Amos - Commentaries by Charles Henry Mackintosh

Communion With God: What is it?, Communion With God: What Is It?

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Amos 5:4-5.

We are ever in danger of being led astray by using a style of phraseology beyond our actual experience. Every religious denomination has a number of expressions peculiar to itself, and one is liable to adopt such, without being able, practically, to enter into their meaning. Hence the importance of bearing in mind that Christianity is not a mere set of expressions, but a divine reality — a living, acting, powerful influence, infusing itself into all the feelings and affections of the soul, and exhibiting itself in the life.

Now, one of those forms of expression, most frequently used, and little understood, is “communion.” Communion with God is the grand secret of the believer’s strength, and it is, therefore, of all importance that he should clearly and distinctly understand what it means, and in what it consists; and, moreover, that he should carefully guard against every thing like a counterfeit of it. If one were asked to give a definition of communion, he might reply, It is simple entrance into the thoughts of God; and as the thoughts of God find their grand center in Jesus, to be able to enter into His thoughts about Jesus constitutes the highest order of communion for the soul. God has highly exalted the blessed Jesus, and when we are enabled, through the Spirit, to do the same, our thoughts are in happy fellowship with God’s, and this is what we should seek for. But we should remember that communion with God is a very different thing from communion with a Christian church, be it ever so sound in doctrine, or pure in practice.

However, the point I desire to bring forward in this paper, is the importance of real, personal communion with God, apart from the aid derived even from divine institutions. We must look upon communion as a pure, abstract, independent, holy thing, above and beyond every thing earthly. “The hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.” Again, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.” Under the law there were four things essentially necessary ere acceptable worship could be offered.

1st. A priest of the pure seed of Aaron — pure in race, and pure in person. A man might be of the seed of Aaron, but yet, if he had a single bodily imperfection, a single personal blemish, he dare not approach to offer the bread, or stand at the altar of his God. (See Lev. 21:1-24; 22:1-33)

2nd. This priest should hold in his hand a pure censer — a censer of gold.

3rd. He should place on that censer, pure incense.

4th. He should burn this incense with pure fire, from off the altar.

It is hardly needful to remind the Christian reader that these things were typical. We must be washed from our sins in the blood of the Lamb, and thus be made priests unto God, ere we can approach the altar. Without the knowledge of these things, there can be no worship. Religiousness there may be in abundance, but no worship. The very object of mere religiousness may often be, to get the soul into the position of a worshipper; and when this is the case, religiousness is put in the place of the precious blood of Christ. Again, as the priest’s censer needed to be pure, whereon the incense was consumed, so the heart of the Christian must be duly regulated, ere the sweet odor of grateful praise can possibly ascend to God. Further, as the priest needed pure incense, so now, Christ must be the pure and simple material of our souls’ worship. And, lastly, as the incense needed to be consumed by pure fire, so now, the Holy Spirit must kindle in our souls the flame of pure and spiritual adoration. Thus, while with true hearts and Spirit-taught minds we feed on Christ, we present to God the fragrance of acceptable worship.

The above points might be enlarged upon, but enough has been said to show what a purely spiritual thing communion is, and also how needful it is that we should watch against every thing like “strange fire,” which is simply the introduction of strange, that is, of carnal and earthly, elements into our worship. Nor is it merely an openly ungodly thing that may be used as a hindrance, but right things, yea, even divine institutions; indeed, the more any institution can be proved to be of God, the more need there is of watchfulness, lest it should usurp the place of God in our hearts. The conscience of a believer will easily detect and shrink from that which is manifestly opposed to God and His truth, but he may not so readily see the danger connected with what has been set up of God, and honoured by generations of the faithful in bygone days. Hence the force and suitability of the appeal, “Thus saith the Lord … Seek ye me, and ye shall live: but seek not Bethel, nor enter into Gilgal, and pass not to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into captivity, and Bethel shall come to nought.” Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba were all places most sacred in the eyes of a faithful Israelite. Bethel was the spot where Jacob’s spirit had first felt the sweetness and solemnity of the divine presence — it was “the house of God” — a spot possessing many charms for the heart, and connected with many hallowed recollections. Such was the character of Bethel in its early days; but, alas! those days were gone by, and Bethel had lost its early glory. Jeroboam had placed a calf there, thus making it the house of a calf, instead of the house of God. Of what value, then, was the house of God, if God had deserted the house? Who would think of attaching importance to the mere name of Bethel, when the God of Bethel was no longer to be found there? No one, whose heart valued God, could ever be satisfied to go to the house of God, and there find only a calf — a mockery — a vanity. Yet this was the very sin of Israel, they allowed Bethel to get between them and the God of Bethel. Hence the importance of the word, “Seek ye ME.”

