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# **The Humiliation of Christ in the Preaching of John Flavel (1627-1691)**

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**EDINBURGH**  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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and her patience when I fail to be an Ephesians 5:25-28 husband.

To my dear son and daughter, Dylan and Rebecca.

‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor,  
so that you by his poverty might become rich.’

*2 Cor. 8:9*

## ABSTRACT

“The Humiliation of Christ in the Preaching of John Flavel” is a study of the Christ-centred, local congregational preaching of the Puritan John Flavel (1627-1691), with a specific focus on the theme of the humiliation of Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of Christ’s humiliation lies at the heart of the Christian gospel, and its exposition ought therefore to be central to the ministry of the church in every generation. If salvation is accomplished through the incarnation, life and death of the Son of God, it follows that the proclamation of these truths is a priority, irrespective of our historical context.

John Flavel’s ministry in Dartmouth on the south coast of England is an example of such preaching in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Puritan tradition. Through a combination of doctrinal incisiveness, creative exploration, evangelistic appeal and rich pastoral application, his 42 sermon *Fountain of Life* (1673) series provides a benchmark in the preaching of Christ’s sufferings.

This thesis briefly explores the theme of Christ’s humiliation from an historical-theological perspective before focusing on Flavel’s own exposition of the doctrine. In particular, it surveys: the theological framework in which he understood humiliation; what he believed it includes; his particular emphases, and finally, his hermeneutical method and homiletical style. Some lessons for the church today are then drawn from the preceding analysis.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed a resurgence of interest in the life and work of ministers and theologians in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England who were described already in their own time as ‘Puritans’<sup>1</sup>.

John Flavel has been less well-served in academic research than other significant puritans. As Brian Cosby notes: ‘Among the annals of Puritan studies, Flavel is virtually a ghost – lost in the corpus of historical studies of the Puritan “greats”: Richard Sibbes, John Owen, John Bunyan and Richard Baxter.’<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, Flavel’s ministry and his published works have been of considerable significance. His contemporary, Anthony Wood (1632-1695) noted that Flavel had ‘more disciples than ever John Owen, the Independent, or Rich. Baxter the Presbyterian.’<sup>3</sup> As Cosby notes, this is particularly telling given that ‘Wood was no friend of Flavel’ but a Royalist ‘opposed to the puritan cause’.<sup>4</sup> Another contemporary, Edmund Elys (1633-1708), identified Flavel alongside John Owen and Richard Baxter as one of ‘three Enemies of the church whose writings have made...much noise in the world’.<sup>5</sup>

Flavel’s legacy and influence stretched well beyond the confines of England, however. Increase Mather (1639-1723), the Harvard College president, wrote that Flavel’s works ‘made his name precious and famous in *both Englands*.’<sup>6</sup> ‘The fruitful labours of this faithful servant of Christ will promote the glory of God, and the good of souls, when he himself has ceased his labours, and his works shall follow him.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of ‘Puritan’ is elusive because it originates in the vocabulary of detractors rather than practitioner. In this context it is used to denote an individual seeking the further reformation of the Church of England according to the regulative principle that only what is required by Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence can be deduced from it, should be mandated in the life and liturgy of the church.

<sup>2</sup> Brian H. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life and Thought in Stuart England* (Lexington Books: Plymouth, 2014), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 35 – Letter located in the Bodleian Library in Oxford: MS J. Walker e.8.32

<sup>6</sup> John Flavel, *Works* IV (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 16. Hereafter: *Works*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 17.

Flavel's writings also had a notable impact on the eminent 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish minister, John Brown of Haddington. As a school-boy in Abernethy, he read Flavel's exposition of the Westminster Shorter Catechism and learned it 'by heart'. Reflecting on his school days, Brown later recalled:

My thirst after knowledge was great. My pride not a little instigated my diligence, particularly in learning by heart what Catechisms I could get. I have found not a little advantage by this, especially by my learning of Vincent's and Flavel's Catechisms, and the Assembly's Larger Catechism.<sup>8</sup>

Further illustrating Flavel's significance, a Church, Library and Community Centre are now named after him in Dartmouth – the last of which is built on the site where his followers first met almost 400 years ago.<sup>9</sup> The influential first Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Archibald Alexander (1772-1851), was converted through Flavel's writings,<sup>10</sup> having been asked to read his works to an elderly lady whose eyesight was failing. He later remarked, 'To John Flavel I certainly owe more than to any uninspired author.'<sup>11</sup> Indeed, his own writings 'breathed the spirit of Flavel' and his general approach to the work of ministry was heavily influenced by his combination of learning coupled with piety – a pattern which became a hallmark of the Princeton view of theological education through to B. B. Warfield's, *The Religious Life of Theological Students*.<sup>12</sup>

As late as 1990, J. I. Packer noted that when Jonathan Edwards wrote his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746), he did so 'as the spiritual heir of Shepherd, Flavel, and Stoddard, all of whom he cites in his footnotes'.<sup>13</sup> Nathan Parker comments that such was the extent of Flavel's influence on J Edwards<sup>14</sup> and George Whitefield, he effectively served as a bridge

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Mackenzie, *John Brown of Haddington* (London: Billing and Sons Ltd, 1964), 18.

<sup>9</sup> Ray Freeman, *John Flavel: A Famous Dartmouth Puritan* (Dartmouth: Dartmouth History Research Group, 2001), 12.

<sup>10</sup> J. W. Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander* (New York: Hess Publications, 1854), 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> B.B. Warfield, *The Religious Life of Theological Students* (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> J. I. Packer, *A Quest For Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Illinois: Crossway, 1990), 312.

<sup>14</sup> Nathan Parker (2012) stated: 'In *The Religious Affections*, which was Jonathan Edwards' mature evaluation and criticism of the Great Awakening, he quoted Flavel more than Richard Baxter, John

between the Puritan era and the First Great Awakening in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> As one example of this influence, Clifford Boone highlights the fact that in refuting Wesley's claim that no Presbyterian or Baptist writer knew of the 'liberties of Christ' Whitefield referenced Flavel, along with Bunyan, Henry and Halyburton. As Boone suggests, the fact that Flavel was one of only four men named by Whitefield 'reveals the esteem' he had for him.<sup>16</sup> Frank Lambert, examining why there were so many conversions in New England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, concluded that one significant factor was the influence of published sermons from the previous century, including those of John Flavel.<sup>17</sup>

## RESEARCH ON FLAVEL

Research on Flavel has begun to blossom only relatively recently. Kwai Sing Chang (1952) produced the first biographical account of Flavel's life and ministry in the last century.<sup>18</sup> Leslie Howard (1973) studied Flavel's methodology and understanding of the atonement.<sup>19</sup> J. Stephen Yuille (2007) has written on Flavel's doctrine of mystical union with Christ.<sup>20</sup> Boone (2009) has studied Flavel's method of preaching for conversion with a specific emphasis on his doctrine of man, sin and the effectual call.<sup>21</sup> Adam Emry has written on both Flavel's understanding of the sealing of the Holy Spirit (2010)<sup>22</sup> and his piety (2012).<sup>23</sup> Nathan Parker (2012) has researched Flavel's theology of proselytization and apocalypticism.<sup>24</sup> Kevin Carr

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Owen, Richard Sibbes, John Calvin, Francis Turretin, William Ames and William Perkins combined.' Nathan Thomas Parker, 'Proselytisation and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World: The Theology of John Flavel' (PhD diss., Durham University, 2012), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 213-247.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford B. Boone, 'Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for conversion in late-seventeenth century English Puritanism as seen in the works of John Flavel' (PhD diss., University of Wales, 2009), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Lambert, *Inventing the 'Great Awakening'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 173.

<sup>18</sup> Kwai Sing Chang, 'John Flavel of Darmouth, 1630-1691' (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1952).

<sup>19</sup> Leslie Howard, 'Clear Waters: A Study of Methodology and Atonement as Seen in John Flavel's *The Fountain of Life*' (M.Th. diss., University of Otago, 1975).

<sup>20</sup> J. Stephen Yuille, *The Inner Sanctum of Puritan Piety: John Flavel's Doctrine of Mystical Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Clifford Boone, 'Puritan Evangelism'.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Emry, *Keeper of the Great Seal of Heaven: Sealing of the Spirit in the Thought of John Flavel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Adam Emry, *An Honest and Well-Experienced Heart: The Piety of John Flavel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> Nathan Parker, 'Proselytisation and Apocalypticism in the British Atlantic World: The Theology of John Flavel' (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, 2012).

(2013) examined the place of the Word and Spirit in Flavel's piety.<sup>25</sup> Finally, Brian Cosby studied Flavel's approach to afflictive providence (2012)<sup>26</sup> as well as authoring a helpful account of his life, ministry, character, doctrine and influence (2014).<sup>27</sup>

However, given that Flavel was exclusively a pastor rather than also an academic, as John Owen and Thomas Goodwin were, it is perhaps surprising that more has not been written about his pulpit ministry – particularly given the effectiveness of his preaching and the high esteem in which it was held. For example, one who heard Flavel once remarked:

I could say much, though not enough, of the excellency of his preaching; of his seasonable, suitable and spiritual matter; of his plain expositions of scripture, his taking method, his genuine and natural deductions, his convincing arguments, his clear and powerful demonstrations, his heart-searching applications, and his comfortable supports to those that were afflicted in conscience. In short that person must have a very soft head, or a very hard heart, or both, that could sit under his ministry unaffected.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, emphasising his evangelistic success, one of his longest standing friends and colleagues, John Quick (1636-1706) wrote that 'Few ministers had more spiritual children of their own begetting in the West than Mr Flavell.'<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding Boone's helpful examination of Flavel's method of preaching for conversion and Howard's examination of Flavel's methodology and understanding of the atonement, no study to date has given specific attention to the dominant theme of his major sermon series published as *The Fountain of Life* - namely the humiliation of Christ. The fact that at least 30 of the 42 sermons in this series focussed directly or indirectly on an aspect of Christ's

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<sup>25</sup> Kevin Charles Carr, "A Convincing Beam of Light: Word and Spirit in the Piety of John Flavel" (Th.M. diss, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, 2013).

<sup>26</sup> Brian H. Cosby, *Suffering & Sovereignty: John Flavel and the Puritans on Afflictive Providence* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Brian H. Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life & Thought in Stuart England* (Maryland: Lexington Books: 2014).

<sup>28</sup> *Works* I, vi.

<sup>29</sup> John Quick, 'Icones Sacrae Anglicanae' in *Puritan Evangelism*, Clifford B. Boone, 39.

humiliation demonstrates the centrality of this doctrine to Flavel's overall view of Christ and its importance in his pastoral and evangelistic preaching.

On the subject of Christ's death specifically, Flavel wrote, '...there is no doctrine more excellent in itself, or more necessary to be preached and studied, than the doctrine of Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is clear that Flavel viewed Christ's humiliation – particularly his sufferings – as central to evangelism and the conversion of unbelievers:

I say, to realise the sufferings of Christ thus, is of great power to affect the coldest, dullest heart. You cannot imagine the difference there is in presenting things as realities, with convincing and satisfying evidences, and our looking on them as a fiction or uncertainty.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, he states: '*the sufferings of Christ are exceedingly powerful, to melt believers hearts into godly sorrow...Eyeing him as a sacrifice offered up to divine justice for our sin... powerfully thaws the heart, and melts the affections.*'<sup>32</sup>

Not only was this doctrine a dominant theme in Flavel's overall preaching of Christ, but it was one he expounded with a powerful combination of theological precision, imaginative illustrations and searching application. Given the significant attention he gave to Christ's humiliation, the insightful and probing way in which he expounded it, and the absence of existing work in this area it is hoped that this thesis will both fill a lacuna in academic studies of Flavel, and also benefit those engaged in ministry to proclaim what is a foundational aspect of the Christian gospel.

In pursuit of these goals our study will introduce Flavel and his ministry, before defining humiliation and surveying the historical-theological context of the doctrine. We will then explore Flavel's preaching on Christ's humiliation, examining in particular: the framework within which he expounded the doctrine; what he believed were its key component parts; his

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<sup>30</sup> *Works* I, 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Works* I, 316.

<sup>32</sup> *Works* VI, 441.

theological emphases and his hermeneutical method and homiletical style. Finally, these strands of our research will be drawn together in some conclusions, highlighting aspects of Flavel's ministry which may serve to benefit the church in our own day.

## CHAPTER 2: THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF JOHN FLAVEL

Born in Worcester in 1627<sup>33</sup>, the elder son of a Puritan pastor, John Flavel went on to study at University College, Oxford in 1646 and it was there that he came to faith in Jesus Christ. By April 1650 he had accepted a call to serve as an Assistant Minister in Diptford, Devon and was ordained by the presbytery at Salisbury around six months later. Flavel ministered in Diptford for six years, during which he was predeceased by a son as well as his wife who died in childbirth.

By 1656, Flavel had received and accepted a call to Dartmouth, a fishing town also in Devon, and a base for the navy on the south coast of England. Here he shared the ministry of two churches with his assistant. Following the 1662 *Act of Uniformity*<sup>34</sup> his labours – along with that of around 2,000 other ministers who shared his non-conformist/puritan convictions - were interrupted by The Great Ejection.<sup>35</sup> Prohibited by the *Five Mile Act* (1665) from living in the area, Flavel moved to Slapton - another coastal town about five miles south west of Dartmouth. From there it was not uncommon for him to travel using various disguises in order to minister secretly in pre-arranged meeting places. On one such occasion he rode north to Totnes disguised as a woman in order to baptise a baby.<sup>36</sup>

In 1672, Charles II's *Declaration of Indulgence* eased restrictions on Puritan ministers and provided Flavel with the opportunity to return once more to Dartmouth. However, persecution was never far away: the next year, the *Test Act*<sup>37</sup> brought about renewed harassment and opposition. In 1682, he moved to London, hoping to enjoy greater freedom to preach the gospel. It was during this period that he lost his second wife and married for a

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<sup>33</sup> Historians are divided as to the precise year of Flavel's birth, some favouring the later date of 1630, mainly on the basis that he was baptised on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1630 and baptisms would have typically taken place days after a birth at that time. However, given that in Vol. 1 of his *Works* his biographer notes that he was 64 years old when he died (in 1691), the earlier birth date of 1627 is assumed here.

<sup>34</sup> Instituted by Charles II to enforce strict adherence to the rites and ceremonies prescribed in the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*.

<sup>35</sup> Those who refused to conform to the *Book of Common Prayer* were ejected from their churches, and forced out of the Church of England.

<sup>36</sup> Freeman, *John Flavel: A Famous Dartmouth Puritan*, 5.

<sup>37</sup> This imposed civil penalties, such as ineligibility for employment, on anyone who did not take communion in the Established Church of England.



third time. However, the later *Declaration of Indulgence*, issued by James II in 1687, brought further freedoms, allowing him to return once more to his beloved Dartmouth, where he continued to minister until his death on 26<sup>th</sup> June, 1691.

Flavel shared both the general difficulties of life in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the particular afflictions of non-conformist ministry. It was in this context he prioritised the humiliation of Christ in his preaching, especially as a comfort to those who were experiencing affliction and trial. As well as the loss of his three wives and child, Flavel also suffered the death of his parents from the plague following their arrest and imprisonment (in Newgate Prison) for attending an unauthorised worship service at Covent Garden.

Flavel also suffered greatly in the context of his own ministry. Not only was he banished from his Dartmouth pulpit in 1662 and prohibited from living or ministering in the area in 1665, but some 20 years later, in derision of his ministry, a group from Dartmouth (including some civil magistrates) carried an effigy of him through the town with the bill of exclusion attached to it, before setting it alight on a bonfire. He was forced to preach in disguise at secret pre-arranged meeting places, often in the woods at night. On one occasion, after preaching on horseback on the island of Salstone Rock, he had to plunge his horse into the rising tide to escape the King's soldiers who had come to arrest him.<sup>38</sup> Freeman comments: 'At all times he was liable to be arrested and his life must have been like that of secret agents in war-time France under Nazi occupation.'<sup>39</sup> In addition, there was the on-going physical frailty resulting from his unrelenting ministerial diligence: 'When the duty of the day was over, he would often complain of a sore breast, an aking head, and a pained back'.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lewis Allen, ed., *All Things Made New: John Flavel for the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), xi.

<sup>39</sup> Freeman, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Works* I, x.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

A dominant feature of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, carrying significant implications for those who sought the further reformation of the church, was the absence of any separation between church and state. The expression *Cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, their religion), summarised the situation. A Roman Catholic monarchy led, almost inevitably, to either the outlawing of Protestant faith or, at best, its compromise. Given the frequency with which monarchs came and went (often bringing with them a complete change of religious affiliation), life in the church could be highly unstable.

Relevant to the subject of this study was the ascension of Elizabeth I in 1558. As Cosby explains, although rejecting the Roman Catholicism of her predecessor, Mary Tudor ('Bloody Mary'), her 'Settlement' of 1559 was 'a *via media*...between Protestant theology and a Roman Catholic aesthetic.' Despite a shift in thinking in the doctrine of justification, the sacraments and church authority, the pattern of worship remained largely the same. Congregants knelt to receive the Lord's Supper and continued to make the sign of the cross, while priests continued to wear surplices and, tellingly, the communion table was still referred to as the altar.<sup>41</sup> The Puritans' rejection of what they perceived as these erroneous, state-imposed practices would become one of the defining hallmarks of their struggle. The most notable example of this came in *The Great Ejection* in 1662 in which, as we have seen, Flavel shared.

The most immediate pressure then, on Flavel and his contemporaries, was the almost constant threat of state-sponsored persecution. John Coffey writes: 'For most of the period between 1558 and 1689, the English state can be described as a persecuting state. It was committed to securing religious uniformity, and to achieve that end it was prepared to employ coercive measures.'<sup>42</sup> If the beheading of King Charles I in 1649, the year before Flavel entered pastoral ministry, illustrated the ruthlessness of the times, the long and fierce Civil Wars provided the back story. Despite the efforts that were made in the cause of

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<sup>41</sup> Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life & Thought in Stuart England*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> John Coffey cited in Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life & Thought*, 8-9.

Protestantism during that period (for example, the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant and the subsequent production of the Confession of Faith, Catechisms, and Directories for Public Worship and Church Government by the Westminster Assembly), Puritan ministry was conducted against a backdrop of political turmoil, brutal conflict and frequent persecution at the hands of the state.

However, such instability did not deflect Flavel from exercising a ministry that was rooted in the doctrines and principles recaptured by the reformers of the previous century:

John Flavel pastored, preached, and published during the rapidly changing political, ecclesiological, and theological environment of the later 17<sup>th</sup> century. His own career was marked by these shifts, from an established Presbyterian minister during the Interregnum, to his ejection at the Restoration under the Act of Uniformity of 1662, later licensed as a Congregational minister after the Declaration of Indulgence in 1672, and finally in the last years of his life and ministry experiencing the greater liberty that came with the Glorious Revolution. Although his status frequently changed, his convictions did not. Flavel continued to maintain the trajectory of the Reformation throughout his ministry.<sup>43</sup>

While no one would choose to suffer persecution, one of its fruits in the Puritan era was the amount of written literature published as a result. The “Five-Mile Act” of 1665 forbade non-conformists preaching within five miles of their former parish. Consequently, as Cosby notes, time previously devoted to pastoring and preaching in-person, was used instead for the preparation of sermons and treatises for the press.<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on this very point, in his introduction to *Husbandry Spiritualised* (1668), Flavel comments: ‘Thou hast here the fruit of some of my spare hours, which were thus employed, when, by a sad providence, I was thrust from the society of many dear friends, into a solitary country-dwelling.’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> William R. Edwards, ‘John Flavel On The Priority Of Union With Christ: Further Historical Perspective On The Structure Of Reformed Soteriology’, *Westminster Theological Journal* 74.1 (2012): 35.

<sup>44</sup> Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life & Thought In Stuart England*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Works* V, 13-14.

## THE MAN & HIS MINISTRY

Identifying the hallmarks of a man who lived almost 400 years ago is no easy task. However, extant biographical accounts of Flavel and his own published writings reveal several qualities in both his character and his ministry.

### Personal and Ministerial Integrity

The foundation for the quality of Flavel's ministry was his godliness of character and his ministerial integrity. He was deeply committed to a life lived *Coram Deo* – in the presence of God. As his earliest biographer notes, 'He was not only a zealous preacher in the pulpit, but a sincere Christian in the closet, frequent in self-examination, as well as in pressing it upon others; being afraid, lest while he preached to others he himself should be a cast-away.'<sup>46</sup>

This earnestness is summed up in his own words:

It hath been my endeavour to keep upon my heart a deep sense of that great judgement-day throughout this work; as knowing by experience what a potent influence this hath on the conscience, to make it deliberate, serious and faithful in its work; and therefore I have demanded of my own conscience, before the resolution of each question, O my conscience, deal faithfully with me in this particular, and say no more to me than wilt own and stand to in the great day, when the counsels of all hearts shall be made manifest.<sup>47</sup>

Flavel was said to be 'assiduous in reading, meditation and prayer'<sup>48</sup>, a man who brought with him, 'a broken heart and moving affections...his tongue and spirit...touched with a live coal from the altar' as he was 'evidently assisted by the Holy Spirit of grace and supplication.'<sup>49</sup> What he was in the pulpit before others was undergirded by his personal walk

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<sup>46</sup> *Works* I, x.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, xi.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, iv.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, vi.

with God. Indeed, towards the end of his life, he himself defined faithfulness in pastors by its expression in five ways: pure and spiritual aims and intentions for God; sincerity and integrity of heart; diligence in the discharge of duty; impartiality in the administration of Christ's house and unshaken constancy and perseverance to the end.<sup>50</sup>

### **A Burden for the Unconverted**

A second feature of Flavel's life and ministry was his deep burden for the unconverted. Not only were his sermons marked by frequent appeals to unbelievers and warnings of the judgement to come, but outside of the pulpit, personal evangelism was a hallmark of his life. He gives a dramatic illustration of this in the sermon series later published as *The Providence of God*. He tells of a 23-year-old surgeon from a ship which had recently returned to Dartmouth from Virginia, who attempted suicide, cutting his own throat with a knife before stabbing himself in the stomach. Flavel was told of the incident and immediately visited the man who was in critical condition. Although the young man professed hope in God, Flavel sensed that his confidence was ill-grounded. Impressing upon him the sinfulness of self-murder, 'the man's conscience began to fail, his heart began to melt, and then he broke out into tears, bewailing his sin and misery, and asking Mr Flavel, If there might yet be any hope for him?' Flavel assured him that there was hope, explained the gospel of Christ and led the man in prayer.

While the wounded sailor was being treated in hospital, Flavel spent many hours at his bedside, again impressing upon him the seriousness of his sin and the importance of repentance and faith in Christ. Responding to the man's doubts that such a sinner as he could still receive God's mercy, Flavel gently explained that the Lord Jesus shed his blood for them who with wicked hands had shed his own blood, which was a greater sin than the shedding of his. The wounded man replied, 'I will cast myself upon Christ; let him do by me what he will.' Some weeks later, after the man's discharge from hospital, Flavel received a letter from

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<sup>50</sup> *Works* VI, 567.

another minister, Samuel Hardy, thanking him for his diligence in the whole affair, in which he concluded, 'if ever a great and thorough work was wrought, it was upon that man.'<sup>51</sup>

Flavel's burden for the lost was not only seen in his dealings with 'outsiders'; he was also deeply concerned about the possibility of false professors, or nominalism, within the church. Indeed, this particular burden gave rise to several of his key published works: *The Touchstone of Sincerity, or The True Signs of Grace and the Symptoms of Hypocrisy* (1698)<sup>52</sup> and *The Reasonableness of Personal Reformation and the Necessity of Conversion* (1691)<sup>53</sup>. Expressing this concern, he said:

If thou be a stranger to regeneration and faith ; a person that makest a powerless profession of Christ ; that hast a name to live, but art dead ; here it is possible thou mayest meet with something that will convince thee how dangerous a thing it is to be an old creature in the new creature's dress and habit ; and what is it that blinds thy judgement, and is likeliest to prove thy ruin ; a seasonable and full conviction whereof will be the greatest mercy that can befall thee in this world, if thereby at last God may help thee to put on Christ, as well as the name of Christ.<sup>54</sup>

It was due in large measure to this that it was later said of him: "God crowned his labours with many conversions."<sup>55</sup>

### A Pastor to the Flock

Coupled with Flavel's burden for the lost, was a sensitive pastoral heart. He not only sought the conversion of sinners, but their comfort in distress. His preaching was geared to helping them to see the trials of life through a biblical lens. This, again, is evident in various published works – notably: *A Brief Treatise on Fear: Its Varieties, Uses, Causes, Effects and*

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<sup>51</sup> The story can be found in *Works* IV, 382-384.

