

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV. JOHN NEWTON

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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &c., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA, DIS-
COURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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LETTER XXIV.

ON COMMUNION WITH GOD.

DEAR SIR,

THOUGH many authors have written largely and well concerning communion with God, I shall not refer you to books, or have recourse to them myself; but in compliance with your request, shall simply offer you what occurs to my thoughts upon the subject. I propose not to exceed the limits of a sheet of paper, and must therefore come immediately to the point.

That God is to be worshipped, is generally acknowledged; but that they who worship him in spirit and in truth, have real fellowship and communion with him, is known only to themselves. The world can neither understand nor believe it. Many who would not be thought to have cast off all reverence for the scriptures, and therefore do not choose flatly to contradict the apostle's testimony, 1 John i. 3, attempt to evade its force by restraining it to the primitive times. They will allow that it might be so then; but they pretend that circumstances with us, are greatly altered. Circumstances are, indeed, altered with us, so far, that men may now pass for christians who confess and manifest themselves strangers to the Spirit of Christ: but who can believe that the very nature and design of christianity should alter in the course of time? And that communion with God, which was essential to it in the apostles' days, should now be so unnecessary and impracticable, as to expose all who profess an acquaintance with it, to the charge of enthusiasm and folly? However, they who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, will not be disputed out of their spiritual senses. If they are competent judges whether they ever saw the light, or felt the beams of the sun, they are no less certain that, by the knowledge of the gospel, they are brought into a state of communion with God.

Communion presupposes union. By nature we are strangers, yea, enemies to God; but we are reconciled, brought nigh, and become his children by faith in Christ Jesus. We can have no true knowledge of God, desire towards him, access unto him, or gracious communications from him, but in and through the Son of his love. He is the medium of this inestimable privilege; for he is the way, the only way of intercourse between heaven and earth; the sinner's way to God, and God's way of mercy to the sinner. If any pretend to know God, and to have communion with him, otherwise than by the knowledge of Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent, and by faith in his name, it is a proof that they neither know God nor themselves. God, if considered abstracted from the revelation of himself in the person of Jesus, is a consuming fire; and if he should look upon us without respect to his covenant of mercy established in the Mediator, we could expect nothing

from him but indignation and wrath. But when his Holy Spirit enables us to receive the record which he has given of his Son, we are delivered and secured from condemnation: we are accepted in the Beloved; we are united to him in whom all the fulness of the Godhead substantially dwells, and all the riches of divine wisdom, power, and love, are treasured up. Thus, in him, as the temple wherein the glory of God is manifested, and by him, as the representative and high priest of his people, and through him, as the living head of his mystical body the church, believers maintain communion with God. They have meat to eat which the world knows not of, honour which cometh of God only, joy which a stranger intermeddleth not with. They are, for the most part, poor and afflicted, frequently scorned and reproached, accounted hypocrites or visionaries, knaves or fools; but this one thing makes amends for all, "They have fellowship with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

I would observe further, that as the incarnation of that mighty One, on whom our help is laid, was necessary, that a perfect obedience to the law, and a complete and proper atonement for sin, might be accomplished in the human nature that had sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God; so in another view it affords us unspeakable advantage for our comfortable and intimate communion with God by him. The adorable and awful perfections of Deity are softened, if I may so speak, and rendered more familiar and engaging to our apprehensions, when we consider them as resident in him, who is very bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh; and who, having by himself purged our sins, is now seated on the right hand of the Majesty on high, and reigns, in the nature of man, over all, God blessed for ever. Thus, he who knows our frame by becoming man like ourselves, is the supreme and ultimate object of that philanthropy, that human affection which he originally implanted in us. He has made us susceptible of the endearments of friendship and relative life; and he admits us to communion with himself under the most engaging characters and relations, as our friend, our brother, and our husband.

They who, by that faith which is of the operation of God, are thus united to him in Christ, are brought thereby into a state of real habitual communion with him. The degree of its exercise and sensible perception on our parts, is various in different persons, and in the same person at different times; for it depends upon the communications we receive from the Lord the Spirit, who distributes to every man severally according to his will, adjusting his dispensations with a wise and merciful respect to our present state of discipline. If we were wholly freed from the effects of a depraved nature, the snares of an evil world; and the subtle temptations of Satan, our actual communion with God would be always lively, sensible, and fervent. It will be thus in heaven: there its exercise will be without

obstruction, abatement, or interruption. But so long as we are liable to security, spiritual pride, indolence, an undue attachment to worldly things, and irregular distempered passions, the Lord is pleased to afford, increase, suspend, or renew the sensible impressions of his love and grace, in such seasons and measures as he sees most suitable to prevent or control these evils, or to humble us for them. We grieve his Spirit, and he withdraws; but, by his secret power over our hearts, he makes us sensible of our folly and loss, teaches us to mourn after him, and to entreat his return. These desires, which are the effects of his own grace, he answers in his own time, and shines forth upon the soul with healing in his beams. But such is our weakness, and so unapt are we to retain even those lessons which we have learned, by painful experience, that we are prone to repeat our former miscarriages, and to render a repetition of the same changes necessary. From hence it is, that what we call our frames are so very variable, and our comfortable sense of divine communion is rather transient than abiding. But the communion itself, upon which the life and safety of our souls depend, is never totally obstructed; nor can it be, unless God should be unmindful of his covenant, and forsake the work of his own hands. And when it is not perceptible to sense, it may ordinarily be made evident to faith, by duly comparing what we read in the scriptures with what passes in our hearts. I say ordinarily, because there may be some excepted cases. If a believer is unhappily brought under the power of some known sin, or has grievously and notoriously declined from his profession, it is possible that the Lord may hide himself behind so dark a cloud, and leave him for a while to such hardness of heart, as that he shall seem to himself to be utterly destitute and forsaken. And the like apprehensions may be formed under some of Satan's violent temptations, when he is permitted to come in as a flood, and to overpower the apparent exercise of every grace by a torrent of blasphemous and evil imaginations. Yet the Lord is still present with his people in the darkest hours, or the unavoidable event of such cases would be apostasy or despair. Psalm xli. 11.

