

ON

COMMUNION WITH GOD,

BY SAMUEL SHAW.

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1 JOHN I. 3.

*“ Our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son
Jesus Christ.”*

THESE words express the way of a Christian's living, and that kind of converse whereby a good man is distinguished from all other men.

A good man is not differenced from other men by anything without him, any church privileges which are common to hypocrites and sincere Christians; any external visible performances, in which the disciples of the Pharisees may be more abundant and more specious than the disciples of Christ, much less by any corporeal or temporal enjoyment or ornament, strength, beauty, riches, descent, &c. nor by any carnal relation, though it were to Abraham, as the Jews boasted of their father Abraham, but by something internal, substantial, by a relation to God; the character of a good man must be drawn from his correspondence to the chief good, and the happiness of a soul must be judged of by its relation to life, and love, and blessedness itself.

'Things external, corporeal, temporal, make some difference amongst men, but it is only nominal and titular in comparison: by these, men are said to be rich or poor, noble or ignoble; but men are really and substantially differenced by the relation that they have to God; by this, they are good or bad, godly or wicked. This is the most certain and proper criterion of a good man, namely, Communion with God: in all other things he may be like other men, but in this he differs from and excels them all. This is a character proper or peculiar to them; for it agrees to every good man, to none but a good man, and always to him, as we shall see hereafter. The ground of my discourse then shall be this short and plain proposition, namely,

“A pious man hath communion with God.”

In order to the more distinct handling hereof, I must premise a few things briefly.

1 “That the gracious and loving God made nothing miserable of all that he made.” There are no slaves born in this great house of the world. He made all things out of himself, and he hath no idea of evil in himself, so that it was not possible that he should make anything evil or miserable. Every thing was good, Gen i. and so in some sense happy. He was free to make the world, but making it he could not make it evil or miserable. Every thing is the product of Almighty love and goodness.

2. “The happiness of every creature consists in its acting agreeably to that nature that God gave

it, and those ends which he propounded to it, and suitably to those laws which he gave to all;” which laws were contrived with the greatest suitability to those natures, and subserviency to those ends. Every creature is in its kind happy, whilst it acts agreeably to that nature which the wise Creator implanted in it; as the sun runs its race without ceasing, and rejoices so to do, and is, in some sense, happy in so doing. Departing from that nature it becomes miserable, as the earth bringing forth briars and thorns, instead of those good fruits which it was appointed to bring forth, is said to be cursed, Gen. iii. 17, 18.

3. “The happiness of the creature is higher or “lower, greater or less, according as it comes nearer to God, or is farther off from him,” according as it receives more or less from him, according to what communion it hath with him. The life and happiness of the sun is much lower than that of a man, because it cannot enjoy such high and excellent communications from, or communion with God, as man doth.

4. “There can be no communion without likeness.” The sun shines upon a stone wall, as well as upon man; but a stone wall has no communion with the sun, because it hath no eyes to see the light of it, as man hath; nor can receive the benign influences of its heat, as the herbs do. A log of wood lieth in the water as well as the fish, but it hath no communion with the water, nor receives

any advantage by it as the fish doth. God is present, according to his infinite essence, with the devils as with the angels ; but they have no likeness in nature to him, and so no communion with him, as these have.

5. "God hath given a more large and excellent capacity to man, than to any other of his creatures upon earth." God hath endued man with reason, and so made him capable of a higher life, and a more excellent communion with his Maker than all the rest. Of all sublunary creatures, the rational soul only is capable to know, love, serve, enjoy, imitate God, and so to have a glorious communion with him. The sun, in all its glory and brightness, is not so excellent a being as any soul of man upon this account. And although man, by his fall, lost his actual communion with God, yet he is a reasonable creature still ; he hath not lost his capacity of receiving influences from him, and enjoying communion with him. The world, when it is at the darkest, is yet capable of being enlightened.

6. "When the nature of man is, by divine grace, healed of its distemperedness, and restored to its former rectitude, to act suitably to the end for which it was made, and to spend itself upon its proper object, then man comes to have right communion with God, and to be happy." All rational souls are capable of holding communion with God, but all do not hold communion with him ; but they that express the purity and holiness of the divine

life, that know God, and live like him, these are his children, Matt. v. 45, and those only do rightly and really converse with him: when the Spirit of God informs these rational souls, and communicates the strength of a divine life through them, and stamps the lively impressions of divine perfections upon them, rendering our hearts, wills, and ways, conformable to that glorious pattern, that infinite good, then do we enjoy a proper communion with him, and are truly blessed; though we are not completely blessed, till this conformity be perfected according to what those souls are, or may be capable of.

This is the true and proper notion of man's communion with God, and relation to him, which we cannot fully describe, till we more fully enjoy. That soul that truly lives and feeds upon God, does taste more than it can tell; and yet it can tell this, that this is the most high, excellent, noble, glorious life in the whole world.

This communion, as also the intimateness and closeness of it, are described variously in the Holy Scriptures, by the similitude of members being in the body; of branches being in the vine; by being formed according to God's image, changed into his image; by God's dwelling in the soul, and the soul in him; by Christ's being formed in the soul; by the soul's having Christ; by Christ's supping with the soul, and the soul with him. Because nothing is more our own, nor more

one with us, than that which we eat and drink, being incorporated into us; therefore is this spiritual communion between God and the pious soul, oft-times in scripture described by our eating and drinking with him. Thus God was pleased to allow his people under the law, when they had offered up a part of their beasts in sacrifice to him, to sit down and feast upon the rest, as a token of that familiarity and oneness that was between him and them. By the like action, our Saviour shadowed out the same mystery, when, in the sacrament of his supper, he appointed them to sit down to eat and drink with him, to intimate their feeding upon him, and most close communion with him: yea, the state of glory, which is the most perfect communion with God, is thus shadowed out too, Matt. viii. 11. Rev. xix. 9. And, which is worth noting, I think the sacramental eating and drinking hath some reference to that most intimate communion of the saints with God in glory. Our Saviour himself seems to imply as much in that speech of his, Luke xxii. 30, "That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom:" in which words he seems plainly to allude to the sacramental eating and drinking which he had a little before instituted. Which makes some to believe that that gesture is to be retained in that ordinance, which is most proper and usual to express familiarity and communion; and to take away that gesture, is to destroy one great end of our Saviour, in appointing this supper, which was to represent

that familiar communion which is between himself and every believing soul. I will not here examine the validity of their argument, which, possibly, if pressed home, might introduce a rudeness into the worship of God, under pretence of familiarity: but it seems very plain, that the nature of that ordinance doth shadow out the intimate communion between God and a pious soul.