<sup>52</sup> *Works* V, 512-604.

<sup>53</sup> *Works* VI. 472-545.

<sup>54</sup> *Works* II, 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, vi.

*Remedies* (1682);<sup>56</sup> *Divine Conduct: or, the Mystery of Providence* (1678);<sup>57</sup> *A Token For Mourners* (1674);<sup>58</sup> *The Balm of the Covenant Applied to the Bleeding Wounds of Afflicted Saints* (1688);<sup>59</sup> the sermon he preached at the funeral of John Upton<sup>60</sup> and *A Familiar Conference between a Minister and a Doubting Christian Concerning the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*.<sup>61</sup> These all reveal the importance Flavel placed on instruction that would comfort, assure, guide and bless his flock as they experienced the heartache, fear and doubt of life in a fallen world.

This is particularly evident in the work for which he is most widely known, *Divine Conduct: or, the Mystery of Providence*, which Sinclair Ferguson notes 'stands out for its insightful, biblical and pastorally-sensitive realism.'<sup>62</sup> From Psalm 57:2, Flavel expounds the doctrine of providence with a view to helping believers understand that God is at work in every aspect of their lives, teaching them to take note of and meditate on past providences in their lives as a means of bringing comfort and assurance in the present.

Similarly, in his sermon *The Balm of the Covenant Applied to the Bleeding Wounds of the Afflicted*, he explains the importance of seeing the whole of life as undergirded by God's covenant in Christ so that every trial might then be understood as a purposeful token of the Father's love. Expounding 2 Samuel 23:5, 'Although my house *be* not so with God yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all *things*', he writes,

This little word yet, wraps up a great and sovereign cordial in it. Though Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah be gone, and gone with many smarting aggravations too; "yet hath he "made with me a covenant," yet I have this sheet-anchor left to secure me. God's covenant with me, in relation to Christ, this under-props and shores up my heart.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Works* III, 245-320.

<sup>57</sup> *Works* IV, 342-497.

<sup>58</sup> *Works* IV, 607-666.

<sup>59</sup> *Works* VI, 486-119.

<sup>60</sup> *Works* VI, 120-140.

<sup>61</sup> *Works* VI, 460-470.

<sup>62</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *Some Pastors and Teachers* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2017), 311.

<sup>63</sup> *Works* Vol. VI, 88.

Moreover, in a world ravaged by plague and disease, where life expectancy was so much shorter than it is today, Flavel paid special attention to the needs of those who were grief-stricken. In his funeral sermon for John Upton,<sup>64</sup> he encourages and comforts his hearers by explaining the appropriateness of mourning the loss of a believer, while in *A Token for Mourners* (1674) he also warns of the ways in which this can tip over into unhealthy grief.

### Defender of the Faith

Flavel was also committed to doctrinal precision and to the defence of the truth:

He was a master of the controversies betwixt the Jews and Christians, Papists and Protestants, Lutherans and Calvinists, and betwixt the Orthodox, and the Arminians and Socinians: he was likewise well read in the Controversies about Church-discipline, Infant-Baptism, and Antinomianism. He was well acquainted with the School divinity, and drew up a judicious and ingenious scheme of the whole body of that Theology in good Latin, which he presented to a person of quality, but it was never printed.<sup>65</sup>

While it is regrettable that this particular work never made it into print, Flavel's love for the truth and his readiness to both defend and teach it is clearly seen in others that did. One example is his *Reply to Philip Carey* (1690),<sup>66</sup> the leading Anabaptist in Dartmouth at the time, in which Flavel contended for the right of believers' infants to baptism. Another is his systematic refutation of Antinomianism in the second appendix to *The Occasions, Causes, Nature, Rise, Growth, and Remedies of Mental Errors* (1691).<sup>67</sup> Like other Puritans, he also skilfully expounded the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1692),<sup>68</sup> adding his own questions and answers to provide a deeper and fuller understanding of its teaching. In his *Method of Grace in the Gospel of Redemption* (1681)<sup>69</sup> sermon series, Flavel provides a rich exposition of

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<sup>64</sup> John Upton was a Member of Parliament for Dartmouth from February until August in 1679

<sup>65</sup> *Works* I, vi.

<sup>66</sup> *Works* VI, 327-378.

<sup>67</sup> *Works* III, 551-591.

<sup>68</sup> *Works* VI, 138-317.

<sup>69</sup> *Works* II, 3-474.



the doctrine of union with Christ and the application of his benefits to the life of the believer. In *Pneumatologia* (1685),<sup>70</sup> he offers a masterful study of the soul of man. John Flavel, then, was not only an evangelist and a pastor, but a teacher of doctrine and a contender for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

### Leader in the Church

Flavel was also a widely-respected leader in the wider church, illustrated by his unanimous appointment by an assembly of nonconformist ministers on 21 June 1691 to preside as moderator over a discussion on union between Presbyterians and Independents – a cause which Flavel was said to be ‘very zealous to promote.’<sup>71</sup> His sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:10, *Gospel Unity recommended to the Churches of Christ*,<sup>72</sup> addressed to congregations besides his own, further highlights the responsibility he felt to help the wider church and guard her from falling into error and schism.

Flavel’s sermon, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor, Drawn by Christ* (1691),<sup>73</sup> intended for an assembly of ministers, illustrates his concern for and contribution to those who shared his vocation. The timing of this -1691- was particularly pertinent. Four years earlier, James II’s *Declaration of Indulgence*<sup>74</sup> had ushered in a time of relative religious liberty, when non-conformists were again able to preach without the threat of state interference that had characterised the previous two decades since *The Act of Uniformity* in 1662.<sup>75</sup> The sermon was an attempt to spur on his fellow ministers and urge them to ‘seize the moment.’ Citing Isaiah 49:20-21 (which he took to refer to a time of unexpected blessing following years of hardship and barrenness in the church), he stated,

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<sup>70</sup> *Works* II, 475-609 & Vol. III, 3-320.

<sup>71</sup> *Works* I, xv.

<sup>72</sup> *Works* III, 592-608.

<sup>73</sup> *Works* VI, 564-585.

<sup>74</sup> James II’s main intention was to provide freedom to the Roman Catholic Church, but the fact that his declaration reaffirmed the King as absolute met with resistance from some Presbyterians and most notably the ‘Covenanters’ in Scotland.

<sup>75</sup> Cosby, *John Flavel: Puritan Life and Thought*, 20.

We have had our wasting time, as well as they; multitudes of faithful and prudent ministers have been swept into their graves by ejections, banishments, imprisonments, and heart-breaking silencings. Whence then are all these which our eyes behold this day! Who hath begotten us, and brought up these? These, where they had been; and out of what secret recesses are they come?<sup>76</sup>

In this way, Flavel sought to galvanise church leaders, encouraging them with the reminder that throughout the many days of trial and violent opposition, God had preserved them and was now providing a season of gospel liberty – one which they needed to embrace with a renewed sense of commitment, devotion and zeal.

### **A Preacher of Christ**

Finally, and of greatest relevance to this study, John Flavel was above all else, a preacher of Jesus Christ. His motivation is best summed up in his own words:

Christ shall be the centre to which all the lines of my ministry shall be drawn. I have spoken often and written of many other subjects in my sermons and epistles, but it is all reductively the preaching and discovery of Jesus Christ: of all the subjects in the world, this is the sweetest; if there be any thing on this side heaven, worthy our time and studies, this is it.<sup>77</sup>

For Flavel, there was simply no greater or more profitable subject to be studied than the person and work of Jesus Christ. All ‘other doctrines’, he said, were ‘but airy things, compared with this.’<sup>78</sup>

What then was his purpose? He had three chief aims. First, he sought Christ’s own glory:

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<sup>76</sup> *Works* VI, 564.

<sup>77</sup> *Works* I, 33.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

If my pen were both able, and at leisure, to get glory in paper, it would be but a paper glory when I had gotten it ; but if by displaying (which is the design of these papers) the transcendent excellency of Jesus Christ, I may win glory to him from you, to whom I humbly offer them, or from any other into whose hands providence shall cast them, that will be glory indeed, and an occasion of glorifying God to all eternity.<sup>79</sup>

Flavel's supreme objective was not to win the accolades of men or to secure any other worldly reward, but to exalt and glorify the name of Christ. Reflecting Paul's words in Romans 11:36 ("For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever"<sup>80</sup>), and before considering any benefits on the horizontal plane, Flavel sought the vertical priority of Christ's own glory. Emphasising the inexhaustible nature of his subject as well as his inability to do it justice, he said:

The whole world is not a theatre large enough to shew the glory of Christ upon, or unfold the one half of the unsearchable riches that lie hid in him. These things will be far better understood, and spoken of in heaven, by the noon-day divinity, in which the immediately illuminated assembly do there preach his praises, than by such a stammering tongue, and scribbling pen as mine, which doth but mar them.<sup>81</sup>

Secondly, Flavel sought the purity of the church. Addressing fellow ministers in *The Character of an Evangelical Pastor drawn by Christ*, he sums this up:

Ignorance and error have overspread the people and the wall of discipline greatly decayed. Our business is to cleanse our churches, and repair their walls; that so they may become gardens of delight, and beds of spices, for Christ to walk and take pleasure in.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Works* I, xvii.

<sup>80</sup> ESV Bible.

<sup>81</sup> *Works* I, xviii.

<sup>82</sup> *Works* VI, 565.

Flavel wanted to remind his colleagues in ministry that the church not only belongs to Christ, but exists for his pleasure and joy. In short, the purpose of ministry, in his mind, is to labour for a church in which Christ himself would feel 'right at home.' The goal is not success in the world's estimation, but rather that the church, Christ's Bride should please her Groom, and be a body which is fit for its Head.

Thirdly, Flavel sought both the conversion of unbelievers and the sanctification of God's people.

Dear friends...my heart's desire and prayer to God for you is that you may be saved. O that I knew how to engage this whole town to Jesus Christ, and make fast the marriage-knot betwixt him and you...Lord, by what arguments shall they be persuaded to be happy? What will win them effectually to thy Christ?...O thou, to whose hand this work is and must be left, put forth thy saving power and reveal thine arm for their salvation ; Thou hast glorified thy name in many of them ; Lord, glorify it again.<sup>83</sup>

For Flavel, preaching Christ was not a merely abstract endeavor; rather it was a task to which he gave himself specifically in order that sinners would be converted and brought to salvation. Moreover, he not only had their conversion in mind, but also then their ongoing sanctification and edification.

'Truth,' he said, 'is the sanctifying instrument...the mould into which our souls are cast...according therefore to the stamps and impressions it makes upon our understandings, and the order in which truths lie there, will be the depth and lastingness of their impressions and influences upon the heart ; as, the more weight is laid upon the seal, the more fair and lasting impression is made upon the wax.'<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Works* I, 28.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

We will later explore in greater detail Flavel's views on Holy Scripture and preaching, but here at the outset we can see his conviction that it is through the preaching of God's truth, accompanied by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, that believers are progressively transformed, sanctified and edified in the faith.

One feature of Flavel's *published* sermons is their focus on specific texts. The samples of his pulpit ministry to which we have access do not include the systematic exposition of whole books of the Bible. But this did not make him any less 'systematic' in his teaching. In fact, his desire was to pinpoint texts from throughout Scripture from which he could expound in detail the doctrines of the faith. It was this approach Flavel adopted in his preaching of Christ as "The Fountain of Life" with its focus on his humiliation in particular.

Before examining his approach to this doctrine, it will be helpful to provide a definition of humiliation, summarise its biblical underpinnings and trace its development in church history.

## CHAPTER 3: DEFINING HUMILIATION

As a theological category, *humiliation* describes one of the two ‘states’ of Christ (the other being his *exaltation*). The Son of God condescended to assume a human nature and body, lived under the law, experienced suffering and temptation in life and died a cursed death on a cross.

### BIBLICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In the ESV translation of Scripture, *tapeinōsis* is rendered ‘humiliation’ on only three occasions: Isaiah 30:3; Acts 8:32-33; James 1:9-10. The concept, however, is not limited to the terminology.

### Philippians 2:5-8

Notwithstanding the importance of Isaiah 53, Paul’s words in Philippians 2:5-8 provide us with what is probably *the* key text of Scripture on the subject of Christ’s humiliation. Here we can only briefly summarise its teaching as a way of underscoring the significance of *humiliation* as a descriptive theological term.

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,  
but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,  
being born in the likeness of men.  
And being found in human form, he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.<sup>85</sup>*

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<sup>85</sup> Philippians 2: 5-8, ESV Bible (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

This passage provides the biblical impetus for several key aspects of Christ's humiliation:

- Although Christ was 'in the form of God', he 'did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped (*harpagmos*). This last phrase refers to the act of *seizing* a desired object. Paul's point then, is that although Christ was truly divine, of the same essence (*homoousios*) as the Father and the Holy Spirit, he did not claim the rights of that divinity or assume its benefits or glory in the condescension of his incarnation.
- Christ '...emptied himself by taking the form of a servant (*doulos*, slave), being born in the likeness of men.' Christ not only took on a human nature and lived as a man ('born in the likeness of men') but he did so as one who was under authority. In the incarnation, the Master assumed the role of slave; the Lord became a servant.
- Christ was 'obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' He not only lived a life of obedience to God's law but in so doing he also experienced real human suffering – culminating in his death. The phrase '...death, even death on a cross...' expresses what is taught elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Galatians 3:13 'Christ.. becoming a curse') that Christ not only experienced death in a physical sense, but a cursed death bearing the judgement of God for human sin.

Philippians 2 also directs us to three key stages in Christ's *humiliation* - each of which is given further emphasis elsewhere in Scripture.

### Incarnation

In the incarnation, the one who is truly God became man: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'<sup>86</sup> Neither here or in Philippians 2:7 ('born in the likeness of men'), is it said that Christ lost or 'gave up' his deity; yet he did lower (or 'humble') himself by assuming all that it means to be human. Humiliation then, firstly describes Christ's condescension, the Creator taking created human nature into union with himself.

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<sup>86</sup> John 1:18.

## Life

Philippians 2 also highlights the manner in which Christ assumed the role of a servant, lived in lowliness and experienced many forms of suffering. Thus, elsewhere Paul writes: ‘though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.’<sup>87</sup> This poverty was not only material, however, for Scripture also reveals that Jesus suffered in several ways: temptation, at the hands of the devil (Matthew 4:1-11); bereavement, following the death of Lazarus (John 11:35); hostility, from religious leaders (Matthew 12:14) and violence when he ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate (John 19:1). Christ’s humiliation thus involved not only the condescension of incarnation, but also his lowliness and sufferings in life. This is summarised well by the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.’<sup>88</sup>

## Death

The final stage of Christ’s humiliation described in Philippians 2 is his death (followed by his burial). We have already noted that Paul intended to highlight not only the physical nature of Christ’s death, but also its judicial import – on the cross, he was subject to the curse of God. Generally viewed as the lowest point in Christ’s humiliation, this is described elsewhere in Scripture. Isaiah stated: ‘he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace’.<sup>89</sup> Thus the words of Psalm 22:1 were ultimately fulfilled by Christ in his death (cf. Mark 15:34): ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Not only did Jesus suffer death, then – and a violent death at that – but in dying, he suffered the dereliction of God the Father and the punishment of God’s wrath for human sin.<sup>90</sup> In classical reformed theology Christ’s death and burial formed the final dimension of Christ’s humiliation.

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<sup>87</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9.

<sup>88</sup> Isaiah 53:3.

<sup>89</sup> Isaiah 53:5.

<sup>90</sup> Isaiah 53:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 John 2:2.



## A KEY DISTINCTION

There is one important distinguishing feature in the humiliation of Christ. It denotes not only something that was *done to* Christ, but something he voluntarily embraced. The apostle Paul speaks of Christ having ‘emptied *himself*’ and ‘humbled *himself*’. The experience then is not wholly passive, but both active and passive. Christ not only *suffers* poverty, shame and death, but does so as one who embraces such experiences for the sake of his people. This voluntary, or active, aspect of Christ’s humiliation is a subject we will return to later in this study.

## CHAPTER 4: THE HUMILIATION OF CHRIST IN CHURCH HISTORY

Lying behind John Flavel's exposition of the humiliation of Christ is an entire theological tradition which we will briefly consider here.

According to Louis Berkhof, the doctrine of the two states of Christ (humiliation and exaltation) came to the fore in 'the seventeenth century, though traces of it are in the writings of the Reformers, and even in some of the early Church Fathers.'<sup>91</sup> While humiliation was not formalised as a theological category until this later period, the aspects of Christ's person and work which the term denotes had been the subject of debate from the end of the apostolic age.

### ISSUES, ERRORS AND DEBATES

#### The Patristic Period & The Person of Christ

Since the doctrine of Christ's humiliation is primarily concerned with the Son of God's assumption of a human nature and his subsequent sufferings as a man, the most significant issues affecting the development of the doctrine emerged almost immediately as the church sought to understand more fully the nature of the incarnation and develop a biblical Christology. A. B. Bruce<sup>92</sup> contends that most theological errors regarding Christ's humiliation can be traced back to the 1<sup>st</sup>-century development of Ebionitism and Docetism.<sup>93</sup> Not only were both positions guilty of Christological heresy, but their underpinning assumptions carried significant implications for his humiliation, in particular. If, on the one hand, Christ is not truly God (as was held by the Ebionites and later the Arians), then although he could still

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<sup>91</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), 331.

<sup>92</sup> A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ in its Physical, Ethical and Official Aspects* (New York: HardPress Publishing, 1899), 1.

<sup>93</sup> The Ebionites were a first century Jewish sect which accepted that Jesus was the Messiah but rejected his virgin birth and deity; Docetism insisted that his physicality was illusionary and that He did not truly exist in human form. Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 74.

experience suffering, that humiliation which is bound up with his condescension is effectively robbed of its biblical force. On the other hand, if the humanity of Christ was a mere illusion (Docetism) then both the essence of his incarnation (in which he is said to have emptied himself by ‘taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men’<sup>94</sup>) and the true meaning of his atonement (in which he is said to have died as our substitute on the cross) are effectively destroyed.

Here the councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD), expressed important affirmations and denials concerning the two natures of Christ,<sup>95</sup> but also stressed the inseparable connection between our understanding of his humiliation and our wider Christology. For example, it was partly Christ’s infirmity as a man that led the Arians to the conclusion he could not be divine – their argument being that since God is impassible, it is not possible for Jesus to be God and yet suffer fear, sorrow and pain.<sup>96</sup> Against this, as Alister McGrath explains, Athanasius and the Alexandrian school placed particular emphasis on the language of Christ *assuming* a human nature, emphasising that this was an *addition* to His deity, rather than a replacement of it, or indeed his only nature.<sup>97</sup>

### Christ’s Moral & Intellectual Development

However, while the deity of Christ and the hypostatic union were the most significant doctrinal affirmations of the first few centuries, other, more-subtle aspects of Christology were also hotly debated. One of these was the subject of Christ’s moral development. Christ’s humiliation included a natural process of intellectual and moral growth as a man: ‘Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.’<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless some theologians rejected this understanding, believing that it robbed Christ’s humanity of

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<sup>94</sup> Philippians 2:7.

<sup>95</sup> The Council of Nicaea condemned Arius (who denied the deity of Christ) and affirmed that the Father and Son are *homoousios* (of the same essence); The Council of Chalcedon further affirmed the hypostatic union (the union of Christ’s human and divine natures in his one person), thereby refuting Nestorius (who denied the singularity of Christ’s person) and Eutyches (who espoused Monophysitism - the belief that Christ’s humanity was effectively swallowed up, or subsumed, by his divinity).

<sup>96</sup> Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ*, 247.

<sup>97</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 361.

<sup>98</sup> Luke 2:52; cf. Heb. 5:8

its perfection. Thus Cyril of Alexandria recognised no real growth in Christ's wisdom or character but instead reduced his intellectual and moral development to mere appearance. His argument was that if Christ was anything less than perfect at any stage of life, then he was necessarily blameworthy, and therefore sinful.<sup>99</sup>

Bruce argued that, to some extent, this discrepancy was the result of two different schools beginning at contrasting points: the Alexandrians began with Christ's divinity and made assumptions about his humanity deemed consistent with its union to the *Logos*. Meanwhile Eastern theologians tended to begin with his humanity, and made 'the union between the man and the *Logos* as intimate as was compatible with the reality of the humanity.'<sup>100</sup> The result, Bruce concluded, was that both schools fell short in different ways: the Alexandrians minimised the reality of Christ's human nature while Eastern theologians did a disservice to the unity of His person.<sup>101</sup> However, that distinction was not absolute. For example, Apollinaris of Laodicea believed that in the incarnation, the *Logos* took on flesh in the sense of a body but not in the sense of human intellect. His argument was that had Christ assumed a human mind as well as body, then it would be possible for his human nature to be severed from his divinity.<sup>102</sup> Like the Alexandrians then, he too minimised Christ's humanity.

### The Extent of Christ's Temptation

Closely related to the subject of Christ's moral and intellectual development, the extent to which he suffered temptation has also been much debated. Despite the teaching of Luke 4:1-3, Hilary of Poitiers (4<sup>th</sup> c.) believed that Christ's body was not subject to the pain, weaknesses or temptations associated with human life: 'She [Mary] brought forth a body, but one conceived of the Holy Ghost; a body possessing inherent reality, but with no infirmity in its nature. That body was truly and indeed body, because it was born of the Virgin: but it was above the weakness of our body, because it had its beginning in a spiritual conception.'<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, *Adversus Nestorium*, 153 & 444.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>102</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 83.

<sup>103</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, X. 35, accessed on January 13, 2022, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3302.htm>.

Hilary struggled with taking at face value those passages in the New Testament (beloved of the Arians) that suggested that Christ experienced a deep humiliation in tasting fear, weakness and suffering. While Arians regarded these elements in the biblical testimony as incompatible with the orthodox emphasis on the *homousion*, he read them within a different framework of interpretation altogether.<sup>104</sup> In this perspective, as Bruce explains, ‘there is no life-experience of temptation, but only a dramatic spectacle – a God wearing a mask, and playing the part of a tempted man.’<sup>105</sup>

At the other extreme, however, was the view popularised by the 8th-century Adoptionists.<sup>106</sup> While claiming to affirm Christ’s sinlessness, they went so far as to say that he not only suffered physical infirmity, but that he participated in a morally vitiated human nature. Out of a desire to affirm the completeness of Christ’s humanity, they said that at birth he partook of the ‘old man’ and therefore belonged to the law of perdition and was subject to the law of sin and the curse of death.<sup>107</sup>

This perspective was not confined to the 8<sup>th</sup> century however; it was revived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both by the German pastor Gottfried Menken and the Scottish divine Edward Irving. Its influence has continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries through the patronage of Karl Barth, T.F. Torrance and others.<sup>108</sup> Barth’s exposition is representative: although he espoused Christ’s innocence in the sense that he did not commit any sin, yet in attempting to affirm the reality of his participation in our humanity, he argued that the Son of God took on a nature that was sinful like ours: ‘He is a man as we are, equal to us as a creature, as a human individual, but also equal to us in the state and condition into which our disobedience has brought us.’<sup>109</sup> In Christ, he said, we see human nature ‘in its perversion and corruption.’<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Cf. De Trinitate X.23-24 and the representative comments of Ellen Scully in “*The Assumption of All Humanity in Saint Hilary of Poitiers’ Tractatus super Psalmos*” (PhD diss., Marquette University, Wisconsin, 2011), 1.

<sup>105</sup> Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ*, 248-249.

<sup>106</sup> Adoptionism, which emerged in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, held a non-Trinitarian view of God. Its advocates believed that the person of Christ was only adopted as the Son of God at his baptism.

