small spiritual improvement in their walking with God.

This is what is aimed at. Many dark and disturbing thoughts are apt to arise in this thing. Few can carry up their hearts and minds to this height by faith, as to rest their souls in the love of the Father; they live below it, in the troublesome region of hopes and fears, storms and clouds. All above is serene and quiet. But how to attain to this altitude they know not. But this

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is the will of God, that He may always be eyed as benign, kind, tender, loving, and unchangeable therein; and that peculiarly as the kind Father, as the great fountain and spring of all gracious communications and fruits of love. This is that which Christ came to reveal, God as a Father (John 1:18); that name which He declares to those who are given Him out of the world (John 17:6). And this is that which He effectually leads us to by Himself, as He is the only way of going to God as a Father (John 14:5-6), that is, as love. And by doing so, He gives us the rest which He promiseth, for the love of the Father is the only rest of the soul. It is true, as was said, we do not do this formally in the first instance of believing. We believe in God through Christ (I Pet. 1:21); faith seeks out rest for the soul. This is presented to the soul by Christ, the mediator, as the only procuring cause. Here it abides not, but by Christ it hath an access to the Father into the Father's love (Eph. 2:18). Faith finds out that He is love, as having a design, a purpose of love, a good pleasure towards us from eternity, a delight, a complacency, a good-will in Christ, all cause of anger being taken away. The soul being thus, by faith through Christ, and by Him, brought into the bosom of God the Father, into a comfortable persuasion and spiritual perception and sense of His love, there reposes and rests itself. And this is the first thing the saints do, in their communion with the Father; of the due improvement whereof, more afterward.

The Believer's Second Duty: To Make Suitable Returns to God

For that suitable return which is required, this also (in a main part of it, beyond which I shall not now extend it) consisteth in love. God loves, that He may be beloved. When He comes to command the return of His received love, to complete communion with Him, He says, "My son, give me thine heart" (Prov. 23:26), thy affections, thy love. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind" (Luke 10:27); this is the return that He demandeth. When the soul sees God, in His dispensation of love, to be love, to be infinitely lovely and loving, rests upon and delights in Him as such, then hath it communion with Him in love. This is love, that God loves us first, and then we love Him again. I shall not now go forth into a description of divine love. Generally, love is an affection of union and nearness with complacency therein. So long as the Father is looked on under any other apprehension than as acting love upon one's own

soul, it breeds in the soul a dread and terror. Hence the flying and hiding of sinners in the Scriptures. But when He who is the Father is considered as a father, acting love on the soul, this raises the soul to love in return. This is, in faith, the ground of all acceptable obedience (Ex. 20:6; Deut. 10:12).

Thus is this whole business stated by the apostle: “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love” (Eph. 1:4). It begins in the love of God, and ends in our love to Him. That is it which the eternal love of God aims at in us, and works us up unto. It is true, our universal obedience falls within the compass of our communion with God; but that is with Him as God, our blessed sovereign, lawgiver, and rewarder: as He is the Father, our Father in Christ, as revealed unto us to be love, above and contrary to all the expectations of the natural man; so it is in love that we have this intercourse with Him. Nor do I intend only that love which is as the life and form of all moral obedience; but a peculiar delight and acquiescing in the Father, revealed effectually as love unto the soul.

Similarities Between God’s Love for Us and Our Love for Him

That this communion with the Father in love may be made the more clear and evident, I shall show two things: First, wherein this love of God unto us and our love to Him do agree, as to some manner of analogy and likeness. Second, wherein they differ; which will farther discover the nature of each of them.

First, they agree in that they are each a love of rest and complacency. The love of God is so: “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). Both these things are here assigned unto God in His love, rest and delight. The words are, “he shall be silent because of his love.” To rest with contentment is expressed by being silent; that is, without complaint. This God doth upon the account of His own love, so full, so every way complete and absolute, that it will not allow Him to complain of anything in them whom He loves, but He is silent on the account thereof. Or, “rest in his love;” that is, He will not remove it; He will not seek farther for another object. It shall make its abode upon the soul where it is once fixed forever. And complacency or delight: “he rejoiceth with singing;” as one that is fully

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satisfied in that object He hath fixed His love on. Here are two words used to express the delight and joy that God hath in His love. The first denotes the inward affection of the mind, joy of heart; and to set out the intenseness hereof, it is said He shall do it, in gladness, or with joy. To have joy of heart in gladness is the highest expression of delight in love. The latter word denotes not the inward affection, but the outward demonstration of it. It is to exult in outward demonstration of internal delight and joy. And therefore God is said to do this with a joyful sound, or singing. When He would express the contrary of this love, He says “he was not well pleased” (I Cor. 10:5); He fixed not His delight nor rest on them. And, “If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him” (Heb. 10:38). He takes pleasure in those that abide with Him. He sings to His church, “A vineyard of red wine: I the Lord do keep it” (Isa. 27:2-3).