I have already, in part, anticipated myself, and showed you wherein the soul's communion with God consists: but yet, to give you a more distinct knowledge of this great mystery, I shall unfold it in these three following particulars:—

1. “A pious soul hath communion with God in his attributes.” When the soul of man is moulded and formed into a resemblance of the divine nature, then hath it a true fellowship with him. Now, this communion with God in his attributes is to be seen two ways.

(1.) “When the soul is, in its measure, according to the capacity of a creature, all that which God is.” This is the communion which the angels have with God. Their beholding the face of God, is not to be understood of a mere speculation, or an idle gazing upon Deity; but they see him, by receiving his image upon themselves, and reflecting his glory and brightness; they partake of the goodness, purity, holiness, wisdom, righteousness of God, which makes them such glorious spirits; and the want of this makes the other, whom we call devils, to be

what they are. Thus, good men shall have communion with God, they shall see God. Yea, thus they have communion with him in some measure: they do not only see God in the world, as the devils do, or see him in the Word, as many hypocritical and wicked men do, but they see him in themselves, in the frame of their own souls; they find themselves moulded into his image, and a resemblance of him drawn upon them. This is a beatifical vision of God, true and real, though not full and complete. This is set out in scripture, by being "holy as God is holy," "perfect as God is perfect." This our Saviour exhorts us to seek after, "Take my yoke upon you, learn of me; for I am meek and lowly;" and the Apostle, "Be ye followers of God, as dear children." When the nature and perfections of God, his holiness, goodness, righteousness, wisdom, &c. are copied out upon our natures, and the same spirit is in us, which was in Christ Jesus, then have we a true communion with God, which blessed communion, when the soul becomes all that which God is, is by a conformity of nature.

(2.) "When the soul, in its actions as a creature, doth rightly answer to the attributes of the Creator." As when the soul doth answer the goodness of God with suitable affections of love and joy, and delight; when the soul doth correspond to the sovereignty and wisdom of God by the acts of self-denial and resignation; and doth converse with the righteousness of God by patience and a holy acquiescence. When

the soul doth rightly exert those acts which are proper and suitable to the nature of God, then it may be said to hold communion with him in his attributes; when the actions and motions of the soul do correspond to the divine nature and attributes. Now, this suitability of the soul, I mean especially with reference to the incommunicable attributes of God, where there is no place for imitation, though it hold good in the rest also.

2. "A pious soul hath communion with God in his word." To read, profess, or hear his word, is not to hold a communion with God therein: many do so that are strangers to God: a man may read my letters, and yet correspond with my enemy. That son, in the gospel, that heard his father's command, and answered, "I go, sir," but went not, had no right communion with his paternal authority. But when the soul is ennobled into such a frame as this word doth require, then it holds communion with God in his word; for example, when the soul puts forth those acts of humiliation, holy fear and reverence, godly trembling, which do suit the nature of a divine threatening; when the soul answers the command of God with suitable resolutions, repentings, reformations, and real obedience; when it entertains the promise with suitable acts of holy delight, joy, refreshment, recumbency, and acquiesces in the same, then doth it truly converse with God in his Word.

3. "A pious soul hath communion with God in

his works." And that is, when the soul doth answer the several providences of God with suitable and pertinent affections and dispositions. The pious soul doth not only eye and observe the hand of God in all things that fall out, but doth comply with those providences, and is moulded into that frame, and put upon those duties, which such providences do call for. Then doth the soul rightly hold communion with God in his works, when it is humbled under humbling providences, is refreshed, strengthened, and grows up under prosperous providences, as they did, Acts ix. 31, who having rest given them, were edified, comforted, multiplied, &c. When the soul doth rightly comport with every providence, and the will is moulded into the will of God, then do we hold communion with him in his works. This theme is large, because the works of God are manifold, of creation, redemption, preservation, works towards other men, and towards ourselves, both towards our outward and inward man. A pious soul hath communion with God in all these; in the sense that I named even now, though perhaps not equally in all, yet sincerely and truly.

By what hath been said, you understand that right fellowship with God is not a bare communion of names. To have the name of God called upon us, and to be called Christians, or the people of God, or to name the name of God, to profess it, to cry, Lord, Lord, doth not make any one really and truly the better man, doth not make a soul rightly

happy. It is not enough to cry, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord," with those in Jer. vii. 4, to make our "boast in the law," with those in Rom. ii. 23, to call ourselves "the children of Abraham," as the Jews did in John the Baptist's time, Matt. iii. 9. These privileges and professions are extrinsical to the soul, and do nothing to the true ennobling of it. But right fellowship with God is a communion of hearts and natures, of will and affections, of interest and ends; to have one heart and will, the same interest and ends with God, is to be truly godly: a God-like man is the only godly man; a Christ-like nature brought into the soul, doth only denominate a man a true Christian. It is not speaking together, but loving and living together, that brings God and the soul into one: "I live, yet not I, but Christ that liveth in me." And thus, I suppose, you have a fair account why the Apostle James, chap. ii. does so much prefer works before faith, (for indeed faith is nothing worth, save only that faith which joins the soul to the object, and makes the thing believed one's own,) as also, why the Apostle prefers love before a faith of miracles, 1 Cor. xiii. 2. Though, indeed, a justifying faith is the most admirable, that faith which unites the soul and God together is more excellent, and, indeed, more wonderful than the faith that removes mountains. When I consider the proper happiness and perfection of a soul, and the nature of this true blissful communion with God, I cannot but wonder

how it is possible, that men should take their communion with God to consist in an overly acquaintance with him, profession of him, performances to him. I am confident it is not possible, that men should have any true feeling of happiness in such acquaintance, any more than a man can be really filled with the seeing or craving of meat which he eats not.

Before I apply the doctrine, give me leave to lay down some rules or positions, tending further to explain and clear it.