<sup>107</sup> Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ*, 249-251.

<sup>108</sup> For example, Thomas G Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2006).

<sup>109</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I, ii, G.W. Bromiley & T.F Torrance (eds.) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 151.

<sup>110</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III, ii, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 26.

In summary then, whereas Hilary underestimated Christ's humanity, the Adoptionists and those who followed suit overstated it to the extent that they viewed him as being tainted by the sin of Adam like the rest of mankind.

### The Necessity of Christ's Humiliation

Another significant historical distinction concerns the question of whether or not Christ's humiliation was actually necessary. Augustine and later Thomas Aquinas held to a position of *hypothetical necessity*, that God could have chosen to save his people without an atonement for their sin, but that Christ's atoning work produced the greatest number of advantages and most fully exhibited His grace.<sup>111</sup> In contrast, theologians such as Calvin and John Owen held to a position, not of *absolute necessity* (as though the atonement itself was a necessity somehow objectively imposed on God), but of *consequent absolute necessity*, since given man's fallen condition and God's election to everlasting life, the sacrifice of his own Son was a necessity. In this view, the perfections of God's own nature dictate that for sinners to be reconciled, there must be a satisfaction of divine justice, and this can only be accomplished by way of penal substitutionary atonement - a blood-bought redemption.<sup>112</sup> Thus Calvin writes: 'The situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him. Hence, it was necessary for the Son of God to become for us "Immanuel, that is, God with us" (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23).'<sup>113</sup> The Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck underlined this necessity:

The incarnation as well as the satisfaction of Christ's death are not necessary in any absolute sense; they are not a necessity imposed on God from without or from which he cannot except, but they are necessary actions that are in agreement with his attributes and display them most splendidly to his glory...For his own sake, he sent his Son into the world as an expiation for our sins that his attributes and perfections

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<sup>111</sup> John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 6

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II, XII, 1, p. 464.

might thus be manifested...God as the absolutely righteous and holy one hates sin with divine hatred...Sin cannot exist without eliciting God's hatred and punishment.<sup>114</sup>

### Creational v Redemptive Incarnation

Related to the previous debate was the question of whether Christ would have come in the flesh had the fall never occurred. The 11<sup>th</sup>-century Benedictine theologian, Rupert of Deutz believed that Christ's incarnation was bound up with God's purposes in creation and therefore would have occurred had sin never entered the world. Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, argued that the incarnation was wholly necessitated by the existence of sin. The point has continued to attract discussion, on the grounds that 'Such a stupendous fact as the incarnation cannot be contingent, and cannot find its cause in sin as an accidental and arbitrary act of man. It must have included in the original plan of God.'<sup>115</sup> But, as Berkhof argues:

Scripture invariably represents the incarnation as conditioned by human sin. The force of such passages as Luke 19:10; John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; I John 3:8; and Phil. 2:5-11 is not easily broken...There is but one plan of God, and this plan includes sin and the incarnation from the very beginning. In the last analysis, of course, the incarnation, as well as the whole work of redemption was contingent, not on sin, but on the good pleasure of God. The fact that Christ also has cosmical significance need not be denied, but this too is linked up with His redemptive significance in Eph. 1:10,20-23; Col. 1:14-20.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Abridged in One Volume*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 437.

<sup>115</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 333

<sup>116</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 334.

### The *Communicatio Idiomatum*

A divergence of views on the *communicatio idiomatum* between the Reformed and Lutheran traditions also carries with it significant implications for our understanding of Christ's humiliation. The Lutheran tendency to see Christ's human nature being clothed with divine properties tended towards a compromise of that nature as being no longer *our* humanity. Indeed, as a general rule, whereas the Lutheran Church tended to emphasise the majesty of Christ's humanity, the Reformed emphasised its reality and whereas the Lutherans saw Christ's exaltation as the dominant lens through which Christ was viewed, Reformed Christology viewed him primarily through the lens of his humiliation on the basis that it is in this state that he is most knowable and needs to be known.<sup>117</sup>

In summary then, the main issues pertaining to Christ's humiliation through the post-Reformation period could be classified as anthropological, experiential, and philosophical. In short, controversies tended to arise because of a divergence of views on the precise nature of the humanity Christ assumed, the character of his experience on earth, and the necessity of his condescension in the purposes of God.

In their understandable concern to uphold and defend Christ's divinity, some of the Fathers, such as Hilary, struggled to accept a Christ whose humanity could be subject to ordinary pain and weakness. Gnostics of course went even further, viewing Christ's humanity as nothing more than a mere illusion. In this context the value of the Council of Chalcedon lay in the fact that while the Council at Nicaea in 325 AD had affirmed Christ's deity, it further emphasised that Christ was 'like us in all respects, apart from sin' thus crystallising the fact that it is in the one *person* of the Son of God that the divine and human natures are united. While they are united in his person, they are never mixed or confused with each other.

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<sup>117</sup> Bruce, 116.



## CONFESSIONS & CREEDS

Although humiliation was not employed as a major Christological category until the post-reformation period, the sufferings of Christ which gave rise to the doctrine have been articulated throughout the literature of the church. However, her creeds and confessions have tended to focus much more on his incarnation and death, with less emphasis on his sufferings in life.

### Early Church Confessions: Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian Creeds

The earliest example of this is seen in the Apostles' Creed: 'Jesus Christ...conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary, Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into Hades.'<sup>118</sup> This was developed further by the *Nicene Creed* in 325AD: Christ 'for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; And suffered and was buried'.<sup>119</sup> The Chalcedonian *Definition of the Faith* made only the slightest of alterations to this, replacing the statement that Christ was 'made man' by He 'lived as a man'.<sup>120</sup> The *Athanasian Creed* stated that Christ is 'man, of the substance of his mother, born in the world...of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting' and that he 'suffered for our salvation' and 'descended into hell'.<sup>121</sup>

### Confessions of the Reformation Period: Scots, Belgic, Heidelberg, Westminster

While the first five centuries saw the church affirming Christ's incarnation and death, not until the time of the Protestant Reformation did confessions begin to explicitly highlight his sufferings in life.

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<sup>118</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds Of Christendom* Vol.1 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 21

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>120</sup> T. Herbert Bindley, ed., *The Ecumenical Documents Of The Faith* (London: Methuen & Co., 1899), 294.

<sup>121</sup> Thomas Hartwell Horne, *A Concise History And Analysis Of The Athanasian Creed* (London: T. Cadell, 1834), 13-15.

Perhaps most significant here was the *Westminster Confession*: Christ: ‘was made under the law, and did perfectly fulfil it, endured the most grievous torments immediately in His soul, and most painful sufferings in His body; was crucified, and died; was buried, and remained under the power of death; yet saw no corruption.’<sup>122</sup> More significant still, it was at the Westminster Assembly that the term *humiliation* was first used in a confessional context. The Larger Catechism stated that, ‘The estate of Christ’s humiliation was that low condition, wherein he for our sakes, emptying himself of his glory, took upon him the form of a servant, in his conception and birth, life, death and after his death, until his resurrection.’<sup>123</sup> It further defined the doctrine by dividing it into three stages: Christ’s birth, life and death.<sup>124</sup> Not only did this become the dominant way of categorising Christ’s sufferings in the generations that followed (particularly in the Puritan tradition, including John Flavel), it also highlighted aspects of his humiliation on which previous confessions had been largely silent. For example, concerning his birth, it stated that Christ was ‘made of a woman of low estate...with divers circumstances of more than ordinary abasement.’<sup>125</sup> Regarding his life, it explained that Christ humbled himself by ‘subjecting himself to the law...conflicting with the indignities of the world, temptations of Satan, and infirmities in his flesh, whether common to the nature of man, or particularly accompanying that low condition.’<sup>126</sup> Then, especially in relation to Christ’s death, the divines affirmed:

Having been betrayed by Judas, forsaken by his disciples, scorned and rejected by the world, condemned by Pilate, and tormented by his persecutors; having also conflicted with the terrors of death, and the powers of darkness, felt and borne the weight of God’s wrath, he laid down his life an offering for sin, enduring the painful, shameful, and cursed death of the cross.<sup>127</sup>

In this way the Westminster divines expounded in considerable detail what had hitherto been recorded in summary form by the early church councils.

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<sup>122</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 48.

<sup>123</sup> Question 46 of the Larger Catechism, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 150.

<sup>124</sup> Questions 47-49 ask how Christ humbled himself in his conception and birth, life and death.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 151.

To a lesser extent, the *Scots Confession* (1560) and *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), had already elaborated somewhat on the statements of earlier creeds, but unlike Westminster had not employed 'humiliation' as a theological category, nor did they specify its triple stages. For example, concerning Christ's life and death, the *Scots Confession* explained that he 'suffered contradiction of sinners...was wounded and plagued for our transgressions...condemned in the presence of an earthly judge...suffered the cruel death of the cross, which was accursed by the sentence of God...(and)...the wrath of his Father which sinners had deserved.'<sup>128</sup> Heidelberg went further with regard to Christ's sufferings in life, but again emphasised his death as the apex of his humiliation: 'Christ my Lord has redeemed me from hellish anxieties and torment by the unspeakable anguish, pains and terrors which he suffered in his soul both on the cross and before.'<sup>129</sup>

One aspect of Christ's humiliation which would appear to have been uniquely stressed in the Heidelberg Catechism was its mention of Christ having suffered the wrath of God, not only in his death, but throughout his life: 'throughout his life on earth, but especially at the end of it, he bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race'.<sup>130</sup> A note sounded in the Belgic Confession (1561) was the way in which Christ suffered, not only on the cross, but also in his contemplation of it: 'feeling the terrible punishment which our sins had merited; insomuch *that his sweat became like unto drops of blood falling on the ground*'.<sup>131</sup> The Westminster *Larger Catechism* did allude to this, (stating in answer to the 50<sup>th</sup> question that Christ 'conflicted with the terrors of death, and the powers of darkness'<sup>132</sup>) but without the specificity of the *Belgic Confession*. But while the confessions and creeds are not uniform in their emphases, neither are they contradictory; rather, they complement one another in such a way that, when taken together, we are presented with a richer understanding and a fuller picture of Christ's humiliation.

Examining every nuance of the development of this doctrine in church history lies beyond the scope of this study, but our purpose here has been to underscore that when Flavel

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<sup>128</sup> The Scots Confession Ch. 9, in *Reformed Confessions Of The 16<sup>th</sup> Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 169-170.

<sup>129</sup> Heidelberg Catechism Q. 44, in *Reformed Confessions*, 312.

<sup>130</sup> Heidelberg Catechism Q. 37, in *Reformed Confessions*, 311.

<sup>131</sup> "The Belgic Confession Article 21, in *Reformed Confessions*, 203.

<sup>132</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Larger Catechism Question 50, 152.

expounded the humiliation of Christ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century he did not do so in a historical vacuum. Although his writings and sermons were primarily grounded in the teachings of Scripture, they also benefited from the debates and confessional documents of the previous 1500 years. Examples of this will be highlighted later in our study, but first we must turn our attention to Flavel's approach to this doctrine in the mid-late 1600s. In particular, we will examine: the theological context within which Flavel expounded this doctrine; what, for Flavel, the humiliation of Christ includes and what his *Fountain* series specifically emphasises.

## CHAPTER 5: THE CONTEXT AND CONTENT OF HUMILIATION

The central section of this thesis, to which we now come, will be divided into three parts:

1. The context in which Flavel approached Christ's humiliation and what, for him, it includes – its main categories
2. What, in particular, Flavel emphasised concerning Christ's humiliation
3. How Flavel preached Christ's humiliation – his hermeneutical method and homiletical style

### HUMILIATION IN CONTEXT

We have already established that the humiliation of Christ was a dominant theme in Flavel's preaching. But it is important to note that his exposition was not done in a vacuum. Instead, for Flavel, Christ's humiliation was positioned both within a wider soteriological framework and against the ultimate backdrop of his personal primeval glory.

In soteriological terms, Flavel viewed Christ's humiliation through four lenses: God's covenant of redemption; God's eternal love for His people; Christ as the only Mediator, and his fulfilment of the offices of Prophet, Priest and King.

#### The Fulfilment of God's Covenant of Redemption

For Flavel, Christ's humiliation and the salvation it accomplished are ultimately understood against the backdrop of the covenant of redemption – which he distinguishes from the covenant of grace. In the former, 'it is God the Father, and Jesus Christ, that mutually covenant' whereas in the latter, 'it is God and man'<sup>133</sup> These covenants also differ in both their requirements and their ends. Whereas the covenant of redemption 'required of Christ that he should shed his blood', the covenant of grace 'required of us that we believe'<sup>134</sup> and

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<sup>133</sup> *Works* I, 53.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

whereas in the covenant of redemption the Father promised to Christ all dominion and a name above every name, in the covenant of grace he promises grace and glory to all who believe.<sup>135</sup>

In this way, Flavel shared a distinction that can be traced back into earlier reformed theology, although the first use of the term ‘covenant of redemption’ is usually traced back to David Dickson’s address to the Church of Scotland’s 1638 General Assembly.<sup>136</sup> He spoke of ‘a covenant of redemption betwixt God and the Mediator Christ, preceeding the Covenant of Grace and salvation made betwixt God and the faithfull Man through Christ’.<sup>137</sup>

Flavel chose Isaiah 53:2 (‘For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him’) as a text from which to expound the covenant of redemption, emphasising Christ’s humiliation as a key to its fulfilment. While other texts - such as Psalm 2 and 110 - were appealed to as a basis for this covenant Flavel did not view these as having the same emphasis on the necessity of Christ’s sufferings for its success. Thus while the subject of this particular sermon is the covenant between the Father and the Son - and not Christ’s sufferings *per se* – in Flavel’s mind it is this covenant that was fulfilled when Christ ‘poured out his soul to death’ and was ‘numbered with the transgressors.’<sup>138</sup>

Flavel explains that although it was God the Son in particular who would experience humiliation, yet the Father’s promises to him were vital to its efficacy. He highlights five such promises.

Firstly, the Father would ‘invest him [Christ], and anoint him to a three-fold office’ (Prophet, Priest and King).<sup>139</sup> It was in his fulfilment of these offices – sealed to him by the Father - that

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>136</sup> Adam Embry, “*John Flavel’s Theology of the Holy Spirit*”, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 14.4 (2010): 84-99.

<sup>137</sup> Alexander Peterkin, ed., *Records of the Kirk of Scotland, Containing the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assemblies, from the Year 1638 Downwards* (Edinburgh, 1843), 159. Cited in Embry, 86

<sup>138</sup> Isaiah 53:12, ESV Bible.

<sup>139</sup> *Works* 1, 55.

Christ ‘became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption’.<sup>140</sup> The Son fulfils this threefold office, yet his ability to do so is in part due to his being equipped and set apart for that purpose by the Father.

Secondly, citing Isaiah 42:5-7, Flavel emphasises that the Son’s ability to undertake his work was also in part due to the Father’s promise, that he would ‘stand by him, and assist and strengthen him for it.’<sup>141</sup> In this context, Flavel adopts a favoured preaching technique, enlivening his exposition by an imaginary dialogue between the Father and the Son: ‘I will underprop and support thy humanity, when it is even overweighted with the burden that is to come upon it, and ready to sink down under it’.<sup>142</sup> Thus the Father not only anoints the Son for his work, but also undertakes to uphold him as he performs each part of it.

Thirdly, the Father was active in the context of the humiliation of his Son in the way he promised its soteriological success. This Flavel derives from Isaiah 53:10 - ‘he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.’ He comments: ‘He shall not begin, and not finish; he shall not shed his invaluable blood upon hazardous terms; but shall see and reap the fruits thereof’.<sup>143</sup> For Flavel then, Christ’s accomplishments were secured before they even began by virtue of the Father’s will and promise to that end.

Fourthly, Flavel Christ would have taken great encouragement in his humiliation from the fact that, while he was being despised and rejected by men<sup>144</sup>, yet he continued to be the delight of His Father:

The Father promiseth to accept him in his work, though millions should certainly perish...the Father manifests the satisfaction he had in him, and in his work, even

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<sup>140</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:30, ESV Bible.

<sup>141</sup> *Works* 1, 56.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, 56.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>144</sup> Isaiah 53:3, ESV Bible.

while he was about it upon the earth, when there came such a 'voice from the excellent glory, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'<sup>145</sup>

Finally, Flavel highlights the fact that the Father not only promised Christ success, but also personal exaltation: 'He engaged to reward him highly for his work, by exalting him to singular and super-eminent glory and honour, when he should have dispatched and finished it.'<sup>146</sup> Speaking of Christ's resurrection, he says:

For then did the Lord wipe away the reproach of his cross, and invested him with such glory, that he looked like himself again. As if, the Father had said, now thou hast again recovered thy glory, and this day is to thee as a new birth-day.<sup>147</sup>

Flavel's point here is that Christ embraced suffering with the Father's vindication and reward in view. He did not experience humiliation in a vacuum, but instead with the Father's glorious reward in his sights. Moreover, his willingness to embark upon the work is to some extent his response to all that the Father has promised to him:

Upon these terms, he is content to be made flesh, to divest, as it were, himself of his glory, to come under the obedience and malediction of the law, and not to refuse any, the hardest sufferings it should please his Father to inflict on him.<sup>148</sup>

Notwithstanding this focus on the role of the Father, Flavel is equally keen to emphasise the voluntary nature of the Son's humiliation. He explains in expounding Philippians 2:8:

It is not said he was humbled but he humbled himself: he was willing to stoop to this low and abject state of sin for us. And, indeed, the voluntariness of his humiliation made it most acceptable to God, and singularly commends the love of Christ to us, that he would chuse to stoop to all this ignominy, suffering, and abasement for us.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Works* I, 57.

<sup>146</sup> *Works* I, 57.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>148</sup> *Works* I, 57.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 225.



The same point is made even more forcefully in a sermon on John 17:19, “Of the Solemn CONSECRATION of the MEDIATOR”:

It is not, *I am sanctified*, as if he had been merely passive in it, as the lambs that typed him out were, when plucked from the fold; but it is an active verb he useth here, *I sanctify myself*; he would have none think that he died out of a necessity of compulsion, but out of choice...although it is often said his Father sent him, and gave him; yet his heart was as much set on that work, as if there had been nothing but glory, ease, and comfort in it; he was under no constraint, but that of his own love.<sup>150</sup>

Thus Flavel sees no contradiction or tension between the assertion that the Son was sent and commissioned by the Father and that he came of his own volition. Both are equally true. Father and Son *together* are actively involved in the humiliation which only the latter would experience.

### The Fullest Expression Of God’s Love

The second soteriological lens through which Flavel viewed the humiliation of Christ was God’s redemptive love for his people. Here, he embraced the threefold classification of God’s love as defined by the scholastics, and fully manifested in Christ’s appearing on the world stage: God’s love of benevolence (his desire to do good to those he loves); his love of beneficence (his actual doing good to those he loves) and his love of complacency (his delight in doing good to those he loves).<sup>151</sup> Preaching on John 3:16, he notes, “the gift of Christ is the highest and fullest manifestation of the love of God to sinners, that ever was made from eternity to them.”<sup>152</sup> Citing 1 John 4:10, he asks rhetorically:

May we not say, that to have a being, a being among the rational creatures, therein is love? To have our life carried so many years like a taper in the hand of providence, through so many dangers, and not yet put out in obscurity, therein is love? To have

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 97-98.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 64.

food and raiment, convenient for us, beds to lie on, relations to comfort us, in all these is love? Yea, but if you speak comparatively, in all these there is no love, to the love expressed in sending or giving Christ for us: These are great mercies in themselves; but compared to this mercy, they are all swallowed up, as the light of candles when brought in the sun-shine. No, no, herein is love, that God gave Christ for us.<sup>153</sup>

Flavel stresses the importance of considering *how* Christ was given – what his being given entailed and was for – and secondly, on what basis his being given constituted the highest manifestation of God’s love.

In terms of *how* Christ was given, God gave his Son for, and to, death. Citing Acts 2:23, he states:

Look, as the Lamb under the Law was separated from the flock, and set apart for a sacrifice; though it were still living, yet was intentionally, and preparatively given, and consecrated to the Lord: so Jesus Christ was, by the counsel and purpose of God, thus chosen, and set apart for his service.<sup>154</sup>

Although both Father and Son continued to operate with perfect divine love for each other, yet there was a separation of sorts caused by the latter’s condescension: ‘His giving Christ, implies a parting with him, or setting him...at some distance from himself for a time. There was a kind of parting betwixt the Father and the Son, when he came to tabernacle in our flesh.’<sup>155</sup> Moreover, Flavel emphasises the fact that the Father not only gave his Son to death, but gave him ‘into the hands of justice to be punished...even as condemned persons are.’<sup>156</sup> Here, we see an example of the powerful and imaginative way in which he often emphasises his point:

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<sup>153</sup> *Works* I, 64-65.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

The Lord, when the time was come that Christ must suffer did, as it were, say, O all ye roaring waves of my incensed justice, now swell as high as heaven, and go over his soul and body; sink him to the bottom; let him go, like Jonah, his type, into the belly of hell, unto the roots of the mountains. Come all ye raging storms, that I have reserved for this day of wrath, beat upon him, beat him down, that he may not be able to look up...Go justice, put him upon the rack, torment him in every part, till all his “bones *be* out of joint *and his* “heart within him *be* melted as wax in the midst of his bowels,” Psal. 22.14.<sup>157</sup>

Finally Flavel draws attention to the fact that God’s giving of his Son was for the benefit of his people: ‘God hath giveth him as bread to poor starving creatures, that by faith they might eat and live...Bread and water are the two necessities for the support of natural life; God hath given Christ, you see, to be all that, and more, to the spiritual life.’<sup>158</sup> Similarly, in his exposition of question 22 of the Shorter Catechism (‘How did Christ, the Son of God become man?’) he states, ‘Those that be in Christ need not fear the denial or want of any other mercy; Rom. 8.32. He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all; how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?’<sup>159</sup>

In Flavel’s mind, then, God’s sending his Son, and thus, the Son’s humiliation, cannot be detached from, but is instead the expression of God’s loving concern to provide for all the needs of his people.

Having established what Christ’s being sent into the world involved, Flavel then explains the basis on which his humiliation was the fullest expression of God’s love for sinners. In particular, he emphasises the nearness and dearness of Christ to the Father; the extent of his sufferings in becoming a curse for sinners on the cross; the fact that Christ was the very best gift it was possible for the Father to give (‘the richest jewel in his cabinet’<sup>160</sup>); that he was

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>159</sup> *Works* VI, 179.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 67.

given for those who were enemies of God; and finally, that Christ was given freely, without there being any compulsion on the Father to send him.<sup>161</sup>

Although each of these factors points us to the love of God in sending his Son, Flavel believed that Christ's experience of the cross was the critical moment in his suffering and therefore the fullest manifestation of that love:

It melts our bowels, it breaks our heart, to behold our children striving in the pangs of death: but the Lord beheld his Son struggling under agonies that never any felt before him...To wrath, to the wrath, of an infinite God without mixture; to the very torments of hell was Christ delivered, and that by the hand of his own Father. Sure then that love must needs want a name, which made the Father of mercies deliver his only Son to such miseries for us.<sup>162</sup>

In this way, Flavel emphasises that Christ's death was the manifestation of God's love, not its cause – an important distinction made earlier by Calvin: 'The work of the atonement derives from God's love; therefore it has not established the latter.'<sup>163</sup>

However, as well as viewing Christ's humiliation as the greatest manifestation of the Father's love, Flavel emphasises that Christ's work was also the result of his own personal love towards his people. In his *Twelve Sacramental Meditations*, he explains:

Such was the love of Christ, that it did not only put him into danger of death, but put him actually unto death, yea the worst of deaths and that for his enemies. O what manner of love was this! We read of the love that Jacob had for Rachel, and how he endured both the cold of winter, and heat of summer, for her sake. But what is this to the love of Jesus, who for us endured the heat of God's wrath?<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 66-68.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>163</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II, XVI, 4. p 506.

<sup>164</sup> *Works* VI, 458.

‘Hence we learn the matchless love of Christ, that he should stoop to such a condition for us...’<sup>165</sup> The love of God for his people is, thus, the particular and personal love of both Father and Son.

