

Reformation 2008
(Lecture Four: Puritan Spirituality)
(Adapted from J. I. Packer's *A Quest for Godliness*, pp. 191-218)

I. Introduction.

A. Review.

1. So far we have seen a brief overview and summary of the forerunners of the Reformation; the Reformation itself under such men as Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin; and the continuing Reformation in England, beginning with Henry VIII, and continuing under Edward VI, being setback by Mary Tudor, but progressing under Elizabeth I and the Puritans.
2. We saw a brief sketch of Puritan preaching: that it is Christ's communication to His church, making it of supreme importance; that it is to be based on the life-giving power of the Word and the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit; that it is to be aimed at the intellect, since it is through the mind that the Lord affects the heart; and that it is therefore to be expository, doctrinal, orderly, popular, Christ-centered, experimental, piercing in its application, and powerful in its manner of delivery.
3. Last week, we consider Puritan evangelism: that it is not man-centered, as though man had the ability to convert himself, but is to be God-centered – we must rely on God for the conversion of the soul, while we earnestly press on them the dying love of Christ for sinners.

B. We end our series this evening, with a lecture on Puritan spirituality.

1. The lessons we can learn from them in this area are the most valuable.
2. As I mentioned this morning, this is the Puritan secret of spiritual power and maturity in living the Christian life.
3. We will focus mainly on the life and thought of John Owen, who wrote a great deal on this subject, but we will consider other authors as well.

II. Lecture: Puritan Spirituality.

A. Background.

1. Biography.

- a. **John Owen** was one of the greatest English theologians, and this is all the more remarkable when you consider the age in which he lived, since there were so many theological giants in those days. Spurgeon called him the "prince of divines."
 - (i) He was born in 1616, in the Oxfordshire village of Stadham, of Welsh descent, the son of an uncompromising Puritan vicar.
 - (ii) Packer writes, "He entered Queen's College, Oxford, at the age of twelve, and took his MA in 1635." He studied hard, driven by his political and ecclesiastical ambitions; but though he was in the church, he was not a Christian.
 - (iii) "In his early twenties, however, God showed him his sins, and the

torment of conviction threw him into such a turmoil that for three months he avoided the company of others and, when addressed, could scarcely utter a coherent sentence. Slowly he learned to trust Christ, and so found peace.”

- (iv) “In 1637, by reason of conscientious objections to Chancellor Laud’s statutes, he left the university, and with it, as far as he could foresee, all hope of advancement. But after Laud’s fall, under the Long Parliament, he rose rapidly and in 1651 was made Dean of Christ Church, becoming Vice Chancellor of the university the following year. Oxford had been the Royalist headquarters during the Civil War, and Owen found the university bankrupt and in chaos. He reorganised it, however, with conspicuous success. After 1660, he led the Independents through the bitter years of persecution. He was offered the presidency of Harvard, but declined. He died in 1683, after years of martyrdom to asthma and gallstones!”
- b. “The epitaph engraved on the monument that adorns **Owen’s tomb** in Bunhill Fields reflects the respect in which he was held by his contemporaries, and indicates something of his quality as a man of God and a teacher of godliness. Here is a translation:
- (i) **“John Owen, born in Oxfordshire, son of a distinguished theologian, was himself a more distinguished one, who must be counted among the most distinguished of this age. Furnished with the recognised resources of human learning in uncommon measure, he put them all, as a well-ordered array of handmaids, at the service of theology, which he served himself. His theology was polemical, practical, and what is called casuistical, and it cannot be said that anyone of these was peculiarly his rather than another.**
- (ii) **“In polemical theology, with more than herculean strength, he strangled three poisonous serpents, the Arminian, the Socinian, and the Roman.**
- (iii) **“In practical theology, he laid out before others the whole of the activity of the Holy Spirit, which he had first experienced in his own heart, according to the rule of the Word. And, leaving other things aside, he cultivated, and realised in practice, the blissful communion with God of which he wrote; a traveller on earth who grasped God like one in heaven.**
- (iv) **“In casuistry, he was valued as an oracle to be consulted on every complex matter.**
- (v) **“A scribe instructed in every way for the kingdom of God, this pure lamp of gospel truth shone forth on many in private, on more from the pulpit, and on all in his printed works, pointing everyone to the same goal. And in this shining forth he gradually, as he and others recognized, squandered his strength till it was gone. His holy soul, longing to enjoy God more, left the shattered ruins of his once-handsome body, full of permanent weaknesses, attacked by frequent**

diseases, worn out most of all by hard work, and no longer a fit instrument for serving God, on a day rendered dreadful for many by earthly powers but now made happy for him through the power of God, August 25, 1683. He was 67.”