1. This must be held, which I touched upon before, that "there can be no communion between God and man, but by a likeness of nature, a new, a divine principle planted in the soul." A beast hath no communion with a man, because reason, the ground of such communion, is wanting. Of all the creatures, there was none found that could be a help meet for Adam, that could be taken into the human society, till Eve was made, who was a human person. So, neither can there be any conjunction of the soul with God, but by oneness of spirit, "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit."

2. "There can be no communion with God but by a mediator," and no mediator but Christ Jesus, who is God-man. "Two cannot walk together," nor hold communion, "except they be agreed; and there can be no agreement made between God and man but by Christ Jesus. Therefore it is said, "Our communion is with the Father and the Son,"

with the Father by the Son: and faith, whereby the soul and God are united, is still said to be "faith in Christ," as we find in the scriptures.

3. "There can be no perfect communion with God in this life." Our communion with heaven, whilst we are upon earth, is imperfect; our resemblance to God is scant and dark in comparison of what it shall be. We know but in part, love but in part, enjoy but in part; we are but in part holy and happy. There can be no perfect communion with God, till there be a perfect reconciliation of natures as well as persons; and that cannot be whilst there is anything unlike to God in the soul, whilst any impure thing dwells in the soul which cannot truly close with God, nor God with that. The Holy Spirit can never suffer any defiled thing to unite itself with it: "It is not lawful for any impure thing to mix itself with pure divinity," saith Socrates the heathen. "What communion hath righteousness with unrighteousness?" saith the Apostle; and so far as a righteous man is in any part unrighteous, so far is he a stranger to God. The unregenerate part of a regenerate man hath no more communion with God than a wicked man, than the devil himself hath; no more than darkness hath with light.

4. "Our communion with God must be distinguished from the sense and feeling of it." Many have run upon sad miscarriages, (and those indeed extremes,) whilst they place communion with God

in the sense and feeling of it, in raptures of joy, ecstasies and transports of soul; which, indeed, if they be real, are not so much it, as the flower of it, something resulting and separable from it. Communion with God cannot be lost in a saint, for then he is no saint; for it is the proper characteristic of a saint to have communion with God; and a saint under desertion, hath communion with God even then as really, though not so feelingly as at any other time, so far as he is sanctified. But the sense of this communion may be very much, if not altogether lost, and oftentimes is lost.

5. "A soul's communion with God cannot be interrupted by any local mutations." It is a spiritual conjunction, and is not violated by any confinement; the walls of a prison cannot separate God and the pious soul; banishment cannot drive a soul from God. The blessed angels, those ministering spirits, when they are despatched into the utmost ends of the world upon the service of God, are even then beholding the face of God, and do enjoy as intimate communion with him as ever. The case is the same with all pious souls, whose communion with God does not depend upon any local situation; it is not thousands of miles that can beget a distance between God and the soul. Indeed nothing but sin does it, or can do it. "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God;" nothing but sin is contrary to this divine fellowship, and so nothing but that can interrupt this spiritual so-

ciety. To speak properly, sin does not so much cause the soul's distance from God, as itself is that distance. Man and wife remain one, though at a hundred miles' distance; and believing souls do maintain a certain spiritual communion one with another, though in several parts of the world. The society and communion of pious souls one with another, so far as it is spiritual, cannot be interrupted by bodily distance; much less, then, the fellowship of God with the pious soul, who carries about with him, and in him, a divine nature, the image of God, a holy, God-like disposition whithersoever he goes.

“6. “This communion with God which I have been speaking of, is much better than all outward acts and enjoyments, duties and ordinances whatsoever, though they be ever so many or specious.” God himself long since decided this matter, that a broken and contrite heart is better than all sacrifices, Psalm li. 17; that to obey was better than sacrifice, 1 Sam. xv. 22; that mercy was better than sacrifice, Hosea vi. 6; that to do justly, love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, was to be preferred before “thousands of rams, and ten thousands of rivers of oil,” Micah vi. 7, 8. It holds in reference to gospel duties, though they may seem more spiritual than the oblations of the law. A real soul-communion with God, a communion of hearts and natures, of wills and affections, of interests and ends, is infinitely more excellent than all hearing, praying, celebration of Sabbaths or sacraments, James

i. 25, as the end is more excellent than the means : for so stands the case between them.

Yea, I will add, (though some proud and wanton spirits have made strange work with it, yet) it is a sure and most excellent doctrine, that this spiritual communion is a continual sabbath, (a sabbath of communion is much better than a sabbath of rest ;) this is the sabbath that the angels and saints in heaven keep, though they know no such thing as a first day in the week, have no reading, preaching, or praying, amongst them. This is a continual praying, and effectual way of praying in silence. A right active appropriating faith, does virtually contain a prayer in it ; right believing is powerful praying. The knees, eyes, and tongues, bear the least share in prayer, the whole of the work lies upon the soul, and particularly upon faith in the soul, which is indeed the life and soul of prayer. Faith can pray without words ; but the most elegant words, the phrase of angels, is not worthy to be called prayer without faith. I speak not so much of faith inditing a prayer, or giving life to it, as of its being virtually prayer, if not something more ; for, indeed, faith is a real bringing down of that God, and drawing in of those influences into the soul, which prayer only looks up for.

Communion with God is a continual fast ; it is that spiritual and most excellent way of fasting, whereby the soul, emptying itself of itself, and all self-fulness, self-sufficiency, self-confidence, receives

of the fulness of God alone, and is filled therewith. A soul communing rightly with God, is a soul emptied of, and, as it were, fasting from itself; which is the most excellent way of fasting.

It is a continual thanksgiving; and indeed the best way of thanksgiving in the world. To render up ourselves to God purely and entirely, to reflect the glory of God in a holy and God-like temper, is a real and living thank-offering. This is that hallelujah, so much spoken of, which the angels and saints in glory do sing perpetually: what other adjunct of it there may be, I will not here dispute.

This communion of hearts and wills is a constant and most excellent celebration of sacraments. The soul that is really baptized into the Spirit of the Lord Jesus, and feeds upon God, and is one with him, keeps a continual sacrament; without which, the sacramental eating and drinking is but a jejune and dry devotion. In a word, it is not possible for anything that is extrinsical to the soul to make it happy; but the soul that is advanced into the noble state of communion with God, is made partaker of a new nature, and is truly happy.