### Christ as the Only Mediator

Significantly, immediately after a sermon on the incarnation, Flavel’s *Fountain of Life* includes three sermons focused on Christ as Mediator,<sup>166</sup> thus highlighting that the chief purpose of his humiliation was to end hostilities and make peace between, God and man:

There was indeed a sweet league of amity once between them, but it was quickly dissolved by sin ; the wrath of the Lord was kindled against man, pursuing him to destruction...And man was filled with unnatural enmity against God...this put an end to all friendly commerce and intercourse, between him and God.<sup>167</sup>

That enmity was cancelled and reconciliation accomplished by Christ because:

the infinite value of his blood and sufferings...was sufficient to stop the course of God’s justice, and render him not only placable, but abundantly satisfied and well pleased, even with those that before were enemies.<sup>168</sup>

### Fulfilment of the Divine Offices: Prophet, Priest and King

While the theme of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King can be traced back to Eusebius the fourth century Bishop of Caesarea,<sup>169</sup> this threefold office came to the fore in the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in Calvin’s emphasis on it as the means by which redemption is accomplished:

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<sup>165</sup> *Works* VI, 179.

<sup>166</sup> These are on: John 6:27, focusing on the authority by which Christ acted as Mediator; John 17:19, on Christ’s consecration to that work and 1 Timothy 2:5 explaining the nature of Christ’s mediation.

<sup>167</sup> *Works* 1, 110.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>169</sup> Eusebius, *History of the Church*, 1.3.8

The work of Christ consists not so much in his humility, nor only in his death, but in his total – active as well as passive – obedience as prophet, priest and king. Calvin, in his Genevan Catechism and in the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*, treated the work of Christ under the rubric of the threefold office and was, in time, followed in this by numerous Reformed, Lutheran, and Roman Catholic theologians.<sup>170</sup>

For Flavel, this reformed understanding is evident in the fact that 10 out of 42 sermons in the *Fountain of Life* series focus specifically on Christ's fulfilment of these offices since, 'SALVATION (as to the actual dispensation of it) is *revealed* by Christ as a *Prophet, procured* by him as a *Priest, applied* by him as a *King*.'<sup>171</sup> Although he did not preach a separate sermon on the fulfilment of these offices during Christ's exaltation,<sup>172</sup> he did specifically expound the necessity of his humiliation to that end in *The Necessity of Christ's Humiliation, in order to the Execution of all these His Blessed Offices for us ; and particularly of His Humiliation by Incarnation*.<sup>173</sup>

Explaining the soteriological significance of Christ's self-humbling, Flavel comments:

The divine did not assume the human nature necessarily, but voluntarily ; not out of indigence, but bounty ; not because it was to be perfected by it, but to perfect it, by causing it to lie as a pipe, to the infinite all-filling fountain of grace and glory, of which it is the great receptacle. And so, consequently, to qualify and prepare him for a discharge of his mediatorship, in the offices of our Prophet, Priest and King.<sup>174</sup>

Emphasising the importance of Christ's two natures (and his necessary assumption of human nature for that purpose) for the fulfilment of the three offices, Flavel explains:

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<sup>170</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in one volume* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 428.

<sup>171</sup> *Works* I, 143.

<sup>172</sup> For clarity, Flavel did believe that the fulfilment of the divine offices is achieved in part by Christ's state of exaltation; the point being made here is simply that this is not given the same emphasis in this particular sermon series.

<sup>173</sup> *Works* I, 223.

<sup>174</sup> *Works* I, 80.

Had he not this double nature in the unity of his person, he could not have been our Prophet: For, as God, he knows the mind and will of God...and as man is fitted to impart it suitably to us...As Priest, had he not been man, he could have shed no blood ; and if not God, it had been no adequate value for us...As King, had he not been man, he had been an heterogeneous, and so no fit head for us. And if not God, he could neither rule nor defend his body the Church.<sup>175</sup>

In Flavel's mind then, the humiliation of Christ enables his fulfilment of the divine offices in these particular ways: as Prophet, Christ's humanity becomes the basis on which he is able to convey the will of God in a way that can be comprehended by other men;<sup>176</sup> as Priest, his assumption of a human nature enables him to experience actual death, as our substitute, for our sins; and as King, his sharing in humanity's nature enables him to be a suitable ruler, one who was akin to his subjects.

Although the answer to question 25 of the Shorter Catechism speaks of Christ fulfilling the office of priest by both his sacrifice *and* his ongoing intercession, Flavel's exposition of this answer focuses almost exclusively on the former.<sup>177</sup> In other words, although he affirmed these two aspects of the priestly office, it is Christ's oblation (in the state of humiliation) rather than his intercession (in the state of exaltation) that holds the priority in his thinking. Similarly, although he did preach on the intercession of Christ in Heaven, of the five sermons that are devoted to his fulfilment of the Priestly Office, four of these focus on his death and only one on his exalted state.<sup>178</sup>

Flavel also gives more attention to his fulfilment of the Priestly office than to the offices of either Prophet or King. This is seen not only in the proportion of sermons he preached on

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>176</sup> Indeed, this same emphasis is seen in Flavel's exposition of question 23 of the shorter catechism where, in answer to the question, "What promises flow out of the prophetic office?" Flavel answers, "All promises of illumination, guidance, and direction flow out of Christ's prophetic office." *Works*, VI, 181.

<sup>177</sup> Only one of Flavel's 11 follow-up questions and answers mentions Christ's intercession, compared with seven which are concerned with his sacrifice. Flavel, *Works*, I, 183-185.

<sup>178</sup> *Works*, I, 131-188.

Christ's priesthood, and particularly on his death,<sup>179</sup> but also in the way his sermon, *Of the Necessity of Christ's humiliation, in order to the Execution of these his blessed Offices for us ; and particularly of his Humiliation by incarnation*<sup>180</sup> emphasizes this office almost to the exclusion of the other two. Here, Flavel's central purpose was to explain that it was because Christ was born in the likeness of men – even assuming man's sinless infirmities - that he was then able to be a 'Mediator of reconciliation', 'make up satisfaction for us'<sup>181</sup> and know 'experimentally what our wants, fears, temptations and distresses are' and therefore 'have compassion.'<sup>182</sup>

In other words, central to Christ's state of humiliation, as it relates to the divine offices, is his ability, as a man, to atone for the sins of his people and to then show empathy to his church as he continues to intercede for her.

Since Christ's humiliation is central to his fulfilment of the divine offices, it follows for Flavel that this 'state' – particularly Christ's death - is central to the Bible's claim that he is the only Mediator between God and Man:

Who but he that hath the divine and human nature in his single person, can be a fit day's-man to lay his hand upon both?...he is alone sufficient to reconcile the world to God by his blood, without accessions from any other. The virtue of his blood reached back as far as Adam, and reaches forward to the end of the world; and will be as fresh, vigorous, and efficacious then, as the first moment it was shed.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> In his "Fountain of Life" more than 20 sermons deal either directly or indirectly with Christ's fulfilment of the Priestly Office, compared to just two on his role as Prophet and four on the office of King.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 223.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 234-235.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 113.



## The Backdrop of Christ's Primeval Glory

It is clear from the second sermon of his *Fountain of Life* series, that Flavel believed it essential to view Christ's humiliation against the backdrop of his primeval glory. In his view it is only when we understand the Son's eternal glory and what he enjoyed before time, that we can begin to comprehend the profundity of his condescension and the extent of his sufferings for our sake.

Flavel employs Proverbs 8:30 ('Then was I by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him'<sup>184</sup>), as an expression of the condition of Christ in his pre-incarnate glory and as a way of emphasising, by contrast, the depths to which Christ descended in his state of humiliation. Following an opening statement of the 'doctrine', that '...the condition and state of Jesus Christ before his incarnation, was a state of the highest and most unspeakable delight and pleasure, in the enjoyment of his Father', and after a general description of the state of pre-incarnate glory, he highlights particular blessings which the Son enjoyed prior to his condescension. There are two points of stark contrast between the pre- and post- incarnate states: Firstly, that God the Creator should become a creature and secondly that the God who is holy should come in the likeness of sinful flesh. Furthermore, prior to the incarnation, the Son was not 'under the law'. Citing Galatians 4:4 Flavel notes:

I confess it was no disparagement to Adam in the state of innocency, to angels in their state of glory, to be under law to God; but it was an inconceivable abasement to the absolute independent Being to come under law: yea, not only under the obedience, but also under the malediction and curse of the law.<sup>185</sup>

Here, Flavel is making two distinct points in Christ's humiliation: first, Christ's subjection to the law put him far lower than the angels in their state of glory as well as lower than the pre-fall Adam. Despite their sinlessness, unlike Christ they only ever existed as created beings. In

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<sup>184</sup> Proverbs 8:30, King James Version.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 45.

addition, Christ not only became subject to the law's *demands*, but also its *curse*. Had Christ's only calling been to obey the law, that in itself would have constituted an unquantifiable debasement; the fact that he was also called to suffer on our behalf the consequences of the breach of the law is an altogether greater level of condescension.

Finally, Flavel highlights the fact that in his pre-incarnate state of glory, Christ was never liable to any of the weaknesses or sufferings that his incarnation entailed sorrow, poverty, shame and temptation:

There was no sorrowing or sighing in that bosom where he lay, though afterwards he became a "man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" ...He was never pinched with poverty and wants, while he continued in that bosom, as he was afterwards, when he said, "The foxes have holes, "and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of man hath "not where to lay his head," Matth. 8.20...He never underwent reproach or shame in that bosom, there was nothing but glory and honour reflected upon him by his Father, though afterwards he was despised and rejected of men...His holy heart was never offended with an impure suggestion or temptation of the devil: all the while he lay in that bosom of peace and love, he never knew what it was to be assaulted with temptations, to be besieged and battered upon by unclean spirits, as he did afterwards.<sup>186</sup>

Here Flavel seeks to evoke a sense of awe and wonder by eloquently delineating the immeasurable contrast between Christ's pre- and post- incarnate experience.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid, 45.

## THE CONTENT OF HUMILIATION

### Three Stages: Incarnation, Life and Death

Adopting the categorisation employed within questions 47-49 of the (Westminster) *Larger Catechism*, Flavel identifies three main stages of Christ's humiliation: incarnation, life and death.<sup>187</sup> Pinpointing its duration, he explains:

It continued from the first moment of his *incarnation*, to the very moment of his *vivification* and quickening in the grave. So the terms of it are fixed...from the time he was found in fashion as a man, that is from his incarnation, unto his death on the cross, which also comprehends the time of his abode in the grave ; so long his humiliation lasted.<sup>188</sup>

Flavel's exposition of the Catechism poses and answers only one question in relation to Christ's incarnation and death respectively, while five questions are answered pertaining to his life.<sup>189</sup> The balance of emphasis in *The Fountain of Life* sermons is, however, different: of the 30 sermons examining Christ's humiliation, 23 are focused on Christ's death or the events surrounding it, compared with just two that deal with his incarnation<sup>190</sup> and one which is specific to his sufferings in life.<sup>191</sup> That notwithstanding, Flavel does provide a systematic examination of these stages and of what each entailed.

### Incarnation

Beginning with the event of Christ's incarnation, Flavel pinpoints six aspects of humiliation related to this first 'stage'. Christ suffered humiliation in being born in the likeness of men: 'The incarnation of Christ was a most wonderful humiliation of him, inasmuch as he is

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<sup>187</sup> *Works* I, 225, 241.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, p. 225.

<sup>189</sup> *Works* VI, 186-187.

<sup>190</sup> *Works* I, 72, 223

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

brought into the rank and order of creatures.’<sup>192</sup> It would, Flavel emphasises, have been a ‘rude blasphemy’<sup>193</sup> to have spoken of the eternal God as being born in time, the Creator as a creature and the ‘Ancient of Days, as an infant of days,’<sup>194</sup> had it not been for the fact that Scripture plainly reveals it.

Moreover, Christ not only became a creature, but ‘an inferior creature, a man, and not an angel.’<sup>195</sup> Had he taken the form of an angel he would have still suffered abasement, but to a far lesser degree since he would have then lived in the highest state of the created realm: ‘For their *nature*, they are pure *spirits*; for their *wisdom*, *intelligences*; for their dignity, they are called *principalities and powers*; for their *habitations*, they are stiled the *heavenly host*; and for their *employment*, it is to behold the face of God in heaven.’<sup>196</sup> He further emphasises this point in his sermon ‘*Of Christ’s Wonderful Person*’ where he highlights the importance of the word ‘flesh’ in John 1:14: ‘the word *Flesh* is rather used here, than *Man*, on purpose to enhance the admirable condescension and abasement of Christ; there being more of vileness, weakness, and opposition to spirit in this word, than in that.’<sup>197</sup>

Flavel also emphasises that Christ not only assumed human nature, but he did so ‘...after sin had blotted out the original glory of it, and withered up the beauty and excellency thereof.’<sup>198</sup> We find the same emphasis elsewhere in his writings. For example in *England’s Duty under the Present Gospel Liberty* (1689) he explains that Christ assumed humanity ‘...after sin had blasted its beauty, and let in so many direful calamities upon it.’<sup>199</sup> His point is that Christ did not assume humanity in its *best* state, *before* the fall, but in its *worst* state, *after* sin, decay and brokenness had entered in. However, he is careful here to distinguish between a fallen nature and a nature which contained (some of) the effects of the fall:

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<sup>192</sup> *Works* I, 226.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

<sup>199</sup> *Works* IV, 115.

The body of Christ...was so sanctified, that no taint or spot of original pollution remained in it. But yet though it had not intrinsic native uncleanness in it, it had the effects of sin upon it ; yea, it was attended with the whole troop of human infirmities, that sin at first let into our common nature, such as hunger, thirst, weariness, pain, mortality, and all these natural weaknesses and evils that clog our miserable natures, and make them groan from day to day under them.<sup>200</sup>

In this way Flavel demonstrated theological precision (distinguishing his view of Christ's humanity from the heterodoxy of the Adoptionists, for example) while at the same time powerfully expounding the extent to which the Son of God shared in our weaknesses.

In addition, Christ's humiliation lay in the fact that his divine glory was so veiled and hidden that '...he looked not like himself, as God; but as a poor, sorry, contemptible sinner, in the eyes of the world...' <sup>201</sup> Later in the same sermon, speaking in particular about the implications of Christ having been circumcised, he adds,

...though he was pure and holy, yet this ordinance passing upon him, seemed to imply as if corruption had indeed been in him, which must be cut off by mortification...Christ did not only veil his sovereignty by subjection but was also represented as a sinner to the world, though most holy and pure in himself.<sup>202</sup>

Here, as well as in his exposition of question 27 of the Shorter Catechism,<sup>203</sup> Flavel is keen to emphasise that having been honoured, adored and worshipped by the angels from eternity, Christ's glory was now veiled to such an extent that he appeared as a common sinner. He makes the further striking point that the communion which Christ enjoyed with his Father after his incarnation was much inferior to that which he experienced before:

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 228.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, p. 228.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 236-237

<sup>203</sup> In this exposition, Flavel explains that in Christ's incarnation his divine glory was obscured as he assumed man's sinless infirmities. Flavel *Works* 6, 186.

Think not...but the Lord Jesus lived at a high and unimitable rate of communion with God while he walked here in the flesh: but yet to live by faith, as Christ here did, is one thing; and to be in the bosom of God, as he was before, is another.<sup>204</sup>

In Flavel's mind, this contrast between the fellowship which the Son enjoyed with the Father before and after his condescension is crucial to our understanding the extent of His humiliation.<sup>205</sup>

Finally, the fact that Christ was born to lowly parents and in humble circumstances is highlighted: 'He will be born...not of the blood of nobles, but of a poor woman in Israel, espoused to a carpenter: yea, and that too, under all the disadvantages imaginable not in his mother's house, but an inn; yea, in the stable too.'<sup>206</sup>

By gathering these points from Scripture, Flavel is endeavouring to highlight the enormity of Christ's condescension and thus the depths to which he was willing to stoop in order to procure salvation for his people. This was a common emphasis in Puritan preaching. John Owen, for example, similarly contrasts the condescension of the 'second Adam' with the attempted exaltation of the first:

As Adam sinned and fell by leaving that state of absolute service which was due unto him, proper unto his nature, inseparable from it,- to attempt a state of absolute dominion which was not his own, not due unto him, not consistent with his nature; so the Son of God, being made the second Adam, relieved us by descending from a state of absolute dominion, which was his own – due to his nature – to take on him a state of absolute service, which was not his own, nor due unto him.<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>205</sup> The focus, in the second sermon in *The Fountain of Life*, on Christ in his Primeval Glory makes clear that, for Flavel, seeing Christ in his pre-incarnate state is a key to understanding the extent of his debasement.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 229.

<sup>207</sup> John Owen, *Works I*, Ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 206.

## Life

When Flavel turns attention to Christ's humiliation in life, he observes that the first thing this entailed was his need to submit to the ceremonial ordinances which belonged to Israel (for example, circumcision) and live in 'subjection to the law'.<sup>208</sup> This was to put an end to those ordinances and to fulfil all righteousness.<sup>209</sup> Moreover, Christ's humiliation in this respect consisted in two elements: he thus obliged himself to keep the whole law, even though he was the giver of that law; and, as we have noted, he was thereby presented to the world as if he were a sinner.<sup>210</sup>

Another feature of this humiliation in life was the persecution Christ endured. Referring to Herod's desire to destroy him at the time of his infancy, Flavel asks, rhetorically, 'The child of a beggar may claim the benefit and protection of law, as his birth-right; and must the Son of God be denied it!'<sup>211</sup> He explains, 'how great a humiliation is this to the Son of God, not only to become an infant, but in his infancy, to be hurried up and down, and driven out of his own land as a vagabond!'<sup>212</sup> Christ thus experienced 'the revilings and contradictions of sinners.'<sup>213</sup>

In addition, Christ lived his entire life in a state of material poverty. He was 'so poor, that he was never owner of a house to dwell in, but lived all his days in other men's houses, or lay in the open air. His outward condition was more neglected and destitute than that of the birds of the air, or beasts of the earth.'<sup>214</sup> Added to this was his experience of temptation by Satan:

What can you imagine more burdensome to him that was brought up from eternity with God, delighting in the holy Father, to be now shut up into a wilderness with the

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<sup>208</sup> *Works* VI, 187.

<sup>209</sup> *Works* I, 235.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid*, 236.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, 238.

<sup>213</sup> *Works* VI, 187.

<sup>214</sup> *Works* I, 238.

Devil, there to be baited so many days and have his ears filled, though not defiled, with horrid blasphemy?<sup>215</sup>

While Flavel does not provide the in-depth exposition of Christ's temptations found in other Puritans,<sup>216</sup> he does reflect on his experience of and resistance to them: 'Satan...saw what he attempted on Christ was as impossible as to batter the body of the sun with snow-balls...the prince of this world came, and found nothing in him...He was not internally *defiled*, though externally assaulted.'<sup>217</sup>

Furthermore, on a point less commonly emphasised, Flavel highlighted that Christ suffered in the extent of his sympathy towards other people:

For he, much more than Paul, could say, *who is afflicted, and I burn not?* He lived all his time as it were in an hospital among the sick and the wounded. And so tender was his heart, that every groan for sin, or under the effects of sin, pierced him so, that it was truly said, "himself bare our sickness, and took our infirmities," Matth. 8.16, 17.'<sup>218</sup>

Flavel was not a speculative or creative theologian. But he was nevertheless a penetrating pastoral theologian, expressing often overlooked insights and deductions from the Scriptures. A further example of this is seen in the final point he makes in connection with Christ's humiliation in life. Explaining that Christ was received by the world with a depth of ingratitude inconsistent with who he was and why he came, he comments: 'When such a Saviour arrived, O with what acclamations of joy, and demonstration of thankfulness, should

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 239.

<sup>216</sup> For example, William Perkins argues that Christ's temptation included both the evil suggestions that were conveyed to his mind (by the devil) and the sorrow, or vexation, he then experienced as a result of those suggestions. He also distinguishes between Christ's temptation and that experienced by his people. Stephen J. Yuille, Ed., *The Works of William Perkins* 1 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 94.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 240.



he have received? One would have thought they should even kiss the ground he trod upon: but instead of this, he was hated.'<sup>219</sup>

His point here is that Christ not only suffered the scorn of men, but that this was radically contrary to the reception that he ought to have been given, and therein lies another dimension of his suffering.

## Death

Unsurprisingly, in *The Fountain of Life* sermons, Flavel gives by far the greatest attention to Christ's death as the '...last and lowest step of (his) humiliation.'<sup>220</sup> 19 sermons are specifically devoted to this final stage.<sup>221</sup> These sermons focus on events that provided six 'preparatives'<sup>222</sup> on its significance of Christ's death: his prayer for the church (John 17:11); the institution of the Lord's Supper (Corinthians 11:23-25); his Garden of Gethsemane prayer to the Father (Luke 22:41-44); his betrayal at the hands of Judas (Matthew 26:47-49); his trial and condemnation (Luke 23:23-24), and his address to the daughters of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-28).<sup>223</sup> Taking Acts 2:23 as his text, Flavel then preached a sermon on the 'Nature and Quality of Christ's Death'.<sup>224</sup> Here he explains that Christ was 'not only put to death, but to the worst of deaths, even the death of the cross.'<sup>225</sup>

With this foundation in place, a further ten sermons focus on what Flavel calls, 'the *deportment* and carriage of dying Jesus.'<sup>226</sup> These highlight the work of God's providence manifested in the words affixed to Christ's cross (Luke 23:38), unpack the solitariness and meekness with which He faced His death (Zechariah 13:7), describe the patience which he

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 241.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 246

<sup>221</sup> For clarity, there are sermons in the *Fountain of Life* series additional to these 19, which also touch on Christ's death. However, those particular sermons are not included in Flavel's systematic treatment of Christ's humiliation and tend to deal with Christ's death as it relates to other doctrines, such as his Priesthood (see, for example 1: 143-188).

<sup>222</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, 246-319.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, 320.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid, 821.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, 246.

demonstrated in the face of such evil (Isaiah 53:7) and expound the seven last statements Christ uttered (Luke 23; John 19:27; Luke 23:43; Matthew 27:46; John 19:28; John 19:30; Luke 23:46).<sup>227</sup> He then turns his attention (in a sermon on John 19:41-42) to Christ's funeral and to its 'Manner, Reasons and Excellent Ends'<sup>228</sup> before preaching a final message on Isaiah 53:11 on the 'weighty Ends of Christ's Humiliation.'<sup>229</sup>

In the context of this sermon series, Flavel gives more attention to Christ's personal experience of humiliation than to its ends. Notwithstanding the fact that he did carefully expound both the purpose and achievements of Christ's death (as we will see shortly), the bulk of his preaching centred on the "what?" rather than the "why?" of Christ's assumption of human flesh. This is consistent with the focus of his exposition of Shorter Catechism question 27. There, although he cites Galatians 3:13 and thus acknowledges the fact that Christ's death redeemed us from the curse of the law, he does not further elaborate its soteriological significance. His immediate answer to his question, 'Wherein was Christ humbled in his death?' is to say, 'His death was painful and ignominious.'<sup>230</sup> Moreover, after citing Galatians 3:13 and Matthew 27:46, the emphasis of his final four 'inferences' is on Christ as our *example* in suffering rather on his redemptive accomplishments.<sup>231</sup>

While this emphasis is at first sight surprising, it needs to be set in context. Flavel is emphatic on the soteriological implications of Christ's death. Specifically, in his sermon on Isaiah 53:11, '*Wherein four weighty Ends of Christ's Humiliation are opened, and particularly applied*' he details Christ's redemptive accomplishments, and in particular that 'One principal design and end of shedding the blood of Christ was *to deliver his people from danger, the danger of that wrath which burns down to the lowest hell*.'<sup>232</sup> Here, it becomes clear that Flavel viewed God's wrath as being the epitome of hell's torments – he uses the word 'wrath' no less than 16 times in the same number of sentences.<sup>233</sup> Employing the typology of the sin offering for

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid, 333-454.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 454.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 467.