2. Character.

- a. Owen had tremendous intellectual power.
 - (i) His knowledge and memory were vast, and he was unusually gifted at organizing his thought.
 - (ii) He did not write for superficial readers, but “for those who, once they take up a subject, cannot rest till they see to the bottom of it, and who find exhaustiveness not exhausting, but satisfying and refreshing.”

- b. His spirituality matched his intellect.
 - (i) “‘Holiness’, said David Clarkson in his funeral sermon, ‘gave a divine lustre to his other accomplishments, it stirred in his whole course, and was diffused throughout his conversation.’”
 - (ii) Owen owed his holiness to two things:
 - (a) First, he was a humble man. He wrote, **“There are two things that are suited to humble the souls of men . . . a due consideration of God, and then of ourselves. Of God, in his greatness, glory, holiness, power, majesty and authority; of ourselves, in our mean, abject and sinful condition.”**
 - (b) Packer writes, “God taught Owen to consider both: to let God, the Sovereign Creator, be God in his thought and life, and to recognise his own guilt and uncleanness. The latter, he held, was especially important: ‘the man that understands the evil of his own heart, how vile it is, is the only useful, fruitful and solidly believing and obedient person. . . .’ A man must abhor himself before he can serve God aright. Owen, proud by nature, had been brought low in and by his conversion, and thereafter he kept himself low by recurring contemplation of his inbred sinfulness.”
 - (c) Second, Owen knew the power of his Gospel. **Preachers, “must have ‘experience of the power of the truth which they preach in and upon their own souls. . . . A man preacheth that sermon only well unto others which preacheth itself in his own soul.’”**
 - (d) He made this rule: **“I hold myself bound in conscience and in honour, not even to imagine that I have attained a proper knowledge of anyone article of truth, much less to publish it, unless through the Holy Spirit I have had such a taste of it, in its spiritual sense, that I may be able, from the heart, to say with the psalmist, ‘I have believed, and therefore have I spoken.’”**
 - (e) These convictions gave Owen unusual authority and skill in probing the human heart. “When Rabbi Duncan told his students to read Owen's *Indwelling Sin* he added: ‘But prepare for the knife.’”

- c. Owen wrote in a difficult style, but this comes from his training in Latin.
 - (i) If you have difficulty reading it, you should read it aloud for it will make more sense.
 - (ii) **“Owen is said to be prolix [wordy, verbose],’ wrote Spurgeon, ‘but it would be truer to say that he is condensed. His style is heavy because he gives notes of what he might have said, and passes on without fully developing the great thoughts of his capacious mind. He requires hard study, and none of us ought to grudge it.’”**

B. Owen on the Christian life.

1. What is man? (Taken from *Indwelling Sin, Mortification of Sin, and Temptation, and Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit.*)
 - a. The Puritans insisted that self-knowledge is the sine qua non [essential] for living the Christian life.
 - b. There were four things under this category that Owen tirelessly reminded the believer:
 - (i) **“First, the Christian is a *man*, created for rational action and equipped to that end with a trinity of faculties: understanding, will and affection.”**
 - (a) The understanding is that faculty of the soul that guides directs, chooses and leads. It is the eye of the soul.
 - (b) The will is the faculty that has the power of action. It is guided by the mind and by the appetites. It chooses what appears to be good to it. One who truly appreciates God’s goodness will desire Him.
 - (c) The affections are the drives or dispositions, both positive and negative, either drawing man to or repelling him from particular objects. “No choice is ever made without some degree of affection.” Owen writes, **“Affections are in the soul, as the helm is in the ship; if it be laid hold on by a skilful hand, it turneth the whole vessel which way he pleaseth.” “It is in vain to contend with anything that hath the power of our affections in its disposal; it will prevail at the last.”**
 - (d) Packer writes, “Man was made to know good with his mind, to desire it, once he has come to know it, with his affections, and to cleave to it, once he has felt its attraction, with his will; the good in this case being God, his truth and his law. God accordingly moves us, not by direct action on the affections or will, but by addressing our mind with his word, and so bringing to bear on us the force of truth. Our first task, therefore, if we would serve God, is to learn the contents of ‘God’s Word written’. Affection may be the helm of the ship, but the mind must steer; and the chart to steer by is God’s revealed truth.”
 - (e) Therefore, it is the preacher’s primary task to teach God’s people the doctrines of Scripture. He must avoid emotionalism and address himself directly to the mind. “Owen habitually spoke of himself as a *teacher*, and conducted his own ministry on these principles, as his published sermons and practical treatises show.”

