

“CONGREGATIONAL FELLOWSHIP AS A ‘MEANS OF GRACE’”

*“Of the Church” and
“Of the Communion
of Saints”*

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“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Introduction

A. The Confessional Statement

"All saints that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, being united to one another in love, have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. Saints, by profession, are bound to entertain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, should be extended unto all who in every place, call on the name of the Lord Jesus."—The Savoy Declaration of Faith (hereafter “SDF”)

B. The Grand Objective: Our greatest good. Conformity to the image of Christ.

The objective of this paper is to show that the communion of saints in Congregational fellowship is not only the expression of love of God in Christ and love for one another but is a principal divinely ordained means of their being conformed to the image of His Son. This communion is not to be understood as replacing the preaching of the word, administration of the sacraments and exercise of church discipline as means of grace, but as the actual context of these all in an even wider and more biblical approach to the application and fruition of Christ’s redemptive work. The paper will include both the underlying theological basis and a few suggestions for practical application.

Part I. Christian Fellowship in Christocentric-Redemptive History

We approach this subject by asking two questions: “What is the chief end of God for mankind?” and, “By what means has God chosen to accomplish that end?” The answer to the first must be something like, “God’s chief end for mankind is the revelation of His attributes, particularly

the glorification of His grace, and His enjoyment of fellowship with His saints forever.”¹ The answer to the second, His means for accomplishing this, is man’s redemption, planned and purposed according to his foreordained counsel, accomplished by the incarnate Son, and applied and perfected by the operations of the Holy Spirit.

The God-revealing, God-glorifying redemption accomplished by the Son had a number of ascending related objectives answering to corresponding cascading consequences of mankind’s apostasy. Rejection of due regard for the Creator resulted in disobedience and objective guilt, resulting in alienation between man and God, the initiation of the curse, which resulted in depravity of the soul, further ignorance of God, captivity to sin and Satan, the beginnings of bodily death, alienation between man and woman (and all fellow humans), and between man and creation.² The reversal of this cascade of disaster is accomplished by the Son, who, through due regard for God,³ rendered obedience, resulting in the righteousness of justification and the reward of the gift of the Holy Spirit. This brought about the beginnings of the reversal of the effects of the fall, including a saving knowledge of the Son, faith in Him, repentance, objective justification, reconciliation with God, the initiation of the reversal of soul depravity in sanctification, freedom from the dominion of sin and Satan, participation in Christ’s resurrection, and the coming of a new creation “wherein dwelleth righteousness” because “the dwelling of God is with men.”

The topic is exceedingly broad, so we will focus our attention on the deformation of the divine image in man by sin, and its restoration by grace, looking first, very briefly, at the historical revelation of this, and then at the manner of its accomplishment in the New Testament church.

A. The Gruesome Deformation of the Divine Image: Fallen Man

It is not difficult to gather from the scriptures what the image of God was like before and after the fall. Consider the description of the image of God depicted by Paul in Colossians.

First, we are directed to see that image in Christ: “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”⁴ Clearly we are not being directed to imitate God in his incommunicable attributes here, but in those which may be known and reduplicated, after a fashion, in man, for without apology or qualification, we are told that we, through our union with Christ in that spiritual baptism “made without hands,” have “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”⁵ How this is done will be addressed below, but the point here is that a renewal is being done, a transformation is underway, to restore what was lost, namely our likeness to God, and that in a way of renewal of knowledge of God, moral-ethical conformity to him, and the restoration of communion with Him and union among His people:

¹ Ephesians 1; 3:10-11; Rev. 21:3.

² Genesis 3 and 4; Romans 1:17-32; 5:12-19; Eph. 2:1-3.

³ Heb. 10:5-7; Mt. 26:39.

⁴ Col 1:15.

⁵ Col 3:10.

11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col 3:11–17).

The same thinking pervades the apostle's call in the Epistle to the Ephesians:

But that is not the way you learned Christ!—²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:20-24).

The likeness of God into which we are to be renewed by Christ is his communicable “true righteousness and holiness.” Likewise, Peter is appealing in a slightly different manner to this image of God idea when he says,

¹⁴ As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵ but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶ since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” ¹⁷ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, ... ²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; ...” (1 Peter 1:14-24).