<sup>230</sup> *Works* VI, 187.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>232</sup> *Works* I, 469.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 469.

the unintentional sin of the people (Leviticus 4:20), he sees Christ's death as a work of atonement, by which he secured 'the reconciliation of the elect to God.'<sup>234</sup> This is expounded as both propitiation and expiation, by which combination Christ satisfied 'the justice of God for our sins.'<sup>235</sup> Thus the atonement is a work in which reparation was made, reconciliation accomplished, and all enmity between God and his people ceases.<sup>236</sup>

A further effect of Christ's death is sanctification. Here, Flavel's emphasis is not so much on the 'setting apart' of believers from unbelievers but on the washing away of sin and the purification of the believer. While it is the Spirit who sanctifies, it is Christ's blood which procures that sanctification.<sup>237</sup>

Finally, Flavel views Christ's death as a work which confirms the benefits and blessings of the new covenant (or testament) to all who are sanctified: 'Where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator, Heb. 9.16. So that now all the blessings and benefits bequeathed to believers in the last will and testament of Christ, are abundantly confirmed and secured to them by his death.'<sup>238</sup>

Thus all temporal, spiritual and eternal blessings are confirmed and conferred to the believer by virtue of Christ's death.<sup>239</sup>

These considerations provide a summary of what, in general for Flavel, Christ's humiliation includes. We must now turn to examine the particular features of his approach to this doctrine.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid, 474.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 475.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid, 474-475.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, 474-475.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid, 480.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, 481.

## CHAPTER 6: TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF CHRIST'S HUMILIATION

Having surveyed the wider context for and the general content of Flavel's exposition of Christ's humiliation, we now turn our attention to his particular emphases.

### HUMILIATION AS A TRINITARIAN WORK

#### The Work of the Father

In our discussion of the covenant of redemption, we noted Flavel's emphasis on the role and activity of the Father in the work of Christ's humiliation. In particular, the Father anointed his Son to the threefold office, upheld and encouraged him throughout his earthly life, delighting in his works, guaranteeing their soteriological success and promising that his humiliation would be rewarded by exaltation. Christ was helped in his state of humiliation by the Father's activity (his anointing, support), his favour (his taking delight in the Son's work) and his promises (of the reward of the gift of those for whom he died and his own exaltation to glory).<sup>240</sup> In addition, Christ was commissioned by his Father—necessarily so since:

what is done by commission and authority, is authentic, and most allowable among men. Had Christ come from heaven, and entered upon his mediatory work without a due call, our faith had been stumbled at the very threshold; but this greatly satisfies.<sup>241</sup>

Thus, for Flavel, the soteriological success of Christ's incarnation and subsequent works depended on the fact that both were the result of the Father's authority and accomplished according to his will.

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<sup>240</sup> *Works* I, 55-57.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

## The Work of the Holy Spirit

Flavel did not preach a specific sermon on the role of the Holy Spirit in Christ's humiliation. Nevertheless, in what was a hallmark of Puritan preaching,<sup>242</sup> he viewed the role of the third person of the Trinity as pivotal to Christ's success. In particular, he saw Christ's obedience as the result of an extraordinary anointing: 'He was sealed, not only by solemn designation, but also *supereminent and unparalleled sanctification*. He was anointed, as well as appointed to it. The Lord filled him with the Spirit, and that without measure, to qualify him for this service.'<sup>243</sup>

Furthermore, Flavel stresses the importance of the Holy Spirit's involvement at each stage of Christ's humiliation. The incarnation was:

the work of the whole Trinity, God the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit, forming or creating that nature; as if three sisters should make a garment betwixt them, which only one of them wears: yet, terminative, it was the act of the Son only; it was he only that was *made flesh*.

This emphasis wove its way deeply into the best of the later reformed tradition, as Herman Bavinck illustrates:

The incarnation has its presupposition and foundation in the Trinitarian being of God. The Trinity makes possible the existence of a mediator who participates in both the divine and human natures and thus unites God and humanity...The incarnation is the work of the whole Trinity; Christ was sent by the Father and conceived by the Holy Spirit.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Joel R. Beeke, & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine For Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 343.

<sup>243</sup> *Works* I, 90.

<sup>244</sup> Bavinck, 412.

Speaking specifically of the Spirit's work in Christ's conception, Flavel explains:

The human nature was united to the second person miraculously and extraordinarily, being supernaturally framed in the womb of the Virgin, by the over-shadowing power of the Highest, Luke 1.34, 35. By reason whereof it may truly and properly be said to be the fruit of the womb, not of the loins of men, nor by man. And this was necessary to exempt the assumed nature from the stain and pollution of Adam's sin, which it wholly escaped; inasmuch as he received it not, as all others do, in the way of ordinary generation, wherein original sin is propagated.<sup>245</sup>

While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine in detail Flavel's understanding of the hypostatic union, it is clear that for him both Christ's humanity and its holiness were dependent on the creative and enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Although the Son took to himself 'a true body and reasonable soul'<sup>246</sup>, his conception by the Spirit ensured that, unlike us, he was born without sin.

#### ACTIVE AND PASSIVE OBEDIENCE

Flavel understood Christ's humiliation specifically as obedience. Furthermore he shared the approach of those reformed theologians who expounded this obedience as both active and passive.<sup>247</sup> In particular, expounding Romans 5:19 ('For as by the one man's disobedience, many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous'), he stresses that the need for both active and passive obedience is related to mankind's twofold obligation to God:

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<sup>245</sup> *Works* 1, 76.

<sup>246</sup> Question 22, Westminster Shorter Catechism

<sup>247</sup> This division was debated at the Westminster Assembly, partly due to a concern that emphasising the imputation of Christ's active obedience might, inadvertently, give credence to Antinomian teaching. Flavel himself acknowledges this concern: 'I know there are some that doubt whether Christ's active obedience have any place here [in his death], and so whether it be imputed as any part of our righteousness.' *Works* Vol. I, pp. 180-181. Although the (Westminster) *Confession of Faith* does not use the terms Active and Passive explicitly, this twofold delineation is implied in sections 8.5 and 11.3.

This twofold obedience of Christ, stands opposed to a twofold obligation that fallen man is under; the one *to do* what God requires, the other *to suffer* what he hath threatened for disobedience. We owe him active obedience as his *creatures*, and passive obedience as his *prisoners*. Suitably to his double obligation, Christ comes under the *commandment* of the law, to fulfil it actively...and under the *malediction* of the law, to satisfy it passively...both these make up that one, entire, and complete obedience, by which God is satisfied, and we are justified.<sup>248</sup>

Thus Flavel holds that Christ's *whole* obedience includes both active and passive elements: his active fulfilment of the law and his passive satisfaction of its malediction. Together, this underlines 'the strength of his love, and largeness of his heart to poor sinners, thus to set himself wholly and entirely apart for us.'<sup>249</sup> However, although he relates active obedience to Christ's life and passive obedience to his death, Flavel also emphasises that the Son of God was not passive in his passion. Citing Philippians 2:8 ('He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'), he explores what he describes as, 'the internal moving cause of Christ's satisfaction for us.' This was:

his obedience to God, and love to us...obedience respects a command, and such a command Christ received to die for us...So that it was an act of obedience with respect to God, and yet a most free and spontaneous act with respect to himself...The matter of Christ's satisfaction, was his active and passive obedience to all the law of God required.<sup>250</sup>

Here, Flavel clearly sees Christ's suffering and death as *active* as well as *passive* obedience as a fundamental to interpreting the atonement. His emphasis is reiterated in the later reformed tradition. Thus, more generally, Herman Bavinck writes: 'The state of death in which Christ entered when he died was as essentially a part of his humiliation as his spiritual suffering on the cross. In both together he completed his perfect obedience.'<sup>251</sup> In a more

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 181

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>251</sup> Bavinck, 448.

specific vein John Murray views ‘obedience’ as the main category under which sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation and redemption ought to be comprehended.<sup>252</sup> Again, this is not to be understood in a merely passive sense:

It must be jealously maintained that even in his sufferings and death our Lord was not the passive recipient of that to which he was subjected. In his sufferings he was supremely active, and death itself did not befall him as it befalls other men. ‘No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself’ are his own words.<sup>253</sup>

## CHRIST’S INCARNATION

### A Profound Abasement

We have seen that Flavel viewed the incarnation, not just as a first step in Christ’s humiliation, but as an event involving a profound (indeed unquantifiable) level of abasement. That he viewed this as both central to the gospel and vital to the work of inspiring devotion in his audience, is clear from the way that he frequently and emotively refers to it. One of the most powerful examples of this is seen in his *Method of Grace*:

It is astonishing to conceive that ever Jesus Christ should strip himself of his robes of glory, to clothe himself with the mean garment of our flesh: O what a stoop did he make in his incarnation for us! If the most magnificent monarch upon earth had been degraded into a toad; if the sun in the heavens had been turned into a wandering atom; if the most glorious angel in heaven had been transformed even into a fly; it had been nothing to the abasement of the Lord of glory. This act is every where celebrated in scripture as the great mystery, the astonishing wonder of the whole world...The Lord of glory looked not like himself, when he came in the habit of a man.<sup>254</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 13.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid*, 15

<sup>254</sup> *Works II*, 238.



## First Stage of Humiliation?

Flavel viewed incarnation itself as the first step in Christ's humiliation - a position with which not all reformed theologians have agreed. Some have argued that it was specifically Christ's identifying with a *sinful* humanity that constituted his humiliation, as opposed to his assumption of a human nature in and of itself.<sup>255</sup> Others have held that his humiliation lies in the fact that in becoming a man after the fall, he was therefore subject to illness, suffering and death.<sup>256</sup> That Flavel believed the incarnation to be a vital part of Christ's humiliation is clear, however: 'The duration, or continuance of this is his humiliation: it continued from the first moment of his *incarnation*, to the very moment of his *vivication* and quickening in the grave.'<sup>257</sup>

Flavel saw a kind of 'double-sided' humiliation in the incarnation - (i) assuming creatureliness, and (ii) doing so in a fallen world: 'The *incarnation* of Christ was a most wonderful humiliation of him, inasmuch as thereby he is brought into the rank and order of creatures, who is over all, "God blessed forever," Rom. 9.5'<sup>258</sup> In taking on human flesh, the Creator became one who was Created and that necessarily constituted a humiliation - irrespective of him being identified with a fallen humanity. Indeed, he later underlines this point: 'It was a marvellous humiliation to the Son of God, not only to become a creature, but an inferior creature, a man, and not an angel.'<sup>259</sup> His contemporary, John Meriton also took this view. Speaking of Christ's incarnation:

He stripped himself of his robes of glory, to put on the coarse, home-spun, and thread-bare tatters of a frail humanity. Had Christ been made an angel, it had been infinitely below himself; and yet then he had remained a spirit, and stayed something

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<sup>255</sup> Cf. Wilhelmus Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* Vol. 1: *God, Man and Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 575-576.

<sup>256</sup> Cf. Berkhof, 336.

<sup>257</sup> *Works* I, 225.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid*, 227.

nearer home. But he clothed his Divinity with a body...To become a man, was so much beneath him, that, upon the matter, it undid him in point of reputation.<sup>260</sup>

Thus Flavel viewed Christ's assumption of human nature both as a humiliation in and of itself (independent of the fact that he took on flesh *after* the fall), and in the way this humiliation was heightened by the fact that the humanity he assumed was affected by Adam's sin - even if he himself was sinless. In short, the mere fact that the Creator became a creature and the one who is eternal, omniscient and omnipotent took on a nature which does not possess these attributes, constitutes – in Flavel's mind – significant debasement, and thus the first stage of his humiliation.

### Transition from Virtual to Actual Mediator

Flavel distinguished between the incarnation as the moment when Christ began to fulfil his role as Mediator in an "actual" sense, and his "virtual" performance of it prior to his condescension:

Christ was invested with this office and power *virtually*, soon after the breach was made by Adam's fall; for we have the early promise of it, Gen iii. 15. Ever since, till his incarnation, he was a virtual and effectual Mediator; and, on that account, he is called, "the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world," Rev. xiii.8. And actually, from the time of his incarnation.<sup>261</sup>

We should therefore view Christ's condescension and sufferings as the *actual* fulfilment of that which he had already embraced and entered into - albeit in a *virtual* sense. In this way, Flavel portrays Christ's condescension and sufferings in a way that was not detached from his pre-incarnate existence and ministry.

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<sup>260</sup> John Meriton, 'Of Christ's Humiliation' In: *Puritan Sermons 1659-1689* Vol. 5 (Wheaton: Richard Owen Roberts, 1981), 215.

<sup>261</sup> *Works* 1, 112. It may be worth noting here that his view is not solely dependent on this particular translation/interpretation of Revelation 13:8.

## CHRIST'S LIFE

### The Uniqueness of His Sufferings

Flavel lays stress on the uniqueness of the sufferings of Christ. Like us he was tempted by the devil and made to experience the toils and pains of life in a fallen world. But what distinguishes him is that he did so as One who was pure and undefiled. He was, therefore, immeasurably more sensitive to the evil with which he was confronted:

The more holy a man is, the more would he be afflicted to hear such blasphemies malignantly spat upon the holy and reverend name of God...How great a humiliation then must it be to the great God, to be humbled to this! to see a slave of his house, setting upon himself the Lord! His jailor coming to take him prisoner, if he can! A base apostate spirit, daring to attempt such things as these upon him! Surely this was a deep abasement to the Son of God.<sup>262</sup>

Thus for Flavel the evils Christ suffered in his life were not only more numerous than those experienced by his people, they were also more acutely felt because of his holiness and hatred of sin. So while this aspect of Christ's humiliation is sometimes described as his '*ordinary* sufferings' (i.e. he shared in the afflictions common to all men), Flavel stresses the fact that the Son of God's experience was *extraordinary*, due to the immeasurable distance between his moral perfection and the evils with which he was tempted.

### An Inferior Communion with the Father

In this context, we should further note Flavel's understanding of the nature of the communication between the Son and the Father. He holds that Christ experienced this in a diminished or inferior sense, as a man. He was 'greatly humbled' by being 'put at a distance

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid, 240.

from his Father, and that ineffable joy and pleasure he had eternally had with him.'<sup>263</sup> Here Flavel 'walks off the page' to address us directly:

Think not, reader, but the Lord Jesus lived at a high and inimitable rate of communion with God while he walked here in the flesh: but yet to live by faith, as Christ here did, is one thing; and to be in the bosom of God, as he was before, is another. To have the ineffable delights of God perpetuated and continued to him, without one moment's interruption from eternity, is one thing; and to have his soul sometimes filled with the joy of the Lord, and then all overcast with clouds of wrath again . . . This was a thing Christ was very unacquainted with, till he was found in habit as a man.<sup>264</sup>

Flavel is not suggesting there was any interruption to the harmony which existed between Father and Son in terms of their shared divine nature, but that the communion with his Father he experienced in his human nature through faith was inferior to his pre-incarnate experience. This may be a less-obvious and more easily overlooked element in Christ's humiliation than, for example, his temptation at the hands of the devil. But Flavel's mentioning of it serves his emphasis on the extent to which Christ suffered for the sake of his elect.

## CHRIST'S DEATH

### The Lowest Step of Humiliation

The death and burial of Christ together form the ultimate stage of Christ's humiliation: '...this being the lowest step he could possibly descend to in his abased state...lower he could not be laid ; and so low he must lay his blessed head, else he had not been humbled to the lowest.'<sup>265</sup> Almost half of Flavel's sermons in *The Fountain of Life* (19 of 42) were preached on this theme. He expounds Christ's death under five main headings: *the preparations made for it* (6 sermons); *the nature and quality of it* (1 sermon); *the deportment and carriage of the*

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<sup>263</sup> *Works* I, p. 229.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*, p. 229.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, 457.

*dying Jesus* (10 sermons); *the funeral solemnities with which he was buried* (1 sermon); and finally, *the blessed and glorious designs of his death* (1 sermon).

These sermons present us with an interesting, and perhaps significant statistic: Flavel preached 17 sermons on the historical facts pertaining to Christ's death, but only two sermons expounding its nature and ends from a soteriological perspective. He did, of course, preach Christ's passion with man's salvation in view; but he did so by creatively 'unpacking' the biblical data rather than expounding key doctrinal categories in and of themselves. His approach was to imaginatively expound the historical facts recorded in Scripture in such a way that would present to his audience the depths to which Christ was willing to stoop and the extent to which he was willing to suffer for his people. Nowhere was this imaginative creativity more clearly seen than in his handling of the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement.

This brings us to what Flavel considered to be the major accomplishments of Christ's death.

### **Its Major Accomplishments**

#### **Penal Substitutionary Atonement**

Flavel stands firmly in the reformed tradition in viewing Christ's death as a work of substitutionary atonement which satisfied divine wrath and accomplished the redemption of the elect.<sup>266</sup> Paraphrasing Christ's words in John 17:19 ('For their sake I sanctify myself'), he notes that that this sanctification was not for His own sake, explaining: 'I sanctify myself', thus: 'I consecrate and voluntarily offer myself a holy and unblemished sacrifice to thee for their redemption.'<sup>267</sup>

His sanctifying himself for us plainly speaks [of] the *vicegerency of his death, that it was in our room or stead*...He stood in our room, to bear our burden. And as Aaron

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<sup>266</sup> Flavel frequently makes reference to the doctrine of election and Christ's work being specifically intended for those whom God chose for salvation (cf. John Flavel, *Works* Vol. VI, 260.)

<sup>267</sup> *Works* I, 96.

laid the iniquities of the people upon the goat, so were ours laid on Christ ; it was said to him in that day, On thee be their pride, their unbelief, their hardness of heart, their vain thoughts, their earthly-mindedness...Thou art consecrated for them, to be the sacrifice in their room. His death was in our stead, as well as for our good. And so much his sanctifying himself (for us) imports.<sup>268</sup>

This understanding of the death of Christ had appeared as early as the church fathers Tertullian and Augustine, both of whom placed 'strong emphasis on the juridical or satisfaction element in sacrifice.' This emphasis was later 'crowned in the Middle Ages with Anselm of Canterbury's great work *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God became Man).' It then found its fullest expression in the teachings of the reformers who believed that 'sin was of such a nature that it aroused God's wrath, and only the atoning death of the God-man could satisfy God's justice and still that wrath.'<sup>269</sup>

Flavel's view, therefore, is to be distinguished from that which sees Christ only as our *representative*, and not as our *substitute*, in his condescension and sanctification.<sup>270</sup> In that view, described by A.B. Bruce as 'redemption by sample as opposed to redemption by substitute':

Common to all forms of this so-called mystical theory is the position that what Christ did for men, He did also for Himself, and that He did it for us by doing it for Himself, acting as the Head and representative of humanity before God. The High Priest of humanity sanctified Himself for the sake of humanity, and in so doing presented the whole lump holy to the Lord.<sup>271</sup>

The distinction here is not that the reformed tradition rejected the notion of Christ's representative work, but that this was neither the whole nor the primary element in the atonement. That place was reserved for his substitutionary sacrifice. This, said Flavel, secured

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<sup>268</sup> *Works* 1, 99.

<sup>269</sup> Bavinck, 427-428.

<sup>270</sup> A. B. Bruce attributes this view to Hilary in the fourth century and to Schleiermacher, among others, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, *The Humiliation of Christ*, 309-310.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid*, 308-309.

the remission of sins, ‘a privilege of the first rank’ of which there is ‘...none sweeter, none more desirable among all the benefits that come by Christ.’<sup>272</sup>

Where Flavel excelled, however, was not simply in expounding the atonement in terms of its theological categories, but in the skilful ways in which he brought these truths to life by employing powerful imagery. He imagines, for example, a dialogue between the Father and the Son taking place during the latter’s passion:

*Father.* My Son, here is a company of poor miserable souls, that have utterly undone themselves, and now lie open to my justice! Justice demands satisfaction for them, or will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them: What shall be done for these souls? And thus Christ returns.

*Son.* O my Father, such is my love to, and pity for them, that rather than they shall perish eternally, I will be responsible for them as their Surety; bring in all thy bills, that I may see what they owe thee; Lord, bring them all in, that there may be no after-reckonings with them; at my hand shalt thou require it. I will rather choose to suffer thy wrath than they should suffer it: upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt.

*Father.* But, my Son, if thou undertake for them, thou must reckon to pay the last mite, expect no abatements; if I spare them, I will not spare thee.

*Son.* Content, Father, let it be so; charge it all upon me, I am able to discharge it: and though it prove a kind of undoing to me, though it impoverish all my riches, empty all my treasures (for so indeed it did, 2 Cor. 8.9 “Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor”) yet I am content to undertake it.<sup>273</sup>

Here, Flavel attempts to both humble and ‘move’ the hearts of his listeners by vividly portraying the extent of Christ’s love for them. Christ was not merely passive in death, nor

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<sup>272</sup> *Works* II, 252.

<sup>273</sup> *Works* I, 61.

did he lay down his life in passionless obedience. Rather his passion was motivated by a heart eager to see the fulfilment of Scripture in the salvation of his people – a point further emphasised in Flavel's *Treatise on the Soul of Man*:

The church is his fullness. He is not fully satisfied till he see his seed, the souls he died for, safe in heaven; and then the debt due to him for all his sufferings is fully paid him, Isa. liii. 11. He sees the travail of his soul; as it is the greatest satisfaction and pleasure a man is capable of in this world, to see a great design which hath been long projecting and managing, at last by an orderly conduct, brought to its perfection.<sup>274</sup>

Neither Flavel's creativity, illustrated here, nor the way in which he emphasised Christ's love for his elect, made him any less analytical doctrinally. Thus, for example, in explaining the moment of Christ's abandonment by the Father on the cross, he distinguishes four types of forsakenness - probational, cautional, castigatory and penal:

*Probational* desertions are only for the proof and trial of grace. *Cautional* desertions are designed to prevent sin. *Castigatory* desertions are God's rods to chastise his people for sin. *Penal* desertions are such as are inflicted as the just reward for sin, for the reparation of that wrong sinners have done by their sins. Of this sort was Christ's desertion. A part of the curse, and a special part. And his bearing it was no small part of the reparation, or satisfaction he made for our sins.<sup>275</sup>

In this way, his teaching on Christ's death was marked by a powerful combination of theological precision on the one hand and, on the other, imaginative, (as he might have said, 'heart-piercing') explanations of the biblical data.

Flavel pinpoints several further consequences of Christ's passion in a sermon on Isaiah 53:11, *Wherein four weighty Ends of Christ's Humiliation are opened, and particularly applied*.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> *Works*, III, 8.

<sup>275</sup> *Works*, I, 408.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid*, 467.



Here he outlines four ways in which the death of Christ fulfilled what was typified by the sprinkling of blood in the Old Testament.

### Propitiation

Firstly, Christ's blood was shed to deliver the believer from the wrath of God: 'One principal design and end of shedding the blood of Christ was *to deliver his people from danger, the danger of that wrath which burns down to the lowest hell*.'<sup>277</sup> 'Wrath' specifies the misery itself, as well as conveying its aggravated nature:

Specified, in calling it wrath, a word of deep and dreadful signification. The damned best understand the importance of that word. And *aggravated*, in calling it wrath to come, or coming wrath. Wrath to come implies both the *futurity* and *perpetuity* of this wrath. It is wrath that shall certainly and inevitably come upon sinners.<sup>278</sup>

Yet it is from this that 'Jesus delivered his people by his death. For that was the price laid down for their redemption from the wrath of the great and terrible God.'<sup>279</sup> Elsewhere, he explains: 'The honour of divine justice required, that he should suffer the utmost degree of punishment. It was meet that the rights of heaven should be vindicated to the full, and that the justice of God should have the last mite it could demand for satisfaction.'<sup>280</sup> Thus both the extent of the divine judgement Christ experienced and the comprehensive way in which he satisfied that justice by his death are emphasised.

### Reconciliation to God

Flavel also describes Christ's death as a work of atonement by which he secured 'the reconciliation of the elect to God.'<sup>281</sup> Specifically, this involved both propitiation and expiation - the combination of which amounts to Christ having satisfied 'the justice of God for

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<sup>277</sup> *Works* I, 469.

<sup>278</sup> *Works* I, 469.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, 469.