- (ii) **“Second, the Christian is a fallen man.”** Sin has alienated him from God and from himself. Sin causes disorder in the soul and destroys character: **“the faculties move cross and contrary one to another; the will chooseth not the good which the mind discovers. . . commonly the affections. . . get the sovereignty, and draw the whole soul captive after them.”**
- (a) Fallen man is no longer rational, but unstable, distracted by various and conflicting passions, and lacks the strength to obey God. Sin is an irrational hatred of God, a desire to avoid, rebel and disobey Him.
- (b) Owen wrote concerning indwelling sin, **“It’s nature and formal design is to oppose God; God as a lawgiver, God as holy, God as the author of the gospel, a way of salvation by grace and not by works, are the direct object of the law of sin.”**
- (c) Sin expresses itself in ungodliness, unbelief and heresy. It pollutes the whole man, **“it adheres as a depraved principle unto our minds, in darkness and vanity; unto our affections in sensuality; unto our wills, in a loathing of, and aversion from, that which is good; and. . . is continually putting itself upon us, in inclinations, motions, or suggestions, to evil.”** It resists the whole work of grace, **“when Christ comes with his spiritual power upon the soul to conquer it to himself, he hath no quiet landing place. He can set foot on no ground but what he must fight for.”**
- (d) Packer writes, “Christian living, therefore, must be founded upon self-aborrence and self-distrust because of indwelling sin’s presence and power. Self-confidence and self-satisfaction argue self-ignorance. The only healthy Christian is the humble, broken-hearted Christian:
- (e) Owen writes, **“Constant self-abasement, condemnation, and abhorrency, is another duty that is directly opposed unto the. . . rule of sin in the soul. No frame of mind is a better antidote against the poison of sin. . . . It is the soil wherein all grace will thrive and flourish. A constant due sense of sin as sin, of our interest therein by nature, and in the course of our lives, with a continual afflictive remembrance of . . . instances of it . . . is the soul’s best posture. . . . To keep our souls in a constant state of mourning and self-abasement is the most necessary part of our wisdom. . . and it is so far from having any inconsistency with those consolations and joys, which the gospel tenders unto us in believing, as that it is the only way to let them into the soul in a due manner.”**
- (iii) **“Third, the Christian is a redeemed man.”**
- (a) Christ became his guaranty in the covenant of redemption to pay his debts and to merit him life, to free him from guilt and deliver him from the power of sin.
- (b) **“Redemption by Christ is the heart of Christian doctrine, and faith and love to Christ must be the heart of Christian devotion.”**

- (c) Owen writes, **“They know nothing of the life and power of the gospel, nothing of the reality of the grace of God, nor do they believe aright one article of the Christian faith, whose hearts are not sensible of the love of Christ herein. Nor is he sensible of the love of Christ, whose affections are not therein drawn out unto him. I say, they make a pageant of religion. . . whose hearts are not really affected with the love of Christ, in the susception [reception] and discharge of the work of mediation, so as to have real and spiritually sensible affections for him. Men. . . have no real acquaintance with Christianity, who imagine that the placing of the most intense affections of our souls on the person of Christ, the loving him with all our hearts because of his love, our being overcome thereby, until we are sick of love, the constant motions of our souls towards him with delight and adherence, are but fancies and imaginations.”**
- (iv) **“Fourth, the Christian is a regenerate man, a new creature in Christ.”**
- (a) He has a new principle of life, a habit of obedience, implanted in him. This is the circumcision of the heart, the Spirit’s regenerating work in the depths of our being. Owen writes, **“Whereas the blindness, obstinacy, and stubbornness in sin, that is in us by nature, with the prejudices which possess our minds and affections, hinder us from conversion unto God, by this circumcision they are taken away.”** Our first and immediate act will be a true, saving faith in Jesus Christ.
- (b) Packer writes, **“Regeneration makes man’s heart a battlefield, where ‘the flesh’ (the old man) tirelessly disputes the supremacy of ‘the spirit’ (the new man). The Christian cannot gratify the one without interference from the other (Gal 5:17; Rom 7:23). Sin, from which by repentance he has formally dissociated himself, seems to take on a life of its own; Paul likens it ‘to a person, a living person, called “the old man,” with his faculties and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, strength.’ It is always at work in the heart; a temporary lull in its assaults means, not that it is dead, but that it is very much alive. “Sin is never less quiet, than when it seems to be most quiet, and its waters are for the most part deep, when they are still.’ Its strategy is to induce a false sense of security as a prelude to a surprise attack.”**
- (c) Owen writes, **“By sin we are oftentimes, ere we are aware, carried into distempered affections, foolish imaginations, and pleasing delightfulness in things that are not good nor profitable. When the soul is doing . . . quite another thing . . . sin starts that in the heart . . . that carries it away into that which is evil and sinful. Yea, to manifest its power, sometimes when the soul is seriously engaged in the mortification of any sin, it will, by one means or other, lead it away into a dalliance with that very sin whose ruin it is seeking. . . .**