The reason the readers must be holy, is because their Father is holy. Holiness is not simply nor primarily a matter of being worthy subjects of a holy Master, but image-bearers of a Holy Father. They are not only his *adopted* children, but his *spiritually-begotten* children, brethren in a begotten family. Now that they have knowledge of Him, they must be conformed to Him, not to the passions of their former ignorance.

Another obvious consequence of the deformation of the divine image, is the relational aspect of the communicated divine fellowship. The love of complacency clearly present among the persons of the Trinity, and with the pre-fallen Adam in the garden, is lost to man in the fall. Alienation, “enmity,” the “fear that hath torment,” discomfort, distance, and denial of access to God take its place as the state of things between God and man. This becomes reflected in the state of things between man and man: selfishness, enmity, envy, jealousy, fear and violence become the

increasingly clear defining character of this deformed image. Man alienated from God becomes a creature attached to earth and time (i.e., this present evil world), ruled by the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the pride of life, unfit to represent God to the creation, unable to glorify God as His image. Redemption, “Paradise Regained,” if it is to be to the glory of God, must undo these effects and do so in a way that results in the revelation (demonstration and proclamation) of His excellencies (“τὰς ἀρετὰς ἐξαγγείλητε”) through the redeemed.⁶

To sum up, the divine image in man meant the created spiritual capacity to have joyous society with the Triune God in knowledge and true holiness. Its ruin meant ignorance, depravity and alienation; its restoration the restoration of that knowledge, holiness and joyous society that was lost.

B. The Gradual Unfolding of the Plan for Restoration

The details are sketchy, but if we give the words their due weight, we can already begin to see the beginnings of this renewal in the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15. In this promise of a divinely prepared curse-reverser, is an intervention that introduces enmity and breaks the fellowship between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. One of them in particular will crush the serpent’s head. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). As soon as this grace is revealed, there is also revealed a means for the preservation of the knowledge of, and experience of, that grace through the institution of animal sacrifice. Accompanying that promise is the regeneration of fallen hearts unto the faithful obedience to the command (i.e., Abel’s faithful sacrifice). Knowledge of God, likeness to God, joy in God – maybe only a candle of hope, but a light in the darkness.

1. The Restoration Advances in the Twilight

This restoration of the divine image, like the knowledge of the revelation of the Redeemer, continues to grow. That is to say, the scattered objects of electing grace become, as a group (despite many occasions that give ghastly and tragic evidence to the contrary), a holy, God-knowing people, the dwelling place of Jehovah.⁷ The law is given to serve as a pedagogue to guard and bring the children up in the knowledge and fear and delight of the Lord, awaiting the Messiah. In Jerusalem, God causes His “name” to dwell there.

Thus far, even in the case of the patriarchs, it was only partial; access to God, communion with God, was quite limited, Enoch’s experience being the most exceptional *type* of the potential New Testament experience. Under the Law, intimacy with the Holy Spirit, communion face-to-face with God, was limited to Moses. Only the priest, once a year, stood near the shekinah. At one time, in anticipation of what would come later, God told Moses, the covenant head of the people,

⁶ 1 Peter 2:9, Eph. 3:10.

⁷ Deut. 4:6-10.

I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone. (Nu 11:17)

So God put His Spirit upon 70 elders among the people and they prophesied one time, and carried on the work of judging the people. Joshua protested that men are prophesying and Moses responded with, “Oh, that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!” (Nu 11:29).