<sup>280</sup> *Works* VI, 422.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid*, 474.

our sins.’<sup>282</sup> Reparation was thus made to God (by Christ) on our behalf (his enemies), thus ending all enmity and effecting reconciliation.<sup>283</sup> Such reconciliation involves three aspects, or stages: virtual or meritorious, actual, and confirmed. *Virtual* reconciliation is objectively accomplished in Christ’s death before faith is exercised; *actual* reconciliation is effected when Christ and his benefits are applied by the Holy Spirit and received by faith; *confirmed* reconciliation denotes ‘the virtual *continuation* of the sacrifice of Christ in heaven, by his potent and eternal *intercession*.’<sup>284</sup>

Flavel further emphasises that it is specifically the shedding of Christ’s blood that makes reconciliation possible: ‘No friendship without reconciliation, no reconciliation but by the blood of Christ.’<sup>285</sup> Again Flavel touches the heights of his rhetorical gifts:

All the gold and silver in the world was no ransom for one soul ; nay, all the blood of the creatures, had it been shed as a sacrifice to the glory of justice, or even the blood which is more dear to us, as being derived from our own ; I mean, the blood of our dear children, even our first-born...I say, none of these could purchase a pardon for the smallest sin that ever any soul committed, much less was it able to purchase the soul of itself...It is only the precious blood of Christ that is a just ransom or counter-price...who can compute the value of that blood?...one drop of it is above the estimations of men and angels ; and yet, before the soul of the meanest man or woman in the world could be redeemed, every drop of his blood must be shed ; for no less than his death could be a price for souls.<sup>286</sup>

#### Sanctification of the Elect

The third accomplishment of Christ’s blood is sanctification. Again, Flavel’s emphasis is less on sanctification in the sense of being ‘set apart’ by God for his purposes, but on being washed and purified from sin. In this work, the Spirit sanctifies, but it is the blood of Christ

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<sup>282</sup> *Ibid*, 475.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 474-475.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid*, 475.

<sup>285</sup> *Works* II, 265.

<sup>286</sup> *Works* III, 160.

which procures that sanctification.<sup>287</sup> Thus justification and sanctification belong together: the blood that purchases our justification also procures our cleansing:

There is a twofold evil in sin, the guilt of it, and the pollution of it. Justification properly cures the former, sanctification the latter; but both justification and sanctification flow unto sinners from the death of Christ. And though it is proper to say the Spirit sanctifies, yet, it is certain, it was the blood of Christ that procured for us the Spirit of sanctification. Had not Christ died, the Spirit had never come down from heaven upon any such design.<sup>288</sup>

This notion runs deeply in the reformed tradition and is particularly evident in Calvin himself. For him the fact that justification and sanctification are distinct from and yet also inseparable from each other is a non-negotiable:

Although we may distinguish between them, Christ contains both of them inseparably in himself. Do you wish, then, to attain righteousness in Christ? You must first possess Christ; but you cannot possess him without being made partaker in his sanctification, because he cannot be divided in pieces (1 Cor.1.13).<sup>289</sup>

In addition, Flavel stresses here the unity between the work of the Spirit and that of the Son. The Holy Spirit performs the work of sanctification, but the means he employs is the application of Christ's death to the life of the believer.

#### Ratification of God's Covenant

For Flavel, Christ's death confirms the benefits and blessings of the new covenant (or testament) to all who are sanctified:

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid, 474-475.

<sup>288</sup> *Works* I, 479.

<sup>289</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* III, XVI, 2, p. 98.

Where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator, Heb. ix. 16. So that now all the blessings and benefits bequeathed to believers in the last will and testament of Christ, are abundantly confirmed and secured to them by his death.<sup>290</sup>

Thus all temporal, spiritual and eternal blessings are confirmed and conferred to the believer as a result of the death of Christ.<sup>291</sup> In Flavel's mind then, Christ's passion is pivotal to both the accomplishment and the application of the redemption of his people.

### Christus Victor

As well as viewing Christ's sacrifice as a work of substitutionary atonement, Flavel embraced the *Christus Victor* doctrine,<sup>292</sup> which sees Christ's death and resurrection as the means by which the powers of evil, sin and death have been conquered and his people set free. Although this is not emphasised in his treatment of Christ's humiliation, it emerges in *The Fountain of Life* when he turns his attention to the resurrection:

Death is dreadful enemy, it defies all the sons and daughters of Adam. None durst cope with this king of terrors but Christ, and he, by dying, went into the very den of this dragon, fought with it, and foiled it in the grave, its own territories and dominions, and came off a conqueror...Never did death meet with its over-match before it met with Christ, and he conquering it for us, and in our names, rising as our representative, now every single saint triumphs over it as a vanquished enemy.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> *Works* I, 480.

<sup>291</sup> *Works* I, 481.

<sup>292</sup> Cf. Psalm 110:1; John 16:33; 1 Cor. 15:25. The *Christus Victor* theme was developed by Irenaeus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, adopted by the reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and popularized again in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Swedish theologian, Gustaf Aulén in his work by the same name.

<sup>293</sup> *Works*, I, 496.

The theme reappears in his *Method of Grace*:

Satan is exceeding unwilling to let go his prey: He is a strong a malicious enemy ; every rescue and deliverance out of his hand is a glorious effect of the Almighty Power of Christ...How did our Lord Jesus Christ grapple with Satan at his death, and triumph over him, Col. ii.15. O glorious salvation! blessed liberty of the children of God!...death is disarmed of its hurting power.<sup>294</sup>

For Flavel then, Christ's death is the means by which believers are liberated from bondage to Satan, sin and death, in whose grip they would have otherwise remained. Again, in his exposition of Shorter Catechism Question 26, *How does Christ execute the office of a King?* Flavel explains that Christ restrains his and his people's enemies, protects his church from them and in this way, saves his elect from all dangers.<sup>295</sup>

### Did God Die?

Since Christ is God (as well as man), the question of whether God therefore died on the cross is one which has been the occasion of confusion and, in some instances, heresy in the course of the church's history. For example, *theopassianism* taught that God Himself suffered death on the cross. Flavel's approach was to ground his exposition on the reality of the hypostatic union being preserved not only throughout Christ's life but also in his death:

True, the natural union betwixt his soul and body was dissolved by death for a time, but this hypostatical union remained even then as entire as firm as ever: for, though his soul and body were divided from each other, yet neither of them from the divine nature.<sup>296</sup>

Explaining this further he cites an illustration earlier used by Toletus<sup>297</sup>:

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<sup>294</sup> *Works* II, 274.

<sup>295</sup> *Works* VI, 185.

<sup>296</sup> *Works* I, 78.

<sup>297</sup> Franciscus Toletus (1532-1596) was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Jesuit theologian and the first Jesuit Cardinal.

A man that holds in his hand a sword sheathed, when he pleaseth, draws forth the sword; but still holds that in one hand, and the sheath in the other, and then sheaths it again, still holding it in his hand: so when Christ died, his soul and body retained their union with the divine nature, though not (during that space) one with another.<sup>298</sup>

Flavel's point expresses the position of Chalcedon orthodoxy that although the divine nature of Christ did not (indeed, could not) die, yet the one divine Person was:

recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ.

The Chalcedonian Definition aimed to set boundaries for biblical thinking, not to provide an ultimate explanation of what is, after all *sui generis*. The incarnation raises questions to which it has never been easy to frame answers: given the inseparable union of the divine and human natures in Christ's person, is it possible that one nature could die without the other doing so? In what sense can it be said that the Son died given that both natures are united in his person? Flavel, with Toletus, appears to respond by insisting that the inseparable union between the two natures must be retained, even although we confess that, in and through his humanity, the person of the Son of God experienced a certain death.

### He Descended into Hell?

The meaning of the statement in the Apostles' Creed, that Christ '...descended into hell', has continues to be the subject of discussion with respect to both its meaning and its inclusion.

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<sup>298</sup> *Works I*, 78.

Calvin understood this phrase to affirm that, on the cross, Christ suffered that same wrath of God which is experienced by those who are condemned to hell: <sup>299</sup>

The explanation given to us in God's Word is not only holy and pious, but also full of wonderful consolation...it was expedient...for him to undergo the severity of God's vengeance, to appease his wrath and satisfy his just judgement. For this reason, he must grapple hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death.<sup>300</sup>

For Calvin, then, the Creed's *descendit ad inferna* was 'an expression of the spiritual torment that Christ underwent for us.'<sup>301</sup> Here, Flavel appears to be consistent with Calvin. For example, in expounding Jesus' words in John 12:27, '*Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour*' he comments on his being 'troubled':

The word signifies, troubled as they that are in hell are troubled. Though God did not leave his soul in hell, as others are, he having enough to pay the debt which they have not, yet in the torments thereof, at this time, he was ; yea, his sufferings at this time in his soul were equivalent to all that which our souls should have suffered there to all eternity.<sup>302</sup>

Christ, according to Flavel, suffered in a way that was equivalent to all that the elect deserved eternally and in this sense he suffered hell. Moreover the fact that he speaks of Christ suffering in this way 'at this time' suggests that, following both Calvin and Heidelberg, Flavel saw Christ as coming under the divine curse prior to his death as opposed to solely at the time of his passion. However, Flavel's emphasis is on Christ's forsakenness, and, notwithstanding his experience of the divine curse beginning before his death, the place

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<sup>299</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes* II, 16.8. p. 513.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid*, 16.10, 515.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid*, 16.10, 515.

<sup>302</sup> *Works* 1, 410.

where dereliction ultimately took place was at the Cross. Thus, he comments when preaching on Christ's cry '*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*' (Matthew 27:46):

This was that hell, and the torments of it which Christ, our surety suffered for us. For look, as there lies a twofold misery upon the damned in hell, viz. *pain of sense*, and *pain of loss* ; so upon Christ answerably, *there was not only an impression of wrath, but also a subtraction or withdrawment of all sensible favour and love.*

Here, Flavel suggests that the key similarity between the sufferings of Christ and the experience of hell is abandonment by God, not a descent into a literal place of condemnation. On the cross, therefore, Christ experienced the same torment *temporarily* as is suffered *eternally* by those who are condemned yet to a degree equivalent to that eternal condemnation.

#### GROUNDING IN THE WORD, INFORMED BY CHURCH HISTORY

Flavel's theology is ultimately grounded in and informed by the teachings of Scripture. But it also echoes the accepted orthodoxy of the previous 1500 years. Not only is his Christology wholly consistent with the assertions of Nicaea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD),<sup>303</sup> but his understanding of Christ's humiliation in particular, reflects the confessions and creeds of the preceding centuries – especially those of the Reformation period. Thus, following in the reformed tradition, Flavel's *Fountain* series sets forth humiliation as the dominant lens through which Christ is to be viewed. Accepting the Westminster Confession's threefold incarnation, life and death delineation,<sup>304</sup> his teaching is also informed by the Shorter Catechism's questions and answers pertaining to each.<sup>305</sup> Not only does Flavel view Christ's death as humiliation,<sup>306</sup> but following in the footsteps of church fathers like Tertullian and

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<sup>303</sup> This is particularly evident in his sermon on John 1:14 – 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...' in which Flavel asserts both the divinity and humanity of Christ on the one hand and the oneness of his person on the other: 'He that undertakes to satisfy God, by obedience for man's sin, must himself be God; and he that performs such a perfect obedience, by doing, and suffering all that the law required, in our room, must be man.' *Works* I, 72.

<sup>304</sup> Cf. questions 47-49 of the Larger Catechism

<sup>305</sup> Cf. his exposition of (Westminster) Shorter Catechism question 27, *Works* VI, 186.

<sup>306</sup> This is seen in the quantity of sermons he devoted to its teaching, as has been noted.



Augustine, scholastic theologians such as Anselm and mainstream reformers represented by Calvin he emphasises Christ's passion as a work of substitutionary sacrifice which appeased God's wrath and thus acquitted man of his guilt.<sup>307</sup>

Flavel, understandably, makes no attempt to retrace the history of debates on Christ's humiliation (his purpose is to expound the Scriptures to his congregation of ordinary 17<sup>th</sup> century Dartmouth citizens). Nevertheless, it is usually clear on which side he stood of any historical debate. Examples of this are evident in his rejection of the Adoptionists' argument that in the incarnation Christ assumed a morally vitiated nature,<sup>308</sup> and in the way he sides with Calvin, rather than Augustine and Aquinas on the subject of the necessity of Christ's death for the procurement of our salvation. Moreover, his appreciation of church history is evident from the way that he refers not only to his contemporaries,<sup>309</sup> but drew on the teaching of ministers and theologians from the patristic,<sup>310</sup> scholastic<sup>311</sup> and reformed<sup>312</sup> periods.

However, although Flavel's theology did not deviate from the accepted orthodoxy of the preceding centuries, his preaching and teaching were marked by his creative, imaginative and incisive exposition of Christ's humiliation. While we have already noted examples of this, it becomes even more apparent when we consider the method in and the manner of his preaching - the subject to which we now turn.

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<sup>307</sup> In this way he rejected the alternative view, which emphasised Christ as our representative only.

<sup>308</sup> Cf. *Works* 1. 76.

<sup>309</sup> For example, Flavel cited John Owen (p. 215), Jeremiah Burroughs (p. 425), Thomas Case (p.519), Thomas Manton (p. 523), Thomas Goodwin (p. 309) amongst other Puritans. *Works* 1.

<sup>310</sup> Cf. his citing of Athanasius (p. 191), Augustine (p. 74, 264), Chrysostom (p. 191, 264), Jerome (p.245) and Nazianzen (p. 450) in *Works* Vo. 1.

<sup>311</sup> Cf. his citing of Anselm of Canterbury (p.191), Thomas Bradwardine (p. 134) and Bernard of Clairvaux (p. 231, 233) in *Works* I.

<sup>312</sup> Flavel made regular reference to Martin Luther (p. 163, 216, 242, 245) and John Calvin (p. 157, 334, 343, 337) in particular. *Works* I

## CHAPTER SEVEN: FLAVEL'S PREACHING OF THE HUMILIATION OF CHRIST

Our goal has been to examine Flavel's preaching on the humiliation of Christ. To set this in context and provide a fuller understanding of his approach, we first examined what he believed humiliation to include and what, in particular, he emphasised. We now turn to the question of how Flavel preached this doctrine both in terms of his hermeneutical method and homiletical style.

### *THE FOUNTAIN OF LIFE AS A SOURCE*

The *Fountain of Life* provides us with an important point of reference from which to examine Flavel's method and style of preaching since this collection comprises the written version of an extended series of sermons preached during his public ministry. He explains that the sermons were preached in a more 'relaxed stile' and some of the content was 'enlarged in the pulpit'.<sup>313</sup> Nevertheless, the published version provides us with a substantial illustration of both the form and the matter of his regular preaching and therefore a window into his pulpit ministry – particularly his exposition of the person and work of Christ.

### FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

#### **Christ, the Great Subject of Preaching**

Significantly, the first sermon in the *Fountain of Life* focuses on Paul's words to the church at Corinth describing his own ministry: 'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'<sup>314</sup> Following in the footsteps of the apostle, Flavel believed that the person and work of Christ was the great subject of all true preaching. He therefore sought to emphasise this basic and foundational principle before expounding the doctrine of humiliation in particular:

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<sup>313</sup> *Works* I, 24.

<sup>314</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2, ESV Bible

After I have well weighed the case, turned it round, viewed it exactly on every side, balanced all advantages and disadvantages, pondered all things, that are fit to come into consideration about it; this is the result and final determination, that all other knowledge, how profitable, how pleasant soever, is not worthy to be named in the same day with the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This therefore, I resolve to make the scope and end of my ministry.<sup>315</sup>

This conclusion is based on several considerations. The knowledge of Christ is: ‘the very marrow and kernel of all the Scriptures...the scope and centre of all divine revelations...fundamental to all graces, duties, comforts and happiness...profound and large...a boundless, bottomless ocean...the most noble subject that ever a soul spent itself upon’ since ‘truths discovered in Christ’ are ‘the very secrets that from eternity lay hid in the bosom of God’ and finally, ‘sweet and comfortable.’ Flavel asks, rhetorically, ‘what ecstasies, meltings, transports, do gracious souls meet there?’<sup>316</sup>

In summary, then, Christ is the great subject of all preaching because he is the supreme focus of all Scripture and knowledge of him is fundamental to experiencing and understanding God’s work of salvation. It is also inexhaustible and brings greatest blessing to the lives of his people. In Flavel’s mind, nothing was more important or profitable to his congregation than a knowledge of the person and work of Jesus Christ – a conviction appropriately reflected in the fact that the first of the six volumes of his collected works was devoted by their editor to sermons on that subject.

### Christ, the ‘Benchmark’ of Preaching

Flavel held that Christ is ‘the great Prophet and teacher of the church’<sup>317</sup> and that therefore several characteristics of Christ’s ministry ought to be evident in the preaching of the church’s ministers.

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<sup>315</sup> *Works* I, 32-33.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid*, 34-36.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

Christ 'declared the whole mind of God to men'<sup>318</sup> and in this way was faithful to his Father in heaven. This does not mean that every minister is called to expound and apply every nuance of Holy Scripture in every sermon, but rather that, 'those doctrines which they have opportunity of opening, they do not out of fear, or to accommodate and secure base low ends, withhold the mind of God.'<sup>319</sup> While the preacher should not expound subjects or truths which may be unpalatable simply because they are such, neither must he avoid them when they appear in Scripture. Rather, 'Truth must be spoken, though the greatest on earth be offended.'<sup>320</sup>

But the unbridled truth must also be undergirded by the same tender-heartedness that was so evident in Christ's own ministry: 'Christ was...full of compassion to souls. He was sent to *bind up the broken in heart*' and '*was full of bowels to poor sinners*.'<sup>321</sup> Flavel underlines this. The person who is hard-hearted and unconcerned about the '*dangers and miseries of souls*', cannot be authorised by Christ for the work of ministry.<sup>322</sup> The spirit of Christ-like preaching stems from a minister's ability to empathise with the condition and circumstances of his congregants:

A hot iron, though blunt, will pierce sooner than a cold one, though sharper. And why, my brethren, do we think, God hath commissioned us, rather than angels, to be his ambassadors? Was it not, among other reasons for this? Because we having been under the same condemnation and misery ourselves, and felt both the terrors and consolations of the Spirit (which angels experimentally know not), might thereby be enabled to treat with sinners more feelingly, and affectionately...and therefore [in a way that is] more apt to move and win them.<sup>323</sup>

Related to this, and drawing on Christ's words to the disciples in Luke 10:17-21 on their return from their 'advance mission' (Luke 10:2), Flavel also highlights the way in which Jesus

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid, 573.

delighted in the success of his ministry. Those called to pastor and preach ought to be driven by a similar concern, one exemplified in Paul's burden for the Galatians, emotively expressed in his words in Galatians 4:19: 'my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!'<sup>324</sup> The task of proclaiming the word of God must be fuelled by a genuine concern for the good of people's souls and a desire to see them coming to salvation through Jesus Christ and growing to maturity in him.<sup>325</sup>

Three further features of Christ's ministry are highlighted: he ministered laboriously, lived by his own doctrine, and maintained 'sweet, secret communion with God'<sup>326</sup> Speaking of the second of these, Flavel comments:

(Christ)...pressed to holiness in his doctrine, and was the great pattern of holiness in his life...He preached to their eyes, as well as ears. His life was a comment on his doctrine. They might see holiness acted in his life, as well as sounded by his lips. He preached the doctrine, and lived the application.<sup>327</sup>

However, following his example is no easy task for Christ's servants:

Believe it, brethren, it is easier to declaim, like an orator, against a thousand sins of others, than it is to mortify one sin, like Christians, in ourselves; to be more industrious in our pulpits, than in our closets; to preach twenty sermons to our people, than one to our own hearts.<sup>328</sup>

Foundational to Flavel's own pulpit ministry was his sense that preaching is a call - to preacher and hearer alike - to follow in the way of Christ. That he felt the seriousness of this responsibility was evident in his challenge to fellow ministers to preach in the light of the final day of reckoning, when all will be asked to give an account for their work. This includes preachers giving an account for both their preaching and their living:

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>328</sup> *Works* VI, 568.

O Brethren! Let us beware of committing, or of neglecting any thing, that may bring us within the compass of the terrors of that day. Let our painfulness and faithfulness, our constancy and seriousness, compel a testimony from our congregations, as the apostle did from his, Acts 20.26: "That we are pure from the blood of all men."<sup>329</sup>

Here he feels the weight of Paul's charge recorded in 2 Timothy 4:1-2 – 'I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.' He comments: 'It must be a powerful opiate indeed, that can so benumb and stupify the conscience of a minister, as that he shall not feel the awful authority of such a charge.'<sup>330</sup>

### The Efficacy of Preaching

Standing in the tradition of the teaching outlined by the Westminster Assembly,<sup>331</sup> Flavel sees preaching as the primary means by which God produces faith in the lives of his people: 'No saving benefit is to be had by Christ, without union with his person, no union with his person without faith, no faith ordinarily wrought without the preaching of the gospel by Christ's *ambassadors*.'<sup>332</sup> He is convinced that it is by the preaching of God's truth that unbelievers will be brought to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. This efficacy he traces to several causes: the distinct quality of the word in general, the convicting nature of the law in particular, and the accompanying ministry of the Holy Spirit.

### The Quality of God's Word

Speaking first of the word itself, and particularly its ability to penetrate even the most stubborn of hearts, Flavel expresses his deep conviction of its power:

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<sup>329</sup> *Works* VI, 584.

<sup>330</sup> *Works* VI, 583-584.

<sup>331</sup> Questions 88 and 89 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, for example.

<sup>332</sup> *Works* II, 66.

Let the soul be armed against conviction with the thickest ignorance, strongest prejudice, or most obstinate resolution, the word of God will wound the breast of even such a man, when God sends it forth in his authority and power.<sup>333</sup>

This is in part due to the quality of the word itself – what Flavel calls the ‘divine teaching.’ God’s word has a multivalent quality in that it is: powerful (it is capable of making ‘the soul fall down before it’); sweet (in that it is pleasant in the hearts of ‘poor melting sinners’); plain (in that it is made understandable and clear by God even to those of the ‘dullest and weakest capacities’); infallible (since it consists of truth without error or mistake); abiding (in that it makes ‘everlasting impressions upon the soul’); saving (in that it makes the soul ‘wise unto salvation’) and transformational (in the way that it changes the soul into the image of Christ himself).<sup>334</sup> These are all aspects of the unique quality of God’s word, or divine teaching, when compared with all other forms of discourse or instruction.

#### The Convicting Nature of God’s Law

The law of God plays a particular role in preaching, since ‘there is no coming ordinarily to Christ without application of the law to our consciences, in a way of effectual conviction.’<sup>335</sup> Granted the law does not have the power to justify (‘which is the peculiar honour of Christ.’<sup>336</sup>), yet it does have ‘...power to convince us, and so prepare us for Christ.’<sup>337</sup> While perhaps not obvious from his *Fountain of Life* sermon series (where his aim is to provide a focused systematic exposition of Christ’s person and work), it is clear from his *Method of Grace* treatise,<sup>338</sup> that he embraced Calvin’s *first use of the law* echoed in the Heidelberg Catechism: ‘Whence knowest thou thy misery? Answer: Out of the law of God.’<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>333</sup> *ibid*, 296.

<sup>334</sup> *Works* II, 318-319.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid*, 287.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid*, 287.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid*, 287.

<sup>338</sup> *Works* II, 3-474.

<sup>339</sup> Heidelberg Catechism, Question 3. Accessed September 15, 2021, <https://prts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Heidelberg-Catechism-with-Intro.pdf>.

There is a mighty efficacy in the...law of God, to kill vain confidence, and quench carnal mirth in the hearts of men, when God sets it home upon their consciences...The hearts and consciences of men of all orders and qualities, have been reached and wounded to the quick by the two-edged sword of God's law.<sup>340</sup>

Beeke and Smalley have highlighted that this preparatory and humbling work of the law pre-dates the Puritan era:

Thomas Bilney (c. 1495-1531) said that during his conversion experience (c.1516) he read 1 Timothy 1:15: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of who I am chief." He wrote, "This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that immediately I felt a marvellous comfort and quietness."<sup>341</sup>

Increasingly then it was emphasised that 'the law was useful not just for regulating society and directing the life of believers but also in wakening unbelievers to their sin and weakness.'<sup>342</sup> This, then, became the backdrop to the 'typical puritan motif of passing through preparatory humiliation prior to attaining assurance of salvation.'<sup>343</sup>

Flavel clearly shares this conviction. But he does not view the preaching of God's law *simpliciter* as efficacious in and of itself; rather, he stresses the necessity of the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>340</sup> *Works* II, 295.

