

## Introduction

I was an undergraduate at the time. I had read little, if anything, by John Owen. The phrase *distinct communion* would have meant nothing to me. But one sentence in a book on Christology managed to lodge itself into a compartment of my brain. The writer, Donald Macleod, was discussing the believer's communion with Christ. In that context he offered this remark: 'I have a relationship with him which I do not have with God the Father.'<sup>1</sup>

I suppose that, read by itself, the sentence could be misunderstood. It could give the impression that the believer has a relationship with Christ, but not much of a relationship with the Father. I suspect many Christians in the history of the church have harboured precisely that idea: Christ is warm and inviting; God the Father is cold and forbidding. That, however, was not what Macleod meant. His meaning was clarified a few pages later in the same book: 'We have an experience of each [divine person] which is different from

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1. Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 138.

our experience of the other. There is an “Abba, Father!”, a “Lord Jesus!”, and a “Come, Holy Spirit!”<sup>2</sup>

For many years Macleod’s sentence remained lodged but undeveloped. I pondered it intermittently. I found the concept of relating differently to Father, Son and Spirit logical, and I found it attractive. But I did not find it woven into the fabric of contemporary Christian piety. As far as I could see, it was absent from the majority of songs and hymns, it was absent from most public prayers, and it was absent from the many, well-intentioned exhortations to ‘pursue a close relationship with God.’ If it was true that the believer has a relationship with Christ which she does not have with the Father, then most believers seemed blithely unaware of it.

Eventually, however, my theological meanderings landed me in the seventeenth century. And, suddenly, that suggestive sentence, lying dormant in the back of my mind, came into its own. I encountered writers in that era whose Christian devotion was not one-dimensional; it was three-dimensional. I discovered men who did not enjoy a relationship with ‘God’; they enjoyed relationships with the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

In some of them it expressed itself in modest ways. James Durham, whose work will be considered in chapter 6 of this book, falls into that category. But others wrote effusively of relating to the different divine persons. One such was Thomas Goodwin. His work on *Justifying Faith* is a marvellous antidote to cold, rationalistic conceptions of ‘believing in Jesus’. He argued there that the believer should aspire to assurance; and he contended that assurance is ‘not only an assurance of the benefits that...are ours...but it is a fellowship’; and he defined that fellowship as ‘fellowship with all the persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and their love,

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2. Ibid., 142.

severally and distinctly.’ He then over several pages issued an impassioned plea, only snatches of which can be quoted here:

Do not then stint yourselves here, that it sufficeth that you know the Father. No; Christ putteth you upon labouring after a distinct knowing of, and communion with all three persons ... not only ... to have fellowship with the one in the other implicitly, but distinctly with the one and with the other, and distinctly with the one as with the other ... As the three angels that came to Abraham were all entertained by him, so for a man to converse with, and entertain into his heart...all three persons, and to have the love of them all distinctly brought home to his heart, and to view the love of them all apart, this is the communion that [the Scriptures] would raise up our hearts unto ... Sometimes a man’s communion and converse is with the one, sometimes with the other; sometimes with the Father, then with the Son, and then with the Holy Ghost; sometimes his heart is drawn out to consider the Father’s love in choosing, and then the love of Christ in redeeming, and so the love of the Holy Ghost, that searcheth the deep things of God, and revealeth them to us.<sup>3</sup>

But even with lines like those flowing from his pen, Goodwin was not the premier exponent of this theme. That accolade is reserved for John Owen. He wrote on Christian devotion in a very similar way to Goodwin: the words just quoted could easily be mistaken for Owen’s. But whereas fellowship with Father, Son and Spirit elicited a few pages from Goodwin, it compelled a whole, weighty volume from Owen. Entitled *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace, and Consolation*, its

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3. Thomas Goodwin, *The Object and Acts of Justifying Faith*, in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 8:377-379.

very structure is arresting: part one addresses communion with the Father, part two communion with the Son, and part three communion with the Spirit.

In these old divines I had found what had been tantalising me all those years. I had found the concept of *distinct communion*. Distinct communion is exactly what it sounds like. It is communing with each person of the Godhead in a way that is distinct. It is experiencing a relationship with each that is distinguishable from one's relationships with the others. These Puritan writers were convinced that this is the pattern to which healthy Christian devotion should conform.