If we look carefully, I think it is fair to say that through the course of the Old Testament there is progression in the experience of the fellowship of the saints with God and with one another. There is an increasing clarity of the promise, increasing personal and corporate intimacy in the divine participation (e.g., the appearances on Mt. Sinai and the leading and covering by the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness are spectacular, but the Psalms often express an even closer, more comfortable, more vivid experience of God. In the observation of the ceremonial law, the obedient people experience near, familial, corporate fellowship with God⁸ and the Prophets promise even more when the Messiah comes. With growing revelation from the prophets and God’s providential dealings with Israel and the nations, there was more ground for knowing and conforming to God. Nevertheless, until the end of the Old and the beginning of the New Covenant (i.e., until the Incarnate one’s work of redemption was accomplished), the saints’ experience of *fellowship* with God was so limited, filial confidence so small, liberty so constrained, as to be nothing *by comparison* to what was to be normal in the New.⁹

2. With the Coming of The Promised Redeemer the Restoration Advanced as the Noon-Day

What happens with the coming of Christ and the subsequent coming of the Spirit? Of course, with the incarnation and appearing of Christ in the world, the knowledge of, access to, and fellowship with God advances greatly. The Logos dwelt among us, we beheld His glory; many more than Abraham and Moses are now called “my friends,” even sons of God, clean through His word, walking together with Him in agreement. By the cross and resurrection, the principle for the dominion of sin and Satan is broken, and by the application of that Redemption it is realized in the soul. With the rending of the temple curtain and the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost,

⁸ Dt 12:5–7.

⁹ This is central to Paul’s point in 2 Cor. 3 and his case against the Judaizers in Galatians 4. cf. Richard Sibbes, *The Excellence of the Gospell above the Law. Wherein the Liberty of the Sonnes of God is shewed. With the Image of their Graces here, and Glory hereafter*, in *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander Balloch Grosart, vol. 4 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson, 1863), 202. See also, John Owen, “And herein consists the principal advantage of the New Testament above the Old; for although the work of the new creation was begun and carried on secretly and virtually under the Old Testament, yet they had not a full discovery of the economy of the holy Trinity therein, which was not evidently manifest until the whole work was illustriously brought to light by the gospel. Hence, although there appear a vigorous acting of faith and ardency of affection in the approaches of the saints unto God under the Old Testament, yet as unto a clear access to the Father through the Son by the Spirit, as Eph. 2:18, wherein the life and comfort of our communion with God do consist, we hear nothing of it.” *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 190.

this application of Redemption comes in profusion, marking the end of the ethnocentric, middle-eastern, limit of the people of God. Moses' wish for the Spirit for all, and Joel's prophecy of it, are fulfilled.¹⁰ Christ's promise that all might receive the indwelling, sealing, Holy Spirit, the spirit of adoption, is granted and the saints become, thereby, partakers of the divine nature, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." They experience the way of bold access for all into the most holy place, come to the heavenly Jerusalem, behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, which, through the energies of the Spirit transforms the beholder into the same image from glory to glory. Truly the picture of the New Testament church is one of amazing, if still incomplete, reparation and restoration of the image of God in knowledge, holiness, and joyous familial society.

3. The Promise Consummated-the Restoration Complete

Finally there comes the end, "Paradise Regained," when that divine image in man as individuals and as a human race, chosen, redeemed, called, and glorified, shall be fully restored, conformed and confirmed in the likeness of Christ. They shall see Him, know Him, be like Him, and dwell with Him in everlasting joy, shining like the sun in their Father's kingdom, walk in the unabating light of His glory. The question we must address now is, by what means does the Holy Spirit begin and carry on this image-repairing work?

Part II. Christian Fellowship and Christology

"All Saints that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit and faith, although they are not made thereby one person with him, have fellowship in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection and glory: and being united to one another in love, they have communion in each others gifts and graces ..." SDF, 27:1

A. The Son Incarnate by the Spirit: the Head of the New Humanity

The Restoration of Humanity begins with the creation of the Head of the New Humanity in the womb of the virgin. The renovation of the image of God in man is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit. This is clear from the abundance of those scriptures which ascribe every facet of our regeneration and sanctification to the action of the Spirit upon the souls of men. From our conviction of sin, and the opening of our hearts, through the work of mortification and the possession and manifestation of love, to the glorification of our mortal bodies from their graves, the Spirit prepares us for fellowship with God.