Nay, further, I will add, that this communion with God is not only better than all duties and ordinances, but even better than all revelations, evidences, discoveries that can be made or given to the soul from without; a manifestation of God, that is, of a divine life in the soul, is much better than such a manifestation as Moses had of his glory in the

clef of the rock, Exod. xxxiv. Many say, O if we might but be assured of the love of God, of the pardon of sin, of an interest in Christ, we should be happy! why, I will tell you, if you had a voice from heaven, saying that ye were the beloved children of God, as Christ had; an angel sent from God to tell you that ye were beloved and highly favoured of God, as his mother Mary had, yet were communion with God to be preferred before these: for these things could not make a soul happy without real communion with God, but communion with God can and doth make a soul happy without these: and to this purpose, I suppose, I may apply that famous speech of our Saviour's by way of allusion, "It is more blessed to give, than to receive," to give up one's self, one's heart, will, interests, and affections, to God, than to receive any external discoveries and manifestations from him. Why do we so earnestly seek after signs from without us, of God's presence with us, as if there were anything better or more desirable to the soul than Immanuel, God with us, or, as the Apostle speaks, "Christ in us the hope of glory?" He that desires any other evidence of grace, but more grace, does not only light up a candle to see the sun by, but indeed he acts like one that thinks there is something better than God himself; though I do not say that all do think so who are covetous of such manifestations. But this I will say, and you may do well to meditate upon it, that holy longings after a true and spiritual

communion with God, do certainly spring from a divine principle in the soul; whereas a thirst after assurance of God's love, and reconciliation of our persons with him, may be only the fruit of self-love and interest.—“Let me die the death of the righteous!” you know whose wish it was.

7. “Though communion with God do concern the whole soul, and all the faculties, affections and motions of it,” it is God's spreading his influences, and exercising his sovereignty over all the powers of the soul, and their mutual spending of themselves upon him, and conforming to him, “yet the great acts of the soul, whereby it chiefly holds communion with God, are loving and believing.” Love is the joining and knitting of the soul to God; faith is the soul's labouring after more intimate conjunction with him, a drawing in influences from him, and participations of him into the soul. We may say that faith fetches in supplies from heaven, and love enjoys them; faith draws in sweetness and virtue from Christ, and love feeds upon it. Certainly these two eminent graces grow, live, and thrive together, and are inseparable companions. It is somewhat difficult to distinguish them, or to assign to each its proper place and work in the soul; they seem mutually to act, and to be mutually acted on by each other; perhaps the Apostle might have respect to this mystery, when he speaks so doubtfully, Gal. v. 6, “Faith which worketh by love,” which words may signify either ‘faith acting by love,’ or ‘faith

acted on by love.' We know, indeed, that in the state of perfect communion, which we call glory, love shall abide and flourish more abundantly, and there shall be no room for faith there, as to the principal acts of it; but which of them hath the greater part in maintaining our communion with God in this world, is not easy, nor indeed needful to determine. The pious soul is the most proper temple wherein God dwelleth, according to that, "Ye are the temple of the living God:" faith and love are the Jachin and Boaz, the two great pillars which keep up the soul as a temple; take away these and it remains a soul indeed, but the soul does not remain a temple to the Lord. In a word, these two are the soul's principal handmaids which she useth about this blessed guest; faith goes out and brings him in, and love entertains him; by faith she finds him whom she seeks, and by love she kisses him whom she finds, as the spouse is described, Cant. viii. 1.

8. "The communion that is between God and the pious soul is altogether different from that communion that is between creatures." Here I might show you how it exceeds and excels that, in many respects: but I shall not insist upon any of those particulars, nor indeed upon any of those many differences that are between them, save only upon this one: The communion that is between creature and creature is perfect in its kind, and so, consequently, gives mutual satisfaction; I mean, it terminates the expectations, so that nothing remains to be enjoyed

in them more than what is enjoyed. The creature is shallow, and soon is fathomed, we soon come to the bottom of it: a finite can grasp a finite being, and enjoy it, as I may say, all at once. A man may come so near to his friend, that he can come no nearer, enjoy him as fully as he is capable to enjoy, or the other to be enjoyed: created sweetness may be exhausted to the very bottom. But the soul's communion with God does not give it any such satisfaction, though indeed, in some sense, it gives a satisfaction of a much higher and more excellent kind. I told you before, that the soul's communion with God is imperfect in this life; and therefore it must needs follow, that it cannot satisfy; that is, not terminate and fill up the desires of it. Communion with God is maintained by faith and love, which proves it to be very sweet; but it also admits of hope, which proves it to be not satisfactory; for where there is yet any place left for hope, there is no full or satisfactory enjoyment. This may serve as a certain mark, whereby to judge of the truth of that communion with God; it is not glutting to the soul, but will certainly manifest itself in incessant hungering, poor in the midst of riches; the soul is in the midst of plenty, and yet cries out, as if it were ready to starve for want. When I consider the temper of some perfectionists, who cry down duties and ordinances, as low and unprofitable rudiments, and boast of their full and inaccessible attainments, and compare it with the temper of the

great Apostle, who did not reckon that he had attained, but still followed after that he might apprehend, who forgot the things that were behind, and reached forth unto those things that were before, pressing towards the mark, &c. I am ready to cry out, either this man is not an Apostle, or these men are not what they pretend; but an Apostle he was, and had intimate communion with his Lord; and therefore, I confess, I cannot allow these men so high a place, in my opinion, as they have in their own. God is infinite; and, therefore, though the soul be ever grasping, yet it can never comprehend; the soul however finds him to be infinitely good, and so cannot cease grasping at him either. The pious soul sees that there is yet much more to be enjoyed of God, and in him; and, therefore, though it be very near to him, yet cries out, and complains of its distance from him;—"Oh when shall I come and appear before him!" though it be united to him, yet it longs to be still more one with him, and to be in a closer conjunction. The pious soul forgets, with Paul, what it hath received, not through disingenuity and unthankfulness, but through a holy ardour and covetousness: all that he hath of God seems little, because there is yet so much to be had. Though the pious soul do drink of the fountain, yet that is not enough, it would lie down by it; though it do lie down by it, yet it is not satisfied either, except it may bathe itself, and even be swallowed up therein. Behold a paradox! the pious soul is most thirsty,

though, according to Christ's promise, it thirsts no more: it is most restless, though, according to his promise, it have rest. It is proper to God alone to rest in his love, for the creature cannot in this imperfect state: by this we know that we are not yet in heaven; for it is a state of perfect rest, not sloth, or cessation, but satisfaction. Faith is the fever of the soul, rendering it more thirsty by how much the more it drinks in of the water of life, the living streams that flow forth from the throne of God and of the Lamb. As the waters of the sanctuary are described by the prophet, growing deeper and deeper, Ezek. xlvii. so hope, which is the soul's appetite, grows larger and larger, and cannot be satisfied till the soul's capacity be filled up.