I know no greater burden in the life of a believer than these involuntary surprisals. . . . And it is in respect unto them, that the apostle makes his complaint, Rom. 7:24. . . .”

- (d) This battle continues throughout our lives: **“Sometimes a soul thinks or hopes that it may through grace be utterly free from this troublesome inmate. Upon some secret enjoyment of God, some full supply of grace, some return from wandering, some deep affliction, some thorough humiliation, the poor soul begins to hope that it shall now be freed from the law of sin. But after a while. . . sin acts again, makes good its old station.”**
- (e) Packer writes, **“And the man who claims perfection is self-deceived, and riding for a fall. ‘You’ll never get out of the seventh of Romans while I’m your minister,’ Alexander Whyte once told his Edinburgh congregation; and Owen, could he have stepped forward two and a half centuries to stand in Whyte’s shoes, would have told them the same.”**

2. God’s will: our sanctification.

- a. Owen believed, as Calvin, as Scripture teaches, that God’s purpose for us as Christians in this life is sanctification: (1 Thes. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:15f).
 - (i) **“For this is the will of God, your sanctification”** (1 Thes. 4:3).
 - (ii) **‘But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’”** (1 Pet. 1:15-16).
- b. He writes, **“Sanctification is an immediate work of the Spirit of God on the souls of believers, purifying and cleansing of their natures from the pollution and uncleanness of sin, renewing in them the image of God, and thereby enabling them from a spiritual and habitual principle of grace, to yield obedience unto God. . . . Or more briefly; it is the universal renovation of our natures by the Holy Spirit into the image of God, through Jesus Christ. Hence it follows, that our holiness, which is the fruit and effect of this work . . . as it compriseth the renewed. . . image of God wrought in us, so it consists in a holy obedience unto God, by Jesus Christ, according to the terms of the covenant of grace.”**
 - (i) **“Holiness is nothing but the implanting, writing and realising of the gospel in our souls . . . the word changed into grace in our hearts. . . the Spirit worketh nothing in us, but what the word first requireth of us . . . growth is nothing but. . . increase in conformity to that word.”**
 - (ii) It is a progressive work throughout the Christian’s life. It is the gift of God and the duty God requires of us. **“Neither can we perform our duty herein without the grace of God; nor doth God give us this grace unto any other end but that we may rightly perform our duty.”**
 - (iii) Packer writes, **“He who would be holy must have a due regard both to God’s law, which is itself holy, just, good and binding, and peremptorily requires of him all those good works of which holiness consists, and to**

God's promise of strength through Christ to keep this law."