After devoting the entire Book I of his *Pneumatologia* to the Person of the Spirit and His work in the Old Testament, John Owen introduces Book 2 with "I now proceed unto that which is the *principal subject of our present design* (emphasis mine); and this is, the dispensation and work of the Holy Spirit of God with respect unto the *new creation*, and the recovery of mankind or the church of God thereby." That is, the Old Testament works were *preparatory*, to the recovery of

¹⁰ Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:16-39.

mankind in the “new creation” by Christ, and this begins with the work of the Holy Spirit upon Christ. This begins in the womb of the virgin by the action of the Holy Spirit upon the human nature of Christ. While the Father was the originator (“a body thou has prepared for me”), and the Son was the one assuming the human nature (“for me”) the divine person actually performing the work of fashioning the human nature of the Son from Mary’s substance was the Holy Spirit, as evident from the expressions regarding His conception (Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:35).

From that new man, the *Second Adam*, resurrected, glorified and “anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows,” there is created, by the Spirit proceeding from Christ, a new humanity, in *His* image and likeness. This new man, however, is not created by their becoming one person with Christ,¹¹ but by being engrafted into Him, i.e., a vital union. They are not formed perfect, by an instantly complete creative act (like that performed upon the Head), but by an effectual act of the “spirit of holiness” upon depraved souls, they instantly receive new life, a new orientation, and come under “the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:2). The restoration of the divine image in the “New Humanity” thus begun, is continued in the sanctification of this people by the Christ-sent indwelling Holy Spirit. As Owen expresses it,

... this falleth now under our consideration,—namely, the perfecting the work of the new creation by the effectual operation and distributions of the Spirit of God. And this belongs unto the establishment of our faith, that he who prepared, sanctified, and glorified the human nature, the natural body of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, hath undertaken to prepare, sanctify, and glorify his mystical body, or all the elect given unto him of the Father.¹²

Part III. Christian Fellowship and the Gifts of the Spirit

“... being united to one another in love, they have communion in each others gifts and graces ...”

¹¹ “although they are not made thereby one person with him” – SDF: 27:1. That is one *natural* person. This emphasis is found in WCF 26:3 as follows “This communion which the saints have with Christ, doth not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead, or to be equal with Christ in any respect.” According to Berkoff, some mystics and Lutherans described the union this way. Also, it was sometimes raised in discussions about the union which is presupposed in the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in justification. John Flavel helpfully explains the distinction thus: “... this coming of Christ into the Soul of a sinner, doth not make him one person with Christ, that is the singular honour to which our nature is advanced by the Hypostatical Union; but this makes a person mystically one with Christ, and though it be beneath the Hypostatical Union, yet it is more than a meer Foederal Union. Christs coming into the Soul signifies more than his coming into Covenant with it, for it is the taking of such a person into a mystical Union with himself by the imparting of his Spirit unto him; as the vital sap of the stock coming into the grass, makes it one with the stock, Iohn 15. 5. So the coming of Christs Spirit into the Soul makes it a member of his mystical body; and this is a glorious supernatural work of God, 1 Cor. 1. 30. most honorable, most comfortable, and for ever sure and indissoluble; as I have elsewhere more fully shewed.” In *Englands Duty under the Present Gospel Liberty from Revel. III, Vers. 20: ...* / by John Flavell, Early English Books Online (London: Printed for Matthew Wotton ..., 1689), 353–354.

¹² John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 188-189.

A. The Body Fitly Framed Together – Functional Anatomy of the Body of Christ.

Every scriptural image of the church is organismic. It is an organization of interdependent interacting parts possessing life. There are living stones “fitly framed together” in a spiritual temple, brothers and sisters who are children of one Father, bride of one Son, citizens of one nation, and, most to the point, members, organs, i.e., parts, in a body. While all of these images point to the idea of *koinonia*, the sharing of a common life, gifts, and graces among the members, none do so vividly as the image of the body, with its interconnected, interdependent parts serving in living systems all receiving life and strength ultimately *from* the head but *through* one another.

B. The Body Growing—Spiritual Physiology of the Body: Head to Spirit to Members to One Another

The Holy Spirit who sanctified the human nature of Christ has been, from Christ’s exalted fullness, poured out upon the whole mystical body, creating it, so that all may say, “of His fullness we have received and grace upon grace.” This regeneration by the outpoured Spirit, has, by that union, by that engrafting, into Christ, simultaneously made them living members of his mystical body, composed of distinct, inter-dependent living parts, as we see in the following scriptures.