The return that the saints make unto Him, to complete communion with Him herein, holds some analogy with His love in this; for it is a love also of rest and delight. “Return unto thy rest, O my soul,” says David (Ps. 116:7). He makes God his rest; that is, He in whom his soul doth rest, without seeking farther for a more suitable and desirable object. “Whom have I,” saith he, “in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee” (Ps. 73:25). Thus the soul gathers itself from all its wanderings, from all other beloveds, to rest in God alone, to satiate and content itself in Him; choosing the Father for the soul’s present and eternal rest. And this is done with delight: “Because thy lovingkindness,” saith the psalmist, “is better than life, my lips shall praise thee” (Ps. 63:3). Supposing himself in the jaws of death, rolling into the grave through innumerable troubles, yet he found more sweetness in God than in a long life, under its best and most noble considerations, attended with all enjoyments that make it pleasant and comfortable. From both these is that of the church in Hosea 14:3, “Asshur shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy.” They reject the most goodly appearances of rest and contentment, to find it all in God, on whom they cast themselves as otherwise helpless orphans.

Second, the mutual love of God and the saints agrees in this, that the way of communicating the issues and fruits of these loves is only through Christ.

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. He is the treasury wherein the Father disposeth all the riches of His grace taken from the bottomless mine of His eternal love; and He is the priest into whose hand we put all the offerings that we return unto the Father. Thence He is first, and by way of eminency, said to love the Son; not only as His eternal Son, as He was the delight of His soul before the foundation of the world (Prov. 8:30), but also as our mediator, and the means of conveying His love to us (Matt. 3:17; John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9; 17:24). And we are said through Him to believe in and to have access to God.

The Father loves us, and “chose us before the foundation of the world;” but in the pursuit of that love, He “hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3-4). From His love, He sheds or pours out the Holy Spirit richly upon us, through Jesus Christ our Saviour (Titus 3:6). In the pouring out of His love, there is not one drop that does not come through the Lord Christ. The holy anointing oil was all poured on the head of Aaron (Ps. 133:2); and thence went down to the skirts of his clothing. Love is first poured out on Christ; and from Him it drops as the dew of Hermon upon the souls of His saints. The Father will have Him to have “in all things the preeminence” (Col. 1:18); “it pleased him that in him all fulness should dwell” (v. 19); that “of his fulness we might receive, and grace for grace” (John 1:16). Though the love of the Father’s purpose and good pleasure have its rise and foundation in His mere grace and will, yet the design of its accomplishment is only in Christ. All the fruits of it are first given to Christ; and it is in Him only that they are dispensed to us. So that though the saints may, nay, do, see an infinite ocean of love unto them in the bosom of the Father, yet they are not to look for one drop from Him but what comes through Christ. He is the only means of communication. Love in the Father is like 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. He draws this water from the fountain through union and dispensation of fullness; we in turn draw it from Christ by faith, from the wells of salvation that are in Him.

Our returns are all in Christ, and by Him also. And well is it with us that it is so. What lame and blind sacrifices should we otherwise present unto God! He bears the iniquity of our offerings, and He adds incense unto our prayers.

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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; through Him passeth all our desire, our delight, our complacency and our obedience.

Differences Between God's Love for Us and Our Love for Him

Now, in these two things there is some resemblance between that mutual love of the Father and the saints wherein they hold communion. And there are sundry things wherein they differ.

First, the love of God is a love of bounty, free and voluntary; our love unto Him is a love of duty.

The love of the Father is a love of bounty, a condescending love; such a love as carries Him out to do good things to us, great things for us. His love lies at the bottom of all His works towards us; and we scarce anywhere find any mention of it, but it is held out as the cause and fountain of some free gift flowing from it. He loves us and sends His Son to die for us; He loves us and blesses us with all spiritual blessings. He loves us and chastises us. It is a love like that of the heavens to the earth, when, being full of rain, they pour forth showers to make it fruitful; as the sea communicates its waters to the rivers by the way of bounty, out of its own fulness, they return unto it only what they receive from it. It is the love of a spring, of a fountain, always communicating; a love from whence proceeds every thing that is lovely in its object. It infuseth into, and creates goodness in, the persons beloved. God's power and will are commensurate; what He willeth He worketh.

On the other hand, our love unto God is a love of duty, the love of a child. His love descends upon us in bounty and fruitfulness; our love ascends unto Him in duty and thankfulness. He adds to us by His love; we nothing to Him by ours. Our goodness extends not unto Him. Though our love be fixed on Him immediately, yet no fruit of our love reacheth Him immediately; though He requires our love, He is not benefited by it (Job 22:2-3; 35:5-8). It is indeed made up of these four things: Rest, delight, reverence and obedience. By these do we hold communion with the Father in His love. Hence God calls that love which is due to Him as a father "honour" (Mal. 1:6): "If I then be a father, where is mine honour?"

Secondly, they differ in this: The love of the Father unto us is an antecedent love; our love unto Him is a consequent love.