- (iv) Owen adds, **"And we have a due regard unto the promise. . . when (1) we walk in a constant sense of our inability to comply with the command. . . from any power in ourselves. . . . (2) When we adore that grace which hath provided help and relief for us. . . . (3) When we act faith in prayer and expectation on the promise for supplies of grace enabling us to holy obedience."**
 - (v) And again, Packer, "We must pray for help, and fight the good fight of faith in God's strength, and give thanks to him for the victories we win."
- c. Sanctification has two aspects. Positively, the new man is to grow into the image of Christ. Negatively, the old man must be put to death.
- (i) First, the new man is to grow in grace.
 - (a) We grow in grace when we stir up the new principle the Lord has put in us by His Spirit. Owen writes, **"Frequency of acts doth naturally increase and strengthen the habits whence they proceed. And in spiritual habits [e.g., faith, hope, love] it is so, moreover, by God's appointment. . . . They grow and thrive in and by their exercise. . . the want thereof is the principal means of their decay."**
 - (b) The more we exercise them, the stronger we'll be. And so we must hear the Word preached, read the Word, meditate on it, pray, worship, seek to obey *all* of God's commands, persevering in these things; all the while remembering that the power comes from God and not ourselves, or we will fail. Owen writes, **"the actual aid, assistance and internal operation of the Spirit of God is necessary . . . unto the producing of every holy act of our minds, wills and affection, in every duty whatsoever. . . . Notwithstanding the power or ability which believers have received by habitual grace, they still stand in need of actual grace in . . . every single. . . act or duty towards God."**
 - (c) Growing in grace also means fighting against the world. Owen writes, **"The world is at present in a mighty hurry, and being in many places cut off from all foundations of steadfastness, it makes the minds of men giddy with its revolutions, or disorderly in the expectations of them. . . hence men walk and talk as if the world were all, when comparatively it is nothing. And when men come with their warmed affections, reeking with thoughts of these things, unto the performance of or attendance unto any spiritual duty, it is very difficult for them, if not impossible, to stir up any grace unto a due and vigorous exercise."**
 - (d) We must guard our hearts and minds, and cultivate meditation, or we will not be able to maintain the spiritual-mindedness necessary to grow in grace.
 - (ii) Further, we need to mortify our old man, our sinful nature.
 - (a) This is more than suppressing or fighting against our sinful impulses;

it is the gradual eradication of them. Mortify means to kill and the goal is to kill all the remnants of sin in our hearts. Owen writes, **“the end aimed at in this duty is destruction, as it is in all killing: the utter ruin, destruction and gradual annihilation of all the remainders of this cursed life of sin. . . to leave sin with neither being, nor life, nor operation. . . .”**

- (b) Our sin was killed on the cross in principle. Christ’s death will eventually kill it. It was dethroned in regeneration. Now, with the Spirit’s help, we are to spend our lifetime draining its lifeblood. Owen writes, **“The whole work is by degrees to be carried on towards perfection all our days.”**
 - (c) **We must never let up for sin “will no otherwise die, but by being gradually and constantly weakened; spare it, and it heals its wounds, and recovers strength. . . . The work. . . consists in a constant taking part with grace . . . against the principle, acts and fruits of sin.”**
 - (d) Packer writes, “It is often painful and ungrateful; Christ compared it to plucking out an eye, or cutting off a limb; but it is the way of life, and it is disastrous to neglect it.”
- d. How can we overcome sin? Two things are necessary:
- (i) **First, humility – it is the best frame of mind against the poison of sin.**
 - (ii) **Second, continual growth in grace. Owen writes, “Growing, thriving and improving in universal holiness is the great way of the mortification of sin. The more vigorous the principle of holiness is in us, the more weak, infirm and dying will be that of sin. . . . This is that which will ruin sin, and without it nothing else will contribute anything thereunto.” Especially, “live and abound in the actual exercise of all those graces, which are most directly opposed to those . . . corruptions that we are most exercised withal.”**
 - (a) That means of grace that most directly kills sin is prayer, including both confessing our sins and acknowledging just how worthy we are of God’s wrath, and pleading with God, on the basis of His promises, while remembering His faithfulness in past petitions.
 - (b) This will bring two results:
 - (1) First, grace will be strengthened Owen writes, **“The soul of a believer is never raised to a higher intension of spirit in the pursuit of, love unto, and delight in, holiness, nor is more confirmed unto it or cast into the mould of it, than it is in prayer.”**
 - (2) And second, sin will be weakened as we look to Christ, **“Let faith look on Christ in the gospel as he is set forth dying and crucified for us. Look on him under the weight of our sins, praying, bleeding, dying: bring him in that condition into the heart by faith; apply his blood so shed to thy corruptions; do this daily. . . .”**