The first is 1 Cor. 12:12-31, where Paul introduces the idea of Christians having diversities of gifts, ministries and activities all given them by the Sovereign Spirit, according to His choice. Each of these several gifts ministries and activities is 1) a *manifestation* of the Spirit, 2) given to each and every one, not for personal benefit but for the profit (συμφέρον) of all.¹³ The image of the body, therefore, is most appropriate. Even with the most rudimentary knowledge of anatomy and physiology, Paul could see that the living body, with its mutually necessary dependent and supportive parts was a perfect image of the church. The “brothers,” i.e., the entire body, came together and engaged in mutual ministry according to the gifts they had. At that time, Paul could say, “One has a hymn, another a lesson, another a revelation, another a tongue and another an interpretation.”¹⁴ The admonition is that “all things be done for building up,” by all persons.

This idea of the fellowship of the saints as a functioning body is then repeated in Romans 12, where Paul asserts that

as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in

¹³ “συμφέρον is that which edifies the community.” Konrad Weiss, “Συμφέρον,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 76.

¹⁴ There is no need here to take up the matter of extraordinary “sign gifts,” and cessationism in order to establish our point from the teaching proceeding from verse 26. If some gifts are not present, the ones which remain are still functioning for the same purpose.

exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness (vv. 4-8).

All have their gifts, all are to exercise those gifts for the body's edification, showing brotherly love in diligent and affectionate, patient, practical service. As the Savoy puts it, they are "obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man."¹⁵

The next place where this church-wide ministry of edifying fellowship receives lengthy commentary is Ephesians 4. There we find the Christological and "realized eschatological" basis for this most clearly stated in vs. 8. Like the Christological "hymn" of Philippians 2, the context for this is its relevance to the Christian fellowship, i.e., of bearing with one another and keeping the unity of the Spirit. Our common Gift of the Spirit, who has given us our particular gifts, is the basis for our unity. "Each one of us," has received his sovereignly-administered redemption-obtained gift from the Spirit from Christ. Paul sets this out beginning with gifts of revelatory office bearers but quickly proceeds to talking about every connected part doing its part for the other:

¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together (συναρμολογούμενον καὶ συμβιβασόμενον) by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

This text clearly demonstrates that the members make up mutually interdependent and supportive organs and systems in body that grows as the vital energy of the body, the effectual working¹⁶ of the Holy Spirit, comes from the Head and to all the members of the body, through the members of the body participating in fellowship.

While he does not use the image of the body, we find a similar directive in the First Epistle of Peter, chapter 4, vs. 10-11. The context is congregational life, living in light of the coming of the Lord (vs. 7) loving one another (vs. 8), being hospitable to one another (vs. 9). So, Peter says,

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.

¹⁵ See also, Heidelberg Catechism Question 55: "Q. What do you understand by "the communion of saints"? A. First, that all and every one, who believes, being members of Christ, are in common, partakers of him, and of all his riches and gifts; secondly, that every one must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members."

¹⁶ ἐνέργειαν. The translation "working properly" is weak. "Effectual working" is preferable. In the other two instances of the term in Ephesians, and 5 of the 7 uses Paul makes of it, it is God's mighty effectual power at work. The only exceptions are Satan's strong power at work in "the lawless one" and God's sending those who follow him a strong delusion, both of which reflect an effectual working.

If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 4:10-11).

Peter is not limiting his general comments concerning ministry to the specific examples of pulpit address and the office of deacon, but the general exercise of grace-stewardship ministry to one another. Each one who has received a gift is a steward of it.