The doctrinal part being thus briefly despatched, it will be easy to infer some things by way of corollary. I shall content myself with three only amongst many.

1. "All wicked men are strangers to God." We know, indeed, that God, according to his infinite essence, is present with all his creatures; not only men, but even devils too, have their being in him: he hath spread his omnipotence, as the foundation whereupon the whole creation doth stand; he reared up the world in himself, and in him it doth subsist at this day. However angels and men have sadly fallen from God, yet they may be truly said to live in him still; and although all wicked souls do straggle off from God, as to their dispositions and

affections, ingrafting themselves into another stock by sin and wickedness, yet they cannot possibly straggle from him as to their subsistence, as the Apostle teaches the Athenian philosophers, "He is not far from every one of us," though few feel after him or find him. And it may be truly said, in some sense, that all the creatures, yea, the very worst of them, have a communion with God; all partake of him; no creature hath anything of its own really distinct from him. Every thing that hath a being, hath a relation to that infinite and Supreme Being; and every living thing may be rightly said to have communion with him who is life itself. And all those several excellencies that are in the creatures, flow out from God, who hath impressed various prints of his own beauty and perfection upon every thing that he hath made. God's making of a thing is no other than the communicating of himself thereunto. And, therefore, when you look into the world, do not view any creature in the narrow point of its own being, but in the unbounded essence of God, and therein love and admire it. But, upon the immortal soul of man, God hath copied out his divine perfections more clearly and gloriously, than upon any other creature in this world. God could not make a rational soul, without communicating of his own infinite wisdom, power, life, freedom to it; so that there is more of the divine nature to be seen in the understanding and will of any one man, than in the whole fabric of heaven and earth.

Notwithstanding this, wicked men are strangers to God. They live and move in God indeed, but they know it not, they consider it not; they act as if they had no dependence upon him, no relation to him. Though they have some kind of communion with God, as creatures, yet this makes them not at all happy: for they are departed from God in their affections and dispositions; they have degenerated from that subserviency and subordination to the divine will, which is the proper perfection of the creature, and are “alienated from the life of God,” as the Apostle speaks. It is not the soul’s moving in God, that makes it truly and happily nigh unto him, but its moving towards God, as the chief object, and according to the will of God, as the chief rule; and therefore wicked men, who pitch upon other objects, and walk by other laws, even the lusts and ordinances of their own flesh and fancy, are properly strangers to God, and miserable. He is not properly said to know God, who hath a notion of him formed in his head, but he whose heart and will are moulded into a conformity to God, and a delight in him; so that a wicked man though he know, and believe, and tremble, as much as any of the devils, yet not loving nor delighting in God, as his chief good, not being conformed to his image, as the highest and purest perfection, may be truly said to be estranged from him; which is a state of hell, and death, and darkness. This is the man, who, though not in words, yet, interpretatively, and really,

saith unto God, "Depart from me, I desire not the knowledge of thy ways," with them in Job xxi. 14. These do really exempt themselves from the dominion of Christ, and do really, though not audibly, say with them in the gospel, "We will not have this man to reign over us." However men pretend, and boast of their relation to, and acquaintance with God, certainly all that live a mere sensual life, non-conformists to the image of God, are truly said to be strangers to him, and in a state of non-communion with him, 1 John i. 6; 2 Cor. vi. 14.

2. "The life of a true Christian is the most high and noble life in the world;" it exceeds the life of all other men, even of the greatest men. The character that is here given of the good man is the highest that can be given of any man, or indeed of any creature. It is the highest glory and excellency of the creature, to partake of the life of God, of the perfections of the Creator; and such is the description that the Spirit of God here makes of the religious man. What an unreasonable and senseless reproach is that which this wicked world doth cast upon religion, calling it a low and despicable thing; and upon religious and pious men, calling them low-spirited, silly people. Can a man be better spirited, than with the Spirit of God? Can anything more truly ennoble a soul than a divine nature? Can a man be raised any higher than unto heaven itself? So noble is the godly soul. "The way of life is above to the wise;" and, consequently,

all wicked men lead a low life, and are bound under chains of death and darkness: the righteous man is of a high and divine original, born of God, born from above; and therefore is more excellent than his neighbour, than any of his neighbours, even a king himself being judge, Prov. xii. 26. What a hellish baseness is that sinful gallantry of spirit, what a brutishness is that sensuality of living, which the degenerate sons of Adam do so much magnify! True goodness and excellency of spirit must be measured by the proportion that it bears to the Supreme Good, the infinite pattern of all perfection. What excellent persons were those renowned saints of old, of whom the Apostle says, that "the world was not worthy," however they were thought not worthy to live in the world! What a noble and generous spirit of true christian valour, patience, meekness, contempt of the world, and self-denial, was that, which was to be seen in the blessed apostles, however they were esteemed as the filth and sweepings of the world, the "offscouring of all things!" To which of the noble, wise, mighty men of the world, as such, did God ever say, These are the men that have fellowship with me, these are the men that lead a noble and divine life? No, no, "not many noble are called;" and when they are called, they are made more noble than ever they were by birth or descent, by places of preferment or command. The life of every wicked man, of what rank soever he be in the world, is but a low life, a

life in most things common to the very beasts with him ; if the main of his business and delight be to eat, and drink, and work, and sleep, and enjoy sensual pleasures, what doth he ? what enjoyeth he more than the beasts that perish ? But the life of the meanest soul, that hath true and spiritual communion with God, is a life common to him with the blessed angels, those sons of the morning, the flower of the whole creation. That life which hath self for its centre, must needs be a penurious, and indeed a painful life : for how can the soul of man possibly feed to the full upon such spare diet, such scant fare as it finds at home ? Nay, indeed, how can it choose but be in pain and torture, whilst it stretcheth itself upon self-sufficiency, or creature fulness, which is not at all commensurate to it ? But the soul that rightly stretches and spends all its faculties upon the infinite and blessed God, finds all its capacities filled up to the brim with that fountain of goodness, and itself perfectly matched with a suitable and satisfactory object. This is the true and only nobleness of spirit, when all the powers and faculties of this immortal soul are exalted and advanced into a true and vital sympathy and communion with the chief Good, formed according to his will, conformed to his image.