- (3) Owen continues, “Christ as crucified is the great object of our love, or should be . . . in the death of Christ do his love, his grace, his condescension, most gloriously shine forth. . . the effects of love, as of all true love, are first, *Adherence*; secondly, *Assimilation*:-[*First*] *Adherence*: Love in the Scriptures is frequently expressed by this effect; the soul of one did *cleave*, or was *knit*, unto another. . . . So it produceth a firm adherence unto Christ crucified, that makes a soul to be in some sense always present with Christ on the cross. And hence ensues, [Secondly], *Assimilation*, or conformity. . . . Love . . . begets a likeness between the mind loving and the object beloved. . . . A mind filled with the love of Christ as crucified. . . will be changed into its image and likeness, by the effectual mortification of sin. . . .”
- (4) Packer writes, “The cross and the Spirit are thus the two focal realities in Owen’s teaching about the Christian life. Christ merited the gift of the Spirit to the elect sinner by dying for him; the Spirit comes to him to show him what the cross reveals of Christ’s love for him, to bring home to him the pardon Christ won for him, to change his heart, and to make him love his Saviour. The Spirit leads us to Christ’s cross, God’s guarantee to us that our sins, so far from bringing about our death eternally, shall themselves die, and brings the cross of Christ into our hearts, with its sin-killing power, so ensuring that our sins do die.
- (5) “It ought to be said before we go further, that this dichotomised scheme of sanctification as a matter of vivifying our graces and mortifying our sins, which Owen sets forth with such masterful and searching brilliance, is not in any way peculiar to him. It is conventional Puritan teaching, going back through Calvin to Romans 6 and Colossians 2:20-3:17. Here, as elsewhere, Owen stands in the main Puritan stream.”

3. Communion with God.

- a. To Owen and the Puritans, sanctification was only one facet of the more important reality of *communion with God* – the very heart of Puritan theology.
- (i) The Puritan were concerned with the many-sided problem of man. They were concerned with the many facets of the covenant of grace. They never tired of preaching about the mediation of Christ in his three-fold offices. And of course, they pressed for the reformation of public worship. But all of these were means to an end, God’s end, that man might glorify God and enjoy Him forever, that man might have communion with God. Packer writes, “**To the Puritans, communion between God and man is the end to which both creation and redemption are the means; it is the goal to which both theology and**

preaching must ever point; it is the essence of true religion; it is, indeed, the definition of Christianity.”

- (ii) It was to this subject Owen devoted his treatise, *Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, each person distinctly, in love, grace and consolation; or, the Saint's Fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, unfolded,*” first published in 1657.
- b. Owen sets out his exposition of communion with God in five points:
- (i) **“1. Communion with God is a relationship of mutual interchange between God and man.”**
 - (a) This is the meaning of the Greek word *koinonia*, which is generally translated “fellowship” or “communion.” It means a joint participation in something by two or more parties. It consists in giving and receiving. It implies the prior existence of a bond between the parties.
 - (b) Owen writes, **“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 . . . [a] mutual communication in giving and receiving, after a most holy and spiritual manner, which is between God and the saints, while they walk together in a covenant of peace, ratified by the blood of Jesus.”**
 - (ii) **“2. Communion with God is a relationship in which the initiative and power are with God.”**
 - (a) Owen identifies God as the starting point of this ‘communion,’ man simply responds. God creates the relationship by giving Himself to us, so that we might know Him and respond to Him. On the one hand, it is our duty to commune with God. On the other, God’s communicating Himself to us is a divine gift. Today, we tend to think of communion with God from a man-centered perspective – to our subjective experience of God, our approach to Him. The Puritans considered it in a God-centered way, considering God’s approach to us first in regenerating and pardoning grace, by which He makes us alive to Himself; then to His giving of Himself to us; and only then broadening the subject to our own seeking after and enjoying of His gracious presence. They weren’t less interesting in our experiential relationship with God, but more. But they didn’t separate their understanding of communion from the doctrine of God’s divine grace. In this way, they avoided the pitfall of false mysticism, something that has polluted a great deal of would-be Christian devotion in our day.
 - (b) Packer writes, **“The idea of communion with God thus covers the whole of the grace-and-faith relationship with God in which we stand, a relationship which God himself initiates and in which at each stage the initiative remains in his hands.”**

(iii) **“3. Communion with God is a relationship in which Christians receive love from, and respond in love to, all three Persons of the Trinity.”**