Again, this expansion of sanctifying activity to the whole body is a characteristic of the New Testament. John Owen recognized this even before becoming a Congregationalist, writing that,

... we may observe that the people of God under the New Testament, contradistinct from their teachers, have a greater interest in the performance of spiritual duties belonging to the worship of God, and more in that regard is granted unto them and required of them than was of the ancient people of the Jews, considered as distinguished from their priests, because their duty is prescribed unto them under the notion of those things which then were appropriate only to the priests, as of offering incense, sacrifice, oblations, and the like; which, in their original institution, were never permitted to the people of the Jews, but yet tralatitiously¹⁷ and by analogy are enjoined to all Christians.¹⁸

C. The Body Exercised

Five months after the death of Joseph Caryl, his larger congregation merged with the small one served by John Owen. On the occasion of their union Owen preached a sermon on Colossians 3:14, “And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.” What Owen said concerning the importance of the local church for the exercise of Christian love pertains to every other sanctifying grace of the Spirit. After the exercise of corporate worship, “the next great end, why he did institute a particular church was,” says Owen,

that we might have a direct exercise of his other great command, and of that other great duty, of love to believers. “I will try you here,” saith Christ; “I require this of you indispensably,—to love all the saints, all believers, all my disciples. You shall not need to say you must go far, this way or that, for objects; I appoint you to such an order as wherein you shall have continual, immediate objects of all that love which I require of you.”

Surely, this love is fundamental to our understanding of the communion of saints as a means of grace—it is the primary arena for its exercise. Owen continues,

¹⁷tralatitious: “idioms handed down from time immemorial” -- Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Thesaurus* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1996).

¹⁸ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 13 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 13.

When God gives commands that great things turn upon, and [that] are general, he gives some particular instance wherein he will have our obedience tried to those commands. When he gave the great command at first in the state of innocency, he tried them in the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life. The Lord Jesus Christ hath given us this great command of love, and hath plainly declared, that if we love not one another, we are not his disciples. “I will give you an instance whereby you may be tried,” saith he;—“cast you into such a society, by my order and appointment, as wherein you may have immediate objects for the exercise of love to the utmost of what I do require.”

Do we not find countless examples of this trial of love in our congregations? Members must choose to “let this mind be in you,” and learn to “esteem others better than themselves,” even to the point of praying for them that spitefully use them, and initiating efforts at reconciliation when differences arise. If they will not, their “bitter root” will show: a want of brotherly kindness will soon reveal itself. If they refuse to exercise Christian love in congregational life it will be evident that they need pastoral or even congregational counsel, reproof, or even discipline. Too many would rather do that most un-Christian thing and leave the congregation rather than repent. At any rate, participation in the life of the church will try their love, and hence their faith. Owen continues,

If we find a person that is orderly admitted into church society, he is as certain and evident an object of our love, as if we saw him lying in the arms of Christ. We walk by rule; he hath appointed us to do so. Let none, then, pretend that they love the brethren in general, and love the people of God, and love the saints, while their love is not fervently exercised towards those who are in the same church society with them. Christ hath given it you for a trial: he will try your love at the last day by your deportment in that church wherein you are. The apostle tells us, “He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, will never love God whom he hath not seen.” I am sure I may say, he that exercises not love towards the brethren whom he doth see in that relation wherein Christ hath appointed him to exercise love, loves not the brethren whom he doth not see, and that he hath not that peculiar relation to and acquaintance withal.

Bringing the point home to the newly formed congregation before him, he says,

I declare unto this congregation this day, I witness and testify unto you, that unless this evangelical love be found acted, not loosely and in general, but among ourselves mutually towards each other, we shall never give up our account with joy unto Jesus Christ, nor shall we ever carry on the great work of edification among ourselves. And if God be pleased but to give this spirit among you, I have nothing to fear but the mere weakness and pravity of my own heart and spirit. This is the great way Christ hath given us to exemplify our obedience unto that great and holy command of love to his disciples; and great weight is laid upon this duty. ¹⁹

¹⁹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 9 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 262–263. Compare with the early pioneer of Congregational thought, Henry Ainsworth: “A fourth cause and benefit of this societie, is the mutual aid strengthening, and consolation one of another in all, other Christiã duties both publick &

Part IV. The Practice of Christian Fellowship in Restoring the Divine Image

All Saints are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities: which communion, though especially to be exercised by them in the relations wherein they stand, whether in families or churches, yet as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who in every place call upon the Name of the Lord Jesus (SBF 27:2).