And O that wisdom might be more “justified of her children !” O that the life of God did but clearly manifest itself, and shine forth in the lives of those that call themselves Christians ! Alas, that ever

God himself should suffer reproach, by reason of the low-spiritedness and laziness of his servants! For this cause is religion evil spoken of. The Lord awake and enable us to express and show forth the divine life with all power and vigour, to live as high as the calling wherewith we are called, and so roll away this reproach!

3. "The life of a Christian is not a heavy sluggish thing, but active and vigorous," as the phrase 'communion with God,' imports. Religion is a communication of life and vigour from Him, who is life itself; which makes the truly God-like soul to be quick and powerful in its motions. Every thing is by so much the swifter and stronger in its motions, by how much the nearer it is to its centre, as philosophy tells us. Certainly by how much the nearer any man is gotten to God, who is the centre of souls, by so much the more does he covet after more intimate communion with him, and the more eagerly lay hold upon him. Communion does necessarily imply re-action or reflection: the soul that receives of God, and his fulness, will certainly be emptying itself into him again. Communion, in the very force of the phrase, implies a mutualness; we cannot suppose a soul partaking of God, but it must needs mutually render up itself to him again. There can be no commerce nor correspondence without returns: but what return can the pious soul make unto God? Why, it renders up its whole self to him. Faith is a giving grace as well as a

receiving, it gives the soul back to Christ, as well as takes Christ into the soul; it draws in strength and grace from God, and reciprocally spends the whole powers of the soul upon him. The happiness of a real Christian doth not consist in cessation and rest; the soul itself being a powerful and active being, the happiness of it, the very rest of it, must also be active and vigorous. Where there is communion, there must needs be quick and lively returns, reciprocations; reflections, and correspondencies; the drawings of God are answered with the soul's running. The motion of Christ's fingers begets a motion in the Christian's soul: "My Beloved put in his hand by the hole of the door, and my bowels were moved for him." These are the divine and harmonious responses which are made and maintained in the godly soul, the temple of the living God. O shake off that lazy and drowsy spirit, which hath so benumbed many in this cold and stupid age of the world; work out your salvation with care and diligence. If your religion be nothing but a spiritual kind of sleep, your heaven will prove to be nothing but a pleasant kind of dream.

Communion with God speaks something divine, active, vigorous. The life of a Christian doth not consist only in cessation from evil, reformation from sin, or dying thereunto; mortification is but one part of regeneration. It is the conceit, and, I doubt, the deceit, of many nominal Christians, that if they

can but keep up an indifferent even spirit and conversation, free from gross and scandalous sins from day to day, they are happy enough; their utmost ambition is to be innocent and harmless. This indeed is necessary and praiseworthy; but surely the happiness of a soul lies higher: thus happy are all the creatures that keep in the station, and keep up the order prescribed them of God: thus happy is the sun in the firmament, running its race continually, and never departing from the office which is assigned to it. But the soul of man is capable of a higher kind of happiness, namely, Communion with God; which is, when the faculties thereof being awakened, refined, and acted on by the Spirit of God, do reciprocally act, and spend themselves upon him, longing to be perfectly swallowed up in him, and to be all that which God himself is, as far as the creature is capable to drink in the perfections of the Creator, and become one with his Maker. This is that truly noble and divine life, which is here called communion with God, which the high-spirited and generous soul labours yet more and more to be growing up into, and perfected in. Keep yourselves, with David, from your iniquities; it is something to be freed from the guilt and power of sin; but there is somewhat higher than this, a more excellent attainment, a more divine accomplishment: go on therefore with the same David, and aspire after this pure and blissful state, this heaven upon earth, waiting for the more ample and glorious manifesta-

tions of God to you and in you, more than they that watch for the morning, as he did. This inference was only of instruction, but the sweetness and needfulness of the subject almost prevails with me to turn it into an earnest exhortation, but that I would not anticipate myself. Therefore I proceed to the next way of improving this doctrine, which shall be by way of conviction or reprehension.

1. Our fellowship *is*—it reproves them that can take up with a *shall be*—a heaven to come. I am now speaking, not to the worst of men, whose very souls are swallowed up in sensual enjoyments, and imprisoned in their senses: for these men either think of no heaven at all, or else they place their heaven and happiness in the enjoyment of themselves or of the creature. Nor yet do I speak to those men who, being persuaded of a future state, do indeed wish for a heaven to come, but then it is a poor kind of low and earthly heaven, consisting in ease, rest, safety, freedom from troubles or torments, which is the best happiness which most men understand, the highest heaven that any carnal mind can see or soar up to. But I am speaking to a better and finer sort of souls than these, that are verily possessed with a sense of a pure and spiritual heaven in the world to come; yea, they are so overpowered with the foresight of it, as that they do earnestly expect and wish for it; yea, the hopes of it do sustain and strengthen their hearts under the manifold temptations and persecutions of this pre-