- (a) Owen continually insisted on the doctrine of the Trinity as the foundation of the Christian faith – if it fell, everything fell. The reason was that salvation was Trinitarian, each of the three persons are involved. The Father initiates it, chooses a people to save and sends His Son to save them. The Son comes to do the Father’s will by living and dying to redeem sinners. The Spirit takes what the Son has done and applies it to those the Father has chosen. All three are involved in fulfilling a common purpose to love unlovely men, all three give their gifts to those who are chosen, and therefore all three should be acknowledged in faith and loved in return. This is Owen’s theme in his work, *Of Communion*.”
- (b) **How should we respond to the Father’s love, but by loving Him in return? Owen writes, “By a peculiar delight and acquiescing in the Father, revealed effectually as love unto the soul.”**
- (c) **How should we respond to Son’s love, but “by maintaining marital chastity towards him, says Owen: that is, by refusing to trust or hanker after any but him for our acceptance with God; by cherishing his Holy Spirit, sent to us for our eternal benefit; and by maintaining his worship undefiled, according to the Scripture pattern. This necessitates a daily deliberate submission to him as our gracious Lord. Daily we should rejoice before him in the knowledge of his perfection as a Saviour from sin; daily we should take the sins and infirmities of that day to his cross to receive forgiveness (‘this is every day’s work; I know not how any peace can be maintained with God without it’); daily we should look to Christ, and wait on him, for the supply of his Spirit to purify our hearts and work holiness in us. Holiness, according to the Puritans, cannot be attained without the exercise of faith, any more than it can be perfected without the effort of fighting sin. The saints, says Owen: ‘look upon him [Christ] as . . . the only dispenser of the Spirit and of all grace of sanctification and holiness. . . he is to *sprinkle* that blood upon their souls; he is to *create* the holiness in them that they long after. . . . In this state they look to Jesus; here faith fixes itself, in expectation of his giving out the Spirit for all these ends and purposes; mixing the promises with faith and so becoming actual partakers of all this grace. This is . . . their communion with Christ; this is the life of faith as to grace and holiness. Blessed is the soul that is exercised therein.”**
- (d) Packer writes, **“How are we to respond to the comforting work of the Spirit? By taking care not to grieve him by negligence or sin (Eph 4:30), nor to quench him by opposing or hindering his work (1 Thess 5:19), nor to resist him by refusing the word (Acts 7:51), but to give him constant thanks, and to pray to him for a continuance of his peace and goodness.”**

- (e) “This then, according to Owen, should be the pattern of our regular communion with the three Persons of the Godhead, in meditation, prayer, and a duly ordered life. We should dwell on the special mercy and ministry of each Person towards us, and make our proper response of love and submission distinctly to each. Thus we are to maintain a full-orbed communion with God.”
- (f) **Thomas Goodwin** wrote something similar, **“There is communion and fellowship with all the persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and their love, severally and distinctly. . . . Christ putteth you upon labouring after a distinct knowing of, and communion with all three persons. . . rest not until all three persons manifest their love to thee. . . in assurance, 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 help of 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, and taketh all the pains with us; and so a man goes from one witness to another distinctly, which I say, is the communion that John would have us to have. . . . And this assurance it is not a knowledge by way of argumentation or deduction, whereby we infer that if one loveth me then the other loveth me, but it is intuitive, as I may so express it, and we should never be satisfied till we have attained it, and till all three persons lie level in us, and all make their abode with us, and we sit as it were in the midst of them, while they all manifest their love to us . . . this is the highest that ever Christ promised in this life (in his last sermon, John 14).”**
- (iv) **“4. Communion with God is a relation of active, forward-looking friendship between God and man.”**
- (a) Packer writes, “This thought brings into perspective at once the whole of John Owen’s complex analysis. Communion with God means simply behaving as a friend of the God who has called you his friend. **Thomas Goodwin** dwells on the love of Christ, who, when we had fallen into sin and enmity against God, died to make us his friends again-though ‘he could have created new ones cheaper’ - and develops powerfully the thought that friendship is not a means to an end, but an end in itself, and that true friendship is expressed in the cultivation of our friend’s company for its own sake:
- (b) **“Mutual communion is the soul of all true friendship and a familiar converse with a friend hath the greatest sweetness in it . . . [so] besides the common tribute of daily worship you owe to [God], take occasion to come into his presence on purpose to have communion with him. This is truly friendly, for friendship is most maintained and kept up by visits; and these, the more free and less**

occasioned by urgent business . . . they are, the more friendly they are. . . . We use to check our friends with this upbraiding, You still [always] come when you have some business, but when will you come to see me? . . . When thou comest into his presence, be telling him still how well thou lovest him; labour to abound in expressions of that kind, than which . . . there is nothing more taking with the heart of any friend. . . .”