Owen's Rules for Fellowship

But, of course, it is always easier to have some idea that we ought to do something than to know how to put into practice. One good place to start thinking about the practice of Christian Fellowship is a much earlier publication of Owen's. In 1647, shortly after adopting Congregational views, he addressed this question in a practical treatise entitled *ESCHOL: A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan ... or, rules of direction for the walking of the saints in fellowship, according to the order of the gospel*.²⁰ This was a treatise written to go to the real heart of church life, penetrating

private. For as the several members of a mans body ar serviceable to the whole and each to other; so are the Saints among themselves, having every one their mesure of faith, their diversity of gifts and graces from God, that what is wanting in one, may be supplied by an other. And as the eye cannot say to the hand, nor the head to the feet, I have no need of yow: so cannot the least member in the church of Christ, be refused as vnnecessarie, but may be beneficial to the greatest. For as iron sharpneth iron; so doth man sharpen the face of his friend. And hence doe arise the mutual exhorting and building up one of another in the faith labouring together vnto the truth; admonishing the unruly, comforting the feble minded, bearing with the weak, considering one another to provoke vnto love and good works; rebuking for syn & trespasse, confessing of faults one to another, & praying one for an other, bearing one anothers burden; rejoycing with them that rejoyce, & weeping with them that are in trouble; communicating to the afflictions and distributing to the necessities one of an other; visiting them in sicknes, mourning & labouring together in prayer for thē; with many other offices of like nature, for the refreshing of soul & bodie; al which ar found and felt in this holy communion and body, wherin if one member suffer, al suffer with it; & if one be had in honour, al rejoyce with it; so neer a conjunctiō doth Gods spirit work in the hartes of the faithfull, which maketh them to look, not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.” Henry Ainsworth, *The Communion of Saints A Treatise of the Fellowship That the Faithful Have with God, and His Angels, and One with an Other; in This Present Life. Gathered out of the Holy Scriptures*, by H.A, Early English Books Online (Imprinted at Amsterdam: By Giles Thorp, 1607), 333–335.

²⁰ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 13 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 51. Of this work, Goold says, “Each rule is established by a body of evidence from Scripture, and is followed by a general explanation. Several editions of this treatise have appeared; and we cannot wonder at its favourable reception with the religious public, for it is as remarkable as any work of our author, for deep piety, sound judgment, lucid arrangement, and a comprehensive knowledge of Scripture, and forms a manual on church-fellowship which is to this day unsurpassed. One feature of it can hardly escape the reader’s attention,—Owen is here, for once, a master in the art of condensation.—ED” (p. 52).

beneath debates about polity and government.²¹ It is very expressive, I believe, of those “spiritual services as tend to mutual edification.” Here, greatly simplified²² are most of his rules for fellowship. In the church fellowship the members must exercise --

1. “Affectionate, sincere love in all things, towards one another, like that which Christ bare to his church.”
2. “Continual prayer for the prosperous state of the church, in God’s protection towards it.”
3. “Dedicated diligent care and endeavoring for the preservation of unity, both in particular and in general.”
4. “Frequent spiritual communication for edification, according to gifts received.”
5. “Mutually to bear with each other’s infirmities, weakness, tenderness, failings, in meekness, patience, pity, and with assistance.”
6. “Tender and affectionate participation with one another in their several states and conditions,—bearing each other’s burdens.”
7. “Free contribution and communication of temporal things to them that are poor indeed, suitable to their necessities, wants, and afflictions.”
8. “In church affairs to make no difference of persons, show no favoritism, but lift up the smallest for service to the rest.”²³
9. “If any be in distress, persecution, or affliction, the whole church is to be humbled, and to be earnest in prayer in their behalf.”
10. “Vigilant watchfulness over each other, with mutual admonition where needed”
11. “Hospitality to each other without grudging.”

The rationale behind the necessity of Christian fellowship, i.e., living and interacting with one another with person to person communication with practical physical expressions of love, including prayer, serving, need-relieving, reproof, exhortation, repentance and forgiveness, church-discipline, according to the Christ-centered evangelical motivation and biblical direction for the action taken, is that all of these things constitute the good works²⁴ which are commanded of members, in order not only to express the life of God in the world, but for the renewal in the body of Christ and members in particular, of the sanctifying knowledge and joyous fellowship of the elect with the Triune God, and thus the restoration of the divine image in the world to the glory of God.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 53–54.