It would be misleading to give the impression that *all* the Puritans felt that conviction. It is not the case that seventeenth-century piety was awash with distinct communion. Considering, indeed, how many works on the Christian's devotional life were spawned in that era, it is striking how seldomly the theme of distinct communion surfaces. The reason for that may partly be connected to an inherent weakness of the Puritan movement. Its keynote was experiential Christianity. It eschewed formalism. Heart-engagement with God was the great priority. This was laudable and refreshing, but was maintained to some degree at the expense of doctrinal rigour. The brightest stars in the Puritan galaxy, like Goodwin and (especially) Owen, were able to marry the devotional vitality of the day with the best Trinitarian theology of the past — and the result was distinct communion. Many others, however, were not. In their passion for knowing God, loving God and experiencing God, they overlooked the most basic truth about God: he is three persons, and can only be known, loved and experienced as such. As Brian Kay puts it:

The substantial trinitarian emphases of [earlier generations] often were inadequately translated in any sustained way to

the otherwise elaborate Puritan devotional models. The doctrine of God was failing to connect to spirituality ... The real weakness of some Puritan devotion is not that it was too doctrinal, but that it was not doctrinal enough.<sup>4</sup>

But there is more at play than just the failure of that era to combine devotion and doctrine. There is a bigger picture. The Puritan period represents one chapter within Western Christianity, and it is arguable that throughout the whole story there has been a reluctance to let God's tripersonality set the agenda for worship and communion. In the east the Cappadocian Fathers, delighting in 'the splendour of the three,'<sup>5</sup> set a trajectory that was conducive to distinct communion. But the trajectory set by Augustine in the west, with his emphasis on an indivisible divine essence, was less

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4. Brian Kay, *Trinitarian Spirituality: John Owen and the Doctrine of God in Western Devotion* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 56-57. It is worth mentioning in passing another figure from that period, Samuel Rutherford. These beautiful words have been attributed to him: 'I know not which divine person I love the most, but this I know, I need and love each of them' (quoted in Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004], 435). I have never succeeded in locating this sentence in Rutherford's writings. On the assumption, however, that it is bona fide, it represents a particularly noteworthy exception to this seventeenth-century weakness I am highlighting. For Rutherford is the acme of experiential Christianity. His devotional material — especially in his letters — is at times unsettlingly intense. Yet these words, if his, indicate that this devotional intensity — his deeply felt need of and love for God — was controlled by a profound, clear-sighted Trinitarianism.

5. Gregory Nazianzen's words (Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations* 40.41, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978], 375.

conducive to it. Robert Letham identifies only two western figures who have significantly broken the mould. One is John Calvin; the other is John Owen.<sup>6</sup>

Owen's monumental work on *Communion with God* seems to be 'on the radar' of sections of the twenty-first-century church. Certainly, in scholarly circles it receives attention. This could suggest an overcoming of past reluctance, a burgeoning enjoyment of the splendour of the three. But is that really evident when one looks at our actual engagement with God today?

Singing occupies a prominent place in contemporary evangelical worship. A new generation of songwriters has gifted the church much material that is pleasingly substantial and biblical. Some of that material is at least moderately Trinitarian, making mention of the different divine persons. But few of these fresh compositions are serviceable for full-blown distinct communion with the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

Over the centuries a hymnic model has surfaced from time to time whereby the divine persons are addressed in

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6. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 2004), 408-409. It is possible that Letham overstates the case. Ryan McGraw contends that Owen 'shows affinity with Dutch authors such as Voetius and Hoornbeeck,' and that 'his emphasis on the persons of the Godhead stems from a continental influence.' But McGraw does acknowledge that 'Owen is largely unique among English writers in terms of Trinitarian piety.' Thus, while we should perhaps be cautious of giving 'the impression that western Trinitarians are the "bad guys"' (Ryan M. McGraw, 'The Rising Prominence of John Owen: A Review Article of *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 24 [2013]: 114), it is nonetheless true that Owen's distinct communion stands out as something striking and unusual within his tradition.

turn across consecutive verses. A fine example from Isaac Watts (1674–1748) is ‘We Give Immortal Praise’;<sup>7</sup> from Edward Cooper (1770–1833) there is ‘Father of Heaven, Whose Love Profound’. More recently, Margaret Clarkson’s ‘Sing Praise to the Father, Creator and King’ follows the same contours, as does Andrew Goddard’s ‘Heavenly Father, Our Creator.’ The transitioning of the worshipper’s gaze from one divine person to another does not have to be as formulaic as in these examples. But one wishes there were more songs being written today which, in one way or another, transport a congregation to the distinct enjoyment of the Glorious Three.