- (c) Such a friendship cultivated on earth will be the best preparation for the day of our death. Owen walked with God on earth, as his friend, and so was prepared for his death bed. Packer writes, **“How Owen had prepared himself appears from his deathbed reply on the morning of 24 August 1683 to the news which a fellow minister, William Payne, had brought him that his last work, entitled appropriately enough *Meditations and Discourses of the Glory of Christ*, was now in the press. ‘I am glad to hear it,’ said Owen, ‘but O brother Payne! The long wished for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done, or was capable of doing, in this world.’”** Before the day was over, Owen was with the Lord.
- (v) Finally, **“5. *Communion with God in Christ is enjoyed in a special way at the Lord's Table.*”**
- (a) The Puritans did not view the Lord’s Supper as a mere memorial, nor as a means to receive grace they could have in no other way, but, as Packer writes, “there is a special exercise of faith proper to the Lord’s Table, where Christ’s supreme act of love is set before us with unique vividness in the sacramental sign; and from this should spring a specially close communion with the Father and the Son.”
- (b) Richard Baxter writes, **“Also in the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, we are called to a familiar converse with God. He there appeareth to us by a wonderful condescension in the representing, communicating signs of the flesh and blood of his Son, in which he hath most conspicuously revealed his love and goodness to believers: there Christ himself with his covenant gifts are all delivered to us by these investing signs of his own institution. . . . No where is God so near to man as in Jesus Christ; and no where is Christ so familiarly represented to us, as in his holy sacrament. Here we are called to sit with him at his table, as his invited, welcome guests; to commemorate his sacrifice, to feed upon his very flesh and blood; that is, with our mouths upon his representative flesh and blood, by such a feeding as belongs to faith. The marriage covenant betwixt God incarnate and his espoused ones, is there publicly sealed, celebrated and solemnized. There we are entertained by God as friends . . . and that at the most precious costly feast. If ever a believer may on earth expect his kindest entertainment, and near access, and a humble intimacy**

with his Lord, it is in the participation of this sacrifice feast, which is called The Communion, because it is appointed as well for our special communion with Christ as with one another. It is here that we have the fullest intimation, expression, and communication of the wondrous love of God; and therefore it is here that we have the loudest call, and best assistance, to make a large return of love; and where there is most of this love between God and man, there is most communion, and most of heaven, that can be had on earth.”

- (c) Packer writes, “Owen and Baxter did not see eye to eye on everything – on the nature of the atonement, the ground of justification, and a number of church questions, they were in fact a fair distance apart – but in regarding the Lord’s Supper as an occasion and means of communion with Christ they were truly at one. Owen never wrote about the Lord’s Supper, but from a series of informal sacramental sermons that were taken down in shorthand as he preached his view of the matter becomes plain. The last sentence of the last sermon expresses his basic position: ‘We say, we have in these things *experience of a peculiar communion* with Christ, in a way made proper to this ordinance, which is not to be found in any other ordinance.’”
- c. To sum up what we’ve seen:
- (i) **Communion with God was at the very heart of Puritan theology.**
 - (a) **It is mutual – God communicates His goodness to us and we return love to Him.**
 - (b) **He initiates it – God begins and we respond.**
 - (c) **It is having fellowship and entering into a relationship with all three members of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**
 - (d) **It is a friendship in which we walk with God, and He with us.**
 - (e) **And it is something which we may particularly enjoy in the Lord’s Supper.**
 - (f) **Sanctification is a means to this end: that we might be like God and walk with Him.**
 - (ii) Let me close with Packer’s closing comments: “A word to the wise? There was once a day when God sent Jeremiah to say to Israel, ‘Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls’ (Jer 6:16). As we study Owen on the spiritual life, may it be that God is speaking in similar terms to us? Owen’s instructions and directions are indeed ‘old paths’, as old as the Bible, but they are paths which the Puritans as a body found to be in truth ‘the good way’. We shall do well to seek for grace to start walking in them ourselves. ‘And you will find rest for your souls.’”