²² In the treatise each is abundantly confirmed by numerous scripture passages with exposition and argument.

²³ Owen here cites James 2:1-6, Mt.20:26f. and Rom. 12:16. and John 13:12-16, adding, “Free grace is the only distinguisher,—all being brethren in the same family, servants of the same Master, employed about the same work, acted by the same precious faith, enjoying the same purchased privileges, expecting the same recompense of reward and eternal abode. Whence should any difference arise? Let, then, the greatest account it their greatest honour to perform the meanest necessary service to the meanest of the saints. A community in all spiritual advantages should give equality in spiritual affairs. Not he that is richest, not he that is poorest, but he that is humblest, is accepted before the Lord.” *Works* Vol. 13: 81-82.

²⁴ “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24–25).

VI. Conclusion

A. Suggestions for Contemporary Application

All that has been said above assumes no diminishing of the authority of the elders, nor the primacy of preaching. But it also assumes that the preaching and eldership will be the servant-leaders in this process, given their place in the directive to prepare the saints unto works of service (Eph. 4:12). So, their expository, experiential, applicatory, preaching must aim at equipping the saints to so understand the word of God so as to be “teachers” of it,²⁵ in the power of the Spirit, according as God in His gifts and providence shall call them. That is, the saints will be learning from their elders’ words and examples and close applicatory pastoral care (in pulpit and visitation ministry), the practice of communicating the truth in love to one another and before the watching world. Brothers, let us examine ourselves and rise to the great task of training elders to do this. In this way, the church comes “unto the perfect man,”²⁶ – which can mean no less than the man in whom the divine image has been restored through the soul transforming agency of the Spirit working in love through the word in the church.

Secondly, in particular, there should be teaching directed to the nature of “fellowship.” You might begin preparations for this by reading J. I. Packer’s chapter on it in *God’s Words*. In my experience, Christians are woefully ignorant of the meaning of the word “fellowship.” For help I also encourage doing studies such as Jerry Bridges’ book *True Community*. It very well covers the practices mentioned in Owen’s rules and much more, in modern language and even includes study questions with each chapter—no need for an extra study guide. Surely these things should be part of any class for new or prospective members.

Thirdly, for the biblical body image to have anything like a manifestation in reality, there must be some way of encouraging, providing opportunity for communication between the members. In an age in which members are being increasingly privatized, and one is as likely to talk with persons on the internet by “tweets” rather than engaging in face to face accountable edifying discourse with a brother or sister in the congregation, the strong temptation is to go with the tide and use more of the electronic media for ministry rather than building relationships through time spent together. If we are at great distances from one another, or from the meeting house, or there are other insurmountable problems preventing mid-week meetings, then some other measures are needed. We certainly ought to take advantage of modern technology while strongly modeling, encouraging, supporting, enabling, and participating in congregational, small group and paired-off activities that provide Christian interaction, Christ-centered teaching and Christ-like modeling of the image of God to and before one another.

B. For Discussion

What are some other ways, or particular examples or applications of these, that you have heard of or participated in which you have found especially helpful for the sanctification of the

²⁵ Heb. 5:12

²⁶ “εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον, εἰς μέτρον ἡλικίας τοῦ πληρώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ”

body, either in the giving or receiving?

What are some “other spiritual services as tend to mutual edification? What are some other ways in which we can be encouraging the members of the congregations to be “relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities?” Let’s talk about it.

C. Appeal to Implement

In closing I would simply say again that the New Covenant means a new dynamic of congregational life as the Holy Spirit operates in each heart, ministering sanctifying grace to all the members acting in concert, i.e., toward one another and to all the saints. So, let us meekly remember that we are all divine works in progress, and humbly remember that we are tools in the workshop of the Lord, and be diligent to be “considering one another in order to stir up love and good works” (Heb 10:24).