But it is not just our singing that can seem far removed from Owen’s vision of communion. There are also the prayers offered during services of worship. Here, distinct communion can be hampered by the idea that the Father only is always to be addressed — through the Son and by the Spirit. In many cases, however, one encounters something even more inimical to tri-personal praise than that overly rigid model. Sheer *sloppiness* is the principal impediment! Prayers are fired off, prefaced by words like ‘God’ and ‘Lord,’ and it is simply unclear what the speaker has in mind: it could be a particular divine person; it could be the three

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7. ‘To Him Who Chose Us First,’ also by Watts, similarly addresses the three persons, but the structure is a little subtler. It is ironic that it should be this particular writer who so successfully translates Owen’s Trinitarian devotion into the realm of hymnody. Watts was one of Owen’s successors to the pulpit of Mark Lane Independent Chapel, London, but, according to Crawford Gribben, ‘moved away from the theological position which Owen had articulated, eventually proposing doctrine which encouraged Unitarians to believe he had endorsed their own position’ (Crawford Gribben, ‘Becoming John Owen: The Making of an Evangelical Reputation,’ *Westminster Theological Journal* 79[2] [2017]: 313).

persons in their unity; or it could be that the triune being of God is not in fact conceived of at all in that moment.

While it is encouraging, then, that Owen's work is on the radar, our congregational engagement with God often betrays little of its influence. There is a great need for distinct communion to become less of a theological curiosity encased in a seventeenth-century text, and more of a weekly liturgical priority.

The book that is in your hands is not an analysis of that seventeenth-century text. Others have engaged closely with Owen's volume, and doubtless many more treatments of that kind will emerge in the future. This book is interested in distinct communion itself. Moving from some texts of Scripture to some theological principles, and then to some practical details, it is a modest attempt to concentrate minds on this great theme.

A.W. Tozer pens a vivid description of that enigmatic nineteenth-century figure, Frederick Faber. Faber is probably not an obvious role model for evangelical protestants! Nor am I able to verify that Tozer's image of the man corresponded to reality. But that aside, we can dwell on the attractiveness of the following lines, and covet for our own Christian lives something of what Tozer describes:

[Faber's] love for God extended to the three Persons of the Godhead equally, yet he seemed to feel for each One a special kind of love reserved for Him alone. Of God the Father he sings: ... *Father of Jesus, love's reward! What rapture will it be, Prostrate before Thy throne to lie, And gaze and gaze on Thee!* His love for the Person of Christ was so intense it threatened to consume him.... Faber's blazing love extended also to the Holy Spirit.... He literally pressed his forehead to

the ground in his eager fervid worship of the Third Person of the Godhead.<sup>8</sup>

It is my hope and prayer that more of our churches might be filled with men and women whose love extends to the three persons equally, and who have a relationship with each that is distinct; and that this might increasingly be reflected in the way that we pray and sing together.

And on the subject of singing, no hymn could propel us into the following pages more appropriately than Edward Cooper's, mentioned above. With its eye on redemption *planned, accomplished and applied* — the relevance of which to distinct communion will emerge in later chapters — the song moves with non-discriminatory relish from *God the Father* to *God the Son* to *God the Spirit!*

Father of heaven, whose love profound  
a ransom for our souls hath found,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
to us thy pardoning love extend.

Almighty Son, incarnate Word,  
our Prophet, Priest, Redeemer, Lord,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
to us thy saving grace extend.

Eternal Spirit, by whose breath  
the soul is raised from sin and death,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
to us thy quickening power extend.

Thrice Holy! Father, Spirit, Son;  
mysterious Godhead, Three in One,  
before thy throne we sinners bend,  
grace, pardon, life to us extend.

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8. A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Bromley: STL Books, 1981), 40-42.