The communion we speak of comprises a mutual intercourse and communication in love, in counsels, and in interests.

In love.—The Lord, by his Spirit, manifests and confirms his love to his people. For this purpose he meets them at his throne of grace, and in his ordinances. There he makes himself known unto them, as he does not unto the world: causes his goodness to pass before them; opens, applies, and seals to them his exceeding great and precious promises; and gives them the Spirit of adoption, whereby, unworthy as they are, they are enabled to cry, "Abba, Father." He causes them to understand that great love wherewith he has loved them, in redeeming them by price and by power, washing them from their sins in the blood of the Lamb, recovering them

from the dominion of Satan, and preparing for them an everlasting kingdom, where they shall see his face, and rejoice in his glory. The knowledge of this his love to them, produces a return of love from them to him. They adore him and admire him; they make an unreserved surrender of their hearts to him. They view him, and delight in him as their God, their Saviour, and their portion. They account his favour better than life. He is the sun of their souls: if he is pleased to shine upon them, all is well, and they are not greatly careful about other things; but if he hides his face, the smiles of the whole creation can afford them no solid comfort. They esteem one day or hour spent in the delightful contemplation of his glorious excellencies, and in the expression of their desires towards him, better than a thousand; and when their love is most fervent, they are ashamed that it is so faint, and chide and bemoan themselves, that they can love him no more. This often makes them long to depart, willing to leave their dearest earthly comforts, that they may see him as he is, without a veil or cloud; for they know that then, and not till then, they shall love him as they ought.

In counsels.—The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him. He deals familiarly with them. He calls them not servants only, but friends; and he treats them as friends. He affords them more than promises; for he opens to them the plan of his great designs from everlasting to everlasting shows them the strong foundations and inviolable securities of his favour towards them, the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of his love, which passeth knowledge, and the unsearchable riches of his grace. He instructs them in the mysterious conduct of his providence, the reasons and ends of all his dispensations in which they are concerned; and solves a thousand hard questions to their satisfaction, which are inexplicable to the natural wisdom of man. He teaches them likewise the beauty of his precepts, the path of their duty, and the nature of their warfare. He acquaints them with the plots of their enemies, the snares and dangers they are exposed to, and the best methods of avoiding them. And he permits and enables them to acquaint him with all their cares, fears, wants, and troubles, with more freedom than they can unbosom themselves to their dearest earthly friends. His ear is always open to them; he is never weary of bearing their complaints, and answering their petitions. The men of the world would account it a high honour and privilege to have an unrestrained liberty of access to an earthly king; but what words can express the privilege and honour of believers, who, whenever they please, have audience of the King of kings, whose compassion, mercy, and power, are like his majesty, infinite. The world wonders at their indifference to the vain pursuits and amusements by which others are engrossed; that they are so patient in trouble, so inflexible in their conduct, so well satisfied

with that state of poverty and obscurity which the Lord, for the most part, allots them; but the wonder would cease if what passes in secret were publicly known. They have obtained the pearl of great price; they have communion with God: they derive their wisdom, strength, and comfort, from on high, and cast all their cares upon him who, they assuredly know, vouchsafes to take care of them. This reminds me of another branch of their communion, namely,

In interests.—The Lord claims them for his portion; he accounts them his jewels; and their happiness in time and eternity is the great end which, next to his own glory, and in inseparable connection with it, he has immediately and invariably in view. In this point all his dispensations of grace and providence shall finally terminate. He himself is their guide and their guard: he keeps them as the apple of his eye; the hairs of their heads are numbered; and not an event in their lives takes place but in an appointed subserviency to their final good. And as he is pleased to espouse their interest, they, through grace, are devoted to his. They are no longer their own; they would not be their own; it is their desire, their joy, their glory, to live to him who died for them. He has won their hearts by his love, and made them a willing people in the day of his power. The glory of his name, the success of his cause, the prosperity of his people, the accomplishment of his will, these are the great and leading objects which are engraven upon their hearts, and to which all their prayers, desires, and endeavours, are directed. They would count nothing dear, not even their lives, if set in competition with these. In the midst of their afflictions, if the Lord is glorified, if sinners are converted, if the church flourishes, they can rejoice. But when iniquity abounds, when love waxes cold, when professors depart from the doctrines of truth and the power of godliness, then they are grieved and pained to the heart; then they are touched in what they account their nearest interest, because it is their Lord's.

This is the spirit of a true christian. May the Lord increase it in us, and in all who love his name. I have room only to subscribe myself, &c.