Again, Gilgal was, as we know, the place in which Israel had first tasted the old corn of the land of Canaan, and had the reproach of Egypt rolled away from them. From Gilgal, too, Joshua and his band of conquerors were accustomed to sally forth to fresh triumphs over the uncircumcised, and thither they returned to enjoy the spoils. Thus was it a place full of holy interest, and, while viewed in connection with the

scenes that had been developed there, it might awaken many godly emotions in the heart of a faithful worshipper. But what could render Gilgal valuable, save the spirit and principles which belonged to it? And if these ceased to be known in real power, Gilgal could only prove an empty name, calculated to draw away the heart from living communion with God Himself, and the more so as it had been a place of truly divine experience to the Lord's people.

Lastly, Beersheba was "the well of the oath," a place rendered dear, for many reasons, to the posterity of Isaac, yet only really valuable in proportion as the circumstance which had given it its name was kept in view.

Thus we see how the sacred antiquity of the above places would act as a snare to the heart of an Israelite, and tend to draw him away from God. Indeed, it was the fact of their being associated with so many hallowed recollections, with so much that was really of God, that would constitute them such dangerous snares. The devil does not present to the Christian things flagrantly evil and unsound; he knows that such would at once be rejected; but he works by the instrumentality of things which have an appearance of truth and godliness about them; yea, and things too which, it may be, had once the divine sanction, but which, after all, will not bear the searching light of the Word. It would not do for an Israelite to have rested satisfied with the old institutions of Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba; he might be most diligent in seeking after these, and yet stand much in need of the exhortation, "Seek ye ME."

What, then, is the moral we are invited to draw from the above train of thought? Simply this, communion with God, and communion with divine institutions, are very different things; we may often lose the former, in our zeal for the latter. How often have we displayed much zeal in contending for some Christian institutions, while, perhaps, our souls were barren and void of personal communion with Christ Himself. How often, too, like the disciples going to Emmaus, have we talked much about the things connected with Christ, when, if He Himself were to draw near, we should not know Him. At such times, it might very reasonably have been said to us, "Seek not to institutions — seek not to ordinances — seek not merely the things which are connected with Christ, but seek Himself — His own blessed Person — the divine reality of personal fellowship with the risen Son of God, without which the fairest institutions are powerless — and the most solemn ordinances cold and lifeless." Nor is it only to merely human ordinances that all this would apply, but even to that which is of divine authority; for example, the Lord's Supper — the ministry of the Word — Christian fellowship, all of which are, as it were, folds of the drapery which may have Christ beneath for a soul that really seeks Him therein, but which may only tend to conceal Him from the view of those who are engaged and attracted by outward form rather than by truth, and spirit, and life.

Let us, then, seek to realize the person of Christ. Let us endeavor to find Him, in the breaking of bread — in the ministry of the Word — in the fellowship of Christians — in the offering up of prayer and praise — in a word, in everything in which He has told us He will be found, but let us not mistake happiness in these things for happiness in God, lest we be found, in our sphere, and according to our measure, helping on, in the peculiar evil of the last days, A FORM OF GODLINESS WITHOUT THE POWER.

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