The love of the Father unto us is an antecedent love, and that in two respects: It is antecedent in respect of our love: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us" (I John 4:10). His love goes before ours. The father loves the child, when the child knows not the father, much less loves him. Yea, we are by nature haters of God (Rom. 1:30). He is in His own nature a lover of men; and surely all mutual love between Him and us must begin on His hand. Furthermore, God's love is antecedent in respect of all other causes of love whatever. It goes not only before our love, but also before anything in us that is lovable. Romans 5:8 reads, "God commendeth His love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Not only His love, but the eminent fruit thereof, is made out towards us as sinners. Sin holds out all of unloveliness and undesirableness that can be in a creature. The very mention of that removes all causes, all moving occasions of love whatever. Yet, as such, have we the commendation of the Father's love unto us, by a most signal testimony. Not only when we have done no good, but when we have sinned, doth He love us; not because we are better than others, but because He Himself is infinitely good. His kindness appears when we are foolish and disobedient. Hence He is said to "love the world;" that is, those who have nothing but what is in and of the world, whose whole portion lies in evil.

Our love is consequential in both these regards: Never did creature turn His affections towards God, if the heart of God were not first set upon Him. And God must be revealed unto us as lovely and desirable, as a fit and suitable object unto the soul to set up its rest upon, before we can bear any love unto Him. The saints (in this sense) do not love God for nothing, but for that excellency, loveliness and desirableness that is in Him. As the psalmist says in one particular, "I love the LORD, because" (Ps. 116:1), so may we say in general, "We love the LORD because!" Or, as David in another case, "What have I now done? Is there not a cause?" (I Sam. 17:29). If any man inquire about our love to God, we may say, "What have we now done? Is there not a cause?"

Thirdly, they differ in this also: The love of God is like Himself, equal, constant, not capable of augmentation or diminution; our love is like ourselves, unequal, increasing, waning, growing, declining. His, like the sun, always the

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same in its light, though a cloud may sometimes interpose; ours, as the moon, hath its waxing and waning.

The love of the Father is equal, etc.; whom He loves, He loves unto the end, and He loves them always alike. "The Strength of Israel is not a man, that He should repent." On whom He fixes His love, it is immutable; it doth not grow to eternity; it is not diminished at any time. It is an eternal love, that had no beginning, that shall have no ending; that cannot be heightened by any act of ours, that cannot be lessened by anything in us. I say, in itself it is thus; otherwise, in a twofold regard, it may admit of change. It may sometimes appear greater, sometimes less; its communications are various. Who among the saints finds it not so? What life, what light, what strength, sometimes! And again, how dead, how dark, how weak at other times! According as God is pleased to let out or to restrain the fruits of His love. All the graces of the Spirit in us, all sanctified enjoyments whatever, are fruits of His love. How variously these are dispensed, how differently at sundry seasons to the same persons, experience will abundantly testify. In respect of its discoveries and manifestations. He "sheds abroad his love in our hearts by the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 5:5), gives us a sense of it, or manifests it unto us. Now, this is various and changeable, sometimes more, sometimes less; now He shines, anon hides His face, as it may be for our profit. Our Father will not always chide, lest we be cast down; He doth not always smile, lest we be full and neglect Him: but yet, still His love in itself is the same. When for a little moment He hides His face, yet He gathers us with everlasting kindness.

Objection. But you will say, "This comes nigh to that blasphemy, that God loves His people in their sinning as well as in their strictest obedience; and, if so, who will care to serve Him more, or to walk with Him unto well-pleasing?"

Answer. The love of God in itself is the eternal purpose and act of His will. This is no more changeable than God Himself: if it were, no flesh could be saved; but it changeth not, and we are not consumed. What then? Loves He His people in their sinning? Yes; His people, not their sinning. Alters He not His love towards them? Not the purpose of His will, but the dispensations of His grace. He rebukes them, He chastens them, He hides His face from them, He smites them, He fills them with a sense of His indignation; but woe, woe would it be to us, should He change in His love, or take away His kindness

from us! Those very things which seem to be demonstrations of the change of His affections towards us do as clearly proceed from love as those which seem to be the most genuine issues thereof. "But will not this encourage to sin?" He never tasted of the love of God that can seriously make this objection. The doctrine of grace may be turned into wantonness; the principle cannot. I shall not wrong the saints by giving any other answer to this objection than this: Detestation of sin in any way well consist with the acceptance of their persons, and their designation to life eternal.

But now our love to God is ebbing and flowing, waning and increasing. We lose our first love, and we grow again in love, scarce a day at a stand. What poor creatures are we! How unlike the Lord and His love! "Unstable as water, we cannot excel." Now it is, "Though all men forsake thee, I will not;" later, "I know not the man." One day, "I shall never be moved, my hill is so strong;" the next, "All men are liars, I shall perish." Whenever was the time, wherever was the place, that our love was one day equal towards God?

And thus, these agreements and discrepancies do farther describe that mutual love of the Father and the saints, wherein they hold communion. Other instances as to the person of the Father I shall not give, but endeavour to make some improvement of this in the next chapter.