sent world; they are so verily persuaded of the truth of it, and of their own title to it too, that they are content to abide this long and disconsolate night of dimness, and anguish, and frightfulness, merely in expectation of the dawning of that day, that clear and bright day of their glorious and everlasting redemption. And herein I am far from blaming them, nay, I must needs commend their magnanimous faith and self-denial. But, in the mean time, they dwell too much upon heaven as a future state, and comfort themselves only in a happiness to come, not longing and labouring to find a heaven opened within themselves, a beginning of eternal bliss brought into themselves: they are too well content with a certain reversion, and do not eagerly enough endeavour after present possession, to be actually instated in so much of the inheritance of souls as may fall to their share even in this lower world; this slothful temper and inactivity I do condemn wherever it is found; yea, though it be in my own soul. Every thing in the world, by a natural principle, thirsts after its proper rest, and a happiness suitable to the nature of it; no creature can be content, though it may be constrained, to be at a distance from its centre, but is still carried out towards its own perfection. And why then should a pious soul, who is God's only new creature in the world, be content with a state of imperfections? why should not he as eagerly covet, and as earnestly pursue the most intimate and close communion and conjunction with

his God, as they do with their respective centres? Can any earthly, sensual, unregenerate man be content with an inheritance in reversion, so as to suspend his minding and following of the world till hereafter? Can any ambitious spirit, who places his main happiness and contentment in popular estimation, and worldly greatness, be content to stand gazing at preferments; will he be willing to sit still, and wait till they drop into his mouth? No, no, there is a raging thirst in the soul, which will not suffer it to be at rest, but is still awakening and provoking all the powers of the whole man, till they arise and fetch in water to quench it. And therefore we read of men making haste to be rich, and hastening after another god; which eager and ardent passions towards earthly objects, you may see lively described in the instances of Ahab, Amnon, and Haman, in the holy scriptures. And is there any reason to be given, why that new nature and divine principle which God putteth into regenerate souls, should not carry them as hastily and forcibly to a present fruition of their proper object and happiness, (so far as at present it may be enjoyed) as that corrupt and degenerate nature doth hurry on those in whom it ruleth, towards the satisfaction of their brutal lusts? Divines speak sometimes of making heaven and eternal life present to ourselves, and say that this is the work of faith; which is a high and excellent doctrine, but, I doubt, not thoroughly understood by ordinary Christians. To make heaven

present to one's self, is not only to insist upon a state of future happiness in frequent meditations, to think much of it, neither is this that noble employment of saving faith; but the life and power of faith is most eminently exerted in drawing in participations of life and grace from Christ, and in a real bringing down of God and heaven into the soul. The truth is, heaven is a state of perfect communion with God, a state of love, joy, peace, purity, freedom; and as far as any soul is in such a state upon earth, so far he is above the earth, and may be said to be in heaven. Therefore a right active soul, that truly understands its proper and spiritual heaven and happiness, so far as he is thus active and sensible, cannot be content to stay for all his happiness till the world to come; cannot be content to be unhappy, no, not for an hour, but is still growing up in God, and springing up into everlasting life.

2. It reprehends those that make a stir about the kingdom of Christ in the world, and men's being brought into the communion of the church, but advance not his kingdom in their own souls, nor long to have their own souls advanced into that noble state of communion with "the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." There is, doubtless, a generation of such popular Christians, who, being strangers to the life, and power, and spirit of true religion, do endeavour to pass off themselves on the world, and commend themselves to the charity of their brethren, by a pretended zeal for the kingdom of Christ in the

world, and the glorious manifestation of it, as they speak. I know, indeed, that it is worthy the cares, and prayers, and utmost diligence of every serious Christian, to spread and propagate the knowledge of the gospel, to pour out the ointment of Christ's name far and near. A more pure and spiritual administration of all gospel ordinances throughout the world is highly desirable; yea, and I think an indifferent and careless disposition towards the worship of God argues much of an earthly and atheistical mind. But I fear that kingdom of Christ, and those glorious manifestations and discoveries which are so much pretended to by many, if they should be thoroughly examined, would be, at length, resolved into nothing else but the advancement of some one party or interest above all the rest, or the exchanging of an old form or dress of religion for a new one; and that this zeal would be found little better than the blazings of self-love, a fire kindled not by a coal from the altar, but by a spark of their own. But, be it so, that this disposition of theirs is sincere and spiritual; should not this charity begin at home? The most proper kingdom of Christ is that whereby he ruleth in the hearts of men; the most excellent worship is when the soul itself becomes a temple for the living God to dwell in, and to receive and reflect the manifestations of his glory; when a fire of divine love is kindled in it, and therein it doth offer up, not bulls and goats, no, nor prayers and meditations, so much as itself unto God; which

is a reasonable service, as the Apostle speaks, far more glorious than either the Mosaical or Evangelical dispensation, if you consider it in the letter only. Whatever men may pretend, no man can be truly and rightly studious of the advancement of the kingdom of God in the world, that hath not first felt the mighty power and blessed effects of it in his own soul. Communion with the church is only so far to be valued, as it is in order to a real and spiritual communion with God; which communion with God, if we do indeed sincerely wish to others, we shall more abundantly labour to promote in ourselves. I cannot believe that he doth heartily seek the happiness of others, who himself sits still, and is content to be miserable, especially when their happiness and his is one and the same.

3. It condemns them as not Christians, whose fellowship is only with their fellow-creatures. We have seen that it is the character, the distinguishing character of a pious man, to have fellowship with God. It must needs follow, then, that those degenerate souls that rise no higher than the world, that converse only with self or any other creature, are verily strangers to true Christianity, whatever their confidence or presumption may be. Christians, tell not me what you profess of Christ, what you believe of the gospel, what orthodox opinions you hold, what an honest party you side with, how many and specious duties you perform, no, nor what hopes or wishes you have of going to heaven; but, tell me,

where is your principal communion ; what do you mainly mind, follow, converse with ; what pattern do you conform to ; what rule do you live by ; what object do you ultimately aim at ? The whole world of worldly men doth hasten after another god, as the Psalmist phrases it, though not all after the same god : they spend their souls, indeed, upon various objects, and use different methods to obtain rest, but yet all their happiness and contentment is ultimately resolved into creature-communion. That dreadful sentence, which the Apostle delivers universally concerning all men, is to be limited to all wicked men only, and of them it is undoubtedly true : “All seek their own, and none the things of Jesus Christ.” And, of all these, that of the Psalmist’s “many” is to be understood : “There be many that say, Who will show us any good ?” that is, any creature-good, as the words following do explain it. All unregenerate souls are bound up in the creature, some creature or other ; and therefore the noblest of them, whatever boasting they may make, are low and ignoble ; their main converse is but with their fellow-creatures, and indeed creatures much inferior to themselves : “Corn and wine,” says the Psalmist ; “earthly things,” says the Apostle,—“who mind earthly things.” In a word, though it be true what the Apostle says in one place, that all men in the world do live in God, yet it is also true, that most of men, as the same Apostle speaks elsewhere, do “live without God in the world,” have their

hearts staked down to one creature or other, and so fall short of this honourable character which the Apostle here gives of good men: "Our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ."