<sup>341</sup> Joel R. Beeke & Paul M. Smalley, *Prepared By Grace, For Grace: The Puritans on God's Ordinary Way of Leading Sinners to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013), 36-37.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid*, 36.



## The Work of the Holy Spirit

In his exposition of the Westminster *Shorter Catechism* question 88 ('What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?') Flavel comments, 'It is not in and from themselves, or the gifts and abilities of him who administers them, but from the blessing and Spirit of the Lord.'<sup>344</sup> Without the ministry of the Holy Spirit, no blessing can come from the preaching of God's word:

Learn then how it comes to pass that so many excellent sermons and powerful sermons are ineffectual, and cannot draw and win one soul to Christ. Surely it is because ministers draw alone; and the special saving power of God goes not forth at all times alike with their endeavours.<sup>345</sup>

Stressing further the necessity of the Spirit's work, he adds:

Suppose the utmost degree of natural ability; let a man be as much disposed and prepared as nature can dispose or prepare him, and to all this, add the proposal of the greatest arguments and motives to induce him to come; let all these have the advantage of the fittest season to work upon his heart; yet no man can come till God draw him: we move as we are moved: as Christ's coming to us, so our coming to him are the pure effects of grace.<sup>346</sup>

For John Flavel there are three key ways in which the Holy Spirit makes the preaching of God's word effectual: He firstly blesses the word to 'convince men of their sin and misery out of Christ', secondly, to convert them to Christ (turning them 'from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God' Acts 26:18) and thirdly, to 'build up the saints to perfection in Christ.'<sup>347</sup> The efficacy of preaching then, as it is blessed by the work of God's Spirit, is seen in its threefold fruit: conviction of sin, conversion to Christ, and conformity to his image.

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<sup>344</sup> *Works* VI, 268.

<sup>345</sup> *Works* II, 82.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>347</sup> *Works* VI, 270-271.

Having identified these three aspects of the Holy Spirit's work in preaching, elsewhere in his *Method of Grace* series Flavel provides further analysis of the first two. It is by the Spirit that the word: awakens 'secure and sleepy sinners', enlightens 'the minds of men', convinces sinners of their sin, wounds or pierces the soul and finally, turns the heart with a 'a soul-converting efficacy.'<sup>348</sup> In short, it is through the preaching of the word *and* the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit that unbelievers are awakened, enlightened, convinced, pierced (by which, he means convicted) and converted.

Related to these elements of faithful preaching is another feature of Flavel's understanding of how the ministry of the word of God becomes effectual.

### The Importance of Prayer

The combination of his own sense of accountability to Christ and of his need to depend on the operation of the Holy Spirit, combined to lead Flavel to stress that preaching – and indeed all aspects of ministry – must be undergirded by prayer. In his address to fellow Ministers, *The Character of a Complete Evangelical Pastor, Drawn by Christ*, he explains:

Those are the best sermons, that are obtained by prayer...Luther obtained more this way, than by all his studies. If an honest husbandman could tell his neighbour, that the reason why his corn prospered better than his, was, because he steeped the seed in prayer, before he sowed it in the field; we may blush to think, how much more precious seed we have sown dry, and unsteeped in prayer, and by this have frustrated our own expectation.<sup>349</sup>

Such prayer is not only a mark of prudence in ministry, but also a key to its success: 'Ministerial prudence will send you often to your knees, to seek a blessing from God upon your studies and labours, as knowing all your ministerial success entirely depends thereupon, 1 Cor. 3.7.'<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>348</sup> *Works* II, 296-297.

<sup>349</sup> *Works* VI, 574.

<sup>350</sup> *Works* VI, 573.

By all accounts John Flavel practised what he preached. It was said of him that ‘he had an excellent gift of prayer’ and ‘always brought with him a broken heart and moving affections: his tongue and spirit were touched with a live coal from the altar, and he was evidently assisted by the Holy Spirit of grace and supplication in that divine ordinance.’<sup>351</sup> Moreover, those who shared his family life noted that ‘he was always full and copious in prayer, seemed constantly to exceed himself, and rarely made use twice of the same expressions.’<sup>352</sup>

## METHOD AND STYLE

Having considered these undergirding principles, we now turn to Flavel’s method and style.

### Expounding Doctrines by Key Texts rather than Employing *Lectio Continua*

It is evident, both from Flavel’s extant sermons and from his stated intentions that he favoured preaching which systematically taught biblical doctrine using key texts, in distinction from the sequential exposition of the books of Scripture. He thus seems to have prioritised providing his congregation with a rich understanding of important Christian truths above the consecutive verse-by-verse approach favoured by Calvin and others.

The Fountain of Life includes texts from fourteen different books of Scripture (four Old Testament, ten New Testament). Flavel’s method is ordinarily to deal very briefly with context. Indeed in preaching on 1 Timothy 2:15 he makes an exception to his usual brevity: ‘I shall not spend time to examine the words in their contexture...’<sup>353</sup>; but he also gives his rationale for his approach: ‘A saving, though an immethodical knowledge of Christ, will bring us to heaven, John xvii. 2 but a regular and methodical, as well as a saving knowledge of him will bring heaven into us, Col. 2.2,3.’<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> *Works* I, vi.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid*, vi.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid*, 107

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

Flavel's interest then is specifically to expound the 'full assurance of understanding' and the possession of the 'treasures of wisdom and knowledge' about which Paul was writing to the Colossians. In his view these become the possession of God's people insofar as they receive detailed and systematic teaching and lively preaching on the person and work of Christ. In this sense his burden in preaching is to communicate the person made known by the text of Scripture, and to expound its inner logic, not merely explain its literary structure or narrative flow—although he recognised these have their appropriate place. This conviction becomes evident when he comments:

It is a rare thing to have young professors to understand the necessary truths methodically: and this is a very great defect: for a great part of the usefulness and excellency of particular truths consisteth in the respect they have to one another...There is a great difference betwixt the sight of the several parts of a clock or watch, as they are disjointed and scattered abroad, and the seeing of them conjoined, and in use and motion. To see here a pin and there a wheel, and not know how to set them all together, nor ever see them in their due places, will give but little satisfaction. It is the frame and design of holy doctrine that must be known, and every part should be discerned as it hath its particular use to that design, and as it is connected with the other parts.<sup>355</sup>

## Plain Style

Flavel adopted what came to be known as the 'plain style' of preaching, an approach that had been epitomised by William Perkins's statement that preaching 'must be plain, perspicuous, and evident...It is a by-word among us: *It was a very plain sermon*: And I say again, *the plainer, the better*.'<sup>356</sup>

But 'plain style' not only implied language and patterns of speech that were clear and intelligible to all hearers, it also came to mean biblical exposition that followed a particular

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<sup>355</sup> *Works* I, 21.

<sup>356</sup> Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 105.

basic outline. Perkins, for example, wrote that a sermon ought to consist of four essential parts: reading the text distinctly out of the canonical Scriptures; giving the sense and understanding of the text by Scripture itself; deducing profitable points of doctrine from its natural sense and finally, applying these doctrines using plain and simple speech.<sup>357</sup>

In his work, *The Faithful Shepherd*, Richard Bernard later elaborated on Perkins' approach, as well as articulating the biblical warrant for it.<sup>358</sup> In an interesting passage, Bernard suggests that 1 Corinthians 11:23-34 is essentially an exposition of Christ's words in Matthew 26:26-28 and that here Paul himself exemplifies the principles of the 'plain-style' - albeit in written rather than oral form. He notes that Paul's exposition includes the: 'scope' of the teaching (v. 26); the 'doctrine' contained in the passage (v. 27); the 'use' to be made of it (v. 28); and the reason for its insistence (v.29). This is followed with application (vv. 30-31), motivation for dissuasion (what the Westminster Divines called 'dehortation'<sup>359</sup> v. 32), all leading to exhortation and prescription (vv. 33-34).<sup>360</sup>

Speaking of this 'plain style' Bernard further comments:

Preaching is...a plainely laying open of holy Scriptures, by a publike Minister before the people, to their understanding and capacity, according to the analogie of faith, with words of exhortation applied to the conscience, both to inform and reforme, and where they be well, to confirme; as it is most necessary, so is it indeed a very hard worke to be performed, though to the unskillful it seem easy.<sup>361</sup>

From this it is clear that the plain style consists of two main elements: plain speech (not to be confused with a lack of biblical eloquence or persuasiveness), and content that consists of a

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<sup>357</sup> William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins* 10 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 356.

<sup>358</sup> Richard Bernard (1568-1641) was an English Puritan who ministered in Batcombe, Somerset from 1612 to 1641.

<sup>359</sup> 'The Directory For The Publick Worship of God' In: *Westminster Confession Of Faith*, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994) 380.

<sup>360</sup> Richard Bernard, *The Faithful Shepherd* (London: Thomas, 1621), 19-20 of 458, accessed on August 15, 2021, <http://archive.org/details/faithfulshe00bern/page/n15/mode/2up>.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid, 16 of 458.

logical progression from the exposition of Scripture to systematic deductions from it. That Flavel embraced these principles is clear from both what he said about preaching and the basic structure of his sermons. He appeals to 1 Corinthians 2.2 which ‘contains an apology for the plain and familiar manner of the apostle’s preaching.’<sup>362</sup> Endorsing this approach, he continues, ‘he not only preached Christ crucified, but he preached him assiduously and plainly.’<sup>363</sup> That Flavel sought to reflect the apostle’s approach is clear:

Such pedantic toys, and airy notions as injudicious ears affect, would rather obstruct than promote my grand design among you ; therefore, wholly waving that way, I applied myself to a plain, popular, unaffected dialect, fitter rather to pierce the heart, and convince the conscience, than to tickle the fancy.<sup>364</sup>

Moreover, although Flavel did not think of all seven categories identified by Bernard as requirements for every sermon,<sup>365</sup> his preaching generally followed a similar pattern. The first sermon in *The Fountain of Life* series illustrates this. Following the briefest statement of context, he turns to the scope of the teaching, then identifies the doctrine, explains the main uses of that doctrine (why it is necessary and important) and concludes with application. Whereas Bernard identified application, motivation for dissuasion and exhortation as three separate categories in Paul’s preaching, Flavel tended to encapsulate all of these under the heading, ‘inferences’<sup>366</sup>. In this way, his sermons reflected a similar structure to Bernard’s pattern, albeit in fewer categories, but using similar terminology.

There is one striking difference between Perkins and Flavel—especially given their somewhat contrasting ministry contexts—Perkins in a University town, Flavel in a seaport: unlike Perkins, he did not seem to view the use of Greek and Latin as a contradiction of the plain style. Perkins had written, ‘neither the words of arts nor Greek and Latin phrases...must be

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<sup>362</sup> *Works* I, 32.

<sup>363</sup> *Works* I, 33.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>365</sup> This is reflective of *The Directory for Publick Worship of God*, which states, ‘This method [of preaching] is not prescribed as necessary for every man, or upon every text; but only recommended, as being found by experience to be very much blessed of God, and very helpful for the people’s understandings and memories. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 381.

<sup>366</sup> *Works* I, 33-38

intermingled in the sermon...They disturb the minds of the auditors...A strange word hinders the understanding of those things that are spoken.'<sup>367</sup> In his *Fountain* series, although not frequent, there are several instances where Flavel juxtaposes English, Latin and Greek.<sup>368</sup> While it is possible that the Greek and Latin expressions were inserted later, for the benefit of the published versions of his sermons, it nevertheless demonstrates that amongst those who advocated the 'plain style' there was diversity in practice, even if the general pattern and principles of their preaching bore the same fundamental hallmarks.<sup>369</sup> Nevertheless the inclusion of Latin and Greek in sermons preached in Dorset might seem surprising, given that the rate of literacy in 17<sup>th</sup> century England was around only 30%.<sup>370</sup>

### Mind, Affections, Will

As well as the plain style, Flavel also held to the standard Puritan anthropology: 'The soul of man is not only endued with an understanding and will, but also with various affections and passions, which are of great use and service to it, and speak the excellency of its nature.'<sup>371</sup> Preaching should therefore be addressed to and impact the mind, the affections, and the will. Here, Clifford Boone provides a helpful analysis of Flavel's emphasis and in the process refutes Perry Miller's analysis,<sup>372</sup> which 'leans towards attributing an intellectualist position to the Puritans.' Rather, Flavel saw both the mind and the will as 'the door to the soul' and when speaking of the mind, in particular, makes clear that he viewed it as being vitally connected to the other faculties.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> Perkins, *Works* 10, 350. This position was also expressed in *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, which exhorts ministers to abstain 'from unprofitable use of unknown Tongues.' *Westminster Confession Of Faith*, 381.

<sup>368</sup> cf. *Works* I, 41, 100, 189, 233.

<sup>369</sup> It has been said of Anthony Burgess (1600-1663) that he made 'judicious use of Greek and Latin quotations while reasoning in the plain style of Puritan preaching.' Joel Beeke, 'Reading the Puritans', *SBJT* 14.4 (2010): 20-37, 27. Similarly, in his sermon, *God's Delight in the Progress of the Upright*, Thomas Brooks referred to Hebrew, Latin and Greek phrases. Thomas Brooks, *Works* XI (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), 339, 348 & 350.

<sup>370</sup> James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2001), 81-82.

<sup>371</sup> *Works*, II, 509.

<sup>372</sup> The statements Boone critiques are in Perry Miller, *New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Harvard University Press: Boston, 1983), 247.

<sup>373</sup> Clifford B. Boone, *Puritan Evangelism: Preaching for conversion in late-seventeenth century English Puritanism as seen in the works of John Flavel*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 92-93.

Boone is correct in his analysis. In his *Treatise of the Soul of Man*, Flavel says the will: 'is a noble faculty, and hath a vastly extended empire in the soul of man; it is the door of the soul, at which the Spirit of God knocks for entrance.'<sup>374</sup> On the other hand, in the *Fountain of Life* he says, 'The mind is to the heart, as the door to the house: what comes in to the heart, comes in at the understanding, which is introductive to it.'<sup>375</sup> But there is no contradiction here, as is already clear from his preceding comment: 'By understanding is not here meant the mind only, in opposition to the heart, will and affections, but these were opened by and with the mind.'<sup>376</sup> His point is that while in God's effectual calling the mind is first to be reached. The soul is not given life without the Spirit affecting the will. This being the case, it is appropriate to describe both the mind and the will as 'the door' to the soul.

From this brief analysis, it is clear that Flavel sought to conform his preaching to a biblical anthropology. Since God has made man with intellectual, affectional and volitional powers, preaching should take account of this by addressing the interplay of mind, affections and will. In this way, and consistent with the puritan tradition, Flavel was student of man as well as of God; he sought to expound the doctrines of the faith in a way that would impact the whole person, not merely the intellect.

#### WESTMINSTER HERMENEUTICS

Flavel's published sermons also indicate that he fully embraced two key principles of biblical hermeneutics set forth by the Westminster Divines in the *Confession of Faith*.

#### The Analogy of Faith

Flavel does not appear to make explicit reference to the *analogy of faith* principle expressed by the Westminster Divines, that Scripture should be interpreted in the light of Scripture, he did reflect it in his preaching. He frequently references biblical passages other than the one he is expounding in order to more clearly set forth its meaning and give further weight to the

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<sup>374</sup> *Works* II, 509.

<sup>375</sup> *Works* I, 131.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid*, 131.



assertions he draws from it. For example, preaching on Proverbs 8:30 ('Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him), he argues that this is a description of Christ's primeval glory in his pre-incarnate state. He further explains this by appealing to John 1:18: 'The only begotten Son was in the bosom of the Father; an expression of the greatest dearness and intimacy in the world; as if it should say, wrapt up in the very soul of his Father, embosomed in God.'<sup>377</sup>

In the same sermon, he goes on to stress this primeval glory of Christ by noting that in that prior state he was not under the law; that belonged only to his state 'in the days of his flesh.' He does this by citing Galatians 4:4: 'But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law...' Here, and in many other instances, Flavel is simply applying the Confession's principle by using the whole of Scripture to help explicate and 'unpack' the text under consideration. His focus then was not so much on providing a grammatical or linguistic dissection of the verse at hand, but rather providing a rich and full understanding of the reality to which the language pointed seen in the light of the teaching of the Scriptures as a whole.

### Good & Necessary Consequence

As well as embracing the principle of the analogy of faith,<sup>378</sup> Flavel also preached in a way that reflected a further principle found in the Westminster standards: 'The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.'<sup>379</sup>

For example, (again in his sermon on Proverbs 8:30), he highlights several aspects of Christ's human experience which were not part of his pre-incarnate glory. Then he was 'unacquainted with griefs...was never pinched with poverty or wants...never underwent

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<sup>377</sup> *Works* I, 43.

<sup>378</sup> This principle is enunciated in *The Westminster Confession* 1.9: 'The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.' *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2003), 24.

<sup>379</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6

reproach and shame’ and ‘His holy heart was never offended with an impure suggestion or temptation of the Devil.’<sup>380</sup> Proverbs 8:30 does not state these particulars, nor are they explicitly mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, but given both the ‘analogy of faith’ and ‘good and necessary consequence’ principles, Flavel regards these assertions as wholly appropriate. It is implicit here that had he holds that had he limited his exposition of Christ’s humiliation to what is *explicitly* asserted in the Gospels, it would fall short of the full picture that the whole of Scripture *implicitly* portrays. As a result the impact of the doctrine would be considerably weakened. Yet by drawing attention by ‘good and necessary consequence’ to what Christ did not experience in his pre-incarnate glory, he is able to provide a far richer and fuller understanding of Christ’s condescension and suffering.

#### APPLICATION (‘INFERENCES’)

Flavel’s ‘inferences’ often account for fifty per cent or more of his sermon content. This statistic underlines the importance he placed on application in preaching. Far from interspersing a few brief questions throughout the sermon, or appending them at its conclusion, he seeks to drive home the teachings of Scripture with up to as many as 12 points of inference (or corollaries, as he sometimes describes them).<sup>381</sup> Moreover, far from being of secondary importance, these are stated with the same degree of precision and organisation as his exegetical points. His sermon on the betrayal of Judas (from Matthew 26:47-49), provides an illustration:

*Corollary 1.* Hence in the first place we learn, That the greatest professors had need to be jealous of their own hearts, and look well to the grounds and principles of their professions...O Professors, look to your foundation, and build not upon the sand, as this poor creature did...

*Corollary 2.* Learn hence also, *That eminent knowledge and profession put a special and eminent aggravation upon sin. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve. Poor wretch!*

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid, 45

<sup>381</sup> Ibid, 295.

better had it been for him, if he had never been numbered with them, nor enlightened with so much knowledge as he was endowed with...To sin against clear light, is to sin with an high hand.<sup>382</sup>

Flavel thus seeks to make considered, logical deductions from the teaching of Scripture and then directly apply them to his hearers. Convinced that specific, practical implications arise from the exposition of God's word, he took time carefully to distil them in a way that would impact the lives of his hearers.

### Christ as an Example to Follow

A marked feature of Flavel's application is the way in which he often places as much emphasis on Christ as the Christian's example, as he does on Christ as the Christian's Saviour. This is particularly evident in his sermon on Matthew 27:46. Here, in expounding a central moment in Christ's atoning work, he spends a significant proportion of his application explaining not just its soteriological significance, but also the way in which Christ's example is instructive and an encouragement to his Church:

Though God took from Christ all visible and sensible comforts, inward as well as outward; yet Christ subsisted, by faith, in the absence of them all: his desertion put him upon the acting of his faith. *My God, my God*, are words of faith; the words of one that wholly depends upon his God: and is it not so with you too? Sense of love is gone, sweet sights of God shut up in a dark cloud? well, what then? must thy hands presently hang down, and thy soul give up all its hopes? What! Is there no faith to relieve in this case? Yes, yes, and blessed be God for faith.<sup>383</sup>

In this way, Flavel is two-dimensional in the inferences he draws from the texts of Scripture: while applying the work of Christ in a redemptive sense, he also impresses upon his congregants important lessons that can be drawn from the Saviour's example.

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid, 289-291

<sup>383</sup> *Works* I, 416.

## Believers and Unbelievers

Before examining the particular types of individuals Flavel sought to address, we should note that, as a general rule, he had both believers and unbelievers in mind. Thus, preaching on Galatians 4:4-5 ('But when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons'), he addresses believers as follows:

Hath Christ not only redeemed you from wrath, but purchased an eternal inheritance also by the overplus of his merit for you? *O how well content should believers then be with their lot of providence in this life, be what it will!*<sup>384</sup>

But this is followed by another inference, directed specifically to the unbeliever:

*Hence we infer the impossibility of their salvation that know not Christ, nor have interest in his blood.* Neither Heathens, nor merely nominal Christians, can inherit heaven...Hear me, ye that labour for the world, as if heaven were in it; what will you do when at death you shall look back over your shoulder, and see what you have spent your time and strength for, shrinking and vanishing away from you? When you will look forward, and see a vast eternity opening its mouth to swallow you up.<sup>385</sup>

Two things merit our attention here. First, it is evident that Flavel never assumes that he is addressing only believers, or for that matter only unbelievers. His assumption is that the visible church contains both those who are genuinely converted and those who are not. He therefore addresses both in his preaching. Second, Flavel's application is direct and includes a personal appeal. He employs the second person pronoun, 'you' and not only the first person plural 'we'; he punctuates his address with exhortations, with words, phrases and questions that engage the hearer: 'hear me', 'what will you do...?', 'remember...'<sup>386</sup> It is telling that in

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>386</sup> Flavel exhorts his congregants with the expression, 'remember' on three occasions within just one inference in the 15<sup>th</sup> sermon of his *Fountain* series. Ibid, 198.

the sermon on Judas' betrayal of Christ, in the first of his twelve 'corollaries' there are no fewer than four exhortations beginning with the warning, 'Beware...'<sup>387</sup> His preaching is marked thus by what the Westminster Divines called 'dehortation' as well as exhortation.

### **Authoritative**

These features of Flavel's preaching lent a sense of authority to it. While recognising that he himself was under the word preached even as he preached it, the manner of his exhortation and appeals indicate his sense that the office of the minister of the gospel, set apart and appointed by God to be his mouthpiece, required that he speak as 'a man sent from God'.

### **Categorising Particular Types of Hearer**

We have seen that in general Flavel embraced the 'plain style' of preaching expounded by Perkins and Bernard and characteristic of the Puritan brotherhood. One particular way in which his preaching style reflects Perkins's method, was in identifying and categorising particular types or categories of hearers who should be addressed. A comparison between Perkins and Flavel is instructive here.

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid, 290.

## Comparing Flavel's &amp; Perkins' Categories of Hearer

FLAVEL'S CATEGORIES			PERKINS' CATEGORIES		
	Type of Congregant	Application		Type of Congregant	Application
1	Those who are strangers to Christ/outside of the faith.	Such people, Flavel said, need to begin their acquaintance with Christ, recognising that no sin is too great for his pardon and that there is sufficient merit in his shed blood to cover all sin. <sup>388</sup>	1	Unbelievers who are both ignorant and unteachable.	'These...', said Perkins, '...need to be prepared to receive the doctrine of the Word...partly by disputing or reasoning with them....and partly by reproving some notorious sin in them.' <sup>389</sup>
2	Those who are self-deceived, whose sense of assurance is groundless and false.	To such people Flavel warned: '...Thy final sentence is not yet come from the mouth of thy Judge; and what if, after all thy self-flattering hopes and groundless confidence, a sentence should come from him quite cross to that of thine own heart? what a confounded person wilt thou be? Christless, speechless, and hopeless, all at once!' <sup>390</sup>	2	Those who are ignorant but teachable,	These, Perkins said, need to be catechised '...in the way of the Lord...The catechism,' he said, 'is the doctrine of the foundation of Christian religion briefly propounded for the help of the understanding and memory in questions and answers made by lively voice.' <sup>391</sup>
3	Those who profess faith in Christ but are tempted by the world.	'Take heed,' said Flavel, 'lest it [the world] interpose itself betwixt Christ and thy soul, and so cut thee off from him forever.' <sup>392</sup> Warning of the dangers of such temptation, he asked, '...what are the sparkling pleasures that dazzle the eyes of some, and the distracting cares that wholly divert the minds of others, but as a napkin drawn by Satan over the eyes of them that are to be turned off into hell?' <sup>393</sup>	3	Those who have knowledge but who have not yet been humbled	Perkins said that such people need to have the '...foundation of repentance...stirred up...' in them such that they will experience '...a certain sorrow which is according to God.' Achieving this, he said, requires the ministry of the law. <sup>394</sup>
4	Those who profess faith in Christ but are licentious, or careless.	To this 'type' of person, Flavel said, 'I beseech thee, let the things thou shalt read in this treatise of Christ, convince, shame, reclaim thee from thy vain conversation...as thou art reading the deep humiliation, and unspeakable sorrows Christ underwent for the expiating of sin, thou shouldst thenceforth look upon sin as a tender child would loo upon that knife that stabbed his father to the heart! thou shouldst never whet and sharpen it again to wound the Son of God afresh.' <sup>395</sup>	4	Those who are humbled	Concerning such people, Perkins explained that it was important to consider whether their humbling was '...complete and sound...' or '...but begun but light or slight...' The danger, he said, was that such people can receive comfort only to soon afterwards '...wax harder like iron.' <sup>396</sup>
5	Those who have been recently converted to Christ from a profane and vain life.	Flavel's desire for such a person was that they learn to '...love Jesus Christ with a more fervent love...' Commending the <i>Fountain</i> series of sermons with such a person in mind he said that it provides 'many great incentives, many mighty arguments to such a love of Christ.' <sup>397</sup>	5	Believers	These, said Perkins, need to be taught the doctrines of justification, sanctification and perseverance as well as the law of God, '...without the curse, whereby they may bring forth fruits of new obedience beseeeming repentance.' <sup>398</sup>
6	Those who have attained assurance in Christ.	Flavel taught that such a person should '...rejoice in their present mercy, and long ardently to be with Christ in his glory.' Moreover, he believed that the <i>Fountain</i> series would '...animate such joy, and excite such longings.' <sup>399</sup>	6	Those who have fallen, either in faith or practice.	Perkins said that those who have erred in knowledge must have the appropriate doctrine '...demonstrated and inculcated...' alongside the preaching of repentance; those who are failing to apprehend Christ need to be urged to examine themselves and confess their sin/s and those who fall in their behaviour or practice need to come under the preaching of both law and gospel. <sup>400</sup>
			7	A mixed group	Here, Perkins was simply acknowledging the fact that a congregation will often comprise all of the above categories. To such a mix, Perkins said that both law and gospel must be propounded. <sup>401</sup>

<sup>388</sup> Ibid, 24-25.<sup>389</sup> William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins* 10, Eds. Joseph A. Pipa & Stephen J. Yuille (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), 335.<sup>390</sup> *Works* I, 25.<sup>391</sup> Perkins, *Works* 10, 336.<sup>392</sup> *Works* I, 26.<sup>393</sup> ibid, 26.<sup>394</sup> Perkins, *Works* 10, 338.<sup>395</sup> *Works* I, 26.<sup>396</sup> Perkins, *Works* 10, 339.<sup>397</sup> *Works* I, 27.<sup>398</sup> Perkins, *Works* 10, 340.<sup>399</sup> *Works* I, 27.<sup>400</sup> Perkins, *Works* 10, 340-342.<sup>401</sup> Perkins, *Works* 10, 342.

Here we see tabulated both similarities and differences in the way Flavel and Perkins categorised those who sat under the preaching of the word. Passing by Perkins's seventh category as essentially a 'catch-all' grouping, we can see that both men identified six classifications of hearers. Flavel, however, appears to identify two groups of unbeliever (1 and 2) and four groups of believer (3-6), whereas Perkins seems to see three types of unbeliever (1-3) and also of believer (4-6).

One obvious difference here is that while Perkins stressed the importance of catechising (in his second category) and the preaching of the law (in his third, fifth, sixth and seventh categories), Flavel mentions neither in this instance. However, since he did in fact engage in both catechising and preaching the law, this difference may be explained by the different audiences the two men were addressing. Flavel was writing for the benefit of general hearers, Perkins was teaching other pastors. To use a culinary analogy, one was preparing a meal, the other was writing recipes for it. That notwithstanding, the absence of these elements may also underline the extent to which Flavel prioritised the preaching of Christ to people, irrespective of their spiritual condition. While he too placed great stress on catechising and the preaching of the law (as is evident from both his *Exposition of the Assembly's Shorter Catechism*<sup>402</sup> and his emphasis on the law in his *Method of Grace*<sup>403</sup>), it is clear that he viewed Christ himself as the greatest antidote to every spiritual problem.

#### PREACHING DEVICES

Flavel's preaching is marked by three key homiletical 'devices' or techniques: rhetoric, vivid illustrations and analogies and apologetic-style questions and answers, all employed to bring further clarity and force to his teaching.

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<sup>402</sup> *Works* VI, 138-317.

<sup>403</sup> In part four of his treatise, *The Method of Grace in the Gospel of Redemption*, Flavel devotes two chapters to what he describes as 'The Great Usefulness of the Law or Word of God, in order to the Application of Christ' and 'The Efficacy of the Law or Word of God as applied by the Sovereign Holy Spirit.' *Works* II, 287-306.

## Rhetoric

Aristotle defined rhetoric as ‘...the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.’<sup>404</sup> Moreover, he delineated three means by which this persuasion is effected, namely: *logos* (the extent to which the word spoken and argument itself is clear, logical and well-reasoned); *ethos* (related to the personal character and credibility of the speaker himself) and *pathos* (related to the values, beliefs and intellectual and emotional receptiveness of the audience itself).<sup>405</sup>

Flavel’s preaching embodied these characteristics. He intentionally sought to persuade his audience in a way that was well reasoned, logical and particularly suited to those he sought to teach. That persuasion was a hallmark of his preaching is evident from both his frequent inclusion of rhetorical questions and answers (to which we will return later) and from the way in which he applied his teaching.

In his sermon ‘Of the blessed Inheritance purchased by the Oblation of Christ...’ (on Galatians 4:4-5), we hear Flavel asking:

Hath Christ not only redeemed you from wrath, but purchased such an eternal inheritance also by the overplus of his merit for you? *O how well content should believers then be with their lot of providence in this life, be it what it will!* Content did I say? I speak too low; overcome, ravished, filled with praises and thanksgivings; how low, how poor, how afflicted soever for the present they are.<sup>406</sup>

Such rhetorical questioning and persuasive appealing is in fact a common feature of Flavel’s sermons.

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<sup>404</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* I.2. Accessed October 20, 2021, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/rhetoric.1.i.html>.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> *Works* I, 195.



Reflecting Aristotle's 'logos principle', Flavel's sermons typically followed the pattern we have noted: the stating of a biblical text, from which the key doctrine is logically deduced, leading to a coherent logical exposition of the doctrine's main uses which then would set up the practical implications. In this way, his line of argument was systematic, logical and well reasoned. It would be difficult for even the most hardened sceptic to question how he moved in his exposition and application from A to B or from C to D.

It is clear that Flavel was well aware of the need to tailor his content to his specific audience (thus reflecting both the logos and pathos principles and illustrating the ethos principle). We find him making a number of statements to this effect. In his address to fellow ministers he argues that prudence requires not only the right choice of subject but also the right selection of words with which to 'dress' and deliver the teaching. This meant adopting language appropriate to the subject matter and also suitable to the congregation: 'An iron key, fitted to the wards of the lock, is more useful than a golden one, that will not open the door to the treasure.'<sup>407</sup> Furthermore, a prudent minister will: 'not be rude, nor unaffectedly gaudy' in his expressions. He will: speak with gravity, be evangelical rather than philosophical, choose 'words that are solid rather than florid' and esteem quality over quantity. 'Prudence will cast away a thousand fine words, for one that is apt to penetrate the conscience, and reach the heart.'<sup>408</sup>

That Flavel was deeply conscious in his preaching of the level of his congregation's understanding and mental aptitude is also clear from his 'Epistle to the Reader' which functions as the preface to his *Fountain of Life* sermons:

You are a people that were born under, and bred up with the gospel. It hath been your singular privilege, above many towns and parishes in England, to enjoy more than sixty years together an able and fruitful ministry among you...you have been richly watered with gospel-showers; you, with Capernaum, have been exalted to heaven with the means of grace.<sup>409</sup>

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<sup>407</sup> *Works* VI, 572.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid*, 572.

<sup>409</sup> *Works* I, 27.

As Flavel preached on the humiliation of Christ then, he did so conscious of who his hearers were and what they were able to grasp. Though he trusted in the efficacy of preaching and depended on the work of the Holy Spirit, he also prepared his sermons with a view to making them most persuasive, suitable and spiritually helpful to the people before him.

### Analogy, Illustrations and Imagined Dialogue

Flavel was skilled in his use of analogy and illustrations. While he may not have shared the theological profundity of a John Owen, like John Bunyan (whose preaching Owen so admired), his creativity was evident in the way that he brought to life the doctrines of the faith by using imaginative and powerful rhetorical devices. Following the original title page of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Flavel too could have quoted Hosea 12:10, 'I have used similitudes'.

We have already noted one example of this in his imaginary dialogue between the Father and the Son in the context of Christ's passion.<sup>410</sup> There, Flavel had creatively imagined the conversation in a way that powerfully emphasised both the extent of Christ's suffering (according to the plan he shared with the Father) and his personal resolve to make atonement for all the sins of his people. But he also called on his powers of imagination in the way he used simple every-day illustrations to re-enforce his points: thus, as we have seen, he illustrates the shared involvement of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the incarnation by the use of a homely illustration of three sisters together weaving a garment that only one of them will wear. Thus by an appeal to the imagination he helps the hearer apprehend what he or she may not fully comprehend.

In another example, Flavel helps his hearers to grasp how it is that in his death the 'God-Man' is able to 'take in a full sense of the wrath of God':

If a man cast vessels of greater and lesser quantity into the sea, though all will be full, yet the greater the vessel is, the more water it contains. Now Christ had a capacity beyond all mere creatures to take in the wrath of the Father...Christ was a large vessel

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<sup>410</sup> *Works* I, 61.

indeed; as he is capable of more glory, so of more sense and misery than any other person in the world.<sup>411</sup>

Here, he not only illustrates Christ's unique suitability to make atonement for a multitude, but does so in a way that would resonate with a significant proportion of his congregants in Dartmouth - many of whom were seafarers. Similarly, in his treatise, *Navigation Spiritualised: A New Compass for Seaman*, he seeks to prepare his congregation for the challenges and difficulties they might face in life by means of something that may have been all too familiar to them as a seafaring community:

No sooner is a ship built, launched and rigged, victualled, and manned, but she is presently sent out into the boisterous ocean, where she is never at rest, but continually fluctuating, tossing, and labouring, until she be either overwhelmed, and wrecked in the sea; or through age, knocks, and bruises, grow leaky, and unserviceable; and so is haled up, and ript abroad...No sooner come we into the world as men or as Christians, by a natural or supernatural birth, but thus we are tossed upon a sea of troubles.<sup>412</sup>

Again, in urging his people to recognise how important it is to mortify sin, he paints another familiar picture:

In storms and distresses at sea, the richest commodities are cast overboard; they stand not upon it, when life and all is in jeopardy and hazard...And surely, it is every way as highly reasonable, that men should mortify, cast out, and cut off their dearest lusts, rather than their immortal souls should sin and perish in the storm of God's wrath.<sup>413</sup>

One striking feature of these illustrations and analogies is that Flavel characteristically kept them short and sharp, rather than elaborate and contrived. They were word pictures, not

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid, 425.

<sup>412</sup> *Works* V, 217-218.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid, 263.

ordinarily long stories. Thus, in making the point that the older a Christian becomes the more spiritually mature, self-denying and humble he ought to be, he comments,

The limbs of a child are more active and pliable: but as he grows up to a perfect state, the parts are more consolidated and firmly knit. The fingers of an old musician are not so nimble, but he hath a more judicious ear in music than in his youth.<sup>414</sup>

Here, in the space of just two sentences, Flavel quickly and incisively describes two familiar aspects of life, both of which enable him to make his point more vividly and therefore in a way that would resonate with and impact his hearers. Living as he did in a conscious sense that this is God's world, and that he providentially governs it, Flavel seems instinctively to see pathways that lead from commonplace objects and events around him to the biblical principles they illustrate.

### Apologetics

Another feature of Flavel's approach to preaching is the way he anticipates possible objections to his teaching and answers them.<sup>415</sup> For example, after applying the victory of Christ over Satan's temptations by saying, 'Believe that the benefits of those his victories and conquests are for you; and that for your sakes he permitted the tempter to come so near him...' he then imagines this objection:

*Object.* Heb. 4.15. If you say, true, Christ was tempted as well as I; but there is a vast difference betwixt his temptations and mine: for the prince of this world came, and found nothing in him, John 14.13. He was not internally defiled, though externally assaulted; but I am defiled as well as troubled.

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>415</sup> In this way Flavel's approach was consistent with *The Directory For The Publick Worship of God*, which states: 'If any doubt obvious from scripture, reason, or prejudice of the hearers, seem to arise, it is very requisite to remove it, by reconciling the seeming differences, answering the reasons, and discovering and taking away the causes of prejudice and mistake. *Westminster Confession Of Faith*, 380.

And then responds:

*Sol*<sup>416</sup>...True, it is so, and must be so, or else it had signified nothing to your relief. For if Christ had been internally defiled, he had not been a fit Mediator for you; nor could you have had any benefit, either by his temptations, or sufferings for you. But he being tempted, and yet still escaping the defilement of sin, hath not only satisfied for the sins you commit when tempted, but also got an experimental sense of the misery of your condition, which is in him, (though now in glory) as a spring of pity and tender compassion to you. Remember, poor tempted Christian, ‘the God of peace shall shortly tread Satan under thy feet,’ Rom. 16.20.<sup>417</sup>

Here in this one example, we can see that Flavel not only takes the time to anticipate and respond to possible objections from his hearers but does so in a way that is designed to both appeal to their minds and move their affections. His answer is both rational (‘if Christ had been internally defiled...he had not been a fit Mediator for you...nor could you have any benefit, either by his temptations, or sufferings.’) and also appeals to the affections (‘he being tempted...hath not only satisfied for the sins you commit when tempted, but also got an experimental sense of the misery of your condition, which is in him as a spring of pity and tender and compassion to you. Remember poor tempted Christian...’). In short, his explanations are marked by biblical logic and heart-warming application.

In examining Flavel’s *Fountain* series, it becomes clear that he viewed preaching – and particularly the preaching of Christ – as the bedrock of his ministry. Undergirded by prayer and with a deep awareness of his dependence on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, he expounds the person and work of Christ with the aim of humbling sinners and edifying the people of God. Reflecting the core principles of preaching established by the Westminster Assembly,<sup>418</sup> as well as the hermeneutical method typical of the Puritan era,<sup>419</sup> his sermons are marked by

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<sup>416</sup> Sol. i.e. Solution.

<sup>417</sup> *Works* I, 244.

<sup>418</sup> For example, Flavel’s belief in the efficacy of preaching and his embracing of both the ‘good and necessary consequence’ and ‘analogy of faith’ principles.

<sup>419</sup> For example, his adopting of the ‘plain-style’, text-based preaching, strong emphasis on application and desire to penetrate the mind, affections and the will.

a combination of doctrinal precision, in-depth exposition, and heart-searching application. In summary, his preaching bore the hallmarks of a man who understood the office of the Christian ministry as a call to evangelise the lost, pastor the flock and teach and equip the saints.

Having now surveyed Flavel's theology and his preaching, we must now by way of conclusion draw together some of the strands evident in his ministry and its focus on the person and work of Christ.

## CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

John Flavel lived and ministered in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and thus in a very different context to the one in which we find ourselves today. Nevertheless, his preaching furnishes a number of lessons that are not time-bound since human nature, the message of the gospel and the act of preaching remain constants.

### THE PRIMACY OF PREACHING

Consistent with the reformed tradition in which he stood, Flavel viewed the preaching of God's word as the primary means by which the lost are brought to salvation and God's people are edified and conformed to the image of Christ.<sup>420</sup> If preaching was a divinely decreed non-negotiable, then for Flavel resistance is necessary to any claim that while the message remains the same, the method ought to change in order to be more 'relevant' to the culture of the day. Following Paul, pragmatism, with its emphasis on 'what works', was for Flavel demeaning to the divinely ordained 'ordinary means of grace'.<sup>421</sup> Flavel certainly endeavoured to preach in a way that would be clearly understood, would resonate in his particular context (as we have seen), and in that sense be *practical*. But it is evident, both from his comments *about* preaching and the depth and manner *of* his preaching, that – dependent on the ministry of the Holy Spirit - he viewed the proclamation of the word as the principal and permanent means by which God blesses and builds his church.

### THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST'S HUMILIATION

Reflecting the priority of the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 2:2 ('For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified'<sup>422</sup>), Flavel viewed Christ's person and work as *the* central message of Scripture and his humiliation, in particular, as the dominant lens through which both are to be understood. While he never deviated from the accepted orthodoxy of

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<sup>420</sup> Cf. SC 89 and LC 155.

<sup>421</sup> Cf. Rom. 10:17, 1 Cor. 1:21, Acts 6:4 (*Westminster*) LC 155. See especially 2 Cor. 4:1-6; 2 Tim. 4:1-5.

<sup>422</sup> ESV Bible.

previous generations, he brought a certain freshness to the doctrine by systematically expounding its component parts in a way that was incisive, imaginative and powerfully applied. Setting Christ's humiliation within the wider context of his primeval glory, the Covenant of Grace and the threefold office of Prophet, Priest and King, he provided deep insight into his sufferings by expounding the biblical record and interpretation of his incarnation, life and death. Given that he understood the atonement as both central to God's work of redemption and emerging from the lowest step of Christ's humiliation, it is unsurprising that the greatest proportion of his sermons (in the *Fountain* series) focused on the passion narrative.

Theologically, although Flavel's treatment of Christ's humiliation was not exhaustive,<sup>423</sup> his *Fountain* series nevertheless provides a benchmark in Christ-centered preaching. Anything he may have omitted in terms of certain nuances of Christ's experience, he made up for by the clarity and richness with which he methodically expounded the three stages of this foundational doctrine. Here, three lessons – relating to the subject, hermeneutical method and homiletical style of Flavel's preaching – can be learned.

## The Subject

There has been a recovery of emphasis in Christ-centered preaching, helpful books have been written on the subject<sup>424</sup> and few, if any, certainly within contemporary evangelicalism would argue with Flavel's assessment that the person and work of Christ is *the* great subject of Scripture. However, Flavel's *Fountain* series poses an important challenge to ministers, in particular, and the church in general. It would be a rare congregation that has been exposed to the level of systematic teaching on the humiliation of Christ exemplified by Flavel's exposition. Since the humiliation of Christ is foundational to the gospel and the fulfilment of God's redemptive purposes, ought not the methodical exposition of its component parts be the priority of every pulpit ministry? Those who would most love Christ, must first have a

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<sup>423</sup> For example, he did not appear to expound Luke 2:52 (the fact that in his humanity, Christ 'increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man.') or Hebrews 5:8 (Christ 'learned obedience through what he suffered')

<sup>424</sup> Cf. Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centred Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).



thorough knowledge of who he is and what he has done. This raises the subject of our method in preaching.

### **Hermeneutical Method**

The contemporary recovery of ‘expository’ preaching has often assumed that this is to be defined in terms of the *Lectio Continua* approach, whereby whole books of the Bible or particular sections within them are sequentially expounded. Those who adopt this method will tend to stress the importance of understanding the purpose, structure, genre and context of a particular book and the need to then expound it from beginning to end – either verse-by-verse or through a series of carefully divided passages. While the Puritans were not averse to *Lectio Continua*, their typical *modus operandi* in regular worship services – and here Flavel was included – tended to be to focus on the exposition of biblical doctrine and its application by preaching key texts selected from the whole canon of Scripture.

Weighing up the merits of these approaches would take us beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it raises the issue of the connection between *how* preaching generally occurs and *what*, in the end, is most likely to be set forth. Here too the depth of a preacher’s knowledge and understanding of the whole of Scripture and his ability to expound and apply it are factors that cannot be downplayed. The basis on which Flavel was able to preach the doctrine of humiliation so extensively, was to a large extent due to his starting point being his understanding of the person and work of Christ and *not* simply his study of any one book within the canon. His preaching – and that of his contemporaries – prioritised doctrinal thoroughness and depth rather than being enslaved to comprehensiveness with its attendant danger of relative superficiality. If core doctrines of the faith such as Christ’s humiliation are addressed only occasionally or tangentially, the church’s appreciation – and ultimately, adoration – of Christ is bound to be correspondingly diminished. The church would do well then, to recapture the method employed by our 17<sup>th</sup> century forebears - at the very least, as part of the preacher’s armoury.

## Homiletical Style

We have seen that Flavel's homiletical style was far from one-dimensional; rather, he employed a wide range of rhetorical devices including analogy, illustration and apologetics – the combination of which was designed to educate the mind, move the affections and shape the will of his congregants. This raises the question of whether contemporary preaching similarly addresses the whole person (mind, affections, will), or remains limited to the cerebral with perhaps a greater emphasis on the imperatives of the gospel than their indicatives. If so, it will inevitably prove to be both less affective and effective than was evident with the preaching of John Flavel. If this is the case, then there are two further lessons to be learned from him.

### Application

Firstly, Flavel gave significant attention, not just to explaining the Scriptures, but also to applying them to his hearers. Whereas application in modern day preaching tends to be somewhat limited and often consists of occasional questions sporadically posed throughout a sermon, the 'inferences' which Flavel deduced from his exegesis were not only substantial, but carefully articulated with several 'types' of listener in mind. He gave attention to the truth taught in Scripture; but he gave at least as much attention to both the implications and the means by which the truth is to be applied in life.

### Authority

Secondly, and related to this, was the authority with which Flavel preached. Here, it seems that there is significant disparity between the way that the Reformers and Puritans understood preaching and the way it tends to be understood in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For Flavel, the preacher is a herald of God's truth, one who is called to 'reprove, rebuke, and exhort.'<sup>425</sup> This contrasts sharply with both the lack of directness in the contemporary pulpit and the increase of the 'conversational' tone. The once 'vertical' sense of preaching (God speaks to

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<sup>425</sup> 2 Tim. 4:2

man) has been replaced with language that is dominantly horizontal. 'He will preach the word to us' has become 'he will give his talk'; 'he will minister the word of God to us' has become 'he will help us to understand the passage'. The move from pulpits to lecterns is almost sacramental of this shift. But fear of 'authoritarianism' and a mood of egalitarianism should not be allowed to diminish a right, biblically rooted authority in preaching.

Having taught his fellow ministers that 'a crucified style best suits the preachers of a crucified Christ'<sup>426</sup>, it is clear from Flavel's own sermons that by this, he did not mean to imply that preaching ought to be any less authoritative. The bold and direct, but so obviously loving and tender way in which he addressed his congregation testifies to the fact that, like both his contemporaries and the reformers, Flavel understood the office of ministry as one in which the preacher is set apart by God to serve as his mouthpiece and his people's pastor. As such, he proclaimed God's truth, warned sinners and appealed to peoples' consciences with an air of divine authority suffused with love.

The combination of these important features enabled Flavel to produce, in *The Fountain of Life*, what remains an exemplary exposition of the humiliation of Christ – one in which Scripture is not only taught and explained, but also 'pressed home' by way of reasoned argument and powerful application. If Anthony Wood was correct in his assessment, that Flavel had more disciples in his day than John Owen and (perhaps even more remarkably) Richard Baxter, then – notwithstanding that salvation is the sovereign work of God – the methodical and incisive way in which he traced and applied the incarnation, life and death of Jesus Christ surely contributed to his fruitfulness. For the sake of Christ's own glory and the ongoing blessing of his bride, the church would do well to make Volume 1 of Flavel's *Works* compulsory reading for those being prepared for ministry today.

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<sup>426</sup> *Works* VI, 572.

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