And now I shall conclude the remainder of this discourse, with a humble request, and earnest expostulation.

"Reckon not upon any happiness below this communion." There are many things which a Christian may take to be comforts; but only one, this one, that he ought to take to be the happiness of his life. I design not to speak anything to the prejudice of natural or civil ornaments or accomplishments, much less to the disparagement of any of those endowments or employments which are, in a sense, spiritual, commonly called gifts and duties: but, I must confess, it is one of the great wonders of the world to me, to see such a noble and intelligent being, as the soul of man is, attending to, and pursuing after, things either extrinsical or inferior to itself, in the mean time carelessly forgetting, or wilfully rejecting its main happiness, principal end, and proper perfection. As for those sensual persons, those mere animals, whose souls are incarnate in their senses, and seem to perform no higher office in the world than the souls of beasts, that is, to carry about their bodies; who value themselves by their bodies, or, which is baser, by the apparel that clothes them,

or the estates that feed them: I shall not now trouble myself about them, but leave them to be chastised by Seneca or Plutarch, or indeed any ordinary philosopher. I shall rather apply myself a little to a sort of higher spirited people, whom by a condescension of charity we call Christians, who, valuing themselves by external professions, privileges, performances, may indeed be said to be somewhat more scrupulous and curious, but no less mistaken than the former: for if the grosser sort of sensualists do deny, and professedly abjure their own reason, and the finer sort of hypocrites do more cunningly bribe theirs, each method amounts to no more than a cheat, and both parties will be alike miserable, save that the latter will be somewhat more tormented in missing a happiness which he looked and hoped for. It is not proper to my present discourse, to speak so highly and honourably of these externals of Christianity, nor to press them so zealously, as I do at all times when I have occasion; for I verily value all ordinances of Christ, and duties of God's worship, at a high rate; nay, I know not any serious and truly pious soul in the world, but is of this same opinion with me; but, I must confess, I think it is one of the greatest and most pernicious cheats in the world, for men to feed upon the dish instead of the meat, to place their happiness in those things which God hath only appointed to be means to convey it. This was the great destruction of the Jewish

church ; by this they perished : thus they are every where described in Scripture, as a people resting in their privileges and performances, boasting of their sacrifices and temple-service ; they made account of a strange kind of flesh-pleasing heaven, something distinct from them, and reserved for them, to be given them by way of reward for the righteousness which themselves had wrought by the power of their own free will (which free will, they say, is an effect of man's fall, but they make it a cause of man's rise ; for now he can purchase and merit a happiness, which happiness is also more illustrious than that given of mere grace ;) which righteousness, if we look either into their own writings, or God's writings concerning them, we shall find was nothing else but a strict observance of the precepts of the law, according to the letter and external dispensation of it. Such a low and legal spirit was generally found amongst the Jews ; I wish the greatest part of us, who are in profession and name evangelical, be not found as truly legal in spirit and temper as they were. If we cry the gospel of Christ, the gospel of Christ, with the same spirit, as they cried, "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord," our confidence will as surely betray us into final misery as theirs did. True, indeed, prayers, sacraments, sermons, are somewhat finer words than the old obsolete ones, the law, sacrifices, ceremonies ; but, alas ! they are but words ;

at least they are not gods, not more fit to terminate our devotions and affections than these. I beseech you, therefore, Christians, be not mistaken in this matter. True Christianity is not a notion, but a nature; that is not religion which is wrapped up in books, or laid up in men's brains, but it is laid in the very constitution of the soul, a new principle implanted by God, in the highest powers of the soul, refining and spiritualizing all the faculties thereof, and rendering them as like to God himself, as such a creature can resemble its Creator. It is a truth, as clear as the sun is clear, that nothing can make a soul truly happy, but what is wrought into the nature of it, and that must be somewhat more excellent than itself, and be nothing less than something divine, even the image of the blessed God. If you be Christians, in deed and in truth, value all the ordinances of God, and the duties of the Christian religion, but value not yourselves by these, or your happiness by these. Attend upon them all for the maintaining and increasing of real fellowship with God; for though these be not it, yet they are the way wherein it pleases God to give it. Drink the sincere milk of the word, but let it be only with a holy design of growing thereby, of growing up into God, and a divine life. Away with those low and base thoughts of happiness; the happiness of a soul is a high and excellent, indeed a divine thing; it is

in some sense common to God and the soul; God is happy in himself alone, and the soul can only be happy in him. What contentment, what real happiness, Christian, can the rising of thy party in the world, or the rising of thy name in the country, bring thee, if, in the mean time, thou thyself harbourest any carnal will, self-interest that doth rise up in opposition to the pure and perfect will and nature of God? how art thou happy in thy prayers, if thou cast sin out of thy mouth, and, in the mean time, a fountain of iniquity be springing up in thy heart! What avails it towards a state of perfection, to be of the most orthodox opinions, the most honest society, the fairest profession, the most popular and sanctimonious form, or the most plausible performances either, the soul being, in the mean time, alienated from the life of God, and feeding upon some earthly trash or other, which destroys the native powers and vigour of it, and keeps it under a perpetual languor? even just so much as a silken stocking upon a gouty leg, or a princely diadem upon an aching head, avails towards a state of ease and soundness and good temperature of body. Let nothing limit your ambition, but a state of God-like perfection, let nothing set bounds to your loving and longing souls, but a real fruition of God himself; nay, let not that bound them either, but the more you enjoy, see, and taste, the more let your love be strengthened, after the manner of fire, which,

the more it is fed, the more hungry and devouring it grows. In a word, let nothing satisfy you lower than the highest character that can be given of mortal man, to be men "after God's own heart," to have God dwelling in you, to be filled with his fulness, to have this real and excellent "communion with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." To whom be all honour, praise, and glory, for ever and ever.